

## Kitsch and Complicity

### The Case of Political Pop and Cynical Realism

#### From Rationalist Painting to Political Pop

The avant-garde myths of the rationalist painters of the 1980s were demystified by political pop. Most of the artists of this group, in fact, had been rationalist painters during the years of the '85 Movement.<sup>1</sup> The extreme frustration and disillusionment of the 1980s avant-garde finally culminated society-wide during the events of June 4, influenced by the booming economy and the malaise that followed a half-century of utopian idealism. This created a new direction for the avant-garde of the late 1980s and early 1990s, and with it the investigation of globalization. However, this was achieved not through the use of the realistic style of the 1970s or 1980s, but rather through a style that directly mimicked socialist realism. Since the early 1990s, official policy and mass urban culture had blended with commercial society as a result of Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms. Without a viewership or official support, the notion of an avant-garde enlightenment became meaningless. Many avant-garde artists of the 1980s therefore shifted from expressing humanist sentiment to representing this newly inverted social structure.

The phenomenon of "political pop" emerged along with other art movements in 1985. If we consider cynicism to be the aesthetic tactic of political pop, then the phenomenon could even be traced back to the cartoon illustrations for "Maple" in the late 1970s (see figures 2.6 and 2.7). At that time, the critical reflection directed toward the Gang of Four, the Lin Biao clique, and the catastrophe of the Cultural Revolution had reached a climax. However, the author of "Maple" did not caricature the images of Jiang Qing and Lin Biao in the manner of fashionable cartoons; instead, he created

completely positive images of people who carefully held the Red Book (*Quotations from Chairman Mao*) in their hands, which stirred up a great deal of agitation at the time. Here, the author intended to reproduce the "real appearance" that people were familiar with, by representing it with a "neutral" and even "positive" attitude, precisely in order to deconstruct it. Generally speaking, cynicism employs a neutral method of imitation, reappearance, and duplication to create a scenario, and then connects it to a completely different context in order to create the effect of fakeness, or perhaps even a masquerade, achieving the humorous effect of being perhaps rather prudish.

This technique could also be seen in the sculpture *Idol* made by Wang Keping, who was a member of the Stars group. Wang combined Buddha's merciful appearance with the image of Chairman Mao with a military cap on his head, to achieve the effect of clearing up the authenticity of Mao's affability. Of course, the authors of the "Maple" illustrations and *Idol* used cynicism to criticize, express, and expose truths as well as the essence of reality, unlike political pop afterward, where the intention was a form of cynicism.

Most of the pop art in the '85 Movement had the same cynical characteristics. However, this cynicism focused not only on politics but also on cultural tradition and aesthetics. For example, in the 1986 painting *David and Venus*, Mao Xuhui put David and Venus together, dressed in jeans. It is very difficult to judge whether the cynicism is directed at the lofty, classical aesthetics of heroism or is a form of self-mockery, chastising the hippie trendiness in modern society. Other works also carried such allegorical meanings, such as the *Injured Buddha*

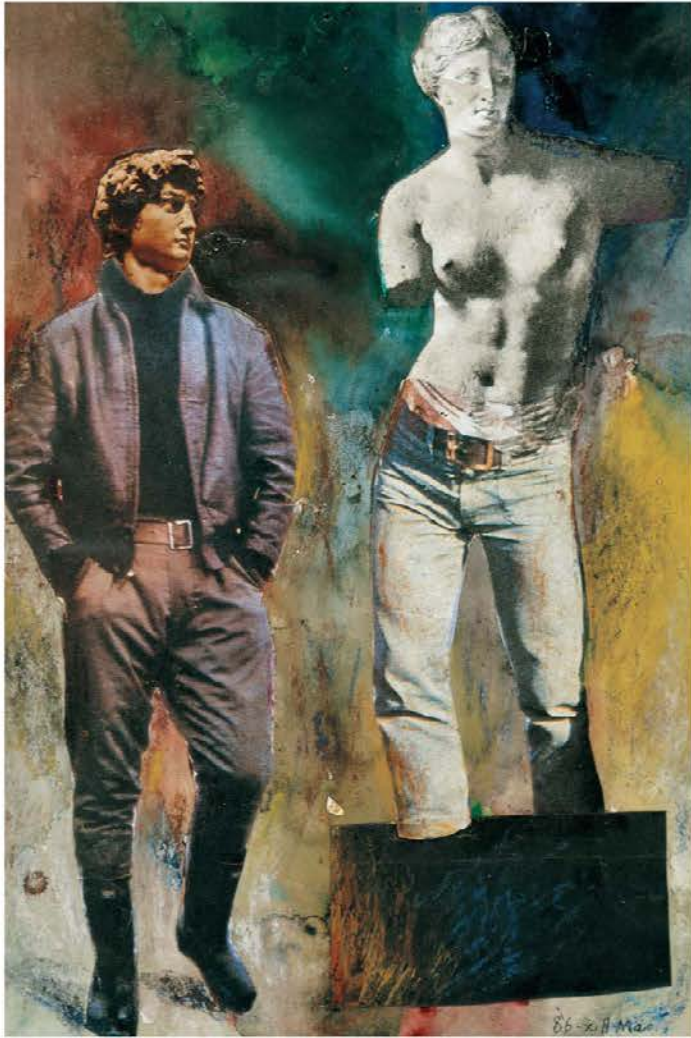


Figure 8.1

Mao Xuhui, *David and Venus*, 1986.

by Chen Lide (see figure 3.20). A similar form of “cynicism” was reflected in the paintings made of finished, readymade products in 1987. In any event, the '85 Movement's version of cynicism touched upon history, culture, society, and politics, while at the same time it related to the aesthetic delight that criticized traditions while transforming and discovering new artistic techniques.

The true beginning of political pop, however, is often traced to 1988, when some of the rationalist painters, such as Wang Guangyi, Shu Qun, and Ren Jian of the Northern Art Group, and Yu Youhan and Li Shan of Shanghai, turned to pop, thereby starting some deep reflection of monumentalism and idealism, both of which were styles of rationalist painting. In 1988, Wang Guangyi's artistic practice marked the beginning of political pop, as it would come to be known.

In 1988 Wang Guangyi suddenly shifted to a cut-and-paste method. In his theoretical comments, he started to criticize “the modern myth” (*xiandai shenhua*), which may refer to both Mao's revolutionary ideals and the utopian leanings of avant-garde art. Wang proclaimed that we had to “liquidate humanist sentiment” (*qingli renwen reqing*); he first made this statement in 1988, at the Contemporary Art Conference (1988 *xiandai yishu yantaohui*) which I convened and organized in Tunxi city.<sup>2</sup> He began to proclaim that art was created only to achieve stardom in the media and the market.<sup>3</sup> Wang called art merely a game of strategy, and Andy Warhol's pop became his model. In fact, in later 1987, he had already produced a number of paintings designed to modify classic Western paintings with grids on the surface, making them look like industrial, mass-produced commodities. He also painted a series he called the *Mass-Produced Nativity*, perhaps to mock his earlier serious work and uphold his new declared intention to “liquidate humanist sentiment.”

In 1988, Wang created a series of portraits of Mao Zedong, sparking a controversy by exhibiting *Mao Zedong No. 1* (see figure 4.12) in the historic “China/Avant-Garde” exhibition in February 1989. In *Mao Zedong No. 1*, a grid is superimposed on an official portrait of Mao: the revolutionary leader and the utopia he stood for are imprisoned within the measurable confines of an analytic frame, just as the



painting itself was required by the authorities to be supplemented by an explanatory text.<sup>4</sup> The squares might also be explained as markers of the process by which many of Mao's portraits were fabricated. A small work would have a grid superimposed in order to enlarge it square by square to a monumental size. Regardless of the meaning, this work encountered harsh criticism. Yet Wang Guangyi had a critical and conceptual purpose rather than an overt commercial goal. Generally speaking, the avant-gardists of the '85 Movement had not yet been involved in a commercial market, as no such thing existed in China at the time.

The methods of political pop can be described in two different ways. First, they marked the juxtaposition of socialist realist iconography and symbols with another, contradictory discursive system. For instance, in 1991 Wang Guangyi began his *Great Castigation* series of oil paintings, which combined both political and commercial imagery. These works appropriated the heroic characters of workers, peasants, and soldiers from Cultural Revolution propaganda posters, juxtaposing them with the corporate logos of companies such as Coca-Cola, Marlboro, and Kodak. The paintings were meant to show that though the two systems, political and commercial, are not united, the principal goal of each is to convince the population of the authenticity and singularity of its products, whether these are political ideologies or manufactured commodities. The artist believed that the mass-media enterprise overwhelmed the population with propagandist images, whether in Mao's previous art campaign or the current ubiquitous corporate advertisements and entertainment symbols. Apparently, for Wang Guangyi, this leveled the differences between Mao's mass culture and American Hollywood-type consumerist imagery.

In contrast, Yu Youhan's work used folk forms to paint Mao Zedong into photographs with the masses, with the addition of numerous flower blossoms. Yu's work conformed to Mao's statement that art should be "pleasant to hear and to look at" (*xiwen lejian*); this statement can be used to describe the aim of both socialist realism and Chinese folk art, which reveals both of them to be kitsch. A similar example is Liu Dahong's *Door Guardians*, in which

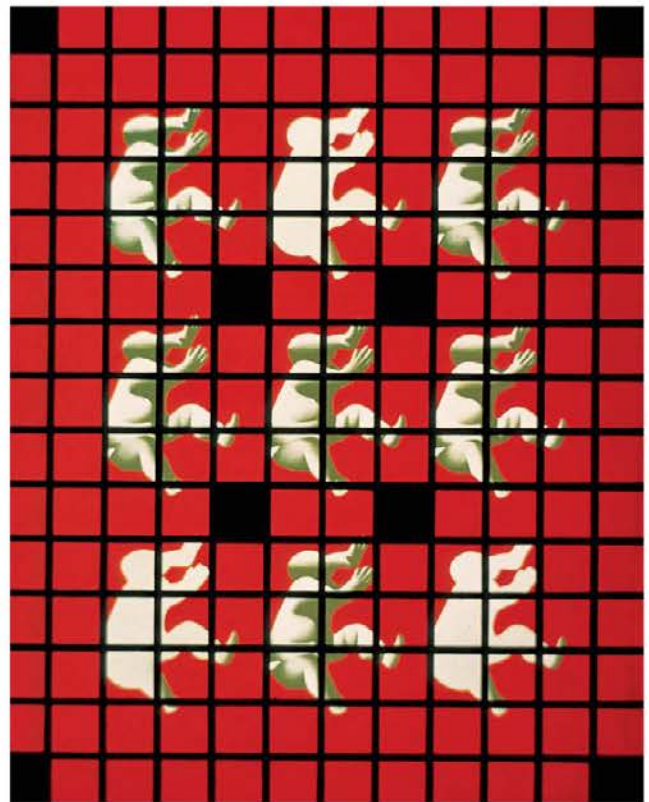


Figure 8.2

Wang Guangyi, *Mass-Produced Nativity*, 1989.

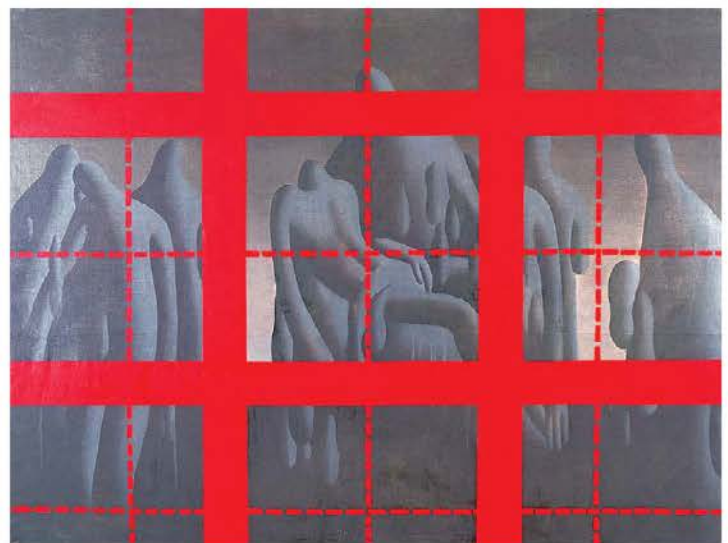


Figure 8.3

Wang Guangyi, *Red Reason—Revision of the Idol*, 1987.









Figure 8.4

Wang Guangyi, *Great Castigation Series: Marlboro*, 1992.

Figure 8.5

Yu Youhan, *Mao Zedong, Double Shadows, Tian'anmen*, 1992.

Figure 8.6

Liu Dahong, *Door Guardians*, 1991.

Figure 8.7

Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, *The Origins of Socialist Realism*, 1982–1983.







Figure 8.8  
Liu Dahong, *Four Seasons: Spring, Summer, Autumn, and Winter*, 1991.

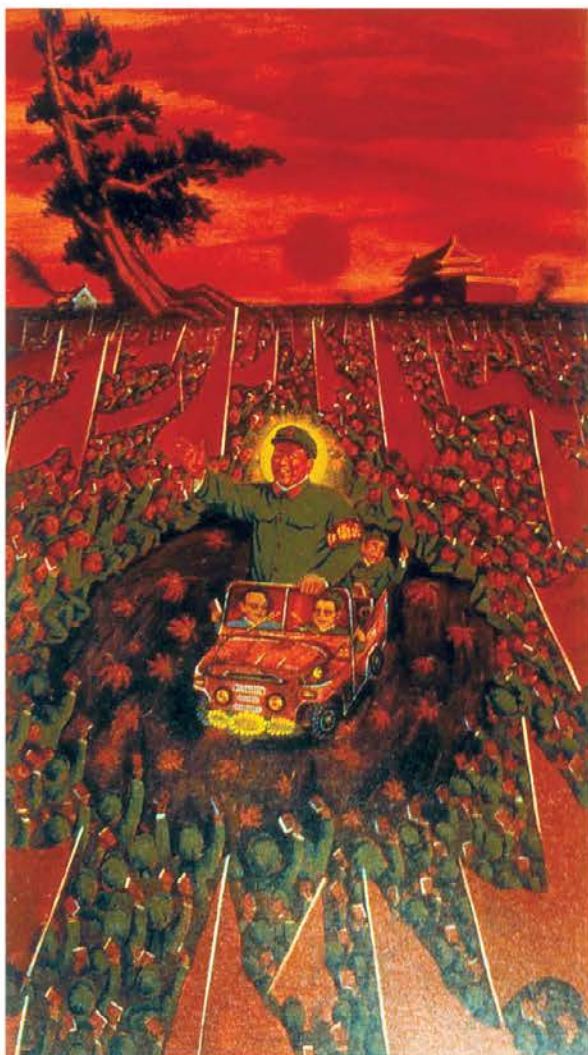


the artist replaced the faces of the guardian figures of ancient folk culture with portraits of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin, turning these four great Western Marxists into protectors of the homes of Chinese peasants. Such an approach, combining both local mythological iconography and social realist myth, can be traced back to the tradition of sots art, an art movement that emerged in the Soviet Union in the 1970s (discussed further below).

The second methodological maneuver of political pop was to reconstruct the revolutionary history employed by socialist realism. At that time, using the old rhetorical devices of the revolutionary

tradition and restructuring them had the effect of mocking that tradition, or mocking rhetoric itself. The best example is Liu Dahong's *Four Seasons*, which depicts the evolution and history of Chinese communist society. It is, in fact, a play on the ancient folklore of peasant uprisings discussed in the Ming Dynasty vernacular novel. Spring, summer, autumn, and winter become metaphors of the history of Mao's revolution, as well as the peasant uprising, from beginning to end. This kind of painting can easily be recognized as political and historical, but it may not be defined as pop, even though Liu Dahong used the forms of folk New Year's paintings.





Political pop had already exhausted itself around the late 1990s because it relied on socialist realism in order to exist, even as it sought to critique and deconstruct it. On the other hand, almost all the artists from the political pop movement carry a strong neonationalist tendency. Besides Yu Youhan's endorsement of Mao's view that art be "pleasant to hear and to look at," Wang Ziwei thought that Mao himself was concerned for, and communicated compassionately with, the masses; while Wang Guangyi worshipped the power of print because we are living in an age of mechanical reproduction.<sup>5</sup>

Although political pop allegorized the Mao myth and Mao's utopia, the artists by no means criticized the discourse of power in Mao's communist ideology and propagandist art, as many Western critics have pointed out. Rather, they still worshipped and desired to gain this power. From an ideological perspective, political pop was a bastardized continuation of the "red humor" of the avant-garde before the Tian'anmen incident. But it neutralized its direct criticism of reality by taking its strategy of imitating both propagandist and consumerist discourse while exhibiting an ambivalence toward the increasing nationalism among Chinese intellectuals in the 1990s.



Figure 8.9

Wang Guangyi, *Great Castigation Series: Coca-Cola*, 1991.



Figure 8.10

Alexander Kosolapov, *Symbols of the Century*, 1982.



The ideological nature of political pop was similar to that of sots art, a Soviet avant-garde art movement in Moscow in the 1970s. (In Russian, the informal word “sots” is derived from “socialist.”) It was based on Soviet mass-cultural imagery, and was a Soviet variation of American pop art that delighted in the spectacle of antagonistic semiotic and artistic systems confronting each other. For example, Alexander Kosolapov’s poster *Symbols of the Century* is a collage of Lenin’s profile and the Coca-Cola logo, which is similar to Wang Guangyi’s *Great Castigation: Coca-Cola*. Coke’s reassuring slogan, “It’s the Real Thing,” and the portrait of Lenin, in Kosolapov’s poster, became interchangeable mass-cultural, consumable products.<sup>6</sup> Sots art and political pop shared a similar ideological content based in the power of nationalist, or at the very least ideological, power. As Boris Groys put it:

In the [case of the] Soviet politician aspiring to transform the world, or at least the country, on the basis of a unitary artistic plan, the artist inevitably recognizes his alter ego, inevitably discovers his complicity with that which oppresses and negates him, and finds that his own inspiration and the callousness of power share some common roots. Sots artists and writers, therefore, by no means refuse to recognize the identity of artistic intent and the will to power at the source of their art. On the contrary, they make this identity the central object of artistic reflection, demonstrating hidden kinship where one would like to see only morally comforting contrast.<sup>7</sup>

Political pop attracted much more international, institutional, and marketing attention than sots art, because it emerged while the communist world was declining and the Cold War was ending. This may also be due to the fact that China has since become a major transnational art market. Whereas the sots artists immigrated to the United States in the late 1970s and found only small commercial success there, none of the successful political pop artists have left China. On the contrary, the majority of the Chinese political pop artists have become part of an upper middle class in the changing Chinese economy. They no longer strive to produce a confrontation with authority and the public, as their predecessors did; they have changed from elite, or even amateur, avant-gardists to professional, careerist artists. Sots art was not a commercial, impersonal

art that responded to, and simultaneously strove to manipulate, spontaneous consumer demand. But the nationalism and materialism of political pop, based on transnational political and economic circumstances, shared common roots with government policies, and it was an art that undoubtedly occupied a position of complicity.<sup>8</sup>

The aesthetic allegory of both propagandist art and consumerist mass culture that functioned in political pop led me to label it “double kitsch.” The political pop artists were producers, and their trademark works were very real commodities. In other words, they themselves became the purveyors of “double kitsch.” Consequently, and paradoxically, the presence of political pop, when marketed as avant-garde in the international exhibitions and markets overseas, might reflect an absence of the avant-garde inside China.<sup>9</sup> Thus, what the Chinese avant-garde represents is questionable from a global perspective.

### Cynical Realism

Cynical realism (*wanshi xianshi zhuyi*) emerged simultaneously with, and shared the critical perspective of, political pop. Cynical realism was initiated by the New Generation (*Xinsheng dai*), and the phrase was used to name the exhibition held in the National History Museum in Beijing in July 1991. The major new realistic painters, such as Liu Xiaodong, Fang Lijun, Liu Wei, Song Yonghong, and Yang Jinsong, participated in this exhibition. The exhibition has been widely recognized as the beginning of the trend of new realistic painting of the early 1990s, marking a departure from the grand themes of the ’85 Movement to the trivial and personal subject matter of the early 1990s.

Rather than using the traditions of socialist realism, these artists focused on themselves and their circle of friends and colleagues. Several artists who began to paint in the late eighties and early nineties exhibited a free-floating cynicism unrelated to any dogma and uncommitted to any one belief system; they approached the existential situation with a sense of humor.<sup>10</sup> This trait can be seen in the painting of Fang Lijun, Liu Wei, Yang Shaobing, and Yue Minjun, who all now live in the artists’ village at

Songzhuang. In Sichuan and Chongqing there were also a number of artists, such as Zhang Xiaogang, the brothers Guo Jin and Guo Wei, and Xin Haizhou, who can be included in this group. Compared to the works of Beijing artists like Fang Lijun and Liu Wei, their works were less cynical and more illusive. Their figurative works were commonly self-portraits, or portraits of family members, relatives, or close friends, and the compositional purpose was symbolic rather than narrative. These painters usually turned their focus almost entirely to an individual face with slightly exaggerated facial features. This kind of face, however, tired the public when the artists repeatedly produced it for the market from the late 1990s. Consequently, the cynical realist style has received a negative nickname, *dalian hua* or “big head” painting, in recent years.

The leading figure in the group was Fang Lijun, who graduated from the Central Academy in 1989, the year of the June 4 Tian’anmen incident. Fang has repeatedly painted stereotypical bald Chinese men with small eyes and stupid smiles. Although these men appeared in his drawings as early as 1988, those earlier figures retained the likeness of rural villagers, in that the relationships among the figures seemed predictable, and the walls and dwellings in the background hinted at the lives of those characters. Beginning with the oil paintings of the early 1990s, however, there was a shift in composition as well as emotional expression. In those paintings, besides the blue sky, long a staple of Mao-era socialist realist painting, there was no specific or concrete background. The rows upon rows of “typical Chinese people” appearing on the canvases seemed as if they could be the image of the artist himself. This could be an artist’s gesture of indifference, self-mockery, and powerlessness, like the figures called *pizi* or “riffraff” by Wang Shuo, a popular novelist of the early 1990s. The yearning and laughter of these characters resonates with Geng Jianyi’s 1987 *Second State* (see figure 7.32). Geng’s portrait did not focus on the “mood” of the characters, however. It dealt rather with the distance, and even misreading, between the audience and the image, and therefore challenged the idea of “representation.”<sup>11</sup>

In comparison with the New Generation painters, who were commonly interested in urban life, Fang



Figure 8.11

Fang Lijun, *Sketch No. 2, 1988*.

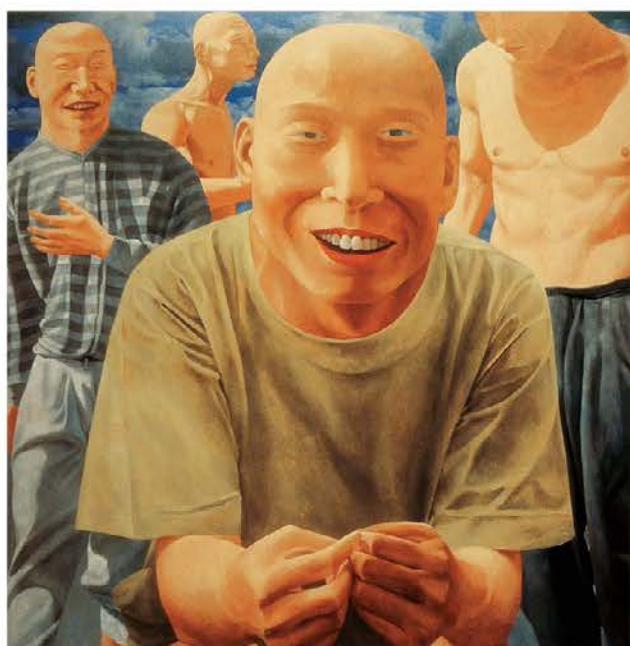


Figure 8.12

Fang Lijun, *Oil Painting No. 2, 1992*.





Figure 8.13  
Zhang Xiaogang, *Bloodline: Big Family No. 2*, 1995.



Figure 8.14  
Liu Wei, *The New Generation*, 1992.

Lijun and the cynical realists seemed to share a certain pastoralism, not only because the figures in their paintings look like peasants, but also because most of these painters were raised in the countryside. At the end of the twentieth century, Chinese artists and intellectuals no longer put themselves in a position of vacillation, in the awkward place between modernity and utopian, naive native ideas. Rather, they simply gave up any attempt at an all-embracing humanitarianism or imaginary utopia and opted for elite escapism and self-indulgence, explaining this as resistance to the dominant authority.

Thus, we can trace a rustic thread through the art of the last twenty-five years, beginning with the rustic realism of the late 1970s, continued in current of life painting, and ending in cynical realism. "Rustic" can be seen as an instantiation of antitraditional, antimainstream, antimodern ways of thinking. Interestingly, in the eyes of these artists, the typological terms and theories behind "urban" and "modern" were other ways of saying "authority."

It was logical enough that in the early 1990s, some current of life artists of the '85 Movement joined up with the cynical realists. At that time, artists such as Zhang Xiaogang and Mao Xuhui shifted their attention from the native land to their own surroundings. Zhang Xiaogang's slick-surfaced *Bloodline: Big Family No. 2* portrays a perfect, modern family with a single child. The child's male genitals are proudly exposed, announcing the parents' good fortune at having produced the preferred gender. However, the apparel, facial features, and gazes of the mother, father, and son reflect almost no differences in gender or even age. Zhang showed the paradox of inner emptiness in the face of the pursuit of individualism in a late-twentieth-century society that increasingly valued commodities.

Cynical realism used the distortion of realistic details, particularly those of human figures, to represent the fundamental absurdity of reality. These painters' representational methods were based in the symbolism represented by distortion, and were not straight narrations of absurd realities. Like Fang Lijun, Liu Wei always composed his paintings in a nonnarrative way, usually with two or three figures. He concentrated on deformed and distorted facial features. The cynical style of figurative painting first

initiated by Liu Wei and Fang Lijun soon influenced a number of artists, in particular those from Sichuan and Chongqing. Some painters went so far as to focus only on the faces or even eyes of their sitters.

In the paintings of Zeng Hao, we see another method of distortion. Zeng was a classmate of Liu Wei. In his paintings, all traces of specific settings have been removed from the composition, leaving only the family and its furniture. These furnishings are then randomly placed all over the canvas without any unifying relationship. Antinarration was a basic typology of cynical realism, a style based on the use of realistic techniques to form symbolic compositions. For this reason, it tended more toward expressionism and symbolism than straight realism.





Figure 8.15

Zeng Hao, *Thursday Afternoon*, 1995.





## Apartment Art

From the early 1990s, apart from political pop and cynical realism, both short-lived and more sensationalist than avant-garde, there was also a low-key avant-garde that involved a retreat from the public sphere. It came in two types, apartment art and maximalism, which shared a common philosophy and strategy in the practice of contemporary art. Neither apartment art nor maximalism suddenly emerged in the 1990s; both can be traced back to the '70s and '80s. It was in the 1990s, however, that the two types of the low-key avant-garde began to map the large ground of the neo-Chinese *guannian* (idea) art. Some of the artists of these two trends were old *guannian* artists, such as Zhang Peili, Geng Jianyi, and Wang Luyan, but most of them, like Song Dong, Wang Jin, and Zhuang Huan, belonged to the younger generation.

The neo-*guannian* art of Chinese avant-garde artists had been forced to abandon the avant-garde myth, the innocence, and even the naiveté that had been adopted by the '85 Movement. They were no longer interested in "revolution in art." Instead, apartment art and maximalism pragmatically addressed changing close relationships between themselves and their environment. The media and language used by the new generation, however, were derived from their close investigation of their surroundings. The *guannian* artists of the 1980s elaborated their concepts of an anti-art project by focusing on the revolution in ideas itself, such as in Huang Yongping's randomness, Wu Shanzhuan's *chizi*, Xu Bing's labor-intensive work, and the New Mark Group's tactile art. The expectation of these artists was that their ideas would be understood by the audience or viewers, and that the objects created were simply byproducts. This communication on

the conceptual level gives us a better sense of the intellectual life of the 1980s. The art of the 1980s can be partially understood as part of a project of dematerializing art-making.

On the other hand, the apartment art and maximalism of the 1990s had moved on toward a totally different approach to materialization, not in the sense of commodity exchange but of the communicated relations between artists and things, which valued the subject matter over the concept or idea. Subjects were often taken from daily life. The discovery of a new idea or concept remained secondary to the work of engaging a new *cailiao*, or substance. The post-'85 avant-garde became disenchanted by the endless game of the abstract logical elaboration of the "revolution in ideas." For them, the idea of something original did not come from thinking but from touching daily materials, which made it possible for them to make art in a strictly controlled environment.

Apartment art and maximalism focused on the observable and tangible. Furthermore, the physical context, the location and relocation of an object, became an important part of their conception. To explore the significance of a specific object in a specific environmental context, rather than its significance in relation to artistic historical and aesthetic references, was the fundamental approach of apartment art and maximalism in the early 1990s. The idea of location and replacement also differentiated them from Western conceptual art.

### Apartment Art: Shelter of a Dream

"Apartment art" (*gongyu yishu*) is a term I coined to summarize a very important phenomenon in