

VISUAL ARTS

Some Rewarding Detours

Chinese and American artists in WFU show take 'Misleading Trails' to impart multilayered meaning

By Tom Patterson
SPECIAL TO THE JOURNAL

Worlds don't collide so much as they bounce off of each other in interesting ways in a cross-cultural art show that has opened with the new academic year at Wake Forest University.

"Misleading Trails," as it is provocatively titled, brings together contemporary artworks from opposite sides of the world in order to highlight their similarities and differences. This internationally touring exhibit, on view at the university's Hanes Art Gallery through Oct. 2, consists of 29 works in a variety of mediums by seven artists, including four from China and three from the United States. It was jointly organized by the China Art Archives and Warehouse in Beijing and the Samek Art Gallery at Bucknell University in Lewisburg, Pa.

One of the American artists represented is Dan Mills, the Samek's director, who is scheduled to discuss the show in a talk at Wake Forest on Wednesday at 2 p.m. In a recent telephone interview Mills commented on the show, its significance for the two countries and how it all came together.

Although Mills is credited in some of the promotional material as the exhibition's curator, he said that the process of selecting artists and artworks was handled collaboratively among the participants. "The show is pretty unconventional from a curatorial perspective in that it was very much artist-organized," he said.

Mills said that his own longstanding interest in international contemporary art dovetailed nicely with his job at the Samek, where he has worked for about five years. During his tenure there, the Samek has focused its programming on contemporary art from a worldwide perspective, he said, in keeping with the university's growing focus on thinking globally.

One of Mills' colleagues in the art department at Bucknell is Xiaozhe Xie, a Chinese-born realist painter also represented in "Misleading Trails." Mills said that the show is an outgrowth of an earlier exhibition of contemporary

Chinese art that he and Xie co-curated a few years ago.

While traveling around China on a curatorial trip, they noticed that many artists were working along thematic and conceptual lines similar to some of their counterparts in this country. The observation prompted them to hatch the idea of inviting artists from each country to participate in a touring exhibition. The idea culminated with this show's opening in Shanghai on Aug. 14 of last year. Since then, it has traveled to university galleries in Illinois and Texas, and after closing at Wake Forest it is scheduled to appear at venues in Tennessee and Maryland before winding up its tour at Bucknell in the fall of 2006.

After Mills and Xie discussed the exhibition idea with several Chinese artists, they invited a few artists in this country to participate.

Mills said he and Xie originally wanted to call the show "Obsolete Knowledge, False Systems and Misleading Trails," but they decided that that title was too cumbersome. "Misleading Trails" is a little more ambiguous, too, which seems appropriate," he said, adding that it seemed an appropriate phrase to apply to the show because all of the represented artists create complex works imbued with multiple layers of meaning. "A number of them seem to be about one thing, but on closer scrutiny you see that they're about something else, or that they deal with multiple issues," he said.

For example, Chinese artist Ai Weiwei is represented by works that "involve embracing the rich history of Chinese culture and destroying it at the same time," Mills said. One of Weiwei's pieces is constructed with two ornately crafted tables from China's Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), albeit reconfigured to subvert their original function by combining them into a single cross-shaped table. And in a series of three self-portrait photos, Weiwei pays homage to an elegant vase from the Han Dynasty (206 BC-220 AD) by dropping it onto an urban sidewalk and breaking it.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF WAKE FOREST UNIVERSITY
A number of works in the show use globes to comment on geopolitical issues.

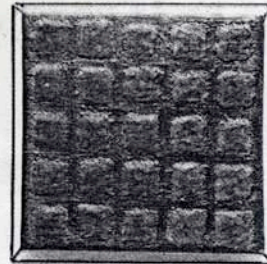
Some of the artists are represented in "Misleading Trails" by works that Mills characterized as serious and sincere, such as Chinese artist Hai Bo's austere photos of landscapes dominated by monolithic industrial buildings. These images reflect the rapid changes that rural China has witnessed in recent years, Mills said.

Some other artists works, by contrast, are conspicuously subversive and bitingly humorous. As examples Mills cited the pieces by Vernon Fisher of Austin, Texas. Fisher's color lithograph titled *Man Cutting Globe* mimics the style of illustrations from mid-20th-century children's books in its depiction of a man showing a boy how to carve a world globe as if it were a jack-

o-lantern. "You can't help but look at that piece as an image of Western empire-building passed on from father to son," Mills said.

The latter work is one of several in the show that employ images of globes or other world maps in order to comment on geopolitical issues. Other examples include lithographs based on strategically reconfigured world maps by Hong Hao of Beijing; satirical, cartoon-augmented world maps by Enrique Chagoya of San Francisco; and Mills' own satirical works on paper, which incorporate world-globe imagery and references to advertising.

The overt political criticism in Chagoya's and Mills' works generated particular interest among the show's



Ethan Brock's *Twenty-Five Handfuls* has a mix of materials suspended on steel.

Chinese audiences, Mills said, because Chinese artists still tend to shy away from being critical in their art. "Things have opened up a lot in China, and many artists there are doing quite well in the global art market and the international art world," he said. "But the area that's still the most problematic for artists there is a critique of Chinese politics or culture. When their works do involve such critiques, they're quite subtle."

Mills said that when he and the other artists were communicating about the exhibition during its planning stages, the Chinese artists often called him and their other American counterparts "comrade," clearly with some humorous intent. On the other hand, he said that when the American artists talked among themselves about the show, they sometimes referred to each other as "co-conspirators."

"In some ways that reflects a deep difference in cultural roots," he said. The Chinese have been accustomed by tradition to working for the good of the collective, he said, while Americans have historically striven to be independent and self-reliant.

■ "Misleading Trails" will be on view at Wake Forest University's Charlotte and Philip Hanes Art Gallery through Oct. 2. Dan Mills is scheduled to present a talk about the show on Wednesday at 2 p.m. in room 102 of the university's Scales Fine Arts Center. For more information phone 758-5585.