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'Art and China' at SFMOMA: defanged, but icky still

Exhibition that drew protests at the Guggenheim comes to San Francisco

The exhibition includes Huang Yong Ping's "Theater of the World" and "The Bridge," which are presented without live animals.Photo: David Heald, © Huang Yong Ping

The overarching sense created by the exhibition "Art and China After 1989: Theater of the World" is that a raucous party, to which you were not invited, has taken place. It has a morning-after feel to it: somewhat illicit, and more than a little icky.

The show, which opens Saturday, Nov. 10, and runs through Feb. 24 at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art,begins with a screen-enclosed bridge about 40 feet long. It rises over a tabletop cage, roughly 6 by 9 feet. Notoriously, in other presentations, these structures have contained living creatures — "spiders, scorpions, crickets, cockroaches, black beetles, stick insects, centipedes … lizards, toads and snakes," according to the exhibition

catalog — that fight it out over the course of an exhibition. The creatures had but two courses of action: devour or be devoured.

Here, however, the cages are empty, as they were at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, where the exhibition originated. They are incongruous and creepy; like manacles glimpsed hanging on the wall of a bondage fan's boudoir, they stoke the imagination without any need for description.

Activated with the insects and reptiles, the cages comprise two works called "Theater of the World" and "The Bridge" by Huang Yong Ping. Huang and the exhibition curators originally planned that viewers, too, would be limited to two choices — to watch or to turn away. They hadn't counted on a third possibility: that those offended by the suggestion of such a spectacle would make enough of a ruckus to shut the piece down.

After enduring protest marches and untold emails, phone calls and letters, as well as an online petition that eventually garnered more than 800,000 signatures, the Guggenheim decided not to show the work in its original form. SFMOMA has chosen to follow suit.

Two other works, videos of earlier performances, have also been altered in collaboration with the artists, their images replaced by short texts. Both suggest motifs of culture in conflict. One, Sun Yuan and Peng Yu's "Dogs That Cannot Touch Each Other" (2003), originally showed fight-trained pit bulls chained to treadmills, ferociously straining to attack one another. The other, "A Case Study of Transference" (1994) by Xu Bing, recorded pigs, one covered in nonsense English texts, the other in fake Chinese, copulating as an audience looks on.

As titillating as they may be, these works are not outliers in a more sober survey of Chinese art in the years between the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989 and the 2008 opening of the Beijing Olympics, the stated scope of the exhibition. Together, they might be the core of the period's art, as analyzed by the show's internationally respected curatorial trio of Alexandra Munroe, Philip Tinari and Hou Hanru.

They describe a scene throbbing with a dark energy, ribboned with themes of disorientation and disruption. Much of the most vital work of the time consisted of actions that exist today only in second-hand documents.

It is, for example, the period in which Ai Weiwei, the Chinese artist best known to American audiences, had himself photographed in a deliberate act of cultural desecration, “Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn” (1995). It’s the moment when Xu Zhen made the video “Rainbow” (1998), which records only the sounds and the welts of repeated beating of his naked back, editing out the hand that strikes him. (We are spared Xu’s “I’m Not Asking for Anything” from the same year, showing the artist “repeatedly throw(ing) a dead cat onto the floor until he gives up from exhaustion.”) It is the time when Kan Xuan, one of few women represented in the show, made her 1999 video “Kan Xuan! Ai!” It pictures her running through a busy subway corridor, sounding an alarm consisting of her own name, with an urgency created only by her presence.

There are less unlovely works, but even these might be drawn on paper by igniting gunpowder (Cai Guo-Qiang’s 1989 “Ascending Dragon: Project for Extraterrestrials No. 2”) or painted in an academic style on a canvas tilted right by 45 degrees (Zhao Bandi, “Young Zhang,” 1992).

The exhibition has about one-third fewer works than the New York presentation, with fewer than the original 71 artists included. Even at that, however, it would take a study of several days to delve into all the works on view and the content of the indispensable catalog. For those who might wish to devote a semester to a master’s thesis on the topic, a large room is lined with books and ephemera to aid in the research.

After all that, you would only know better than you do now how much you missed. It’s not an altogether bad thing to be reminded that the world and its histories can, and do, proceed without us. You might leave the museum feeling left out, because that might be exactly what you should feel.

“Art and China After 1989: Theater of the World”: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Friday-Tuesday, 10 a.m.-9 p.m. Thursday. Saturday, Nov. 10, through Feb. 24. $19-$25; ages 18 and younger free. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 151 Third St., S.F. 415-357-4000. **www.sfmoma.org**