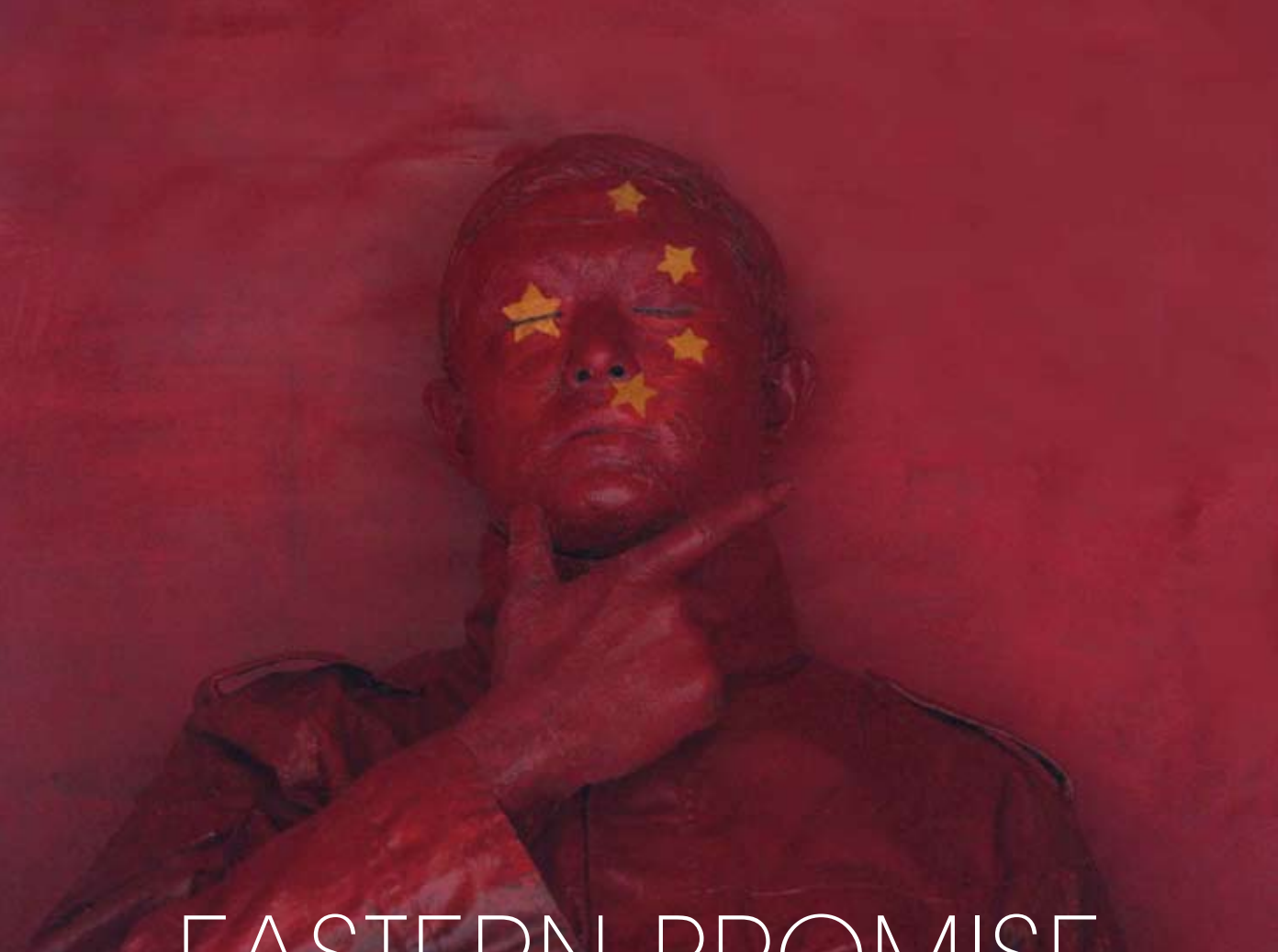


# LISA SETTE GALLERY

2008-2009

FALL / VOLUME 11





# EASTERN PROMISE

## CONTEMPORARY ART FROM CHINA

This past year has been a seminal time for China, with the country seldom far from the headlines of the world's press. No one can deny the success of Beijing's staging of the Olympics, and now the newest superpower races towards achievements in space. The state of the world economy offers further room for bolstering China's new standing, and within the country, there is huge promise for those who can ride the wave of the boom. Yet behind it all, there is continued unrest as those left behind have to struggle even for life's basics, and as corruption and lack of quality control have led to tragedy in the earthquake zone and in daily industrial accidents, not to mention to serious damage in China's reputation in both domestic and world markets.

Ironically, these contrasts provide much of the continued dynamism in the contemporary art scene. A local market has developed amongst the burgeoning numbers of the wealthy, and it is largely this that has led to prices for the best-recognized names to be driven ever more stratospheric, thus stimulating further interest in the wider art world. This growing interest and concomitant income has enabled artists to enjoy experimentation with works often huge in scale and breathtaking in ambition, safe in the knowledge that there will be space for exhibition given that the large number of new galleries and art centers ensure some desire for innovation as well as commercial success. Yet if it is wealth that brings the art to market, it is the dark side of the boom that tends to provide

the content. With its assemblage of emerging artists together with some of their more established peers, "Eastern Promise: Contemporary Art from China" offers a vision of the themes that concern most artists in China today.

Chief amongst these remains the idea of the supremacy of power of government and the inevitable subjugation of the individual. This is of course not new to post-1980's art in China, but it does reflect the fact that even in the information age, with its multiple conduits for new ideas and images, the government is as controlling as ever. So in the works of both the older artists (Qu Yan, b.1955, and Suo Tan, b.1962) and some of the youngest (Li Mingzhu, b. 1973, and Zheng Li, b.1976) Mao features prominently – to most Chinese he remains the archetypal symbol of power. Liu Bolin (b.1973) paints himself into the Chinese national flag to suggest that even artists are not immune to the vagaries of governmental decree, whereas Zhang Dali (b.1963) composes the face of an anonymous individual from repeated yet differing shades of the symbol of the Chinese military assault rifle – AK-47 – to broaden the target to Everyman.

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The power of government in China may be well documented and therefore widely known amongst even the most casual visitor to the country, but it is certainly not as highly visible as the second of



the themes that emerges within the work of the artists represented here. Nobody visiting a major Chinese city today could fail to notice the impact of consumer culture in China. Unsurprising therefore that the ubiquitous gloss and tack is commented upon in many art forms, but interesting that it is presented most effectively in the most traditional media of lacquer (Luo Brothers, b.1963, 1964, 1972) and ceramic (Li Mingzhu), as well as in photography (Qu Yan, Tong Dazhuang b.1977) and bronze (Chen Wenling b.1969). Li Mingzhu has also explored the theme in a novel way through his newest work 'Renminbi', in which he has carved a Chinese 100 yuan banknote onto the back side of a wooden memorial plaque dating from 1876. China's tradition itself has become bankable.

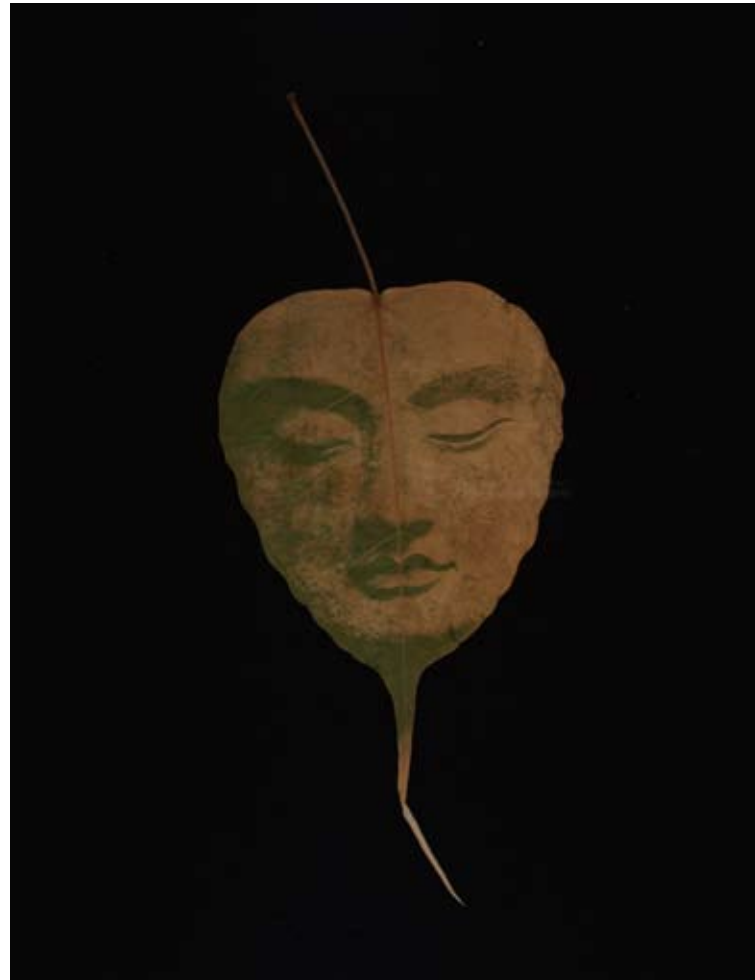
The increase in references to international art history shows that Western tradition, too, is now much better understood. Art History courses in Chinese academies have always been thorough but now frequent exhibitions in China of international artists as well as the busy travel schedules of many Chinese artists have led to a far wider familiarity with images. Andy Warhol has always been popular, in part because of the fascination with his use of the Mao image, and Marcel Duchamp has provided inspiration in China as much as anywhere for the more conceptual artist, but now Jeff Koons makes his appearance too. Tellingly, it is the youngest artist in the exhibition, Huang Binyan (b.1984), who has appropriated Koons' Rabbit, slip-cast now in ceramic and intricately painted with traditional Chinese blue on white. As with her ceramic urinal "Cover #2" with its laboriously sculpted flowers, the work could not be further from the conceit of the original artists. And therein lies the promise.....

*Thomas J. Whitten*



Cover: Suo Tan: *Chinese Dragon #1*, 2007, ceramic, 15" x 12" x 9.5"  
 Page 1: Liu Bolin: *Hiding in the City #13, Face of the Flag*, 2005, c-print, 30" x 40"  
 Page 2: Wang Zhiyuan: *Underpants #6*, 2005, fiberglass resin, 31.5" x 30" x 4"  
 Right: Li Mingzhu: *China Tools, Shovel #2*, 2004, ceramic, 42.5" x 7.75" x 1.5"  
 Far right: Zheng Li: *The King and the Little Bird*, 2008, oil on canvas, 78.75" x 69"  
 Back cover: Qu Yan: *Mao Zedong-Cellular Phones*, 2003, c-print, 39.5" x 114"





Above left: Binh Danh: *The Nature of the Buddha on a bodia leaf*, 2007, chlorophyll print and resin, 20" x 15.5"

Bottom left: Julianne Swartz: *Placement (Family)*, 2007, c-print, 14" x 18"

Above right: Alan Bur Johnson: *Aether*, 2008, 609 photographic transparencies, metal frames, dissection pins, 54" x 108" x 2"

Bottom right: Enrique Chagoya: *don't follow me, i am lost too*, 2008, acrylic and water based oil on canvas, 60" x 80"

To describe his work, the artist James Turrell has stated, “I make spaces that apprehend light for our perception.” The concept of light as the spiritual center of our senses underlies all of Turrell’s work. Whether by means of serene and expansive spaces or simple mechanisms, his pieces catch light as though it were a rare and precious creature, compelling us to examine it with awe. Simultaneously, we observe ourselves, looking at the light—the artist’s simple and spare structures create an architecture for seeing and introspection: places that frame the changing sky as though it were a deeply nuanced canvas, painted for our eyes only. Turrell’s pieces offer their viewers the opportunity to consider light as a spiritual and artistic medium, as a physical structure, and as a range of perceptions as various as the waves in the ocean. Says Turrell, “The ideal viewer...will treasure this light. I make situations that allow anyone to have this relationship.”

# JAMES TURRELL

## CAPTURING LIGHT

Roden Crater, an extinct volcanic cone in Arizona’s Painted Desert, may be seen as the culmination of Turrell’s lifelong experiments in perception and the spiritual qualities of light. Beneath the two-mile wide crater site Turrell is excavating a vast series of subterranean celestial viewing chambers. The project has ancient and venerable antecedents in sites like Ireland’s Newgrange and Peru’s Temple of the Fox: like those enigmatic places, Roden Crater designates a space on earth from which humans may observe and absorb meaning from the bright, hot, cosmic phenomena that move across our galaxy. Not only do these celestial movements provide content for human myth, the paths of the stars and planets also determine the intervals by which we live, our seasons and our days and nights. In creating a celestial observatory Turrell makes these daily measures of light the subject of his art as well. He has remarked about the crater, “In this stage set of geologic time, I wanted to build these spaces that engage celestial events... making music with a series of light.”

Roden Crater is also similar to its ancient predecessors in that its construction is a feat of nearly inconceivable proportions, a work in progress that future generations may reinterpret or reinvision. Over 30 years in the making, the piece is not officially open to the public, but Turrell has provided us with a series of photographs documenting the development of this massive project. As an artist who works with light, the photographic quality of this documentation is integral to Turrell’s overall project: the images documenting his works are inquisitive and serene, capturing light like two-dimensional viewing chambers.

Just as we can find meaning in pondering Turrell’s endeavor without having visited the site, his means of documenting of the site is also significant. The photograph *Roden Crater: The Complete Site Plan* was created using one of photography’s most revered methods: the carbon print. In this process, a negative is exposed to light repeatedly—each time, layers of pigment are added via a gelatin medium. On the resulting final image, one can see gradations in the surface of the print, where the actual pigments overlap on the fine cotton paper.

The process is so time consuming that only a handful of photo studios are capable of making carbon prints, yet it is clear why Turrell has chosen this medium to document the site: Unlike the dyes usually used in photo processing, pigment is elemental, like the lava-rich soil around Roden Crater. Because of this, a carbon print is permanent. The images remain archivally stable for hundreds of



years, just as the pigment-based paintings of the Old Masters have. The look of the carbon print is inimitable, is a photographic palate of deep colors, lights and dangerous shadows. Like one of Turrell’s earlier “wall of color,” sculptures, it is almost as if one could fall inside, so bright and buzzing and corporeal are the colors emitted from it.

In *Roden Crater: The Complete Site Plan*, we see from an aerial perspective the crater’s “eyes”—two main circular observatories that open to the sky. We see evidence of the ancient volcanic field around the four hundred thousand-year-old cone, a topography that speaks of the ongoing formation of our earth. We see the periphery of the Painted Desert, where the Roden Crater is located, a swirl of iron-rich red dirt and dark volcanic dust. We see in a way only possible with a carbon print a thin, silvery layer of reflected sunlight, glancing along the crater at the top of the image—an almost tangible suggestion of heat and glare in the high desert. We also see Turrell’s markings, delineating the elliptical border of his excavation and the parameters of the chambers and spaces within. Perhaps we can also perceive an echo of what our distant descendants will imagine, when they think about the way we experienced the cosmos, and our vocation within it.

Above: James Turrell: *Roden Crater: Complete Site Plan*, 2008, color carbon print, 40” x 30”

# ANGELA ELLSWORTH

## SONNETS IN BLACK THREAD

Sonnets in black thread, sutured to the unlikely surfaces of white paper napkins, Angela Ellsworth's stitched pieces exemplify the tension between chaos and control, delicacy and strength, palpable in all of her work. The creation of these pieces is an act of performance; an entry into what Ellsworth calls "an unknown space." She does not make preliminary sketches or grid out images on the napkins, but instead acts from a spontaneous emotional response to her subjects—once needle pierces paper, there is no retracting of actions or marks. To further divert the simple narrative of aesthetic intention, Ellsworth makes the stitched pieces not in the isolation of a studio, but in cars or airplanes, exposing her process to the distractions of public observance and unpredictable motion.



The stitched images are an essential and unmediated response to their subjects—at once tender, tangled, and gestural. In these instinctive delineations vagary and specificity meet; the unthinking trajectory of the needle and thread, scraped through thin tissue paper, is capable of interrupting the sewer's intent, and the result is beautiful and unruly.

The indelible, universal mark of the body in action is a signature of Ellsworth's performance pieces and objects. Ellsworth frequently sketches while engaged in other forms of physical activity—often her drawings include a fluctuating path of lines, like the constant yet irregular pulse of an EKG monitor, scoring intervals of tension and release. "In general my work examines the body in motion," Ellsworth states, "a place where art and physical activity overlap." A deep examination of the body as both aesthetic material and concept is a lasting theme in Ellsworth's career; as a graduate student at Rutgers, painting large figurative canvases, Ellsworth found that the act of representation would not grant her the profound access to physical experience that she required. "I started using my own body in space, as opposed to painting an image of my body, because I was trying to go for this physical, visceral experience of body, and I couldn't get it in paint."

Ellsworth's objects and performances observe the body interacting with other bodies, over time and through the making of demonstrative marks; in *Drawing on Breath* a group of artists were observed capturing the motions, over two and a half hours of high-endurance charcoal drawing, of a triathlete running on a treadmill. In *Drawing on Site*, Ellsworth traced the long path from a gallery to the imagined home of a distant Scottish ancestor, using audio recording and drawing. The resulting performance and drawing was an intermedia map of the artists' own experience navigating the unfamiliar streets of urban Glasgow.

In other recent performances created by Ellsworth, one sees bodies interacting with prescriptive social settings: Ellsworth and her performers physically represent, and then transgress, the strict

demarcations of family, love, and home as defined by societal norms. This work refers to the family structures of Ellsworth's ancestors (who were pioneers and early members of the Mormon church), her relationship with her partner Tania, and, in her recent body of work, the female performance artists who have inspired her. Ellsworth draws or stitches while walking toward, away from, or with loved ones; she walks to the local courthouse with her partner; she recreates floor plans of the homes of her ancestors on the Utah frontier using leaves and branches, and needle and thread.

Increasingly, says Ellsworth, she's discovered a "parallel understanding of performance work and the drawings.... they feel much closer as activities and gestures now." For performance and intermedia artwork like Ellsworth's, straightforward documentation cannot always capture the sly and cerebral nature of the work. Recently Ellsworth has been exploring notions of "the document" and how to suggest live presence within the document of a past live event. She is doing this by creating stitched pieces depicting the artists who inspired and influenced her own work. With the precarious action of stitching she becomes engaged again in their performances, iconic poses, and the significance of their initial gesture as artists. Repetition becomes ritual documentation as Ellsworth responds to her loved ones and her predecessors with portrayals in thread. Ellsworth's practice of making art begins in physical action, and results in complex portraits of movement, endurance, and love.



Left: Angela Ellsworth: *Hare*, 2008, black thread on paper napkin, 8.5" x 8"

Above: Angela Ellsworth: *Marina (as Joseph)*, 2008, black thread on paper napkin, 8.5" x 8"



## EXHIBITION SCHEDULE 08/09

2008

**Eastern Promise: Contemporary Art from China**  
November 6 - Jan 3 - Opening November 6th, 7-9 PM

Artists: Chen Wenling, Huang Binyan, Li Mingzhu, Liu Bolin, Luo Brothers, Mu Jun, Qu Yan, Suo Tan, Tong Dazhuang, Wang Dajun, Wang Nengtao, Wang Zhiyuan, Xiang Xiaoli, Xue Song, Yu Fan, Zhang Dali and Zheng Li

2009

January 8-31  
Opening January 8th, 7-9 PM

Angela Ellsworth / Julianne Swartz

February 5-28  
Opening February 5th, 7-9 PM

Enrique Chagoya / Eduardo Gil

March 5-28  
Opening March 5th, 7-9 PM

Alan Bur Johnson / Mike & Doug Starn

April 2 - May 2  
Opening April 2nd, 7-9 PM

David Kroll / Li Mingzhu

May 14 - June 27  
Opening May 14th, 7-9 PM

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## ART FAIRS 08/09

2008

**photo Miami**  
The International Contemporary Fair for  
Photo-Based Art, Video, & New Media  
December 3 - 7, 2008  
Wynwood Art District  
NW 31st Street & North Miami Avenue  
Miami, Florida

2009

**AIPAD**  
Association of International Photography  
Art Dealers  
March 26 - 29, 2009  
Park Avenue Armory,  
New York, New York

## LISA SETTE GALLERY

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Gallery hours: Tuesday-Friday: 10 am to 5 pm | Thursday evening: 7 to 9 pm | Saturday: 12 to 5 pm  
Closed Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Years Day

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Essays written by Megan Bates except where noted. Design: P.S. Studios