

CHINA

This summer, **Catherine D. Ansporn** traveled to one of Asia's most sizzling cities to observe as 41 Texas artists took on the Chinese art scene.

SYNDROME

Houston Artists Shanghaied



BAYOU BURG TO ASIAN METROPOLIS

Most major art exhibitions are planned years in advance, excruciatingly mapped out to allow extensive time for selection, fund-raising, loan agreements and the nuts and bolts of crating, transporting and installing. This year, however, an incisive and important survey of Houston's current art scene was organized, from idea to opening night, in

Shanghai Art Museum as the third co-sponsor to fund the show's six-figure costs.

The exhibit engulfed the museum's entire second floor, approximately 14,000 square feet of painting, sculpture, video and photography by a sampling of Houston's best and brightest. All total, 71 works were displayed by 41 artists, spotlighting a cross-section of Texas talents.

Included were late masters such as Lucas Johnson (his hypnotic landscape was used for the catalog cover and entry wall) and recently departed Latino sculptor Luis Jiménez (represented by a self-portrait and the sexy *American Dream*, depicting a car making love to a woman). Emerging talents also stood out, such as Suzanne Banning (her photographic self-portraits resonated).

pop-art foodstuffs; Wayne Gilbert's American flag painted from human ashes; Ramzy Telley's video of the Angola, Louisiana, prison rodeo), other works possessed a strong Asian aesthetic. In this category were Brian Portman's exquisite dyed and bleached paper works — abstract and calligraphic at the same time. Other Asian-inspired offerings included Weihong's lenticular prints and Virgil Grotfeldt's coal-dust-on-rice-paper diptych.

What did the Chinese audience think of the Texas talents? The figures speak for themselves: The exhibition drew 20,000 attendees during its two-week run. Meanwhile, the curator of the Shanghai Biennale told Zhu, "You are challenging me!"



"HERE WE ARE — 1,000 YEARS AFTER MARCO POLO. THE PROBLEM, GUYS: HOW ARE WE GOING TO TOP THIS?"



less than six months. "Houston Contemporary Art" opened this July at the Shanghai Art Museum.

NOT LOST IN TRANSLATION

One of China's major museums, the august Shanghai Art Museum was once the Shanghai Race Club, a mecca for upper-crust gambling back in the day. This institution is best known as the site of the Shanghai Biennale (on view through November 5).

It all began with a couple of passionate Asian art collectors, Margarida and Penn Williamson, who introduced two curators continents apart, Christopher Zhu and Gus Kopriva, and the idea of a Houston exhibition in China was born.

Shanghai-based Zhu, a scholar in ancient Asian art whose credentials include a degree from Princeton and a previous post at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, was the perfect partner for Kopriva, owner of Houston's Redbud Gallery, who regularly discovers Texas talent and has curated shows around the globe.

The Williamsons brought the Asia Society (Texas and Shanghai branches) on board as exhibition co-sponsors. Zhu enlisted the

The co-curators adroitly mixed recognized mid-career masters Sharon Kopriva, Joseph Havel, The Art Guys and Jesús Morales with underknowns such as Harvey Bott (now a cult figure for obsessive, geometricized paintings and sculpture), Kelly Alison (witty ab-ex, symbolist canvases) and Magdalen Celestino (childlike toy figures the artist christens *Pupas*).

Instead of the Glassell School of Art Core Fellows dominating, artists from the University of Houston took center stage, linked to many that came of age during the first flowering of the Lawndale Art Center. This generation was represented in full force, including founder James Surls, his protégé Kopriva, sculptor Paul Kittelson, The Art Guys and Alison. Tellingly, many of the inclusions (Richard Stout, Johnson, Ibsen Espada, Kopriva, Alison) were artists who had shown in the landmark 1985 traveling group show "Fresh Paint: The Houston School." Their selection 20 years later for this international exhibition underscored the longevity of our scene.

DOUGHNUTS TO RODEO

While many of the themes were so American (Kittelson's droll



OPENING NIGHT

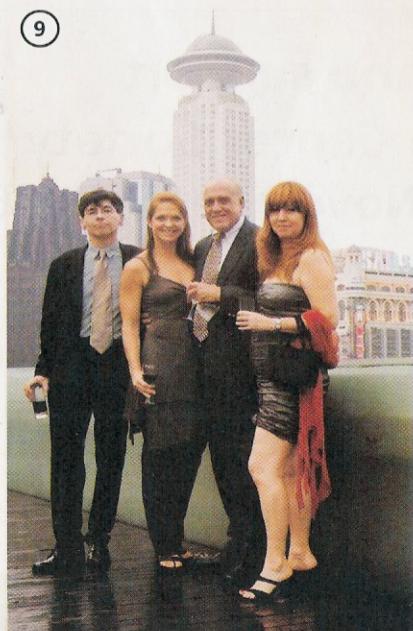
Words cannot describe the feeling when I saw our artists on opening day at the museum. A very VIP contingent of Oriental and Occidental dignitaries turned out for the tony afternoon-into-evening festivities. The ceremonies began with a press conference, followed by red-ribbon cutting and speeches, then a cocktail preview (drawing a throng of 400), concluding with an alfresco dinner for 100 on the museum's rooftop, gazing out upon Shanghai's gleaming skyline at dusk.

In the crowd, journeying from Houston, were Margarida and Penn Williamson; Asia Society Texas representative Thomas Au; Lily Foster and sons Anthony and Zachary (part of the mayor's delegation to China); co-curator Gus Kopriva; collector Jennifer Shankman — and the heroes of the night, the artists. Eleven of the 41

traveled 7,500 miles to be there: Kelly Alison, Suzanne Banning, Magdalen Celestino, Michael Collins, Dixie Friend Gay, Wayne Gilbert, Tim Glover, Sharon Kopriva, Angelbert Metoyer, Jesús Morales, and Brian Portman.

Asian-based big brass included Shanghai Art Museum director Li Lei; co-curator Christopher Zhu; from Asia Society Shanghai Freda Wang; Capital Art's Sun Yongkang; Susan Xie with Art Shanghai; China Daily reporter Yvonne Zhang; Tony Xie; Rosemary Zhu; artist and antique dealer Henry Wang; consultant Kathy Hanna; Nina Liu, of SPX Corporation Asia Pacific; Zijiang Holding's VP Brenda Hu; and Ford Motor Company China VP Keith Davey and wife Jeanene.

Artist Alison summed up the evening perfectly: "This is the most exciting thing that has ever happened in my entire life!"



- 1) Contemplating Paul Kittelson's *Sugar Donut*
- 2) Angelbert Metoyer, Sun Yongkang, Susan Xie
- 3) Paul Kittelson's pop-ular *Olive Totem*
- 4) Judy Wong, Gus Kopriva, Joy Chen
- 5) Ayvee Jolie, Wayne Gilbert
- 6) Angelbert Metoyer, Suzanne Banning, Sharon Kopriva, Wayne Gilbert, Christopher Zhu
- 7) Magdalen Celestino's *Proto-Viva-Pupa* (detail)
- 8) Suzanne Banning's *Pele, Goddess of the Volcano 11*
- 9) Brian Portman, Gayle Collins, Penn & Margarida Williamson