

*In God We Trust*  
*Contemporary Chinese*  
*Christian Art*

*Patricia Eichenbaum Karetzky*  
*co-curated by Daozi*  
*essay by Wang Yun*

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*Daozi, Saintism, 2010, ink on rice paper 38 x 60"*



*Since the founding of the Peoples' Republic, faith in Chairman Mao provided comfort and guidance; but after Mao's death in 1976, his failures were gradually acknowledged. Primary among them was the disastrous Leap Forward of the 1950's, which focusing on technological progress and steel production, discouraged farmers from planting their crops; over thirty million people are said to have starved to death. This was followed by the Cultural Revolution 1966-1976 which was responsible for the obliteration of the historical monuments, the humiliation and abuse of the educated members of society, and the closing of the universities. The youth of China were led on a rampage destroying all monuments--secular and religious--that belonged to the past. In a zealous attack icons were smashed, and temples befouled. Even Confucius' grave was ripped open. The Cultural Revolution did what centuries of civil war, foreign invasion, and periods of chaos and uncertainty could not. Overnight Chinese religions were extirpated. In the aftermath, faith in Mao dissipated, though the population inland, as opposed to that of the coastal cities, still venerates him. Since the 80's rush to modernization and capitalism, many social programs that provided health care, housing, food, and unemployment insurance were abandoned and large segments of the urban population of China have been left to their own resources. Those in the countryside still struggle for subsistence existence. Bereft of the comforts of the cult of Mao, many Chinese, feeling increasingly vulnerable and fragile, are turning to religion.*

*In an effort to help people find spiritual solace and to maintain social stability, the government has allowed the reestablishment of religious institutions. Precedent for anti-religious policies can be traced back to the end of the nineteenth century when the government endorsed a Confucian mission to turn temple cults into schools. Beginning in 1979 the administration afforded freedom to practice religion under the central Religious Affairs Bureau, along with State approved religious associations; and the United Front Work Department. Offices were set up on a national, provincial and city level. Reestablished after the Cultural Revolution, the central Religious Affairs Bureau has two missions--managing the practical affairs of temples and writing policy. Since 2005 there are five state approved associations for the five recognized religions - Buddhism, Daoism and Islam each have an association, and Protestantism and Catholicism each have two associations - the China Christian Council and Three-Self Patriotic Movement Committee of Protestant Churches of China, and the China Catholic Patriotic Association and Chinese Catholic Bishops Conference. These governing bodies administer funds to regulate restoration of temples, help reclaim temple lands and buildings, and ensure compliance with party regulations. But such freedoms are closely monitored, engendering freedom to only state sponsored temples that are self-supporting financially and patriotic in accepting the leadership of party members. Service in such organizations is not voluntary and members are not necessarily believers given the dictum that party members must be atheists. Religious activities not recognized by the state are strongly discouraged and carefully watched. Of late, suspicions heightened by the success of the "Jasmine Revolution" the government is increasingly wary and the situation for Christians, whose numbers grow daily, is growing more difficult. For example, the New York Times reported the recent arrest of a group of professors from Tsinghua and Beijing Universities for protesting the refusal of a landlord to allow them to rent space for their congregation, as they were intimidated and withdrew their previous agreement, forcing the community to worship outdoors in the middle of winter.*

*The situation is different for worshippers of Buddhism and Daoism, who are now a familiar site at refurbished temples, where newly ordained state supported monks and priests instruct them in the old beliefs and rituals. Uncertainly, the young fashionables light incense and bow to the newly restored deities, sometimes guided by only an old temple caretaker. Art school students are sent to the old temples to study the remnants of the ancient decorative programs and to learn how to replicate the lost techniques and skills. Contemporary artists however are not drawn to these ancient beliefs; they are not inspired to reinterpret its monuments. This may in part be attributable to the fact that Buddhist and Daoist temple art had, since the Tang dynasty, been the provenance of professional artists trained in a common style of art that with certain adjustments became Daoist or Buddhist in content. In contrast Christian art is an important subject of exploration for contemporary artists. There are several kinds of art with Christian themes. In the first category are artists who appropriate the great masterpieces of western art done by Leonardo, Michelangelo, Raphael, and others. Most professional artists in China have been trained in western technique as well as in traditional Chinese painting and therefore their works reveal a deep knowledge of Christian art and iconography. Though these artists are not necessarily practitioners, their use of Christian themes is new and particularly significant in today's society. By their referencing this religious tradition they call attention to a set of spiritual values, which are largely forgotten in today's rush to capitalistic globalism. A second group of artists explore the grass roots movement of Christianity documenting in their works the humble life of rural practitioners. Lastly, are a group of artists who are believers*

and use art as an expression of their faith. A group of artists under the guidance of Daozi, the co -curator of this show and painter have grouped together to show their art which he terms 'Saintism' which he defines as,

*"When we say Saintism art, in a broad sense we mean Christian art. In a narrow sense, Christian art emphasizes a more direct communication of the Christian faith, with clear missionary overtones. Because of this, in the contemporary semantic landscape it has been put in absolute service to theology and the essentials of the church. Thus it has appeared as confined and marginalized. However, Christian art is in its broad sense "Saintism art". It is art that does not only face the historical gospel and the church that defends it. Rather, it also echoes the continually life-giving truth of the kingdom of God, and places importance upon the individual experience of the Christian faith, upon its characterization amidst the contemporary milieu, and upon the connections in the themes and subject matter of every work. It gives expression to the grace and truth, suffering and redemption, compassion and universal love of Christ. Thus, "Saintism art" changes with the aesthetics of the times, and on its own demonstrates free visual form and style. Through the deep spiritually moving power of Christ, people will also enter into the realm of sacred meaning. Among the mysteries of God, there is the mystery of freedom, which continually widens that which once chose a narrow field of vision, and helps us out of the woods right now."*

*Miao Xiaochun* (born in 1964 in Wu Xi, Jiangsu [www.miaoxiaochun.com](http://www.miaoxiaochun.com)) began as a photographer and now lives and works in Beijing. Recently he has taken up the exploration of certain Christian masterpieces such as the Michelangelo's Last Judgment from the Sistine Chapel and reinterpreted it in a contemporary medium. In 2006 he created a three-dimensional, monochromatic computer rendition, substituting the 400 individual figures of the composition with a cyber image of himself, bald and naked. The video presents a three dimensional version of the composition, and the viewer, floating, sees the figures, from above, the side and the back. A disembodied voice intermittently asks, "Where am I going?" and there is the occasional response, "You will go there!" This is a modern version of the apocalyptic Renaissance vision of the salvation and damnation of mankind. Black and white large-scale C prints also represent the multiple perspectives of the video's futuristic vision. Miao also has appropriated the imagery of the mysterious Dutch Renaissance painter Hieronymus Bosch's triptych Garden of Earthly Delights which dates to 1503. In a complicated three part video technique that draws on photography, painting, and computer manipulation, Miao, once again uses his cyber alter egos, but here they operate in brilliantly colored landscapes filled with oversized objects of daily life. In Fullness from 2008 a legion of cyborgs explore giant fruits--oranges, apples and pears; soda in bottles and cans; an old fashioned clock and chess game. In Transport they operate Leonardoesque flying machines, and in an animal procession, which repeats Bosch's scenario, they ride all manner of animals and fish through an eerily lit barren landscape. Destruction displays icons of Chinese culture—porcelains and Neolithic ceramics, along with modern laptops, prop planes and nuclear warheads. Against a darkened sky, the figures struggle to stay upright or fall into a stagnant black river. The themes of the eggshell home, the disembodied head, and stagnant water recall Bosch's vision of Hell. Here too anachronistic pairings of modern commercial products and the unchanging nature of the eternal mysteries.



*Xiao Xiaochun, Last Judgment, C Print of video, 2006*

**Cui Xiuwen** (born in the 1970s in Harbin, north China, now living in Beijing--[www.brooklynmuseum.org/easfal/feminist\\_art](http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/easfal/feminist_art)) recreated the Last Supper by Leonardo da Vinci. She also used the computer to substitute an alter ego for the original figures in the composition, but in this case the image is that of a young girl in her school uniform. The same actor assumes all the roles and postures of the disciples. This eerie reconstruction using a schoolgirl for all the characters ironically internalizes and universalizes the theme. If all of the actors are the same character, are then all of them betrayers, supporters, and saviors? The young model, it becomes clear in later works, is personification of Cui who with each series of works matures; for example she is a pregnant teenager in the series *Angel* from 2008, looming large at the center of the composition. Standing in a river with a distant view of Calvary, she portentously holds her belly, the moon rises in the sky. In *Angel 13* the figure lies on her back, the sky filled with cumulous clouds looms above her; and in *Angel 7* of 2008 the figures are repeated several times in varying size and placed on a pyramid of sand by the wall of the Forbidden City-- there is no way out, no way to climb the hill of sand, no way to get over the masonry wall. At first look, this art seems to be an expression of a feminist concern for the situation of women in China, who are now devalued, no longer holding up one half of the sky; used and abused, they are left to survive on their own limited means and are subjected to prostitution, pregnancy, venereal disease, homelessness and aborted female fetuses. But Cui universalizes the image, partly by the repetition of the same figure, partly by masking her face with operatic makeup that suggests an actor and the punished expanded to suggest mankind.



Cui Xiuwen *Angel 7*, 2008, C Print, 36 x 72"

**Gao Yuan** (born in Tejing in the 1970s--[www.gaoyuanartist.com](http://www.gaoyuanartist.com)) was trained in Taiwan and Japan and now lives in Beijing. Gao has photographed a range of subjects, including tattooed bodies of young yakuza and calligraphic graffiti written on the walls of buildings in Beijing. Recently, she has created a series of twelve images of mothers holding their children inscribed within a circular composition like Renaissance paintings of the Madonna on roundel. But Gao explains the symbolism incorporates traditional Chinese values as well:

*"This is a story about 12 mothers, their 12 children and the 12 animals of Chinese astrology. All of the 12 mothers and their children now live in Beijing, but are originally from 12 different provinces of China. They all came to Beijing with their husbands who are construction workers building the new China. Each child has a different Chinese astrological animal tattoo. The background of each photograph is a composite of several digital photographs: a "mash-up" of the new and the old China."*



Gao presents the diversity of the Chinese and the problems of the uprooted rural population subjected to homelessness, insufficient food, lack of permanent employment or social programs like health care and education. Yet these women hold their prize babies, fulfilling their filial obligation to perpetuate the family clan, the precious result of the single child dictum, someone to care for them. In her laborious process Yuan took at least a month to finalize each image in the computer and close scrutiny reveals the detailed landscapes in which they exist are a compilation of locations throughout China, rural and urban, old and new. The image also educes a range of temporal references; the moons allude to the menstrual cycle's chrono-biological rhythms and issues of fertility; and the twelve moons of the calendar which are indicated by a zodiac mark inscribed on each child's image. In the end the multi-layered works are a paradigm of time and space of ancient and modern Chinese culture.

Gao Yuan *Twelve Moons*, 2009, C Print, 19 x 14"

***The Gao Brothers** (Gao Zhen born in 1956 and Gao Qiang born in 1962 in Jinan, China, [www.gaobrothers.net](http://www.gaobrothers.net)) have pursued a number of different types of artistic expression. Together they have presented a variety of installations, performances and photographic projects. Their on-going series, *Utopia of a Hug*, is played out all over the world, as strangers are gathered together and enjoined to embrace each other. The performances are photographed and made available on their website. This act of affirmation of affection for one another is problematic in China and elsewhere where there is a reluctance not only to demonstrate physical affection in public but also to physically engage with strangers. The photos documenting the performances reveal a wide range of responses from discomfort to a kind of euphoria. Some of these performances were held in one of the thousands of unfinished skyscrapers in Beijing. Friends, artists, itinerant laborers and prostitutes as well as passersby joined together for the event. In a later stage the brothers take images and manipulate them in a computer making kaleidoscopic panoramas that resemble a mandala. Their critique of consumerist and a repressive society is represented in the photograph exhibited here. Inhabiting the unbuilt structure, crowds of figures interact, but the imagery has become more strident. Look carefully and you will see a montage of figures interjected into the photo- a toppling statue of Mao, a raging fire, crimes being committed, bodies lying on the ground bleeding; Osama Bin Ladin clad only in underwear sits in a great comfy chair drinking beer, the Olympic flag flies, acrobats tumble, blind men walk with canes among the chaos of sports cars, trucks, and bicycles; the whole of the human comedy is here in this diary of events in modern China. At the top is the crucifixion. Other works that are more critical of the authorities show the red army shooting Christ. This is a secret art, one that cannot be shown in China where there is a limit to be completely free.*



*Gao Brothers, Unfinished Building, 2008, C Print, 36 x 120" (detail)*

***Longbin Chen** (born in 1964 in Taiwan [www.longbinchen.com](http://www.longbinchen.com)) fashions large-scale sculptures out of the cultural debris of our information society. Chen's paper sculptures are inextricably tied to issues central to contemporary society: discarded reading materials--out-of-date books, newspapers, magazines, and computer paper that are transformed with a buzz saw into formal works of art. Beautifully executed, the sculptures look like wood or marble from a distance, but the monumental forms are built of paper. Although the finish of the pieces is smooth and polished like stone, the sculptures can be riffled like a book causing the printed texts and illustrations to magically appear. The construction is based on Chinese furniture joinery, the pieces fit together like the pieces of a puzzle, which can be dismantled and reassembled at will, and the books retain their original function and appearance. Using recycled materials to make art addresses the voracious appetite of the consumer society that results in ecological problems of garbage disposal, the mindless destruction of forests, and the exhaustion of nonrenewable resources. In one series he recreated the heads of statues that were decapitated and brought home by Western collectors in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This restoration series includes a variety of Buddha heads that represent the development of religious sculpture in China. Lately Chen has been crafting remarkably life-like portraits. One astonishing work reduplicates Mount Rushmore, and the heads are placed around a miniature train installation, whose circuit travels through Egypt and Asia, represented by heads of antiquity. As the train travels its path, the voyage is geographical as well as temporal. Chen is also rendering portraits of ancient thinkers like Socrates, Old Testament Prophets, and even such contemporary figures as Freud and Barak Obama. For the show, Chen has provided a portrait of Jesus and Mary, in his continuing series of portraits of those who have had a great influence on Chinese culture. Though these look monumental, the sculptures ironically convey a sense of fragility due to the paper material.*



Longbin Chen, *Jesus and Mary*, 2001 books, 40" tall



Zhao Suikang, *Untitled* 2009 C Print 12 x 18"

*Zhao Suikang's* (born in Shanghai, now living in New York, [www.zhaosuikang.com](http://www.zhaosuikang.com)) works consistently encompass a spiritual vision he first expressed in his *Holy Bible*, written on plastic sheets with a ring binder of neon lights and set on a pedestal. In another piece, *Holy Pamphlet*, he wrote selections from the bible and other religious texts on a clear plastic medium which was lit from behind, the sculpture reached six feet in height and 16 feet in length. The texts interacted with each other to form a lacy calligraphic pattern. Zhao also wrote a computer program *Polyphonic Realities*: displayed on a computer screen was a globe, enclosing the area was a wall of string that was hung from the ceiling. As the viewer touched a place on the globe shown on the screen, an animated hand begins moving, as music of that tradition is heard, LCD projectors reflect the image on the strings. Here in a C Print Zhao shows the most personal of parts of human beings--the hands and feet-- locked in a universal embrace. Zhao partakes of a tradition that reveres scripture as the revelation of spirit with powers of its own. These works, which encompass his belief that all religions appeal to the same saintly spirit in man, have been worked out in a number of surprising media.

A second group of artists document religious life of rural China

*Li Qiang* (born in 1966 in Jiangsu in a small town outside of Nanjing) now lives and works in Beijing. For thirty years since graduation he lived a rural existence teaching art and documenting the pious faith of the villagers' dour existence. The elders, left alone after the flight of the younger generation to the city, turned to religion in the 1980's when western proselytizers came to the countryside. He sardonically notes that even the village priest escaped to Shanghai to be an itinerant street sweeper. One day Li Qiang realized that the villagers, though illiterate, seemed to be reading the bibles given to them by the missionaries. He described his 2004 project that was the result of this observation, *The Sound Disappeared*, "I started to exchange the old used Bibles from the local Christian church with my new ones, while at the same time I wrote down their names and recorded their sounds. I put them together with the bible. During this process, I found many Christians cannot read and write. They made remarks somewhere inside the book, which accordingly they can read phonetically in order. 'Thank you God', they read, 'for the sake of understanding the Truth...' I put these books and the mike together since I hope the world can hear the sound." In a moving installation framed photos of his neighbors, in close up head shots, are mounted on the wall; for the most part they avoid the camera, reticent, sincere, and meditative. The bibles are placed near the photos, inside each bible is a transliteration of the prayer. Li has provided a notebook for viewers to record their impression of his piece.

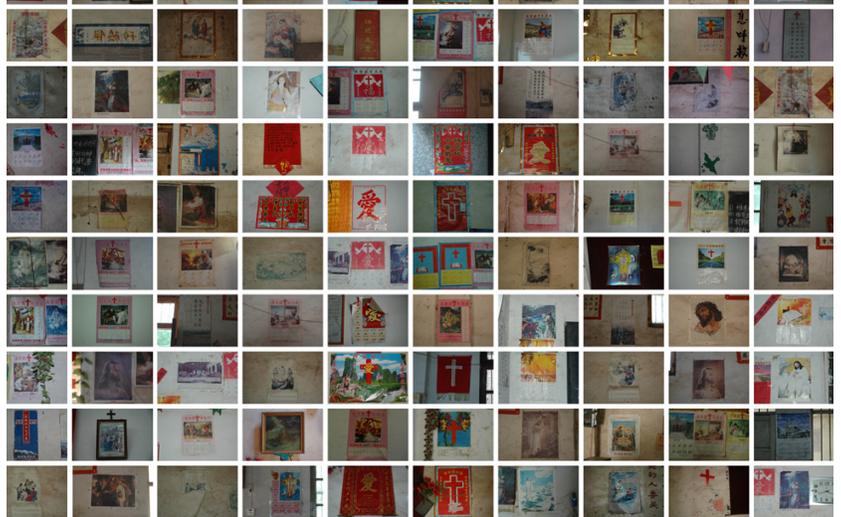


Li Qiang, *The Voice Disappeared*, 2008, mixed media

A third group of artists are converts to Christianity. Their works reflect the images important to their faith.

Painter and photographer, **Cao Yuanming** (born in 1974 in Suzhou, Anhui, Province [www.purdue.edu/newsroom/events/2010/100819AR-MartinGalleries.html](http://www.purdue.edu/newsroom/events/2010/100819AR-MartinGalleries.html)) currently teaches at Shanghai University. A Christian convert, Cao is the gatekeeper at his local church in Shanghai. Moved by the humble circumstances of his church and the devoutness of its adherents, he photographed pictures of churches bereft of believers. A haunting spirituality infuses the simple but touching images of the old and worn out stools on which the congregation sits, or their folded cloths that serve as cushions, and cheap paper woodblock icons of their faith pasted on the walls of their homes and on the doors of local buildings. In modernist fashion he arranged the small images into a geometrical grid composition for a large scale C-print. In his own words, Cao explains how he has been investigating the unofficial form of Christianity, not represented by the state, "I spent four years researching in various provinces, such as Anhui, Henan, Shandong...etc. Since the Cold War, religion has been the key to conflicts . . . There are nearly a hundred million Christians in China now. Churches in the countryside present the primary space, where Christian culture and Chinese local culture meet and blend together. My artworks are mainly discussing Chinese peasants' imagination towards foreign religion. They have never been to the west, nor have they seen the western churches. They have built the churches based on their fantasy, and fully intake the religion as a part of their lives." In another work of 2008 he buried resin-coated bibles in the sand during wheat planting season and harvested them with the crops one year later. In this way, he attests, he made fossils of the bible. The process invested them with the ancient associations of the biblical culture in which they evolved. Cao has also made drawings of the local church and faithful farmer.

*Cao Yuanming, Humble Faith, 2009, C Print 48 x 60"*



*Daozi, Saintism, ink on rice paper, 2009 36 x 72"*

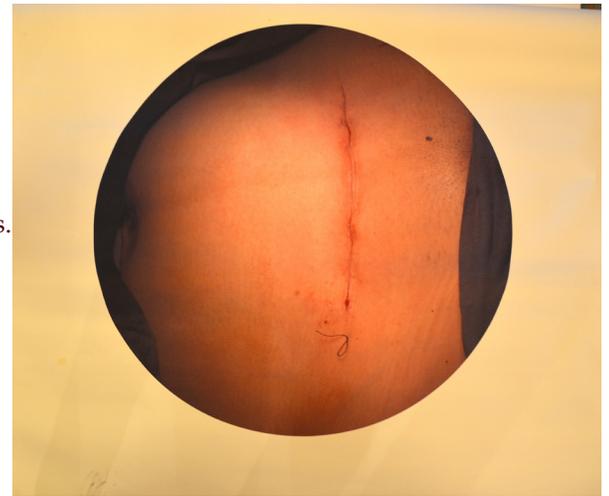
**Daozi** (born in 1956 in Qingdao) is a well-known art critic, professor, and writer who during the upheaval of the Tiananmen Incident found Christianity. He calls it the new Christianity to distinguish it from its more institutional forms. He and others from the academic community where he teaches, along with neighborhood people, meet for unofficial weekly prayer meetings in a variety of local places. In the aftermath of personal turmoil of the last few years, Daozi's faith has become more insistent and being a visual person he turned to painting as a form of meditation, it soon became a form of prayer. Using traditional Chinese ink painting media, he created uninhibited compositions that seem largely abstract, but are infused with such Christian images as angels and crucifixes. Revitalizing the traditional Chinese ink technique was an important choice for Daozi who is keenly aware of the secondary role this medium has taken since the introduction and subsequent domination of Western oils and acrylics on canvas. Daozi calls his work, *Saintism*. Large scale and freely executed with broad brushes in a wash medium on rice paper, the paintings evoke in a semi-abstract manner the traditional imagery of Christian art. Large crosses, angels in flight, haloed figures, and a crown of thorns are central in his largely improvisational monochromatic ink works. These paintings are executed in long prayer sessions during which he meditates on the subject. They resemble the spontaneous work of the Song dynasty Zen masters in their immediacy and evocative technique of free brushwork. In this way Daozi has combined the spiritual works of the past, using the technique and medium of ink painting with Christian iconography. Daozi has joined with other artists to show their work, he is the co-curator of this show, offering the work of his friends which has had little or no publicity.

*Gao Ge* (who was born in 1964 in Shandong province) now works and resides in Shanghai and Beijing. The work in the show illustrates the fruits of the tree of goodness, for "Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit." Gao uses delicate washes of grey ink applied to hand made paper, as a result the image is nearly invisible. It seems as if the internal structure of the fruit and its pit are visible through the veils of light grey. The fruit, filling the entire area of the paper, takes on a monumentality and luminous quality that resonates with the mystical monochrome fruit painted by the thirteenth century Zen artist Mu Qi.



*Gao Ge, Fruit, 2010, ink on paper 36 x 40"*

*Yu Bending* (born in 1967 in Qufu, Shandong Province [www.mocarts.com](http://www.mocarts.com)) is a feminist artist whose work focuses on images of birth. In her exhibition "Crisis... What Crisis?", held at China Visual Arts Center in October 2010, Yu Bending showed a piece that focused on both the lack of freedom and personal choice available for women in China giving birth. This has been seen as a critique of the medical practice of C-Section that leaves irreversible scars on women's bodies. Her work made for the show is a ten-foot raw canvas with intermittent large circular photographic images of pregnant women's bellies marred by the scars of a C-Section contained within a round shape. A slit in the canvas bifurcates the womb. This telling image is in part a response to the forced abortions caused by the one child policy in China. Reference is also made to the Madonna.



*Yu Bending, Birth, 2009, ink on canvas, 48 x 72"*



*Zhu Jiuyang, Blue Light, 2009, oil on canvas, 48 x 60"*

*Zhu Jiuyang* (born in 1969 in Wu Qi, Shanxi Province) a professional artist, „made two Blue Paintings for the exhibit. Lost in the vast and undifferentiated blue background suggestive of the sky, small-scale figures, dressed in business attire, stand in a vast undefined space, with everyday objects floating around them. In the lower right a pair of young men commune, near them is a tank and a snoopy dog, above them a male and female couple stand close together. To the left another man kneels to pray, a faint light illuminates him. Nearby are scattered toys. Another composition focuses on the male and female couple who occupy the foreground, they look up and a bright light illuminates their faces. Toys, a cross, a single figure on the left and a man in a car at the right surround them. Drawn in

various sizes, these objects suggest some spatial definition, but they are all overwhelmed by the massive blue environment. Zhu's works highlight the isolation of modern life and the problems of a consumer society. Only the light from the sky provides some relief from the alienation and pollution of modern life.

*Ying De* (born in 1968, Wang Qing County, Jilin Province) is an artist working in Beijing. His triptych of a baptism conveys the unity of spirit and deep sincerity of vows of faith. In a murky setting, a woman, dressed in a tee shirt emerges from the water, which still drips over her face; two friends hold up her hands in a gesture of support and triumph. The diffuse light illuminates their white shirts against the murky sky and dark water. In another work, a young boy kneels in prayer, his figure illuminated in a brilliant light. (see rear cover) Ying De's extreme skill in realistic rendering adds poignancy to these works. As Zhang Yi in her essay "Dwelling with Love Keeping Watch for Spiritual Life – "Spiritual Love for China" for the exhibit Roving Contemporary Art Exhibition at the 798 Space in Beijing explained,

"The "Hosanna" series is of a theme that Ying De has continually created with, but this time the difference is that the canvas is full, overlapping with shouts of praise. The Holy Spirit shows up in this place. Hosannah is a shout, is a reply, is repentance, is praise, is community. This cry for salvation ultimately evolves into responsive singing of praise; it is the salvation of God ultimately evolving into peace and joy. The characters in the picture are missing eyes, with only an open mouth, and hands raised high, each one singing together in praise, the Holy Spirit descending upon them. The spiritual life of Pastors Pollard and Fraser, who labored in sowing in this place descends upon this scene as well, giving birth to those who enjoy the gospel, and to a few who devote themselves to it; together they bear to witness a hundred years of vicissitudes, of changing tides of time, and yet as God's love was sown, it has grown stout and vigorous, never ceasing to bring life. The pure white clothing of the people is like a dove. The blood-red cross is particularly eye-catching. Holy white and glowing red, all the pairs of outstretched hands, are the seeds borne from the lives of two pastors. There are two kinds of light in Ying De's paintings: one kind is harsh, leaving a strong human silhouette, another kind is soft, full of mystery, saturating the foreground of the painting like fog." (The full text of Zhang Yi's article is available at [Karetzky.com](http://Karetzky.com))



*Ying De, Hosanna, 2010, oils on canvas, triptych, 90 x 60"*

In conclusion, today in China people are finding themselves in a cold capitalist world after the Cultural Revolution destroyed the ancient humanist values of Chinese culture *ren* or benevolence has been replaced by greed. Seeking meaning in the mindless acquisition of fame and fortune that drives 21st century China, a number of people have turned to religion for solace and hope in the restored temples of Buddhism and Daoism. However, in the arts, it seems that it is only Christianity that has motivated religious works of art. Some take the traditional Western images and interpret them in unique ways to infuse their art with spiritual meaning. Others directly express their Christian faith. It should be said that the work of the Christian artist stands outside of the government's monitoring of the state recognized forms of religion, and as such they are considered as *outsiders and subject to government disapproval*.

Sources Vincent Goossaert, "1898: The Beginning of the End for Chinese Religion" *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 65 no. 2 (2006) 307-335.

Yoshiko Ashiwa And David L Wank, "The Politics of Reviving Buddhist Temple: State, Association and Religion in Southeast China, *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol.65, no. 2(2006): 37-359.

## Works of Meditation

Wang Yun

No laughing face, no sparkling material, no obvious Chinese symbol, Cao Yuanming's work is peaceful and deep, like meditation. Born in a small town in the area around Suzhou, Anhui province in 1974, Cao Yuanming had a simple childhood running around the town. Cao Yuanming's grandfather was a well-known veteran practitioner of traditional Chinese medicine and his father teaches Chinese and drawing. Unlike other family members, his mother became a Christian in 1977, before the reform of the religions policy in 1979. His father did not support his mother's religious belief while his grandfather, educated in the Sishu (old-style private school) and deeply influenced by Confucianism, as the patriarch also objected to her belief. Unlike Buddhism or Taoism, it was unacceptable and so Cao's mother had to go to church secretly. Cao Yuanming sympathized with his mother's religious belief and became familiar with the local churches where he found "special" people different from those he met in daily life. Though he was taught the Christian religion was superstitious, he did not care because he got candy and gifts from the church during the Christian festivals.

Because Cao learned to enjoy painting from his grandfather and father, he chose to study oil painting at Nanjing University. After graduation, he worked as a teacher in the Fine Arts Department, Art Academy of the Anhui University; several years later, he went back for a master's degree but majored in religious studies and took courses in humanities and sociology. At first, he was interested in Buddhism but soon realized that Chinese ignored Buddhist Faramita (the other world) while paying more attention to this life. The Christian Bible asserts the other shore is the root of this life. While, Buddhism asks for charity, Christianity seeks charitable contributions and the pursuit of independence and equality. Cao had the rewarding opportunity to meet with some famous professors in Nanjing University especially Professor Ding Fang who seemed "tough" and had a very simple requirement for life-- all he cared about was the spiritual life, and, as an artist, a consistent preference for hard materials, three-dimensional sculpture and the allure of ancient geology. For Cao, Ding Fang was not an inhospitable eccentric but someone who saw beyond social position, wealth and women. After three years' training in philosophy and having read a lot of books, Cao felt limited and so started to research churches recording the outer appearance and interior of the churches in the country; Christian daily life; installation; sculpture and the development of Christian religion in Suzhou, Anhui province. These works are a very good document of Christianity in rural China for these churches might collapse or be damaged, removed or renovated and thus quickly forgotten. Cao Yuanming tried to get information (e.g. the number of the believers in one church, etc.) from the preacher and gatekeeper, sometimes from the local committee (e.g. a comparison of the population of the believers of different religions) and sometimes he had to do the measurements himself (e.g. detail size of the architecture). Gradually, his research covered 600 small churches in the Suzhou area as well as churches in the surrounding rural areas. Cao endured many hardships-- walking on mud roads for about ten kilometers in the heavy rain to visit an isolated church. But he also saw the heartfelt sights of a poorly dressed old man bringing a half bag of wheat flour and an old lady carrying eggs to contribute to the church. Cao saw the Chinese character for love everywhere and he thought these places were cleaner than those in secular society and after visiting many Christians found they were very happy. Cao realized these people should be his model, instead of the "successful man".



The "Chinese Tabernacle" series is a miniature of the local church. At first he wanted to create the architecture in the original size but it was too difficult. He invited the mason who built the local church to work with him. Using cement and a combination of mud, hemp rope, human hair and salt etc, he built it as a clay icon. For Cao Yuanming, the material and form reflect the mood of these small churches, plain but soulful. Cao is interested in the interactive relationship between painting, sculpture and philosophy. For his work "How Much Sand Do You Have, How Much Love Do You Have", he put an old Bible in an enclosed space and piled sand on it. Every day, he sprayed hair gum on it, bit by bit, the shape became fixed. And then, he poured on layers of clear resin and the work became very hard, like a fossil. For Cao the sands, being innumerable represent infinite love. For believers, the Bible is the book of life.

Cao Yuanming, Bible, 2009, mixed media , 8 x 10"





