



**WESTERN SYDNEY**  
UNIVERSITY



Australia-China Institute  
for Arts and Culture

# JIAWEI SHEN'S ARCHIBALD PAINTINGS

## Venue

Ground Floor, Building EA  
Australia-China Institute for Arts and Culture Gallery  
Parramatta South Campus  
Western Sydney University

## Exhibition Period

20 Jun - 10 Aug 2018

## Gallery Opening Hours

Mon - Thu 10:00am-3:00pm  
Fri 11:00am-3:00pm

For more information and to RSVP, please visit [westernsydney.edu.au/jiawei](http://westernsydney.edu.au/jiawei)





# JIAWEI SHEN'S ARCHIBALD PAINTINGS

## ARTIST STATEMENT

From 1990 to 2018, some twenty five China-born artists (not including Jenny Sages) were named finalists for Australia's prestigious Archibald Portrait Prize. Most of them came from mainland China in the 1980s and 1990s, although a few exceptions arrived after 2000. Many of them had had a specialist art school background in China, and some were finalists more than once. For this reason, the total number of finalist paintings by them was sixty four.

Jenny Sages as an artist from an earlier generation clearly does not belong to this Chinese group, because she was born in Shanghai in 1933, and left Shanghai in 1948, the year in which I was born in the same city, a few streets away from her home in the French Concession. In the Archibald competitions, she was twenty times a finalist, and seven times Highly Commended (runner-up).

I myself belong to the newer group of China-born Archibald finalists. I submitted my first entry work *Mabel* (1991) in 1992, which however, was not selected. In the following year I became a finalist and then continued to be a finalist for seven years. Up until last year I was in the Archibald Portrait Prize twenty three times and fourteen times as finalist, including runner-up once in 1997. Up to now, thirteen of my twenty three Archibald works have been acquired by public or private collections. The rest of them remain with me in my own collection. In this exhibition I am showing eight from the twenty-three and one of these is of course *How to Explain Art With A White Rabbit* (2015) which is in the collection of the White Rabbit Art Gallery. I thank Judith Neilson, its Subject and Owner, for kindly agreeing to loan it for this exhibition. The other seven are from my own collection. Among these eight, three were Archibald finalists, and in the rest of the five, two, through some stroke of providence, won the Holding Redlich People's Choice Award in the *Salon des Re-fuses* exhibition at the S.H.Ervin Gallery in 2003 and 2007.

I see myself as a natural portraitist. Because of the Archibald Prize which has been running for a century, I see Australia as my paradise and my lucky country, and I am pretty sure this country has inspired, and will continue to inspire, many other portrait artists in the world.





# JIAWEI SHEN

Jiawei Shen was born in Shanghai in 1948. Largely self-taught, he became a well-known artist in China in the mid-1970s during the Cultural Revolution. His oil painting *Standing Guard for Our Great Motherland* (1974) became an icon in those years and later shown in New York twice at Guggenheim Museum in 1998, and Asia Society Museum in 2008. In 2009 it was auctioned away in Beijing Guardian for the price of about one million US dollars. Now it is in the collection of the Long Museum in Shanghai.

From 1982 to 1984, he studied in the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, and later became a professional artist in Shenyang. He won the National Art Exhibition Prize in China five times.

Jiawei Shen moved to Australia in 1989 and for the first three years had to support himself financially by drawing portrait sketches for tourists at Darling Harbour. He looked on this experience as an opportunity to research portraiture and since then he has completed many accomplished portrait commissions in Australia and overseas. As a leading portraitist he was commissioned by the Australian government to paint official portraits for Pope Frances (2013), Princess Mary of Denmark (2005), Prime Minister John Howard (2009) and Australian Governor General Sir Peter Cosgrove (2018).

Since 1993, Jiawei Shen's portrait paintings have been finalist for the Archibald Prize at the Art Gallery NSW fourteen times and in 1997 he was runner-up for this prize. He has also been a finalist in the Doug Moran Portrait Prize (1994, 1996, 2006, 2007 and 2017) and has twice won third prize in the Sydney Royal Art Show (1993 and 1994). In 1995 he won the Mary McKillop Art Award and received a medal from Pope John Paul II. He also won the Sir John Sulman Prize in 2006, and the Gallipoli Art Prize in 2016.

Jiawei Shen has made a reputation for his large history paintings. In his Australian epic, *At the Turn of Century* (1998), there were more than 100 historical figures; in his Malaysian epic *Merdeka* (2008), 260; and in his Chinese epic *Brothers and Sisters* (2010-2017), more than 450.

Jiawei Shen has six works in the collections of the National Portrait Gallery and the Parliament House in Canberra. In China, he has seventeen works in the collections of the National Museum, the National Art Museum, and the National Military Museum in Beijing. His portrait of Pope Frances is in the Vatican Art Collection.

"Shen is a whole-hearted painter who has come through a tough artistic training in China. He has all the technical ability, the courage to take on ambitious compositions, and a hint of self-deprecating wit." (John McDonald, SMH, 29/03/97).

# MABEL

1991

Oil on canvas, 137 x 137cm

Mabel Lee was the first academic I met in Australia. She was the President of the Chinese Studies Association of Australia (CSAA) and she organized the CSAA's Second Biennial Conference at the University of Sydney in July of 1991, during which a week-long exhibition of contemporary Chinese artists was held at the University Club. I was amongst the twelve artists invited to participate. Mabel's home was often open house for Chinese artists and writers and after I rented a studio in Redfern I also came to her parties, and we soon became good friends. Just before Christmas, my wife Lan and daughter Xini came to Sydney after three years of separation. At Mabel's big Christmas party that year, our little family was included, and we felt it was like being back home in China.

I had asked Mabel if I could paint her as the subject of my first Archibald Prize entry. She agreed but warned me against painting her holding a cigarette. I said, "If you're not holding a cigarette, it wouldn't be you!" Her reply was: "Then, your work won't be selected as a finalist." I said, "That is not so important."

As she had predicted, my painting was not selected. But I was happy because I was confident that I had captured her on my canvas. Twenty-seven years has since then passed, but Mabel still looks as she does in the portrait, neither any older nor any younger.

In another twenty-seven years, both Mabel and I will have vanished from this world, but people will still be able to see Mabel in this painting. This is why I always call myself a history painter.





# THE LADY FROM SHANGHAI

## (JENNY SAGES)

2002

Oil on canvas, 203 x 153cm

Finalist of 2002 Archibald Prize

Jiawei Shen arrived in Sydney in early 1989, and soon afterwards he made his first visit to the AGNSW (Art Gallery of New South Wales). He was immediately captivated by a large landscape oil painting. He loved its wild and colourful style, and noted the name of the painter: Jenny Sages. The next year on visiting her solo exhibition, he was surprised to read on her CV that she had been born in Shanghai in a Russian-Jewish family, and had left Shanghai for Australia at the age of fourteen in 1948. That year was of course also the year in which Shen was born, and he, too, was born in Shanghai.

Jiawei had imagined that the painter must be a powerful woman with a big stature. When they subsequently met, however, he was surprised to discover that Jenny was a petite and gentle person. Jenny told him: "You're too late meeting me! If my father were still alive, he would talk to you in pure Shanghainese!" Shen said: "But I guess you could speak Shanghainese, too!" Jenny said: "I've forgotten it all!" But then Shen heard an old-style Shanghainese greeting: "Have you had your dinner tonight?" It was Jenny.





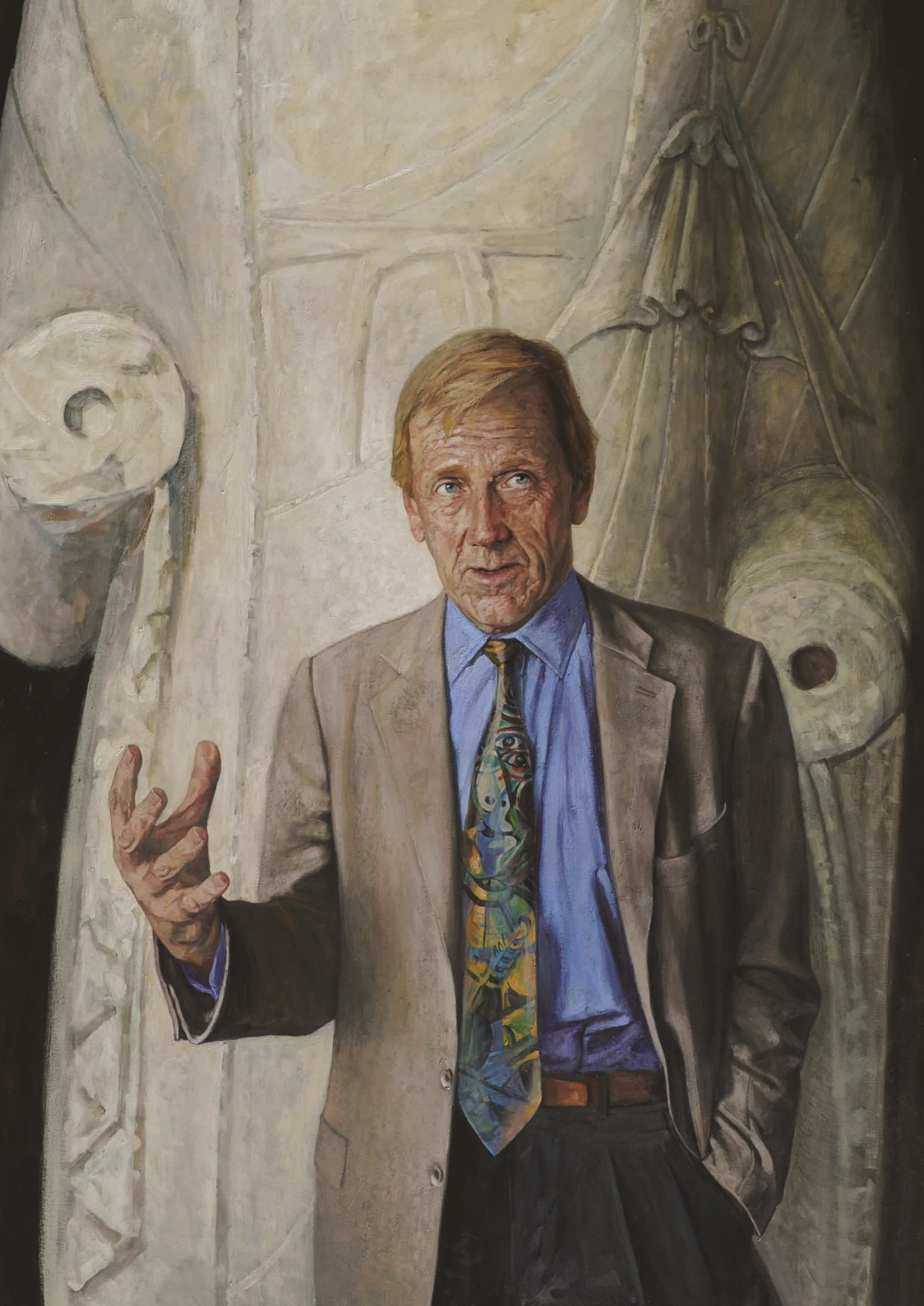


Jenny and her beloved husband, Jack, lived together in Double Bay for half a century. In Jenny's upstairs studio, she showed Shen her family album. Her mother's family had lived in Shanghai for more than three decades, and they had run many shops in Joffre Street, which was quite close to the home of Shen's parents. Later, Shen painted these family photos on a separate canvas for the bottom part of his portrait of Jenny.

In his portrait of Jenny, Shen made the image seem larger than life, especially the eyes behind her glasses. Through her eyes, viewers may be able to get a glimpse of her artistic soul. Yet her hands are portrayed as the hands of a labourer, which explains why her paintings are so powerful.

When the painting was completed, Shen came across a story from a 20<sup>th</sup> century chronicle which said that, in 1948, Hollywood had released a movie called *The Lady from Shanghai*.

Both Shen's portrait of Jenny and Jenny's own entry were the finalists for the 2002 Archibald Prize. Jenny said to Shen: "People are always saying: 'We love your painting,' but what they really mean is my portrait painted by you!"





# EDMUND CAPON

2003

Oil on canvas, 198 x 167cm

Winner of The Holding Redlich People's Choice Award in 2003, Salon des Refusés

Jiawei Shen met Edmund Capon in 1993 when he became a finalist for the Archibald Prize for the first time. Before that he had already read quite a lot in the news about this extraordinary and colourful Englishman: he was being sued for comments he had made on a particular artist's Archibald entry; he always wore socks that did not match; at a Chinatown banquet he said that he used to be a member of the UK Communist Party but had resigned from it because it was too far to the "right." But what interested Shen most was that this Director of the AGNSW (Art Gallery of New South Wales) was an expert on ancient Chinese art, and that he could speak Chinese. They later became good friends.

In the portrait Shen tries to capture an instant of Edmund presenting a speech at an exhibition opening: he is looking at an artwork and commenting on it. Wearing a Picasso necktie, Edmund is standing in front of a Sui dynasty (581–618CE) Buddhist statue that he had acquired for the AGNSW at a London art market. The statue is headless and has also lost both hands. One of Edmund's hands is in his trouser pocket, so only one hand can be seen in the painting. Shen's idea is that the single hand is not merely the hand of a person, but also stands for the hand of the stone Buddha, and this in itself is symbolically powerful and rich in implied meanings.

The painting was entered for the 2003 Archibald Prize, but was removed from amongst the finalists at the last minute. Edmund was quite upset, and said to Shen: "They think the hand is too big."

The S. H. Ervin Gallery chose the painting for their *Salon des Refusés* exhibition, where it won the Holding Redlich People's Choice Award. Four years later, Shen won the same award again for his self-portrait *Tri-selves*.





# IT IS NOT A PHOTO

2005

Oil on canvas, 183 x 305cm

Finalist of 2006 Archibald Prize

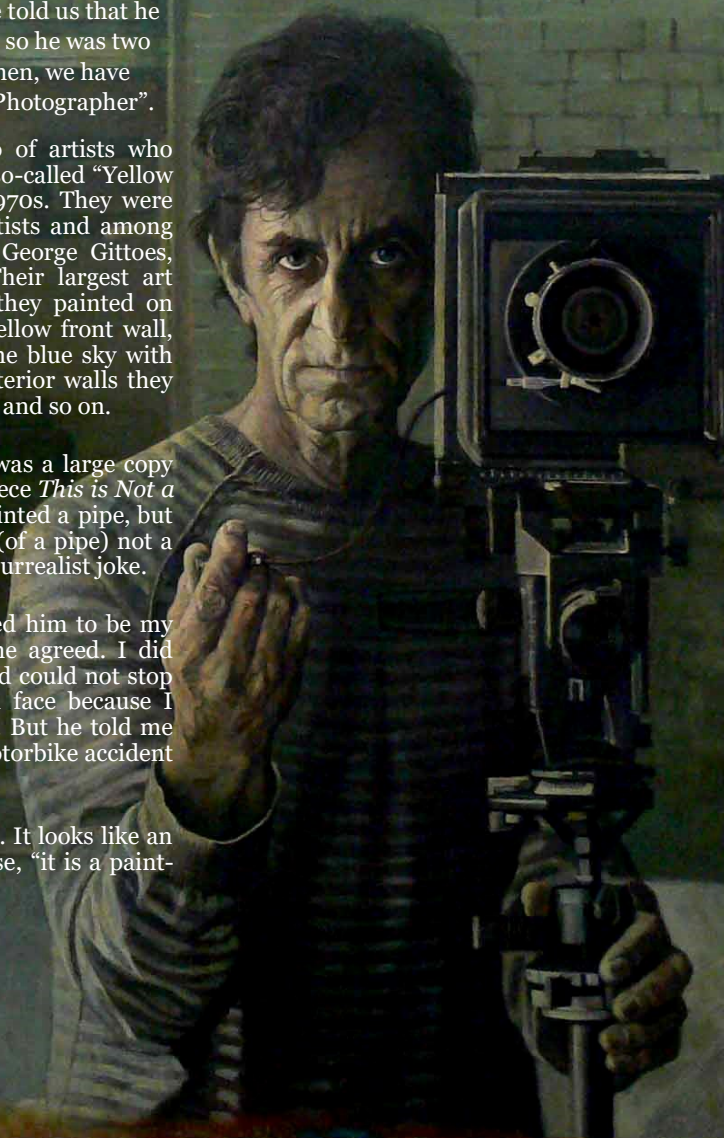
My wife and I met Greg Weight twenty years ago, when he was taking some photos for Bob Marchane's paintings in the latter's exhibition in Potts Point. He told us that he was born in the Year of Dog, so he was two years older than me. Since then, we have always called him the "Dog Photographer".

Greg belongs to the group of artists who used to work together in a so-called "Yellow House" in Potts Point in 1970s. They were young Aussie modernist artists and among them were Martin Sharp, George Gittoes, and Brett Whiteley, etc. Their largest art work was something that they painted on the house itself: with the yellow front wall, on the floor they painted the blue sky with white clouds and on the interior walls they copied Matisse or Van Gore, and so on.

On one of the walls, there was a large copy of René Magritte's masterpiece *This is Not a Pipe*, on which Magritte painted a pipe, but of course it was a painting (of a pipe) not a (real) pipe. It was a typical Surrealist joke.

I liked Greg's face and asked him to be my Archibald subject. Kindly he agreed. I did many drawings from life and could not stop praising his unsymmetrical face because I felt it inspired me so much. But he told me that it was the result of a motorbike accident which cost part of his chin!

I finally painted his portrait. It looks like an old photograph but of course, "it is a painting, not a photo"!









# HOW TO EXPLAIN ART WITH A WHITE RABBIT (Judith Neilson)

2015

Oil on canvas, 183 x 183cm

When Judith Neilson asked Jiawei Shen if he would like to paint her portrait for the Archibald, Shen immediately envisaged the composition: it would be Judith with a white rabbit in her arms.

Judith is the founder and director of the Sydney-based White Rabbit Collection, the largest collection of post-2000 contemporary Chinese art outside of China. Shen and Judith have known each other for more than a decade. Judith had collected three of his important history paintings in 2003, including his work *1972 Imperial Palanquin: after Yan Liben* (2002), a detail of which serves as the background to Judith's portrait. Tang dynasty Yan Liben's (601-673CE) masterpiece *Imperial Palanquin* was a typical work of traditional Chinese court art. In Judith's clothing in the portrait, we encounter another kind of traditional Chinese art: folk art. In post-1949 China, a third tradition, that of "revolutionary realism" was established, and Shen's early works in China conformed to that art tradition. However, in Shen's 2002-work, *1972 Imperial Palanquin*, while ostensibly painting in that tradition, he is flaunting that tradition by poking fun at the historical characters depicted.

In 1985 another kind art was born in China: contemporary Chinese art. In this portrait it assumes the form of a white rabbit, a soprano white rabbit.

In 1965 German artist Joseph Beuys created his famous performance artwork *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*. Of this Shen says: "My Judith portrait is an echo of Beuys' work from Down Under."





## TRI-SELVES

2006

Oil on canvas, 213 x 198cm

Winner of the 2007 Holding Redlich

People's Choice Award

I have done many self-portrait paintings in the past few decades. Tri-selves was the largest one of them with double larger-than-life images of me: one wearing a Soviet Red Army cap from the past while the other in present time wearing an Aussie Akubra cap.

It could be seen as an opposite view composition to Vermeer's masterpiece *Art of Painting* or *The Allegory of Painting* (c. 1666–68). From the convex mirror on the wall we can see the model whom I am painting from, is the same girl who is sitting for Vermeer. She is playing the Muse for the artist: Vermeer and me.



The convex mirror was from Jan Van Eyck's masterpiece *The Arnolfini Portrait* (1434), but I added an Aboriginal Australian pattern to it. The wall I painted here was after a photo which I had taken in Port Arthur's old prison room in 2006.

Before I finished this painting, I added a third self: the rat. I was born in 1948, the Year of the Rat.

I submitted this painting to the 2007 Archibald Prize but didn't make it into the finalist show. It was chosen by S.H. Ewin Gallery for the *Salon des Refuses* exhibition and it won the Holding Redlich People's Choice Award!







# ANDREW SAYERS

2016

Oil on canvas, 198 x 137cm

The subject of my 2016 Archibald Prize entry work, Mr. Andrew Sayers, is my friend from 1998. He agreed to be my subject for the Archibald entry portrait in June 2015. He sat for me in his Melbourne home on 30 August, 2015 and in his Melbourne studio on 1 September, 2015. After the second sitting he signed on his head drawing study which I had just completed. I left this drawing for him as a present but took a photo. Andrew passed away on 11 October, 2015 when I was overseas. For this reason, I couldn't get his statement and signature when I decided to use his portrait for this exhibition.

Andrew visited my Bundeena studio in 1998 when he was appointed as the Director of the National Portrait Gallery. Afterwards, we collaborated on three portrait commissions for NPG, including the one for Princess Mary of Denmark. We travelled together to Copenhagen and London for that painting. I respected him a lot as he was a great Director capable of distinguished leadership. But when he suddenly became an artist, and an extremely talented artist, I felt not only happy, but wild with joy. That also gave me the inspiration to paint this portrait for him. When he was sitting for my drawing, he recalled how he used to dream of becoming an artist, not a Director of a museum. Then he said: "My dream has become reality..." He stopped talking and his eyes became red at the sheer knowledge that he would not have much longer to live. I said, "Yes, your self-portrait for the Doug Moran Prize is a powerful masterpiece. I love it so very much!"

The red frame is suggesting the logo of the NPG (National Portrait Gallery).



# YALDA OUR GIRL

2017

Oil on canvas, 183 x 167cm

Entry of 2017 Archibald Prize

I often work from afternoon till mid-night, and I watch ABC news before going to bed. One night in early 2016, at 1 a.m. when ABC was replaying BBC's world news *Impact* program, I noticed this special hostess: she was a young girl but she was also a beautiful lady. But she was not just a simple beauty. I saw something hidden in her eyes that spoke of some aspects of her extraordinary character: bravery, staunchness, and a little wildness.

When summer time stopped in late March, ABC stopped replaying *Impact*. I tried to check Google to see how I could continue to watch it. But what I found from Google, to my great surprise, was that Yalda Hakim, that hostess, was an Afghan-Australian who had grown up in my city, Sydney, and that she used to work for SBS as an award-winning television journalist. She was the only journalist to walk through the minefields to a village near Kandahar where an American soldier had massacred 16 civilians, and then reported it to the general public.

With the help from a friend working in SBS, I contacted Yalda and asked her to be my Archibald subject. She generously agreed. In early November 2016, I had an opportunity to go to London for an academic conference. I thought that afforded a perfect chance for me to meet Yalda. But things didn't work out that perfectly after all, because Yalda accepted a task for Australia and had to come back to her parents' home! We had only a few days while she was here in Sydney before I left for UK. Finally, we met in her parents' home in Baulkham Hills. I suggested that Yalda sit together with her parents and I'll paint a group portrait of them all.

I got this idea because of their unusual family story. Wali, Yalda's father, was an architect trained in Czechoslovakia. To avoid the war he took his young family from Kabul to Pakistan on a dark night in 1983. He put Yalda the little baby on a horseback together with her siblings. Finally they arrived in Sydney and became Australian citizens. When Yalda went back to Kabul as a 25-year-old journalist, and saw the women, most of whom were illiterates, hiding behind the burqas, she felt genuinely lucky.

Before I finished this painting, Wali and his wife, Mazari, visited my home and sat for me. It was the first day of Ramadan, and Wali couldn't eat lunch. My wife, Lan, was quite disappointed because she was prepared to serve them some nice food. We eventually worked out a way by letting them "take away" the good food when they went back home. This great couple taught their four children to be professionals and believe in universal values. Mazari is a midwife and she likes her job. She told us to call her Mary.

In 2016, I watched a BBC TV series called *Our Girl*. It tells the story of an UK woman soldier in the wars of Afghan. This is where I had the name for this painting.



# EXHIBITION O





# OPENING EVENT







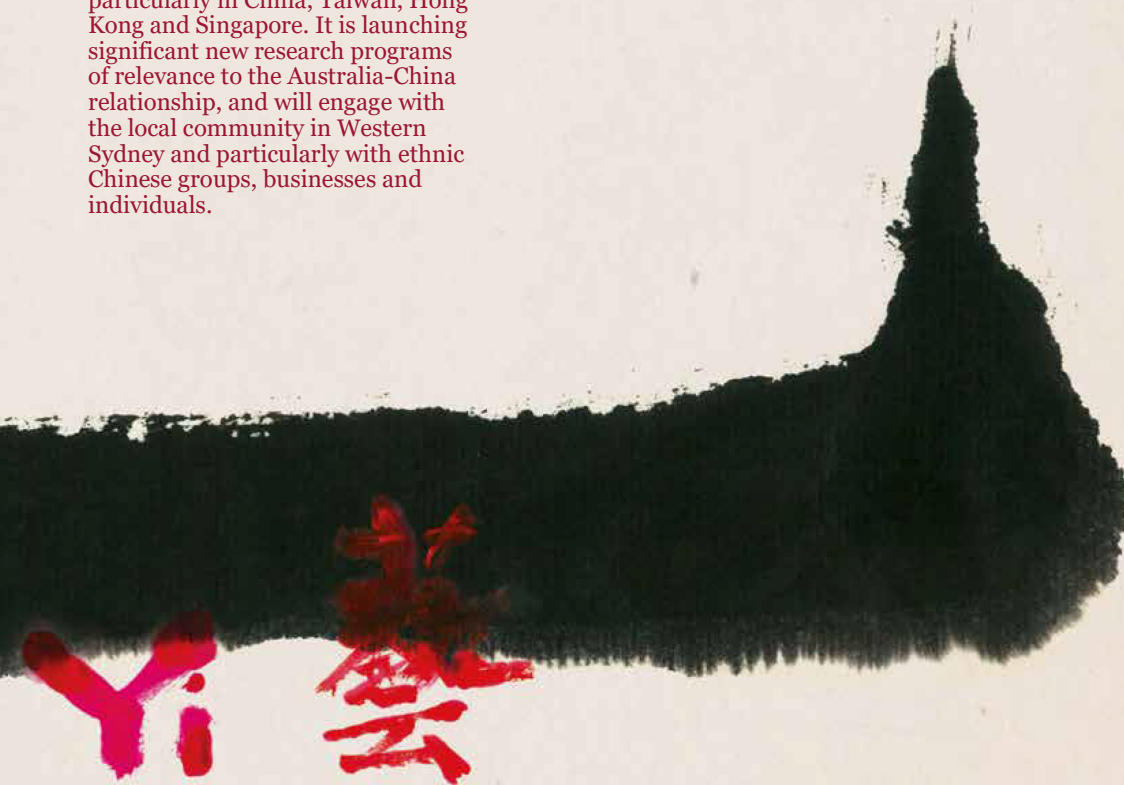
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The Institute will enhance existing exchanges between the University and partner universities overseas, particularly in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore. It is launching significant new research programs of relevance to the Australia-China relationship, and will engage with the local community in Western Sydney and particularly with ethnic Chinese groups, businesses and individuals.

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