

ESSENCE, ENERGY, SPIRIT

WESTERN SYDNEY
UNIVERSITY



Australia-China Institute
for Arts and Culture



Guan Wei

14 October 2019 — 21 February 2020

VENUE

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

GALLERY HOURS

Monday - Thursday: 10.00am - 3.00pm
Friday: 11.00am - 3.00pm

Australia-China Institute for Arts & Culture

澳大利亚-中国艺术与文化研究院

ESSENCE, ENERGY, SPIRIT

INTRODUCTION

The artworks for this exhibition were chosen by Guan Wei from his own collection. Guan Wei named the exhibition **Essence, Energy, Spirit**, which aptly captures the recurring themes of his art's practice. Guan Wei is renowned for creating works that interlace imagery from his Chinese heritage and his personal iconography, working across painting, sculpture and installation.

The exhibition is comprised of three distinct series of work. The series, **Longevity for Beginners** explores themes of spiritual and physical balance via imagery of both external and internal views of the human body, drawn

from traditional Chinese medicine and qi-gong, as well as his own personal symbolism. The underlying narrative of these paintings suggests the importance of the connection between the mind/spirit and body, and that being in balance with nature is essential for good health and general well-being.

The series, **Return to the Origin** contextualises our human journey within the Universe. Images of the human figure are juxtaposed with symbols of the cosmos, deliberately drawn upon ceramics - a material that has been used by humans for thousands of years - to remind the viewer of their relatively brief time in history.

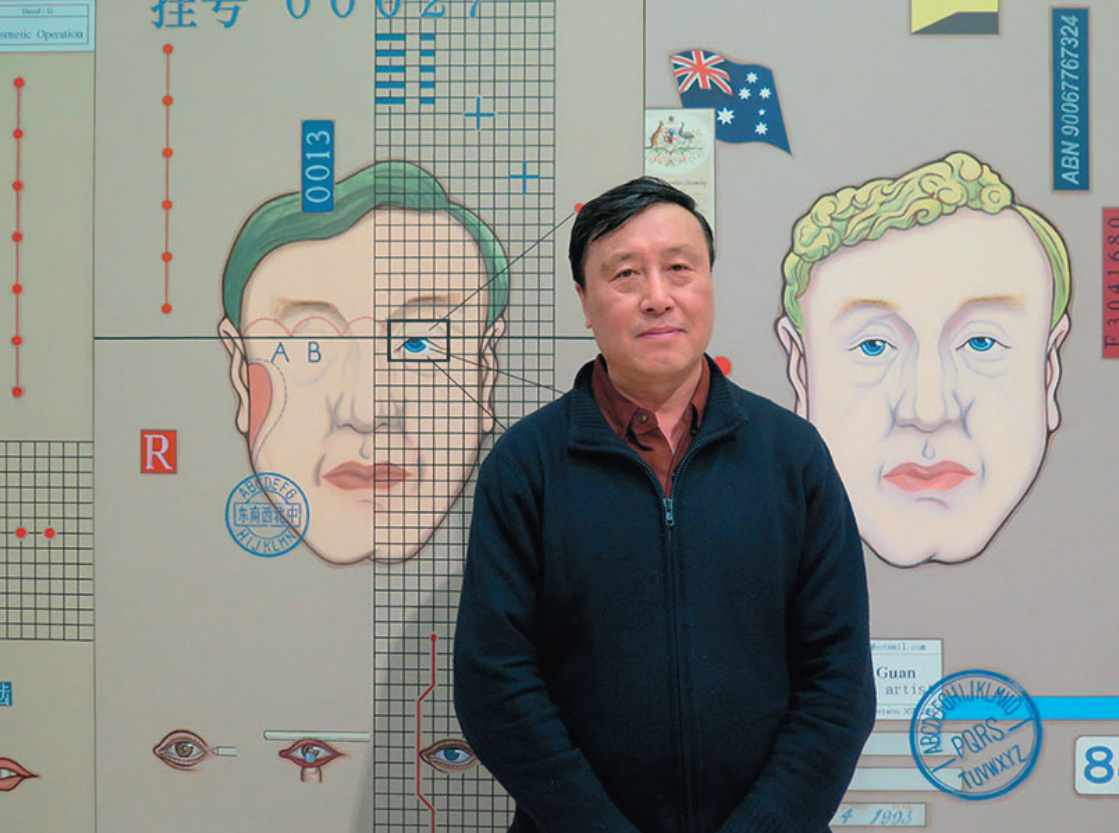
Humans are portrayed as being part of nature, but a mere speck within it, when one considers how vast and old the Universe is.

The final series, which is **Untitled**, explores the relationship between the subconscious mind and its effect on our individual perception of our daily reality. Some of these works evoke emotional states of fear, uncertainty, anxiety, pressure, powerlessness and entrapment, whilst others suggest a state of meditation. This series of works suggests to the viewer, that to master their subconscious, spiritual practices and/or exercises can assist in transforming their experience to higher states

of consciousness, such as peace, joy and bliss. Ultimately these works by Guan Wei, remind us of the consequences of a fast paced, technology driven, western lifestyle, too full of angst, can be transcended, if we remember our essence, energy and spirit and how to nurture them.

Monica McMahon
Art Curator
Western Sydney University

Cover image: Guan Wei; Untitled



Guan Wei

BIOGRAPHY

Guan Wei graduated from the Department of Fine Arts at Beijing Capital University in 1986. From 1989 to 1992, he completed art residencies at the University of Tasmania, Australian National University and Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney. In 1993, he immigrated to Australia. In 2008, Guan Wei set up a studio in Beijing. He now lives and works in Beijing and Sydney.

Guan Wei has won many awards. His work has been held in major public and private collections including universities and corporate organisations. He has held more than 60 solo exhibitions internationally, and has been included in many important international

contemporary exhibitions, such as the *Shanghai Biennale*, China; the *10th Havana Biennial*, Cuba; the *Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art*, Australia; the *3rd Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, Australia; the *Osaka Triennial*, Japan; and the *Gwangju Biennale*, South Korea.

Guan Wei's work has a profoundly felt (if implicitly ironic) moral dimension. In their complex symbolic form, his subjects potently embody current social and environmental dilemmas. They are equally the product of his rich cultural repertory of symbols and his informed socio-political awareness and art-historical knowledge.

ESSENCE, ENERGY, SPIRIT

Longevity for Beginners Acrylic on canvas 2009

In this day and age of television, movies, advertising, broadcasting and posters, we are bombarded with imagery that imposes an overwhelming amount of abuse to our bodies such as breast implants, liposuction, hair removal, hair implant, hair dyeing, diets, body slimming, skin whitening, health foods, etc. These aspects of modern culture that play with body technology have greatly repressed our physical and psychological health. It has become a major obsession in our daily lives. Today where consumption is heavily promoted in our society, the pendulum is beginning to swing towards traditional Asian health-enhancing regimens; the likes of *wushu*, *qi-gong*, traditional Chinese medicine and numerology are now coming back and being explored and promoted.

The principles of traditional health-enhancing regimens lie in keeping a contented psyche and labouring the body. The aim of health preservation is to achieve a relaxed mental state through moderate exercise, so that

our minds and bodies can reach a perfectly harmonic state. We can improve our overall body condition, raise our spiritual quality, and make ourselves feel content and satisfied with techniques of balancing *yin* and *yang*, harmonising blood circulation, mediating the meridian network and strengthening the muscles.

In the Chinese school of thought, including cosmology, numerology, physiognomy, *yin-yang* and the five elements, *qi* is at the origin of all life forms on earth. The five elements determine the life pattern or fate of all organisms. This represents a very complete set of Chinese-specific views towards the universe and the world. Although there is a bit of mysticism involved, it sums up the Chinese way of living that has existed since ancient times. It also includes the need to fulfill our mental states. It has a very strong self-consciousness and a desire to fulfill one's wishes. I have tried to extract the positive elements of the Chinese school of thought and express it through my



No.14

paintings, to show a cheerful and forward-looking attitude of human beings who try to take hold of their fate and in turn live harmoniously with nature.

Since the emergence of pop art, we have discovered a new visual culture in the contemporary world of art. This is a world crammed with inter-related symbols: a world beyond reality, a surreal world. Due to this rapid rise of man-made symbols, a big change has taken place in our living environment. Nature, having been the main theme in paintings since the last century, has now been replaced with new man-made signs and symbols. In my recent series *Longevity for Beginners*, I have used the idea of choosing symbols in my paintings by using the theme of Chinese traditions.

My new painting language is built on scientific analysis. The parts of Chinese characters on

the canvas, be it a horizontal or vertical slash, or a radical component of the character, form the major visual skeleton. We know that Chinese character writing is one of the oldest languages in the history of the world. It has a developing history of five to six thousand years. It has deeply influenced the thinking and communication of us Chinese. Our life is so closely related to the characters, or to put it in another way, we live in a culture built on Chinese characters. The red dot is also a symbol I've been using for a long time. In my work, it can mean a kind of energy – cosmic energy, nature's energy, the human body's energy, etc. It is also a message. We live in an era of electronics and the internet, and we have an on-going communication with people and with society all the time. In the works, the red dots and the black slashes of Chinese characters

form a visually strong conflict: square versus circle, black versus red, one being asserted, while another is light and flowing. One might reflect on ancient mystery while another is the contemporary wonder. One represents space and the other represents time. When time and space come across each other in Chinese, they form a field.

Based on the visual structure formed from the crossing of these radical components of the characters and the red dots, there emerges the human body, bodily organs, clouds, plants and other elements to form the details on the canvas. The faces, the prints of the palm and of the foot, all symbolise a mysterious life code from an ancient culture, reminding us not to stop adapting our behaviour, so that we human beings can live in harmony with both nature and society, and to avoid disasters. The

human organs, water, fire and clouds imply this relationship between human beings and nature. The forces must be joined in order for us to fight all kinds of invaders such as viruses and illnesses to achieve a truly healthy life balance.

I returned to China after living in Australia for 20 years and made this set of works one year after. From the blue skies, white clouds and the openness of Australia, I am now back in China, a land which is old and mysterious, busy yet vibrant. The change in my surrounding environment gave rise to a different form of expression in my works. The point of view has shifted back to China. Apart from refreshment and delight, there is also a bit of uncertainty and unease. I hope that this series of works, *Longevity for Beginners*, can help its viewers to improve their spiritual balance and attain a healthy physical state.



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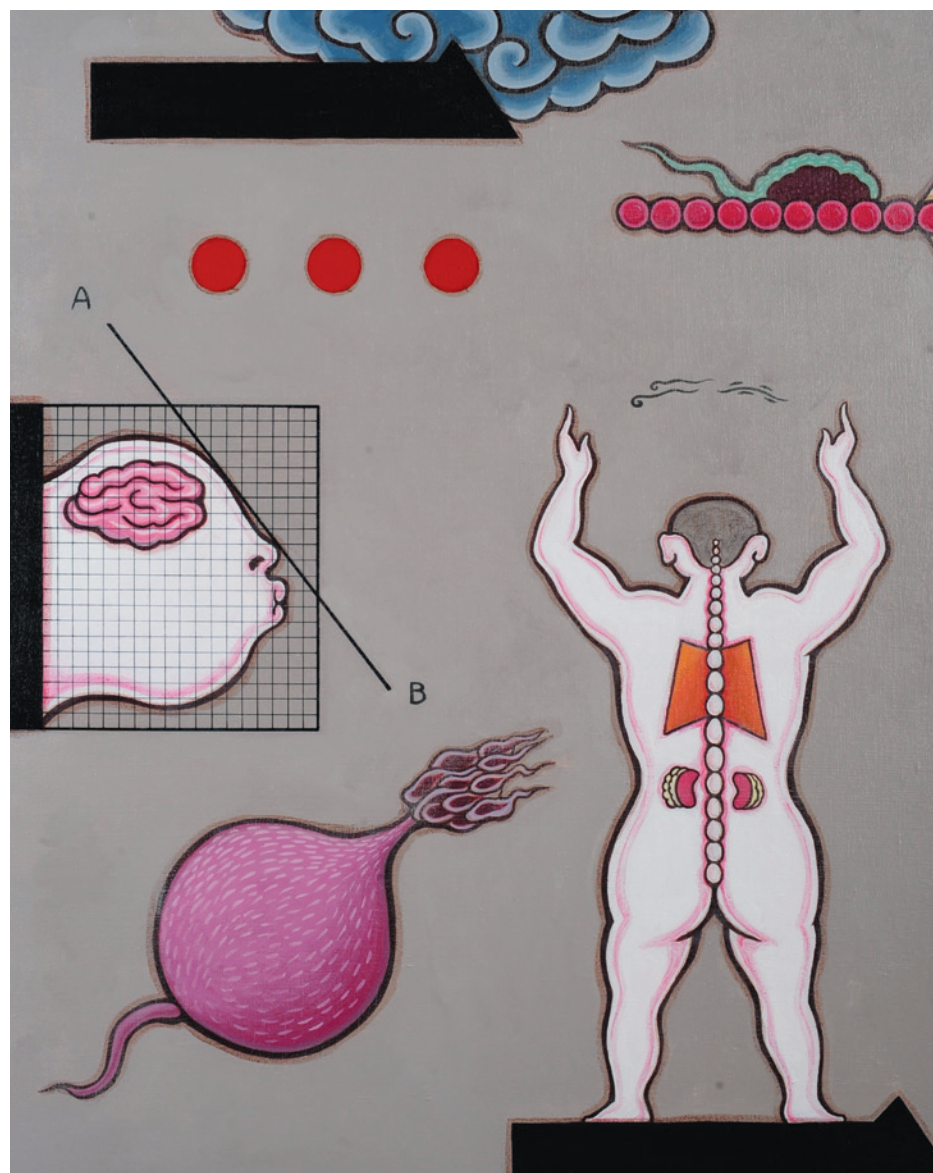
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No.10

Return to the Origin

Ceramics
2014

Ceramic has a long history.
It carries a lot of culture codes and
history of the legend.
Chaotic and overloaded modern
life brings anguish, confusion
and exhaustion to people.
It is time to free our hearts from
this increasingly zoomed-out life
style, and return to the origin.
Like the stars in the sky,
let us experience the infinite
freedom and happiness.



No. 2



No. 4



No. 3

Untitled

Acrylic on Japanese Board
2016



No.1

All kinds of signs and symbols correspond to fear risen from the subconscious. Different types of dynamic and secretive subconscious activity are reflections of reality. False and truth, real and imagined, they correspond to an anxiety and uncertainty of contemporary life.

The subconscious is wondrous, terrifying, gloomy. It contains magnificent power, thus one can only converse with it through symbolic

and metaphoric means. Symbolism is a simple expression of the subconscious, but at the same time it is the most advanced intuition that consciousness develops. Humans, upon repeated meditations, can in the end absolve impurities to extract exquisite consciousness and let our souls be exonerated, reaching freedom, an unrestrained state of mind. Floating like clouds, passing like wind.



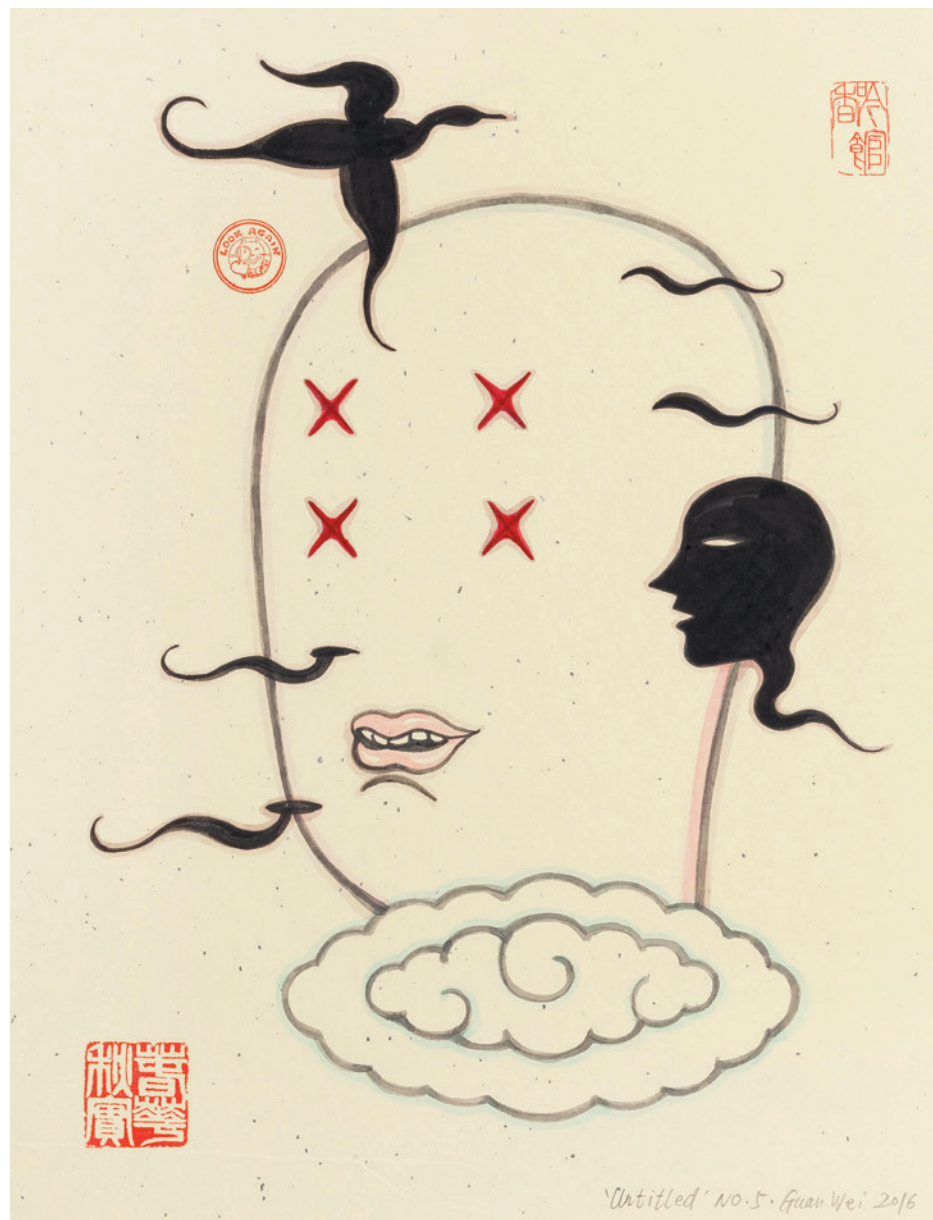
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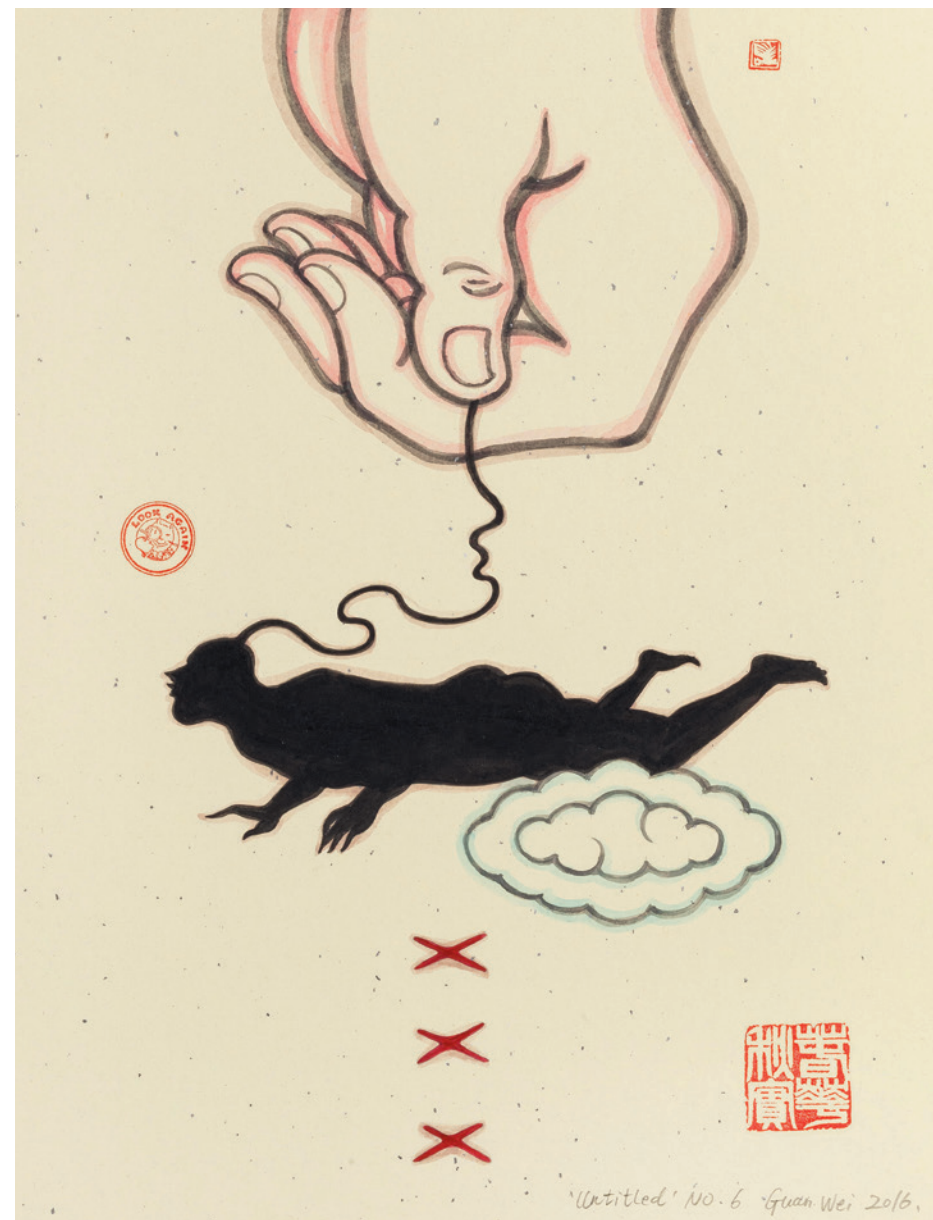
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No.6

About ACIAC

The Australia-China Institute for Arts and Culture (ACIAC) at Western Sydney University was founded for the purpose of facilitating collaboration and engagement between Australia and China in a culturally smart way.

ACIAC positions itself as a hub and national resource centre for arts and cultural exchange between Australia and China and across the Sinosphere, and for cross-cultural collaborative research in the arts and other cultural fields.

ACIAC promotes exchanges between Western Sydney University and its partner universities overseas in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore. Each year, it engages with the local community in Western Sydney and particularly with ethnic Chinese groups, businesses and individuals and launches significant new research programs of

relevance to the Australia-China relationship. Building on the research strengths of Western Sydney University and on existing exchange programs in the University, ACIAC will stay committed to the enhancement of bilateral understanding between members of Australian and Chinese cultures and to the development of deeper ties through an open, intellectual and dynamic engagement.

For more information, please visit westernsydney.edu.au/aciac/about

Chinese calligraphy by Shen Wednesday.



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