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Headline: Showing their true colours

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A contemporary artist uses pop culture and folk art to convey inner tension, **PARVATHI NAYAR** finds out

"MY paintings cost far too much," says Chinese contemporary artist Feng Zhengjie, somewhat disarmingly. With works priced on average between US\$200,000 to US\$300,000 — and a recent private sale of a three-panel work selling to a collector for US\$960,000 — Feng is certainly doing well on the art market. But, as he goes on to explain later, via a translator, he was never motivated by the market when he decided to become an artist.

Feng is in town for his solo at the Singapore Art Museum (SAM) unveiled earlier this week. Titled *Primary Colours*, the exhibition shows 25 recent paintings by the prolific artist. Colour is one of the most important aspect of his work, with early paintings inspired by the 1930s Shanghai posters, and recent works in acid pinks, greens and reds taking some inspiration from traditional Chinese New Year hues.

The term, *Primary Colours* (*Ben Se*), is a paradox, according to Feng "because *Ben Se* means something simple and natural but when we look at the colours red, blue and yellow, they are vibrant and dramatic". Similar dualities, he says, exist within his works.

Born in Sichuan Province in 1968, Feng now lives and works in Beijing, and is very successful as an artist. However, he came to a life in art rather serendipitously. "As a child, I liked handicrafts, but I only learnt art formally when I was 16, and training to be a teacher. I had to choose between art and music, so I picked art since I did well in it, while in music class I was always out of tune."

Feng's contact with art changed his life. "Raised in an isolated village away from the city, I didn't know that (being an) 'artist' was an occupation, nor was I aware about the Chinese contemporary art scene," he says.

Earlier, he was content to contemplate a quiet life as a primary school teacher, but on discovering art, he felt there could be more to his life. He went on to study at the Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts, and says some of the primary art influences were from the Russian modern school.

Through contemporary exhibition catalogues and books, he broadened his visual knowledge. As for his own work, the first breakthrough was the 1992 *Anatomy* series — of which examples can be found in the SAM show.

Romantic Trip series of the mid-late 90s, also featured in the exhibition, shows how Feng had grown in confidence as a painter and colourist. These are some of the most interesting works on show, where Feng gently satirises the exaggerated poses and colourful backdrops seen in the photos taken of wedding couples.

One feels most ambivalent about the works that are ar-



Perfectly disturbing: The superficial beauty of flawless faces in Feng's 'Chinese Portrait' series show internal conflict through their strangely divergent eyes, which the artist sees as windows to the soul

guably what Feng is best known for today — a form of rendering seductive beauty that he's been playing with for the past seven years or so. These smoothly perfect, seeming flawless faces, mostly of women, are known as the *Chinese Portrait* series, and are in large-scale formats painted in startling acid colours.

The stylised faces are based on actual pictures of women, models and celebrities who are part of the celebrity culture, whose faces adorn the covers of glossies, advertisements and billboards. The eyeballs of these faces have shrunk over the years to pinpoints; a signature detail are the divergent eyes, each looking in a different direction.

Feng sees eyes as windows to the soul, and as a way of showing an internal conflict with the superficial perfection of the faces, but the resultant effects often feel eerily soulless. Size is part of the impact of a Feng work; the gigantic works at the SAM exhibition are between two and three metres long.

In Feng's experience, international recognition came about organically. It helped that he participated in important shows like the first Chengdu Biennale or the first Guangzhou Triennial in China, as well as many shows in places such as Italy, France and Germany.

Within the Chinese contemporary art landscape, he became well-known as an artist who used both contemporary popular culture and folk art images in his work. Critics saw in his work a critique of the contemporary consumer society in China. But speaking to Feng today, his relationship with Chinese pop culture seems far more ambivalent.

The wall text offers a quote from the artist on the subject: "Strictly speaking, what I really want to express has nothing to do with popular culture. Rather, my works are more concerned with the inner state of people today — the tension between the inside and the trappings of the (trendy). That's the important thing. Everything else is merely colours or images on the surface."

During our conversation, he explains how he's not really an outsider looking into the contemporary culture; in many ways, he is part of it. Since his student days, he has been fascinated with pop culture. Now with his art doing so well, you suggest, he also has the spending power to feed this fascination.

He laughs and says: "Well, if you have money — and have money in your hand — it's selfish not to spend it. You need to spend so someone else can earn."

Importantly, he also makes a conscious, sustained effort to buy the artworks of young, unknown Chinese artists. "I have been there and struggled like them," he says, explaining that he wants to offer financial and moral support to today's new artists. Moreover, he hangs up such works in his studio, which sees a fair amount of traffic, with visitors, collectors and gallerists.

"I don't sell their art for them, but by buying and displaying them, I get them exposure. It is my way of contributing to the contemporary art scene in China."

Primary Colours: Feng Zhengjie, at Singapore Art Museum, 71 Bras Basah Road, till April 20. Mon to Sun, 10am to 7pm, with extended hours and free admission on Fri from 6pm to 9pm