

**Misleading Trails**  
Vanderbilt University Fine Arts Gallery  
October 13-December 9, 2005

**Nashville**

Don't be led astray by the title *Misleading Trails* or claims that the work of the four Chinese and three American artists misleads because it appears disconnected. On the contrary, this collaborative exhibition (organized by the artists, the China Art Archives and Warehouse, Beijing, and the Samek Art Gallery, Bucknell University) presents work that commingles around themes of imperialism, government control and subversion.

Ai Wei Wei creates aggressive photographs and objects depicting the destruction or reconstruction of Chinese antiques. "Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn" (1995) is a conceptual performance piece comprised of three large black and white photographs in which Ai destroys an urn. In the first photograph the artist holds the urn, balancing it carefully between his fingers while appearing to make as little contact with the object as possible. In the second photograph he has let go of the urn with a fling of his hands, while the third photograph captures the urn in pieces on the ground.

These photographs possess an expressive clarity in which

every detail communicates. Ai wears the simple clothing of a worker, including cotton-soled Chinese slippers, thus identifying himself with the common citizen. His facial expression is defiant and angry. In none of the images does he look at or acknowledge the urn. He does not revere the authority represented by the Han Dynasty urn. Instead, his hands, as they let the urn drop, convey utter disregard, as if he is casting off something despised and toxic. There is a thrill, a sharp feeling of liberation, in the way Ai metabolizes his anger in this elegant dance.

Born in 1957, Ai Wei Wei is the oldest of the Chinese artists included in this exhibit. He is the son of Ai Qing, a well-known poet of his generation, who was a victim of the purges of the 1950s and then the Cultural Revolution of 1966-1976. This formative experience gives Ai's work striking gravitas. He reclaims for himself, and by extension the Chinese individual, the beauty and power claimed by those who govern.

Xiaozhe Xie's works also evoke destruction. Xiaozhe paints scenes of libraries, stacks of bound volumes and newspapers, with a sensibility at once painterly and photographic. To offer this particular setting brings to mind that libraries, frequently targeted during political upheaval, can signify a society's relationship to its own accumulation of contributions and failures.

The volumes depicted in "Chinese Library No. 14" (1999) and "Chinese Library No. 29" (2001) have a distinctly melancholy aspect. They are helpless things in a state of coming unbound, portrayed as fragile, ephemeral objects. The dangling threads of deteriorating bindings and the faded and bruised palette of the paintings offer emotional beauty. These volumes have survived, for the time being, and serve as reminders of the destruction of books that occurred during the Cultural Revolution, when Xiaozhe Xie was a child.

Xiaozhe's newer paintings, such as "December 2001, L.T." (2002) depict stacks of recent newspapers. Less mysterious, more contemporary and representational, these images pull one out of the library and into the city street. No longer mulling over the distant past, the viewer reconstructs moments in time from snippets of visible journalism, reminded of the filtered and fragmentary nature of contemporary news dissemination.

Hai Bo makes exquisite traditional black and white photographs representing essentially empty, isolated locations. Titles such as "Building Site," "California Bus," and "Elder" describe an aspect of each photograph. These images seem to be located in the middle of nowhere, in a timeless and transitional place. They contain a strong sense of the constant change that is China's recent history. Here, the past has been

cleared to make way for the future. The present is an odd, disconnected place, holding within it a foreboding of what is to come.

Hong Hao's photographic series entitled *My Things* presents self-portraits constructed of cultural commodities that resonate with a shift in contemporary Chinese art toward themes related to commercial culture. "My Things No. 8" (2003) is a meticulous tabletop arrangement of currency, film, paint, and identification, along with myriad other things. "My Things No. 7" (2003) presents an arrangement of books, catalogs, and compact discs – a personal library. This fascinating array of flotsam and jetsam begins to form a portrait of a person or, perhaps, a constructed persona. There is a universal quality to the portraits; these could be the possessions of any artist with the freedom, inclination, and affluence to travel. It is a glamorous and seductive picture, perhaps a bit of a gloss, an illusion. This is the artist as a contemporary mobile character participating freely in a global market economy.

The American artists produce works containing images of maps or globes. This reflects an increasingly global consciousness and situation; it is also a way to critique forces in play and imagine new scenarios. In *Vermeer in Bosnia*, writer Lawrence Weschler interprets the presence of maps in Jan

Vermeer's paintings as signifying the turbulence of Europe during his lifetime; Vermeer's response to violence was to create paintings that radiate serenity, works in which he invented a "zone filled with peace." In this exhibition, by contrast, artists Dan Mills, Vernon Fisher, and Enrique Chagoga each, in their use of map imagery, cast a critical eye towards America's military, religious, and capitalist encroachments abroad. Their works also exude a particularly American shame, along with a wish to be detached from these practices and policies.

Mills's works on paper employ advertising imagery and humor to comment on the American desire to exert global dominance. Three collages comprise *United States Empire* (2004). These works play on the Sherwin Williams Cover the Earth logo in which a globe is being coated with paint poured from a paint can tipped above. In Mills's pieces the paint can is labeled Use and the poured paint is a rich, blood red. On each piece is written, respectively, Cover the Earth, Cover the Earth, and Coven the Earth. These and Mills's related works on display are an obvious critique of the predatory and invasive tendencies of American culture.

Fisher's lithograph "Man Cutting Globe" (1995) depicts a retro-style father carving a model globe as if it were a jack-

o-lantern, while a young boy looks on in wicked fascination. Fisher's other works, such as "Hardvark" (1999) explore imperialist tendencies more subtly via the strange poetry of dictionary definitions.

Chagoga, a Mexican-American painter and printmaker, is a visual storyteller. His work springs from an authentic melding of cultural influences, resulting in a complex blending of religious, military, and sexual imagery. Chagoga creates satirical maps and comics, such as his *Road Map* series, which display the absurdity of supposing Jesus to be at the helm of current U.S. foreign policy.

*Misleading Trails* originated in response to a 2004 exhibit entitled *Regeneration: Contemporary Chinese Art from China and the US* and is the result of a discourse that began during visits to studios of Beijing artists in 2003. American artists choosing to create political works can rarely claim life experience as harsh as that endured by Chinese artists such as Ai Wei Wei. And so it follows there is much to be gained in an encounter with work evincing the ability to infuse political statements with personal and specific content.

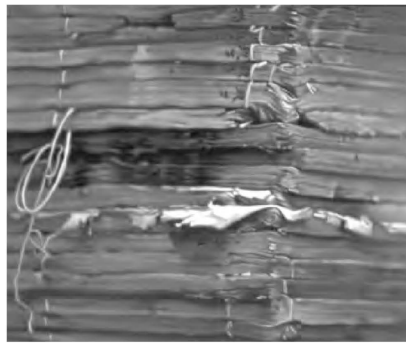
**Carrie McEee**  
McEee is an artist and writer who lives in Nashville.



Dan Mills, "United States Empire" (2004), 100% acrylic collage, and graphite on paper, 14 1/4 x 10 1/2" Courtesy of the artist and Printworks Gallery, Chicago



Enrique Chagoga, "Good Map" (2006), 2006, Acrylic on mixed paper, 38 x 40" Courtesy of the artist and George Adams Gallery, New York



Xiaozhe Xie, "Chinese Library No. 14" (1999), oil on wood, 20" x 18" x 10" Private collection



Vernon Fisher, "Man Cutting Globe" (1995), Lithograph, 38 x 38" Courtesy of the artist and Charles Coe Gallery, New York