

Chonggang Du

Having emigrated to Australia from his native China in 2003, Chonggang Du has an acute awareness of the differing cultures he has known first-hand. But as well as differences he sees parallels and echoes across time and space, often alluding to Chinese history through a range of aesthetically pleasing, but symbolically potent subjects. Chonggang's carefully chosen motifs are frequently loaded with references to political and social histories from both cultures, colliding with others from the present day. His seemingly gentle and poetic works thus depict multiple narratives, from the deceptive beauty of embroidered *lotus* shoes made for tiny, bound feet to piles of books, asleep and waiting to be opened. In this way a still life painting can reference the historic oppression of women and the importance and fragility of intellectual life. These are archaeological artefacts in a sense, voiceless objects that carry with them a plethora of historical and social critique, evidence of cultural foibles and practices across different eras and regions. They are offered for us to read as well as enjoy. Like an archaeologist, Chonggang offers us fragments that act as gateways to thought, sometimes memory, and speculation.

When Gerhard Richter and Sigmar Polke crossed from East to West Germany almost sixty years ago they were exposed to western culture and its excesses and absurdities for the first time. They soon set about making memorable art that would reflect this transition, often a mixture of wry observation and curiosity. Fifty years later, Chonggang Du's arrival in Australia would have brought similar surprises and fascinations, mixed inevitably with memories (good and bad) of his homeland. Already an accomplished artist and teacher in China, Chonggang brought with him a search for cultural hybridity, one that could be symbolically expressed through visual art. Having initially felt the impact of a freer and more open society in Australia, he gradually became aware of more subtle manipulations through consumerism and the media. It is these vehicles of cultural control that interest Chonggang, who compares the restrictions of his country of origin with the power and influence of, for example, corporate advertising and the media. In much of his work he champions and celebrates the value of knowledge and education, depicting tall but vulnerable towers of books.

Much of Chonggang's thinking is inspired by Taoist philosophy that proposes a harmonious balance between humans and the natural world, with our species seen as being integral rather than dominant. Needless to say this utopian equilibrium is far from the realities of the world we live in today, with heavy industry, the media and voracious consumption of natural resources forcing us to survive in a compromised environment. In the artist's own words:

As an artist interested in the ethics of technological development and the environmental costs of human civilization (such as the limitless exploitation of natural resources and the apparent lessening of a social politics) I intend to research these ideas through the language of painting, photography, sculpture, and video. Being a Chinese Australian who is in dialogue with both traditions, I shall situate my investigation in the hybrid space between the two cultures.

The “hybrid space” between cultures can take many forms. Most likely we think of this as an inter-national space, but the hybridity can represent the traveller through time as well. Chonggang’s interest in the repressive politics of early Chinese dynasties and the similar repressions and corrupt practices that have followed suggest a continuum that is as old and ubiquitous as human occupation. Occasionally a small bird perches on one of the many piles of books in Chonggang’s paintings, ready to fly away at the first hint of danger. The artist alludes to the anti-intellectual histories of book burning, a hallmark of many dictatorial regimes. Sometimes newspapers, too, are represented; crumpled, fragile, degradable. We are offered glimpses of images and headlines, ‘fake news’ perhaps? In much of Chonggang’s work carefully arranged groups of subjects collide, often echoing each other despite far-flung and distant origins.

Chongang Du’s skills as a painter are elite. His brushwork is both sensitive and unforced, visually precise but never tight, while his compositions are muted in palette but never dull or bland. His command of this medium is evidenced by the absence of any need to dazzle; the paintings are quietly compelling and, without exception, memorable. As such they manifest both the “hybrid space” he proposes – a seamless marriage of eastern and western techniques – and also a mixed sensibility, a metaphoric vision that is both timeless and almost musical. In this way the viewer is granted space to contemplate and to register the artist’s nuanced critique of contemporary society’s dangerous failings. But these are not angry paintings, they show love and compassion as well. They reveal themselves slowly and offer us a record of the artist’s trained and thoughtful gaze.

However, despite his mastery of painting, Chonggang does not restrict his output to a single medium and shows the same poetic fluency in a range of other media, including photography, video, and sculptural installation. As a cross-cultural artist his work exemplifies a fascinating tradition, and that is the blending of other traditions into our own, a dynamic that continues to expand our understanding of ‘Australian art’. Chonggang demonstrates that visual art is a language that is universal and, like music, can build bridges between worlds. With his abundance of skills and unique understanding of social histories and politics, he brings much to our culture, enriching us with his singular and powerful vision.

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