

**WESTERN SYDNEY
UNIVERSITY**



Australia-China Institute
for Arts and Culture

Essence, Energy, Spirit

Exhibition Opening

Soft Quiz with Guan Wei

24 October 2019





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.

Soft Quiz

Mr Guan Wei & Professor Jing Han (Director of ACIAC)

Jing Han: Not everyone, including myself, is confident when admiring artworks, particularly contemporary art. But we are often too afraid to ask questions in case we are seen ignorant. Today I will ask some “simple questions” on your behalf. Let’s play... soft.

Jing Han: First question, in all your paintings, your human figures only have a gaping mouth, they have no eyes, or they only have half-closed eyes, which must be cut and paste because they look exactly the same on every face. So my question is, is it because you don’t know how to draw human eyes?

Guan Wei: This is a very good question. Many people have asked me why I only paint one eye and sometimes only the mouth. It has been a long time, for the last 30 years, that I have been painting one eye and one mouth. I have learnt the traditional Russian painting skill, so I can create very realistic eyes and human figures. I can do that. But I feel that it can’t make my painting interesting. For the 30 years of developing my own style of human figures, I tried many times to give these people eyes and other facial features, but I just feel it’s difficult and not right. I tried many times to give two eyes and a mouth to my human figures, but afterwards I just took them off. And also my human figures are always nude, wearing no clothes. I also tried many times to give them clothes but took the clothes off eventually. I feel that if they have clothes on, I would need to provide more detailed info and should be talking about their nationalities, who that person is, etc, which I feel is not quite right. What I’m concerned with are human beings as a whole. That’s why I have one eye and one mouth in my paintings. I think having the humans living in the universe is enough.

Jing Han: It is a really good answer to my very simple question.

Question two: I read online that in 2000 when we could still trust what we read, that before your exhibition was opened, all your paintings were sold out and you were very upset. Is that the reason why you chose our institute for your exhibition, knowing that we will make sure your art won't sell?

Guan Wei: This is another story. My first solo show in the MCA was in the 1990s, and MCA recently held a 10-year anniversary show for me. One or two weeks after the first MCA solo show, the Sherman Gallery also held my solo show. Before the opening, all the works were sold out. I was very sad because your works are just like your babies. You spend 10 months in pregnancy of your babies and suddenly you give them away to somebody else, I feel it's not quite right. But for artists, it is a very difficult situation. If your works do not sell, you feel upset; but if your artworks are sold out, you still feel it is not quite right. So this is a very difficult situation, because if no artwork is sold, what is there to live with for tomorrow? There is no money to buy rice or other things. Artists need to be able to make a living by selling their works, and that's why it is a dilemma. As for why I chose the university for my exhibition, as I just mentioned in my speech, university is a more interesting place, being an academic area. For the art, on the one hand, it is for the commercial and art industry, on the other hand, it should also be for the academia. The academic world can make your art more powerful and expand your art's reputation and it can be good for economic benefit. Just as I mentioned, maybe one day a student will become the Prime Minister who can collect your works. I'm just joking. I like to have an exchange and communication with young students, that's why I have chosen here.

Jing Han: Thank you, we are very honoured for having been chosen. We will make sure that we will keep your babies and will keep you starving. Next question, in your paintings, you use a lot of symbols and signs, to me, to silence any questioning or criticism, as any questions will show ignorance. Is that your intention?

Guan Wei: This is a quite academic question, you know. For paintings, there are several levels. On the first level, paintings are like cartoons or animations. On the second level, it shows a realistic style and when you go up another level, paintings show abstract things. On an even higher level, there are metaphysical things. I believe in metaphysical things. But I can also make low level cartoon series. I think there are many layers and levels and when you look at my works, I use many simple human figures. I just remake and put all the elements together, and give my works a higher level of thinking, such as metaphysical thinking, and they are about philosophy and other interesting things. This is one thing. The second thing is, for art, creativity is very important. In my works, you can feel that my they are very different, very new, very individual, as I must use the new visual language. Where does the new visual language from? It comes from the computer science, from paperwork science, and from the sciences such as physics and chemistry. When you look at my works, you find that there are many little dots, and SOS signs which also mean sulphur dioxide. I try to create new visual language in my works. That's why when you look at them, you will find them quite different and new.

Jing Han: Such a good explanation. My next question, one of the very iconic features in all your paintings is the cloud, cloud is everywhere, “Lucky Cloud” as we call in Chinese. You must predict years ago, one day we would live in the cloud, as we are now, and really we can’t live without cloud. Also in your famous painting Feng Shui, which right now is exhibited in the MCA and was created in 2004, of all ugly or cute marine animals that Australia is famous for, you picked and painted a stingray. In 2006, to everyone’s shock and sadness, Steve Irwin was killed by that stingray. So to me, you are a very good fortune teller, a feng shui master. How do you get your vision?

Guan Wei: Probably I am a feng shui master, I don’t know. But an interesting thing is, before I came to Australia, when I was still in China, one fortune teller was reading my fortunes, and he said my future would be very good in the south, “when you go to the south, you will find very good fortunes.” For my first trip to Australia, I didn’t come to Sydney, I went to Tasmania, the very south of the globe. After staying in Tasmania for two years, I came to Sydney. So I’ve been very lucky. Anyway, the cloud in my works is very important. Cloud has many meanings. Cloud is like beauty and it also can be floating everywhere. But now, the cloud has another meaning, for computers, you put things in it to make it a storage. I didn’t know this before. But anyway, my picture has stingrays. I did it in 2004, because I feel that stingray is like the cloud, in the water, you know, they are very gentle and very beautiful when they are swimming. They are beautiful creatures. Bad luck for the stingrays, because they stung Steve Irwin. Before that, stingrays had a good reputation. After that incident, many people started hating them. I don’t think it’s my fault.

Jing Han: Thank you for being such a good feng shui master. All your human figures have one very prominent characteristic. They are all very chubby and pink, like piglets, and obviously very well-fed. Is that because you were born in the year of famine?

Guan Wei: Yeah, that's right, we came from the "three-year natural disaster". When I was little, I was starving all the time. I remember if my mother brought me some you tiao (deep-fried dough sticks) or you bing (deep-fried dough cake) for breakfast, I felt very happy. I'm thinking back from my memories, that's why I make my people a little bit fat and pink. It also has another two meanings. Firstly, nowadays, rich people are not fat, the poor are fat. Secondly, those people are just like myself. When an artist creates his works, they are just like themselves, because you know yourself very well. Some people sometimes ask me, "These figures are like you", and I would say "Ok, right, it's me." Those figures are like myself.

Jing Han: Last question. In your “Self-Portrait Series”, of 50 shades of yellow or brown or black you could have chosen, you chose the bleached white for your skin. Did you suffer the same disorder as Michael Jackson?

Guan Wei: When I was a young student, I read a novel by a Japanese writer, I think. This novel talked about a Japanese guy who has a girlfriend, a white girl from Europe. When they are together, he still feels embarrassed when he looks at his own skin, which is dark and yellow. This author made a deep impression, but that was a long time ago. For this self-portrait called plastic surgery, it is meant to be ironic which talks about how one gets involved in the Australian culture. It talks about migration and how difficult it is to join the mainstream culture. I think there is a very long way for every migrant who would like Australia to recognise their work and their value. But for this picture, I was making a joke, using many documents and rubber stamps, showing how you can change from Chinese to Australian. That means from Guan Wei to David Guan or something like that. But I still like my Asian face and Asian background. I am proud of this, because Australia is a multi-cultural country, which for everyone is very important.

Jing Han: Thank you so much. Please give artist Mr Guan Wei a round of applause for his wonderful answers to my very simple questions. Thank you. Thank you so much.







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