

## Chinese avant-garde exhibit, Scheveningen, the Netherlands

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Number 74, Winter 2005–2006

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/8950ac>

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**Publisher(s)**

Le Centre de diffusion 3D

**ISSN**

0821-9222 (print)

1923-2551 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

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**Cite this document**

Appelbe, A. (2005). Chinese avant-garde exhibit, Scheveningen, the Netherlands. *Espace Sculpture*, (74), 36–37.

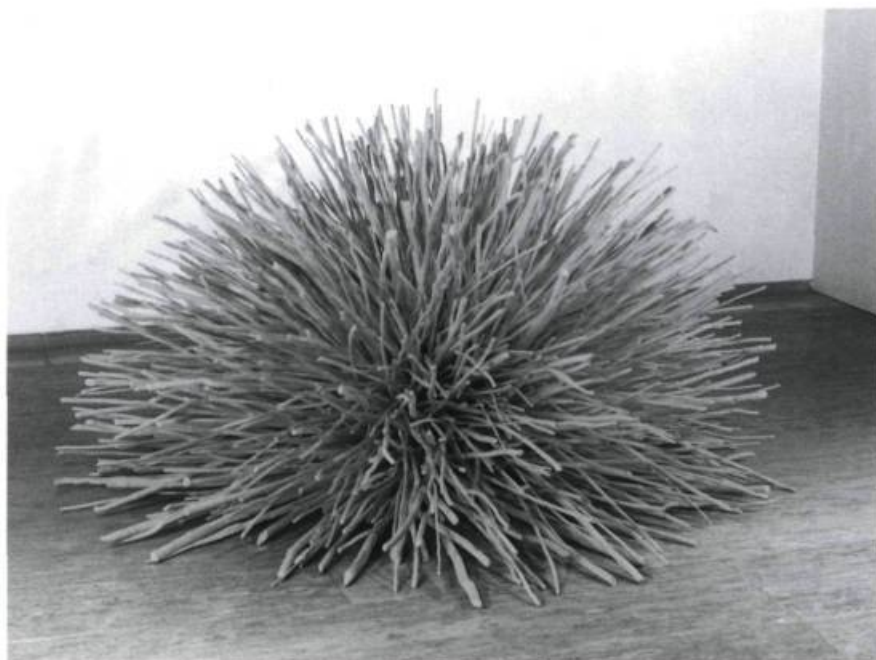
ries in Toronto and Ottawa researching a series of murders that occurred in the city of Ottawa, going so far as to interview the police officers involved in the pertinent cases. Dark was even able to obtain permission to photograph the very artefacts of homicide: the bullets themselves, those spent objects the clean aerodynamics of which have been torn asunder by the force of murderous impact; metallic forms bent, split, and distorted into virtually unrecognizable objects.

The intention throughout was to explore a grisly societal sub-culture few of us are ever privy to know unless we have the great misfortune to experience its horrors firsthand. Dark was initially fascinated by the artefacts retrieved from crime scenes. "What struck me when I viewed these discharged bullets," he wrote, "was the fact that they actually exploded into incredibly beautiful and lustrous shapes upon impact with human flesh and bone."

And so *Body of Evidence*, as this new body of work is called, begins with a sculptural manifestation assuming the form of a series of six freestanding works—all made of cast aluminum and each just shy of 100 centimetres in height—that are exact replicas of the distorted

remnants of the spent bullets used in the commission of six separate homicides. One piece actually has a passing resemblance to a bullet as we typically imagine it, the original artefact having survived impact in a relatively unscathed way and retained some resemblance to the original thing. But the others all teeter perilously close to an abstract reading, the only vestige of possible representation being a vaguely botanical resemblance to flowers in which jagged metal petals open to expose a circular core that is itself the only remnant of the original artefactual shape, of the bullet's pre-murderous form.

These forms are contextualized by accompanying wall-mounted images and text. The former comprise large-scale black and white photographs of the original bullets held by small chunks of clay alongside small rulers that highlight their diminutive size—out of all proportion with their massive societal impact. The latter element of handwritten text—graffiti, really—is scrawled across the images and spills onto the walls, spelling out some of the narratives that swirled about the events that lent significance to these artefacts in the first place.



The material ranges from the indifferently factual ("bullets travel 3000 to 5000 feet per second") to the more narrowly specific ("inquest into the murder of the children by their father recommended that the Department of Justice's firearms registry be implemented without delay").

With *Body of Evidence*, Shayne Dark doesn't abandon us to a cloistered artistic consideration of homi-

cide; we are not left alone in some uninvolved aesthetic isolation to merely consider the beauty of a sequence of abstract three-dimensional shapes. Instead, he makes larger contexts—social, political, cultural—overtly a part of the very shape of the sculptural. ←

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Shayne DARK, *Resurrection*, 1999. Wood, pigment, and steel. 86.4 x 152.4 cm. Photo: courtesy the artist.

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ALISON APPELBE



Being somewhat incongruously displayed in the Beelden aan Zee (Sculptures by the Sea) museum on the ocean near The Hague, in The Netherlands, an exhibit of Chinese avant-garde sculpture garners all the more power.

In this light-flooded modern building on top of sand-dunes overlooking the North Sea, three-dimensional pieces by 16 leading Chinese artists—all reflecting the change and repression in China in the past few decades—are shown at their best.

In the museum's main hall stands a phalanx of several dozen identical would-be soldiers by Yue Minjun, titled *Contemporary Terra-cotta Warriors*. The massive piece mimics the famous collection of more than 7,000 terra-cotta warriors, horses, and chariots from the Qin Dynasty (second century B.C.) at Xian, China. This piece juxtaposes issues of individuality

and collectivism in current communist and ancient Chinese eras. It also suggests conformity, fear, coercion and hypocrisy.

Fear and alienation come through in another assembly of figures titled *Urban Peasants*. Here, in a loose cluster of life-size men, artist Liang Shuo allows us to look into the eyes of poor, rural Chinese who have come to the city looking for work. What we see is reactions such as bewilderment, humiliation, and indifference—and resolve that ranges from swagger to defiance to hopeless resignation.

Other pieces cast light on the treatment of women and a sexual revolution that has accompanied an evolution from puritanical communism to state-controlled capitalism. Among them is a fibre-glass piece titled *Fucking Well*, by Li Zhanyang. It features a man—a husband—trapped in a contraption down in a deep well. At the top of the well, his wife is trying to turn the handle on the winch to

Liang SHUO, *The Urban Peasants*. Photo: Alison Appelbe.



Yue MINJUN,  
*Contemporary  
 Terracotta Warriors.*  
 Photo: Alison  
 Appelbe.

raise her husband, while being sexually abused – from behind – by a ninja warrior.

Says Dick van Broekhuizen, a spokesman for the Beelden aan Zee's Sculptuur Instituut: "These Chinese artists don't only use serious means to put their message across, they also use humour and alienating techniques to tell their stories."

Outspoken artists may need to be subtle and subversive, Mr. van Broekhuizen explains. "Changes in Chinese society force these artists to work out a visual strategy to cope with, or to criticize, the very swiftly developing circumstances."

The lingering influence of icons are depicted in several pieces. In *Clothes Veins Studies*, artist Sui Jianguo dresses a statue by Michelangelo in a Chairman Mao outfit. In *Chinese Dream*, Wang Jin presents traditional Chinese clothing made from recycled material embroidered with fishing line. And fibreglass flowers housed in miniature traditional Chinese buildings float on placid water in Lu Hao's *Lotus Pond*. The work suggests the vulnerability of gentle tradition and the destruction of historic architecture, particularly in cities like Beijing and Shanghai.

This overview of contemporary Chinese sculpture, titled *Xianfeng!*, was assembled and curated by Dutch collector and modern Chi-

nese art expert Cees Hendrikse. The exhibit is a response, says Mr. van Broekhuizen, to enormous interest in *The Netherlands in modern China*. Other exhibits this year include a modern Chinese music festival in Amsterdam, and a Chinese photography exhibit in the city of Den Bosch. *Xianfeng!* was put together with the help of Chinese-speaking faculty at the nearby University of Leiden. In China, project coordinator Sabine Wang collected the works, packed and shipped them. "We couldn't have done it without her," Mr. van Broekhuizen says.

In this museum, with an impressive library and other amenities, films about China run simultaneously in the video room. The exhibit, largely funded by the VandenEnde Foundation, runs solely at the museum until Dec. 11, 2005. Adds Mr. van Broekhuizen: "There has never been an exhibit of modern Chinese sculpture in The Netherlands. The artists are well known, and make great quality works. So what more can you ask for?"

The Museum Beelden aan Zee sits on the site of a former pavilion erected by King William I in 1826, in the seaside village of Scheveningen. It is part of a much larger collection of superb art facilities in and around the seat of the Dutch government, The Hague. They

include the Mauritshuis museum, with Rembrandts, Jan Steens, and Vermeers, in The Hague's historic centre; the Escher in the Palace, devoted to graphic artist Maurits Escher; the Panorama Mesdag, with a fine 19th-century panorama of Scheveningen; and the Gemeentemuseum, with paintings and drawings by modern Dutch master Piet Mondrian.

The flat-roofed Beelden aan Zee was designed by Dutch architect Wim Quist with a variety of rooms and levels – inside and outside. Clean light from a vast, unimpeded horizon and often cloudy skies illuminate the sculptures to their best advantage. Among works in the museum's permanent collection, assembled by founding collectors Theo Scholten (museum director) and Lydia Miltenburg, are those of Dutch masters that include Karel Appel, and Americans such as Man Ray and Tom Otterness. Purchased in 1994, Otterness's *The Head*, is among a number of bronze figures on an upper-level patio overlooking grassy mounds and ocean surface. Other pieces include *Cyrano de Bergerac*, by the late Dutch artist Arie Teeuwisse, and the nude figure of a black boy, *Muchacho*, by Cornelis Zitman, a Venezuelan.

Spectacularly nestled into a wind-swept knoll outside the

museum is a huge mask-like face, titled *Light of the Moon*, created in 1992 by Polish sculptor Igor Mitoraj. On a broad terrace between the museum and public beach sprawls a permanent installation of light-hearted bronze figures by New York-based Otterness titled *Fairy Figures by the Sea*. Intended for children as well as adults, the figures reflect European culture and habits (like *Haringeter*, or Herring Eater), and tales as varied as Pinocchio, Hansel and Gretel, Gulliver, and Moby Dick. Some figures are massive: the Herring Eater stands, or bends, more than 10 metres above the natural stone plaza. All are accessible to a public seeking a hands-on experience. Together with the museum's interior collection and temporary exhibits, the Fairy Figures demonstrate a resolve by the Beelden aan Zee to display sculpture of every inclination to every possible viewer. ←

Alison APPELBE is a Vancouver-based writer and photographer. Though she has written for magazines and newspapers – from the *Globe and Mail* to *CNN Traveller* – on subjects that range from politics to travel, she has a special interest in art and architecture.