

Exhibition: The Real Thing: Contemporary Art from China

IVAM-Centre Julio González

7th February – 27th April 2008

Organised by: Institut Valencià d'Art Modern

Curated by: Simon Groom, Karen Smith and Xu Zhen

As a result of an agreement with Tate Liverpool, *The Real Thing: Arte contemporáneo de China* (The Real Thing. Contemporary Art from China) brings to Valencia the recent art of one of the speaking most dynamic and sophisticated countries in the world. The exhibition presents some of the most spectacular works made in China in recent years, many of which are shown for the first time away from home, and gives an in-depth view of the works of an emerging generation of young artists. Curated by Simon Groom, director of modern and contemporary art for the National Galleries of Scotland, Karen Smith, a curator based in Beijing, and the artist Xu Zhen, the exhibition comprises 33 works by 18 artists in a great variety of supports, including several large-scale installations.

The catalogue of the exhibition, edited by one of the most outstanding graphic designers in China, relates the history of cultural development and exchange in the country, as well as identifying some of the themes addressed by a new generation of artists accustomed to global exchange. This catalogue reproduces the works displayed in the exhibition and contains texts by

Consuelo Císcar, director of the IVAM, Christoph Grunenberg, director of Tate Liverpool, and the three curators.

In the Western World contemporary Chinese art is still associated with the work of the previous generation of artists, who launched the new art scene from the mid eighties to the mid nineties. The emphasis they put on figurative political painting, which they presented in the West as an example of political and cultural engagement, was simply seen as an updating of the tradition of social realism. Many people still consider this “political Pop” as the definitive style of contemporary Chinese art and a synonym of the avant-garde.

The title “*The Real Thing*” can be taken literally, as proof that the exhibition is a true reflection of contemporary Chinese art. Many artists display a sincerity in their work that is clearly lacking in the “cynical realist” style of the generations that went before them. “*The Real Thing*” can also be understood ironically: humour and irony are typical features of a great deal of the art currently produced in China. The title also alludes to the insatiable fascination the West feels for China and its attempt to discover the “real” China.

With the advent of collective cultural spaces like 798 Art District in Beijing and the Moriganshan Warehouse complex in Shanghai and the increase of media coverage in publications in Chinese and other languages, contemporary art has made a leap forward in Chinese society. Accompanied by an awareness of international practice, the work has changed, often radically, in the last few years. These artists, most of whom are young, have chosen to remain in China, unlike many artists of the previous generation. They are acquiring a self-confidence that stems from an understanding of contemporary art, China’s place in it and a reflection about their own position in a society at a time of rapid cultural change.