

The Gao Brothers: *Sense of Space*

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THE GAO BROTHERS *SENSE OF SPACE*

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China's artists, it seems, have a hybrid, nomadic imagination that can transfer images, ideologies, and situations just as their own society, where populations have been moved, shifted, as the system changed and production quotas escalated. And so you often find this combination of social critique, and a new hybridism in Chinese art born of the speed and scale of change from an agricultural to predominantly urban society.

The Gao Brothers works embrace performance, sculpture, and photography and are indelibly imprinted with a memory of China's Cultural Revolution and the tragedy of Tiananmen Square, for their father was imprisoned by Mao Zedong and died in captivity. Such are the incongruities of present-day Chinese society that during one of the Gao Brothers renowned "hugging" performances, students, workers and even a policeman got involved. The policeman then threatened to arrest the artists after making a pass at one of the performers, a French friend of the Gao brothers!

Looking at two large scale photographs of Chinese youth in *Growing* (2000) and *Sense of Space – Wake* (2000) we see them collectively isolated as individuals, each one of them crouched and cramped into small cubes of space. There is nowhere for these people to grow, or, indeed go! In reality their spaces are tight. And these spaces form part of a larger container framework. These photographs, one of nude young men, and the other with clothed youth and several dogs, are emblematic of the new China, where vast numbers of people have moved to new instant cities, to work wherever without really knowing what the collectivity they are a part of really is.

A fun recent work titled *Outer Space Project No. 6* (2007) has a Lost in Space aura. When you get close to inspect this beehive-like structure that hangs in astral darkness, you can see tiny miniature people, some walking, some standing, others carrying bags, and a car. These drone-like figures are dwarfed by the scale of the structures, (of production and consumption), they have become a part of. The economies of scale cause an inverse effect on the people working within them, in that there is a reduction and redefinition of context. Non-space is space and vice versa. And not having an identity could be identity.



The Gao Brothers ironic and iconic hybrid sculptures include a perfectly hybrid Chairman Mao. *Miss Mao #1* (2006) is all white but she has breasts, and her nose could even have been appropriated from Pinocchio, but the Chairman's mole on the chin remains. This portrait bust is as marketable as post-Communist post-ideological Pop sculpture, as Mao's Little Red Book was in the era of Communist culture – both are forms of propaganda.

For the Kandinsky Prize awards in Moscow December 10th, 2008 in Moscow, the Gao Brothers smashed one of their Miss Mao sculptures using hammers (but not sickles). This bright shiny huge Mao hybrid again had breasts (mother Mao). As that statue came apart one ideology) another red statue of Lenin appeared within (another ideology). It too was destroyed. The Gao brothers then pulled a black skull out of the shards presenting it to the audience like a post-performance memento of our origins.

Looking at *The Installation of Tiananmen Ghost* (2005), which consists of four vertical colour photos of Mao, we see the

angle of the picture shift from image to image, from frontal to flat, becoming almost invisible. Such is the nature of propaganda whether it's your latest add for blue jeans or a communist propaganda mural. But times change just as the angles shift in that four-photo art piece.

Miss Mao in Confinement (2007) reflects all the ambiguities, the awkward transitions from Communist to Capitalist, from country to city, that are today's China. Here we see a sexy, glittery gold Miss Mao. Though she is shiny, she is actually a painted bronze vessel. A fiery red dragon emerges from her body. Bravo for Art Mur! They pulled off the Gao Brothers' first Canadian show, and a first for Montreal as well. *Sense of Space* is a wake up call to the arts community in Montreal. This is the state of today's culture – global, dispossessed, engaged, changing, uncertain but aware of the shift that is taking place. The Gao Brothers: *Sense of Space* captures contemporary China's brazen and brash, de-localized culture down to a T. □