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The Pavilion of China in the Globalization of Time

Curtis Carter

Marquette University, curtis.carter@marquette.edu

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Curtis L. Carte

In 1999, Harold Zeeman included 19 Chinese artists in the 48th Venice Biennale. The Chinese Ministry of Culture created the first official Chinese pavilion in 2005 for the 51st Venice Biennale and presented an exhibition "Virgin Garden Emersion" organized by Yu Jiang. Since that time, Chinese contemporary artists have experienced increasingly strong participation in the Venice Biennale. The role of Chinese artists has gained prominence in each of the succeeding Biennales held in 2007 and 2009, thus affirming the recognition of Chinese contemporary art as a leading contender in the global art world.

The theme of the 2011 Chinese Pavillion of the Venice Biennale, is "Pervasion of Chinese Flavors." The flavors or fragrances are linked in ancient Chinese philosophy to the five elements intended to explain the origins of the world and its components. This theme, as developed by the Curator Peng Feng, Professor of Aesthetics at Peiking Univeristy and art critic in Beijing, affirms once again the inventiveness of contemporary Chinese artists for offering fresh reflections on Chinese art and culture in their contemporary artistic expressions.

Despite the rise of globalization introducing western art to China, especially after 1980, Chinese artists have mainly resisted hegemonic dominance from western art. There is little resemblance in the 2011 Chinese Pavilliion, either to modern western art from Paris or New York, or to the era of Revolutionary Romanticism/Social Realism, prominent in the art of China in the mid to late Twentieth century. Instead, the approach that Peng Feng has taken in curating for this Biennale continues the pattern of bringing innovative Chinese artists' contributions to the Biennale since China first participated in 1999.

The five artists chosen by the Chinese Pavillion's Curator Peng Feng, are PAN Gongkai (President of the Central Academy of Fine Art in Beijing), CAI Zhisong, LIANG Yuanwei, YANG Maoyuan, and YUAN Gong. Each artist has selected a single cultural metaphor to evoke a particular flavor of Chineseness in their respective art media. The fragrance of the lotus is transformed into visual sensations through PAN Gongkai's "Snow Melting in Lotus, Installation" based on his brush and ink paintings. Multi-fragrant scents of tea represented in CAI Zhisong's "Cloud-Tea, Installation." The essence of Baijiu (white spirit) is present in LIANG Yuanwei's "I Plead Rain, Installation," as is the fragrance of medicinal herbs in YANG Maoyuan's "All things are Visible, Installation," leaving the

aroma of incense to YUAN Gong's "THE SCENTED AIR 6000m³-MUCH MORE THAN 6000m³" Like the spectacular display of artistic achievement present in the opening ceremonies of the Beijing Olympics in 2008, the current Biennale Pavillion offers a fresh view of the evolving creativity in contemporary Chinese art.

If it is the task of artists in the Venice Biennale is to create signs and symbols to interpret the past and present of their national cultures, the artists represented in the 2011 Chinese Pavillion have succeeded in capturing both enduring and ephemeral aspects of Chineseness. Their efforts bring together stages of Chinese art and culture linking the past to the present, the ordinary to the transcendent. In doing so, the artists invite sybaritic, pleasurable responses to their installations while also standing on the borders of conceptual art by testing again the boundaries of conventional art media.

Chinese artists of the present generation must continue to perform the role of equilibrists as they struggle with the question of how their work relates both to tradition and to the circumstances of contemporary life, both internally in China and in the global world. Given that Chinese art and culture are currently in a state of transition, in search of new groundings, the current exhibition can be seen as a noteworthy effort that brings together ancient and contemporary Chinese culture. The forging of new states of artistic innovation is on-going in China as it is elsewhere. Thus the new identity of Chinese art must rely essentially on the creative forces internal to art itself, in concert with the past and the changing social conditions of today. The outcome may well result in Beijing's becoming the next art capitol of the world, both for producing and marketing art. The art exhibited in Venice will no doubt be tested against the background of changing conditions as China continues "The Great Leap Forward" aimed at an empowered Chinese society with Chinese characteristics.

Curtis L. Carter is a writer on contemporary Chinese art. He is President of the International Association for Aesthetics, Professor of Aesthetics Marquette University USA, Founding Director of the Haggerty Museum of Art, and International Curator/ Honorary Director of the Beijing Museum of Contemporary Art.