

GU Dexin

It is tempting to leave this space blank – it is what Gu Dexin would prefer – but it would not be of much help for an audience unfamiliar with his work to get an idea of what makes Gu Dexin's art 'real'. Gu Dexin likes to let his work speak for itself, which on the whole it does rather well, being often monumental in scale, and directed at the eye and, above all, the senses. For the public, Gu Dexin's verbal diffidence cloaks the man with an air of mystery, which amuses even Gu Dexin given that he is, in fact, endearingly down to earth. He just doesn't like talking. Although he has particular views on art, most of which revolve around the utter futility of 'the system', of its art schools and institutions, art history and critical theory, it is rare to see him reveal even a hint of the formidable depths of his convictions on the subject in public. He prefers to treat audiences to one of his signature enigmatic grins.

As might be presumed, such views were formed in response to the *ad hoc* definitions of 'art', and the role of the artist, that were formulated by Mao in 1942 (at the famous *Talks on Literature and Art* in Yan'an, Shaanxi province, where Mao outlined the goals of all creative expression and the role of those who produced it, as spreading the word of socialist ideology), and which make Gu Dexin's approach to art all the more intriguing. The work remains unique in China for its use of site-specific space, of natural materials, such as apples, fire, and even pig brains, and for its appeal to senses (works are often drenched in perfume or carry the odour of putrefaction) other than just the mind or the intellect. It is also unique for being conceived as installations before most artists in China had even heard the word. Gu Dexin brings an immense level of intuition to his work, worked out of an instinctive feel for things rather than being directed by external influences, with the result that the works are idiosyncratic, often disturbing and bizarre, and completely original. Even today Gu Dexin does not visit museums or exhibitions, or look at catalogues or art magazines. Yet, he exerts an extraordinary influence within contemporary art circles in China, which can be attributed to his unorthodox invention, and the element of anarchy he brings to art deployed in the most courteous of manners.

Gu Dexin's initial contact with art was through painting, at the age of fifteen, alone, in a single room in a dormitory complex just twelve metres square. His four elder sisters lived in the room at the time, but worked during the day, permitting him to indulge his interest in art that his cadre parents vehemently opposed, and thus where they couldn't see him do it. For a brief period, when Gu Dexin married, the cramped room was both home and studio. The couple now lives in a slightly larger apartment but the walls are still hung from corner to corner with layer upon layer of the paintings that Gu Dexin made in his teens. Of greater interest here, though, are the shelves littered with abstract, gruesome forms, or with smooth-skinned, multiple-breasted beings, limbs and lips entwined, each of which appear to grow out of a larger fertility mother, like an inverse stack of Russian dolls, which Gu Dexin sculpts from children's plasticine.

Perhaps Gu Dexin does not like to talk about his work as the words really cannot do the work justice, beyond being obviously visceral, intoxicating as well as offensive, and always compelling. Often the works will undergo some physical change during the course of an exhibition, and the majority of the pieces are site-specific projects relevant to the time and place of the exhibitions in which he participates. Without precise knowledge of the exhibition environment, or the specific location and environs of a work, Gu Dexin is unable – and often unwilling – to conceive a plan for a work. The relationship between location, and the physical nature of the place, as well as the cultural framework in which it is sited, plays an enormous part in his choice of form, content and materials. Here, a site visit to Liverpool allowed him to encounter the red lighthouse boat that inspired the work created for *The Real Thing*.

Fascinated with the idea of the flashing lights and bold red surface of the monster steel structure, Gu Dexin chose to recreate the grand funnel of the boat that served as the last working mobile lighthouse in Liverpool. Once the idea took root, there was to be no changing it, even given the tremendous challenges of finding the appropriate workers and materials to achieve the desired exactness of replication. Working from archived engineering plans that came as close to the original blueprint as possible, and from a good deal of creative improvisation, a team of factory workers from a local steel plant—located two hours east of the capital in the northern port city of Tianjin—embarked upon the process of recreating the structure for Gu Dexin's chosen contribution to *The Real Thing*, working to a scale identical to the original in almost every practicable detail. Importantly for the artist, in the final work, which he predictably titled *2007/03/30 (Lighthouse Funnel)*—2007/03/30 being the opening date of the exhibition—the light swings in rhythmic warning circles as the original did in the boat's working life. The only modification that the artist elected to make was to add the element of sound to the final work. Here, from the twelve loudspeakers that have been attached to the lower rim of the glass casing surrounding the light, Gu Dexin blasts a cacophony of sound bites that he selected specifically for the project. Within the confused din of the aural maelstrom the twelve recordings engender, we can still pick out individual sounds that have come to symbolise specific cultures—the various tones of police car sirens being the most obvious example—as well as more mundane noises heard on city streets and in the course of daily life—here, human cries mix with gurgling water, and a variety of loud bangs and clanking.

Each of Gu Dexin's animation works has a distinctly evocative soundtrack: a sound chosen because it helps to underscore the joke around which the cartoon sequences revolve. Gu Dexin began to experiment with animation in 2002, following the acquisition of a computer in 2001, and having mastered the use of Flash software. The first group of twenty animation works that resulted were shown at the Fiftieth Venice Biennale in 2003. Since then he has created many, many more, all following a similar format that is analogous to a cartoon strip. Firstly, the storylines are as to the point as an episode of Andy Capp. Secondly, none are of more than twenty seconds duration: most are, in fact, less than ten seconds long. Every single work in the series alludes, in one form or another, to abiding human fears of failure, rejection, and humiliation, and conveys a sensibility that is in stark contrast to the masculine aura of the installation and site-specific works, although still played out with the same degree of visual violence. Here, it is a violence softened by the medium, and the average viewer's familiarity with the power of childlike simplistic forms to convey urgent social messages. Again, this is in contrast to Gu Dexin's general preferences for his installations which, courtesy of the natural, 'biodegradable' materials Gu Dexin uses to complete these three-dimensional works, are overtly masculine to the point of being bombastic, hence the frequently shocking experience for the audience of confronting them. One must assume that the contradictory emotions that are embodied in these two divergent seams of Gu Dexin's art are but a perfect expression of the balance of *yin* and *yang* in his character. Following this logic, for this new work, the conjoining of humorous, childlike sounds with such a potently virile form as the lighthouse boat funnel, reveals an equally perfect understanding of how the juxtaposition of opposites contributes to a consummately powerful whole.