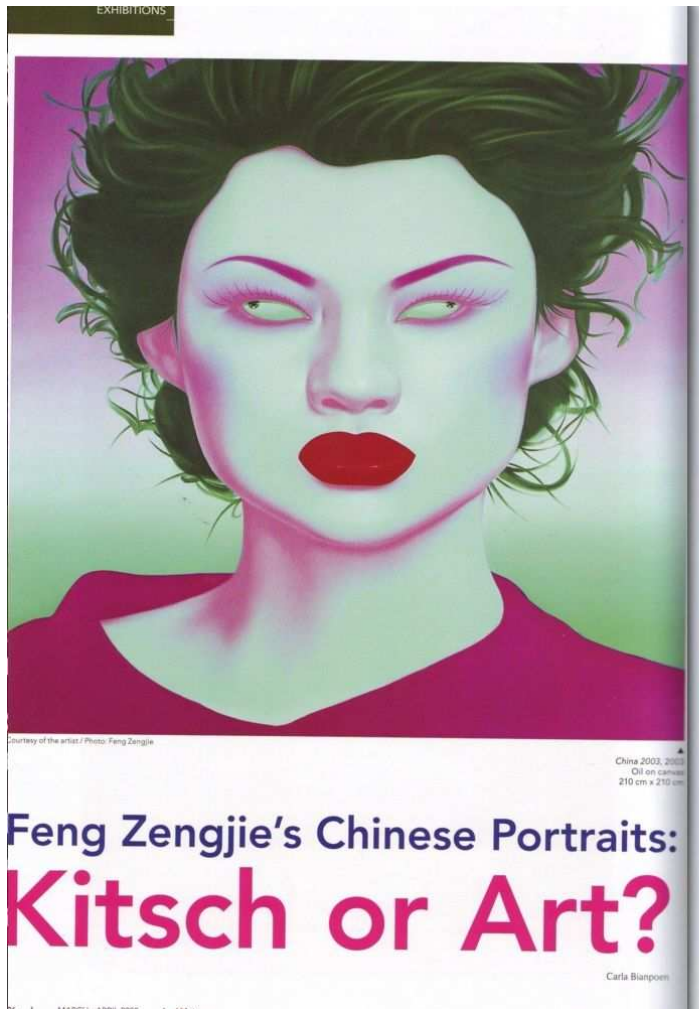




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**Headline:** Feng Zhengjie's Chinese Portraits: Kitsch or Art?



**W**omen's faces with exuberant red-colored hair in an abundance of stylish fashions, smooth pale skins with exotic reddish or greenish hues, luscious lips and slanting eyes looking in opposite directions—such are the features marking Feng Zhengjie's *China Portraits* at his recent Singapore Art Museum (SAM) show entitled *Primary Colours*.

Huge paintings, many ranging in measurement from three to five meters long, they are like inviting billboards with the kitsch sex appeal and fantasy glamour of today's socialite lifestyles. Some people might consider these paintings as just that: promotional billboards one passes by then forgets. But art critics and scholars have found meaning in these exuberantly colored faces.

"Feng's art suggests a new category of imagery that appears to speak in the language of kitsch, yet it is able to subvert both high art and popular culture," says SAM's director Kwok Kian Chow in his introduction to the exhibition. China's venerable art critic Li Xianning—in the book catalogue printed for the occasion of the SAM exhibition—mentions Feng Zhenjie, along with Qi Zhilong, as the only artists of *Gaudy Kitsch* "whose works have found maturity." He goes on to say, "The reason that Feng Zhengjie's beauty portraits can stand on their dignity today lies in transformation, or the artist's examination of China's fashion and consumerist culture today." Meanwhile, the president of Museo d'Arte Moderna in Bologna—Lorenzo Sassi de Bianchi—is filled with praise: "His canvases open up to a new world, which seems to have forgotten its history and involves us in an original and aesthetic vision that tells about contemporary life through images."

This indeed seems to be the concern driving Feng into the massive production of women's faces, dehumanized by vacant glances through tiny diverging eyeballs. They transmit some of the drama and alienation resulting from the void between the quality of material life and the spiritual values that once marked traditional life. Lately, some of his paintings have begun to feature larger eyeballs—looking in the same direction, though still not straight ahead.

"After 200 years of chaos, China is now embracing a rapid economy, and in many ways we are on a par with international standards," Feng explained on the day after the exhibition opened on 28 January 2008. "But from a cultural point of view, China experiences confusion. I want to express that in spite of external wealth and richness, internally, there exists great confusion."

As his highly successful paintings of Chinese women continue to entrance collectors, it should be realized that Feng had to go a long way, climbing the ladder of success through a long process of experimenting and refining his skills.

He grew up on a farm. As a boy he imitated the irrigation system,



▼ Coolness 2000 No.12, 2000  
Oil on canvas  
190 cm x 150 cm





Courtesy of the artist / Photo: Feng Zhengjie

Life Like Flower No.02, 2008  
Oil on canvas  
300 cm x 500 cm

making mini-sculptures of the machines used on the farm. Following training at a Teacher Training School, Feng studied to MA level at the Fine Art Education department of the Sichuan Academy of Fine Art between 1988 and 1995, where he was impressed by Michelangelo, Raphael and Cezanne, along with Chinese masters like Xu Beihong and Qi Baishi. Initially taking inspiration from traditional images, he proceeded to greater experimentation when he began questioning Chinese society after the Tian'anmen crackdown in 1989.

It was good that the exhibition also included paintings from his earlier period. This allowed the viewer to have a better understanding of the artist and his explorations. In one intriguing early painting, *Self Analyze* (1992) anatomical transparencies form a red layer over his face and body. Intricate paintings of the skin in *Recounting of Skin* or *Staggered Space* (1995) suggest a quest for the self. Paintings



Anatomy Series - Self Analyze, 1992  
Oil on canvas  
95 cm x 100 cm

representing female figures with male genitalia, or female couples in affectionate poses—one nude and one dressed—could also be considered to be in the same self-searching category. One could also see here his initial attraction to painting actors and actresses of the Chinese star firmament, and how this ultimately led to the plain enigmatic paintings of today.

Feng uses a lot of red, blue and yellow, considered primary colors of *Ben Se*. He says his basics are still grounded in traditional Chinese folk art. In traditional art, he told me, *Ben Se* means something natural and simple, although paradoxically, the colors red, blue and yellow are vibrant and dramatic, just as his paintings of women are.

While the exhibition includes paintings of his earlier period, it is his signature works, the China Portraits, which take up the majority of the exhibition space. They command high market prices, too: One 50 x 50 cm painting fetched a SGD 46,000 hammer price, almost four times its lowest estimate in the first Borobudur auction of contemporary works in Singapore in 2005. Feng revealed that a medium size painting would now sell for between USD 200,000 and 300,000, while his most expensive painting of three panels recently sold for USD 960,000. At a dinner auction held for special invitees the night before the SAM exhibition, a package of nine red envelopes (so-called *angpauw*), each with a different picture from the China Portrait series, sold for the magic price of SGD 88,888.

It will be interesting to see how Feng Zhenjie proceeds to the next phase in his artistic career. The question is whether he will hold on to his successful female faces or muster the courage to leave them behind and show his greatness with new forms of expression.

## SNAPSHOTS



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To acquaint our readers with the faces behind our magazine, this column presents the people and individuals from C-Arts who have attended events connected with Asian contemporary art. The following features them at various events:

Harry Gunawan from C-Arts is seen at the opening of a solo exhibition of Feng Zhengjie in Singapore, January 28, 2008, with Chinese contemporary art collector Mrs. Budi Tek (photo 1). While in photo 2, the artist (center) is shown with Mrs. Budi Tek.

The opening of the solo exhibition of an internationally renowned artist from China, Cai Guo-Qiang, at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, on February 22, 2008, was attended by Sardjana Sumichuan from C-Arts with his wife, seen here with the artist (photo 3).

And in Jakarta, Anytha Ryan of C-Arts, with her colleagues, is seen at the preview of an auction of Indonesian contemporary art, held by Masterpiece Auction House, at Aryaduta Hotel, on January 26, 2008 (photo 4), which was attended by art collectors from Indonesia, including Dian M. Soedarjo (photo 5).



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