Views of Mao's China, and What It Became

by Benjamin Genocchio
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With just over a dozen artists, "State of the Dao," at the Lehman College Art Gallery, is smaller than many of the Chinese contemporary art shows that have come to the New York region over the past decade. But it is just as politically astute.

Dao, or Tao, is a concept from ancient Chinese philosophy concerned with the underpinnings of the universe. "State of the Dao," purports to survey the current order of things in China, a country undergoing social, cultural and economic transformation. But the work assembled here by Patricia Kowalik, an independent curator and an adjunct professor of art history at Lehman College, does not tell us much about Chinese art or society that we do not already know. Themes of pollution, consumerism and militarism predominate this show, as they have done in Chinese art for over a decade.

Although several of the artists, like the Gao Brothers, Long Bing Chen and Xiao Xianchun, are well known, happily there are also a handful of fresh faces. Among them is the sculptor Zhao Suilang, who makes sensual, elemental abstract assemblages using thin ribbons of powder-coated steel.

Yang Jingsong is another extremely talented artist who is relatively little known in this country. His large, colorful painting "Watermelons" (2009), an expressionistic tour de force depicting a ripe watermelon, is the most visually alluring work in the show.

But the real strength of the exhibition is the way in which it highlights the continuing influence of imagery from the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) in the work of contemporary Chinese artists.

Shen Jingdong makes glossy, idealized but tongue-in-cheek takeoffs of cheesy peasants, model workers, soldiers and other imagery once used by the Chinese authorities to shape political discourse — art for the masses mobilized for the views and aims of the few. On display are a pair of 2008 shiny, colorful porcelain sculptures of Chinese soldiers wearing Mao jackets, part of Mr. Shen's "Soldiers" series. Among the works of Mr. Chen, an artist who carves into stacks of discarded telephone books to create delicate, beautiful figurative sculptures, is a monumental portrait of Mao ZeDong.

Not only is Mr. Chen's work appealing, but it also makes reference to the mindless cult of Mao that arose during the Cultural Revolution. Few political figures in the 20th century were the subject of more portraits than Mao, China's leader from 1949 until his death in 1976. Estimates of the number of his portraits, including political posters, are as high as two billion. Today, Mao's image continues to exert a tremendous fascination for Chinese artists.

But because it has been so widely used in art, it no longer possesses the power of serious political critique, and I have to agree with the widespread view among Chinese critics (and possibly Mr. Chen) that its current use is opportunistic and facile.

Other works in this show are oriented toward a more current revolution: China's obsession with consumerism and materialism in the wake of the economic growth. "The Forever Unfinished Building No. 4" (2008), by the Gao Brothers, is a very densely detailed, computer-generated photograph that depicts China as a giant shopping mall perpetually under construction.

A series of painted tomb sculptures by Liu Fenghua and Liyong deals with one of the most important art issues of our era: cultural property, specifically the looting of archaeological sites for objects that are then smuggled out of the country, often painted to look like souvenirs.

There is a kitsch quality to these tomb sculptures, which remind you somewhat of tacky garden gnomes. They also bring to mind the work of 1960s appropriation artists, especially Jeff Koons, who fabricated everyday objects in stainless steel or porcelain. But, over all, they are successful works of art, appealing equally to the eye and the mind.

Not everything in the show is about politics. Pang Yongjie paints charmingly quaint atmospheric abstractions, while Xu Yong takes black and white photographs of the old, traditional communal Hutong neighborhoods in Beijing, now largely destroyed for redevelopment. His pictures owe nostalgia for a way of life that is all but gone.

The only flaw in this otherwise enjoyable exhibition is that it lacks a standout piece, something that you absolutely have to go to the Lehman College Art Gallery to see. The upbeat is nothing more, or less, than a somewhat random survey of contemporary Chinese artists.