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Chinese art exhibition reflects transformative modern times

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Hundreds visited Auckland Art Gallery over the weekend to view more than 60 works by 42 Chinese artists that included photography, sculptures, installations, moving images and new media.

Titled *Forever Tomorrow: Chinese Art Now*, the exhibition is the first major survey of Chinese contemporary art displayed in Auckland on this scale.

The exhibition features work by some of China's best-known contemporary artists, including Ai Weiwei, Xu Zhen, Xiao Lu and Cao Fei, alongside artists exhibiting in New Zealand for the first time.

Among the key works is Ai Weiwei's *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*, a photographic series capturing an act of deliberate destruction that raises questions about history and cultural memory.

Also on view is a striking sculptural work by multimedia artist Xu Zhen.

Standing 7.5 metres tall and weighing 3 tonnes, the work brings together a Buddhist figure associated with China's Tianlongshan Grottoes and the sweeping form of Greek sculpture *Winged Victory of Samothrace*.

Another featured work is a robotic Corinthian column that stands nearly 4m tall and occupies an 8m x 8m footprint, giving a classical symbol of Western civilization an unsettling - almost living - presence.

The exhibition opened to the public on Saturday, attracting visitors from all walks of life for a first look.

Troy Zhou, who has lived in New Zealand for about a decade, said he felt proud as a Chinese New Zealander to see such a large-scale presentation of Chinese contemporary art.

He said the exhibition offered people from different backgrounds an opportunity to better understand Chinese culture.

"I think it is a window for the world to understand China," he said.

"Artistic expressions are diverse. Through the work of these artists, visitors from different countries and ethnic groups can find resonance with their own cultures.

"They can learn more about Chinese culture through these artworks."

Heather Cunningham, who has previously visited China with her daughter, said she was struck by some of the political elements in the exhibition and by the courage of some Chinese artists in questioning and challenging history.

She said the exhibition also gave her a new perspective on Chinese contemporary art, including its use of technology.

"This is very technologically advanced in terms of the video," she said.

"The layered look, how the videos are used, how the photographs are used, how they are

presented, the subject matter. It is very new to me, which is so exciting."

Clara Curtice, who visited Beijing and Shanghai about a decade ago, said she was also struck by the political elements represented in the exhibition.

"I am really enjoying considering that there is still a strong political element to what these artists are trying to say, and that they use old types of Chinese art to express modern political ideas," she said.

Curtice was impressed by the way the exhibition reflected China's rapid transformation and the enormous disruption experienced by its people over a short period of time.

"It reminds me that this is a significant population, and there are a multitude of different ways of seeing the world," she said. "It is a really interesting space."

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Hutch Wilco, curator of *Forever Tomorrow: Chinese Art Now*, said Auckland's Chinese community had grown rapidly over the past 15 years and that New Zealanders' interest in contemporary Chinese culture and art had also increased.

Wilco said the exhibition highlighted the breadth of contemporary Chinese art.

Spanning the period from China's reforms and the introduction of an "open door" policy in 1978 to the present day, the show reflects the country's dramatic transformation over more than four decades, he said.

"There's this sense of speed in the development in China," he said.

"That is something we are all feeling globally, particularly since Covid, with changes to society, changes to global politics ... and the impact of artificial intelligence.

"I think we can learn from the experience that has really sort of preceded us in the experience of China and Chinese artists."

Pu Yingwei, a Beijing-based artist, has two paintings on display in the exhibition - one titled *Purple King Kong: Red and Blue Entangled in Space* and the other *Chinacapital 1978*.

Pu said his artworks explored the complexities of China's rapid development, its rise as a global power and the ways that transformation had shaped the country's relationship with the wider world.

"*Chinacapital 1978* tells the story of China's reform and opening up, and the emergence of a completely new China," he said.

"It looks at the impact that transformation had



Chinese artist Pu Yingwei Photo: RNZ / Yiting Lin

Pu said his second work, *Purple King Kong*, examined the entangled relationship between red and blue.

"Red represents China and blue represents Western ideology," he said.

"The purple figure, formed from a mixture of red and blue, is a metaphor for China's reform and opening up."

Pu said the exhibition had also given him an opportunity to see works by other Chinese artists, some for the first time.

"I think this exhibition will provide both New Zealand and Chinese audiences with new insights into contemporary Chinese art," he said.

Chen Wei, another Chinese artist who travelled to Auckland for the opening of the exhibition, has a photographic work titled *Today Is Unsuitable for Shooting* on display.

The image, made from a carefully constructed set assembled in his studio, reflects the difficulty of accurately capturing Beijing's smog.

Chen said the exhibition of contemporary art gave visiting Chinese artists a chance to catch a glimpse of New Zealand's artistic and cultural landscape.

audiences to walk into a period of our history," he said.

"All history is connected. China's development is closely related to the development of the world."

Wang Ziquan, a Shanghai-based cross-media artist, has a sculptural work titled *Compromise* on display in Auckland.

Wang said his practice focused on creating sculptures without relying on traditional sculpting methods.

He hoped audiences could sense the rapid changes taking place in Chinese contemporary art in his work.

"Even things that might once have barely been considered art are now becoming artistic [in China]," he said, noting that internet memes could now be considered a form of contemporary art.

"The shift is enormous," he said.

"Contemporary art today does not necessarily need to be about profound social issues or grand themes. It can also be about small things hidden in the details."

Wilco agreed, saying the exhibition explored globalization, its effects and the ways different cultures come into contact with one another.

He hoped every visitor would find something in the show that resonated with them.

The exhibition is supported by the Auckland Art Gallery Foundation and the New Zealand government's Events Boost Fund. It runs through 23 August.