

# GLOBAL VISION

NEW ART FROM THE 90's PART II 7.7-26.9.1998

MONTIEN BOONMA  
CAI GUO QIANG  
JOHAN GRIMONPREZ  
SHAHZIA SIKANDER  
NARI WARD  
CHEN ZHEN





NARI WARD *Hunger Cradle*, 1996 Mixed media Dimensions variable

One of the issues arising immediately out of the reality of globalisation is that of personal identity, which is also one of the main points of focus in this group of exhibitions, and has already been enunciated in the first part of *Global Vision: New Art From the 90's*. The second part of the exhibition continues to explore similar issues and is likewise sited within a multi-cultural context. Again, it brings together the works of artists of varying origins: Montien Boonma is from Thailand, Shahzia Sikander comes from Pakistan, Chen Zhen and Cai Guo Qiang are both Chinese, while Nari Ward and Johan Grimonprez are Jamaican and Belgian respectively. However, once again the show is not concerned with making redundant assumptions about ethnicity, cultural stereotyping, or definitions of 'national' art; rather it is about continuing a trans-national discourse which arises out of the interweaving of native cultural references and belief systems, and

shared global realities which are part of contemporary artistic conscience. As a result, a variety of sub-texts arise in the work of these artists: memory, the legacy of history and cultural tradition; the dissolution of boundaries between distinctions of 'east' and 'west', socialist and capitalist ideologies, and, of course, the issue of fragmentary, diasporic identities or identities in transition.

What these artists share is an anthropological approach towards the exploration of the consequences of globalisation, and their address of a wide range of philosophical, political and social issues sited within a broad international framework, yet acknowledging the particularities of their own cultures and experiences. Hence, most of the work combines traditional references and indigenous stylistic iconography or materials but is always poised in relation to the present. There is also a great deal of critical engagement with society at large, but also introspection,

inwardness, meditation, which situates the work firmly in the 90's, and makes for an altogether more intimate artistic confrontation.

Most of the works are large-scale, impressive, and physically imposing installations that systematically map the surrounding environment and demand audience interaction. Through these, the artists have created a series of evocative, intensely charged spaces: sites of projection and reflection which possess an ambiguous or non-specific sense of narrative, and may spark off different associations for the individual viewer, rather than dictating meaning. Thus, allegory and metaphor abound and the viewer is encouraged to adopt an intuitive, reflective approach towards the work. What counts here is the overall experience of a *situation* rather than an object, the creation of a mood, rather than articulation of a categorical conceptual or ideological discourse.

At the same time, one cannot ignore the physicality and

material presence of these works, to the extent that one could speak of a tendency towards the *re-materialisation* of art. In these works, the theatrical blends with the contemplative, dramatic staging is coupled with emotive content, and the monumental is combined with the meditative; poetic sensibility, conceptual vigour, and formal beauty all co-exist. One will also observe an emphasis on the hand-crafted and labour intensive in works that are the antipodes of those that manipulate the high-tech sharpness of digital media.

An eloquent example of these strategies can be found in Montien Boonma's *House of Hope*, a temple-like space, comprising of 1648 strands of hanging herbal beads and culminating onto a stair-like structure made of 440 wooden stools; the walls surrounding the work are painted with a mixture of a number of local herbs that fill the air with a distinctive aroma, thus engaging the viewer's senses in more ways than one. Despite its sensuous and ethereal character, the work is informed by the perspective of living today. Coming from a country riddled by HIV, environmental pollution, social disorder and unrestrained industrial development Boonma's *House of Hope* functions as a metaphor for escape, for physical and mental rejuvenation, and offers refuge from the traumas of daily life. Issues of industrialisation versus the natural environment, urbanisation versus ruralism, and material versus spiritual yearning are evoked in this contemplative space. The artist's use of simple, organic materials and the uplifting, dreamlike quality the 'house' possesses advocate a return to traditional values and more natural ways of life. The experience of the work evokes ancient medicinal curing practices based on the use of herbs and

meditation. In effect, *House of Hope* functions as a sanctuary, a quasi-religious shrine offering hope, and transcendence which paves the way for spiritual catharsis. Ultimately, it speaks of daily survival, healing, and faith.

Chen Zhen (like Cai Guo Qiang) belongs to a generation of Chinese artists that grew up with the cultural revolution and are now witnessing China's gradual detour towards a free market economy and modernisation. His work is thus concerned with the clash of cultures and lifestyles both between 'traditional' and 'modern' China, as well as between east and west. *Daily Incantations* is a sculptural installation made out of 101 wooden chamber pots gathered from the streets of Shanghai and suspended from tiered racks. In the centre of the installation, Zhen has placed a large globe-like structure composed of old television sets, computers, radios, and other obsolete electronic equipment. This bulky conglomeration of objects is accompanied by the sound of brushes scrubbing and water flowing, evoking images of the pots being cleaned. At the same time, one can hear excerpts read from Mao's *Little Red Book*, a daily ritual enforced in schools and work places during his regime, intended to cleanse the mind. The work is thus based on a series of juxtapositions, parallelisms, and paradoxical confrontations: between bodily waste and consumerist refuse, hygiene and ideology, physical and mental purification, old and new, the organic and the synthetic, the primitive and the modern and ultimately brings two distinct worlds into a critical encounter. In addition, Zhen points to the homogenisation of daily rituals and lifestyles throughout the world, the universal desire for consumption, as well as to bygone ways of life. The irony here is that this 'modern'

electronic equipment very soon becomes as outmoded and obsolete as the chamber pots themselves. Zhen's 'daily incantations' are an eloquent meditation on everyday life and modern being, on ruptures in continuity, and shifting realities.

Cai Guo Qiang, on the other hand, has become known for his monumental earthworks, ambitious outdoor projects related to specific locations which bring into confrontation the cosmic forces of creation and destruction, underlying the contradictions inherent in nature. Many of these projects are often epic in scale and apocalyptic in nature and take place at sites of historic significance such as the controlled fire which Cai extended through the Great Wall of China into the Gobi desert, or his recreation of the form of a mushroom cloud at a nuclear testing site in Nevada. The artist also employs the use of traditional Chinese materials such as herbal medicine and ancient techniques such as Chinese geomancy (*feng shui*) as well as acupuncture. Philosophical in nature, Cai's work is concerned with promoting a positive, harmonious interaction between man and his environment.

Cai's large indoor installations are also epic in scale and have a pronounced sense of physicality and visual presence. The *Dragon Has Arrived*, for example, is a work made out of wood from an old shipwreck, which can be developed in a variety of ways. In this case, it takes the shape of a pagoda-like tower and is hung from the ceiling and tipped on its side. Sporting fans, lights, and red flags from the People's Republic of China the work also evokes the dynamics and shape of a rocket and functions as a comment on traditional cultures bent on modernisation. Here past and present, tradition and modernity, stagnation and progress, old



CHEN ZHEN *Daily Incantations*, 1996 Wood, metal, char

SHAHZIA SIKANDER *Veil 'n' Trail*, 1997 Acrylic on linen 3 panels 168x244 each





CHEN ZHEN *Daily Incantations*, 1996 Wood, metal, chamber pots, sound system, electrical appliances and electrical cable 700x350x230 cm



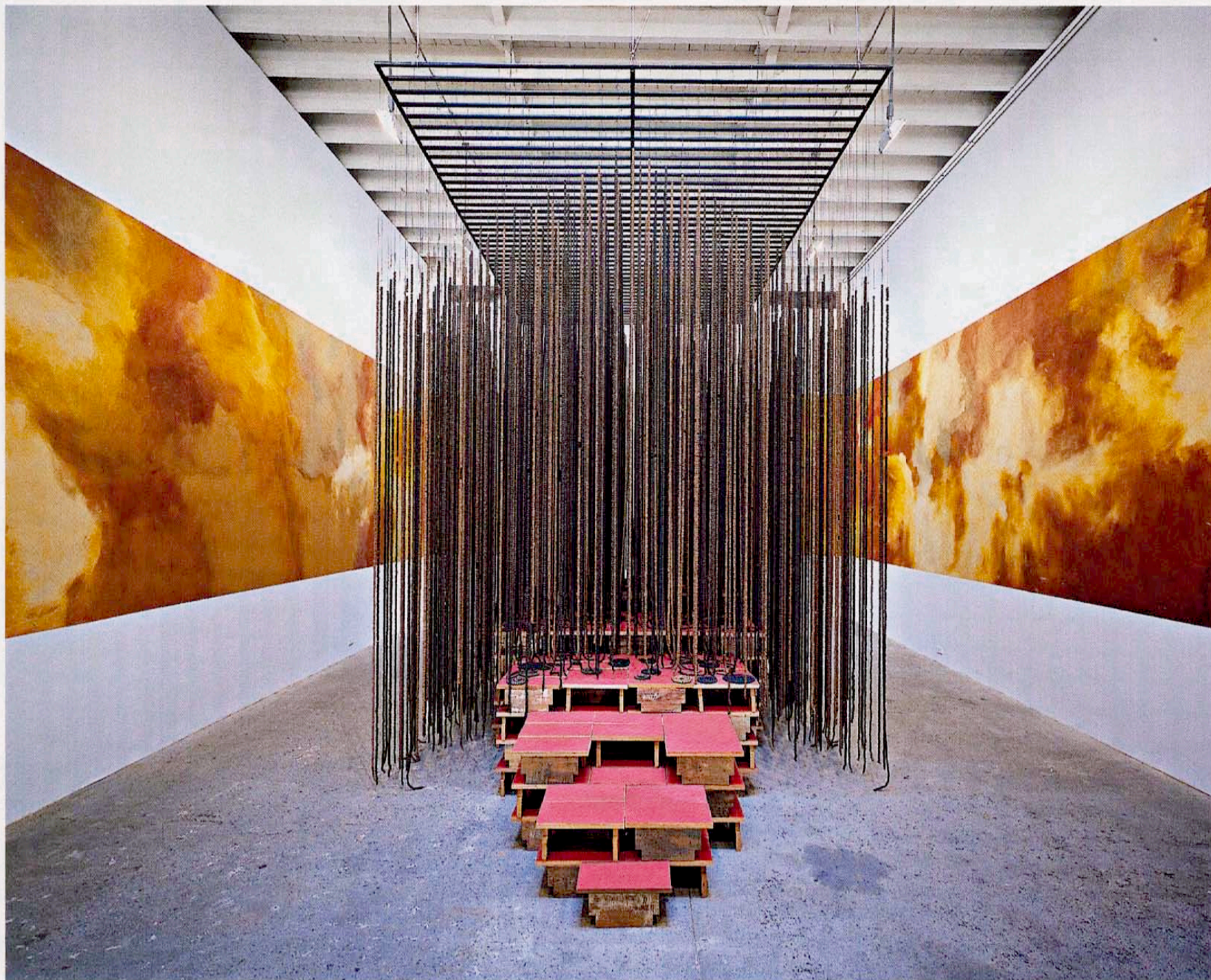
and new ideologies are fused into an animated whole.

A different, quieter, more introspective experience is created by Nari Ward in *Hunger Cradle*, a web or nest-like sculptural environment made out of rope, yarn, and discarded objects and adapted especially for the space. Ward often creates large scale psychologically charged installations (such as *Amazing Grace* consisting of a number of abandoned baby strollers and shown at 'The Factory' in 1996) by transforming everyday refuse and humble, neglected objects into uncanny, complex structures, profound and potent ciphers of survival and transcendence. Here, he has created an intricate surrounding, a contemplative space made out of urban detritus, which the viewer has to 'enter' physically and mentally. *Hunger Cradle*, as the title suggests is about hunger, need, and yearning, whether of a physical, mental, or spiritual nature. However, it is also a site of reflection and refuge, solace and spiritual regeneration, a sanctuary for the individual, as well as a comforting, nurturing space. It imposes no fixed meaning or sense of narrative, but rather, is a work which is loosely associative, whose 'completion' depends entirely on the viewer. Both pragmatic and transcendental, *Hunger Cradle* is a highly intimate space, where the individual is called to respond in his own, very private way.

Issues of female identity, misrepresentation and cultural typecasting lie at the core of Shahzia Sikander's work. The artist studied Persian and Indian miniatures and has adapted this most traditional of Eastern visual languages to explore her own contemporary artistic identity. Using a multiplicity of iconographic sources from the Hindu and Muslim traditions, such as the shredded veil and the multi-armed goddess, Sikander exploits their inherent symbolism to dismantle 'orientalist' stereotypes. Drawing especially on the Kangra style with its lyrical naturalism and stylised architectural settings, and Mithila village painting

executed exclusively by women on mud walls and floors, as well as western references such as tales of Rapunzel and Red Riding Hood, Sikander creates a complex, often cryptic, hybrid tableau filled with clues where personal experience, memory, history, fantasy, and mythology are interwoven, spliced, and reconstructed to create a fragmentary, ambiguous narrative which often resembles fractured dreams. In her work images float, forms and figures overlap, are layered and entangled, and identities effectively remain elusive. Through the use of dry pigments, vegetable dyes and tea Sikander creates diaphanous, translucent, beautifully patterned and exquisitely crafted surfaces. Her execution displays the detail, precision and exactitude associated with miniature painting, but also a looser, more informal style which is entirely her own. Central to her symbolism is the female figure, sometimes her own - ubiquitous and omnipotent - often veiled or sporting dangling entrails as feet which floats, as if rootless, through the picture space. However, there is no overt feminist discourse here; the veil - an archetypal eastern feminine stereotype - is not portrayed as a symbol of oppression, as is more often than not the case, but one of protection, empowerment, and assertion of femininity and individuality.

A completely different kind of reality resides in Johan Grimoprez explosive film, *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y*. Its subject is the unofficial chronicle of worldwide airplane hijacking, pseudo-documentary style. The film is a collage of archival footage, personal home-movie imagery, airline safety films, and historical clips, while its narrative is inspired by two novels by Don DeLillo (*White Noise* and *Mao II*). It explores the question of media politics, and its fascination for catastrophe culture, by charting the progression and methodology of terrorism; from the romantic revolutionary hijacker of the 60's and 70's to the anonymous, sociopath of the 90's, Grimoprez explores the visual spectacle



MONTIEN BOONMA *House of Hope*, 1997 Steel grill, herbs, chinese medicines and mixed media Dimensions variable

of terrorism (and violence in general) and the mythology that has woven itself around it, abetted, of course, by an incessantly image-hungry press. But despite its highly charged subject matter the film refrains from being didactic. Instead, the artist adopts a fast-paced, jazzy, 70's, TV adventure-style approach which is sarcastic and often comic. Images succeed one another rapidly, and there is a steady dose of deliberate sensationalism and aestheticisation of horror which ironically mimics media methods. In much the same way, the film feeds off the aesthetics of disaster films, and cinematic hyperbole, and takes the phenomenon of media spectacularisation to its extreme. The macabre and the humorous, banality and soap opera style melodrama, the tragicomic and the farcical are intermingled in this visual roller coaster. The film is accompanied by David Shea's deliberately lightweight lounge/easy listening soundtrack which renders the film even

more hilarious, the violence even more mindless and absurd.

Grimonprez wisely refrains from making any sweeping judgements or statements but his parallelism between terrorism as a kind of radical 'performance' does not go amiss. The film inevitably raises questions about the role of the artist in terms of efficacy and social leverage. At a time when society is increasingly being dominated by the media spectacle, and the image of art has to compete with the proliferation of media imagery, Grimonprez' film reminds us that art must re-examine its capacity for persuasion and social transformation.

From the ritualisation of daily life to the abstraction of personal experience and the articulation of a dispassionate social commentary, the artists in *Global Vision* bring into dialogue a variety of languages, experiences and approaches to art making ranging from the pragmatic to the philosophical.

Although their work acknowledges the particularity of their respective local cultures, it transcends any notions of 'ethnic' art, contests cultural stereotypes of the 'other' and is situated firmly within a broad international framework. In favour of globalisation but against homogenisation, the exhibition forces us, in addition, to re-examine the issue of hegemony of the centre vis a vis the periphery but demonstrates simultaneously how cultural difference aids the search for common ground, ultimately raising issues which concern us all.

Katerina Gregos  
Director, Deste Foundation, Centre for Contemporary Art



Cover: CAI GUO QIANG *The Dragon Has Arrived, 1997* Wood, electric fans, flags (P.R. China), lights Dimensions variable

JOHAN GRIMONPREZ *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* Video, 68 mins (Belgium/France 1997) Courtesy Incident vzw

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