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Abstract

The works of contemporary artists Xu Bing, Ed Pien and Gu Xiong are involved in bringing to light some of the factors inherent in social, cultural and linguistic translation. In doing so, each artist is also engaged in the nuanced activity of moving between historical and contemporary aesthetic strategies in order to interrogate the way meaning is produced through materials-based iterations, against a backdrop of public culture. This essay situates the works of Xu Bing, Ed Pien and Gu Xiong in relation to each artist's own respective practice which has spanned more than twenty years. Concentrating specifically on projects where the artists mobilize Western-influenced art methodologies and refer to traditional Chinese/Asian art styles, the essay makes canny revelations about the nature of communication, and on linguistic and material translation, in contemporary culture in the globalizing world.

Prologue

On any given day, a journey on public transit through an urban center in North America offers encounters that require acts of social reading and engagements with social translation. Young hipsters, bearing tattoos, wear get-ups that could become ready fodder for a treatise on the semiotics of self-presentation. And citizens from differing generations and ethnic backgrounds manifest signs of their cultures on their bodies and through their speech so that before our eyes the city bus becomes a theater of social understanding and misunderstanding at once.

In one such recent circumstance that I encountered, a literal reading of what was written on the body of another passenger became a cipher for the complexities of linguistic and cultural translation in the globalized world. A young woman was wearing a seemingly fashionable t-shirt that bore a glittering slogan: "Your smile my happy." Very likely, the girl was aware of the generalized fashion codes to which her t-shirt subscribed, but was possibly less cognizant of the nuances of the textual code—written English—that had been used to mark the garment. In that instance, I speculated on the background that might have brought the young woman and the ill-phrased t-shirt together, (was she an immigrant whose knowledge of English did not allow her full understanding of what the slogan meant?); and on the route of language and culture that had contrived to generate

the text, (had the shirt been produced in a place where the phrasing would be unreadable to most people?).

Whatever the specific answers to the foregoing questions, the determinants of meaning made according to and despite acts of translation are subjects of necessary interrogation at this historical juncture. Thus, the works of the artists under consideration in the following essay are germane, for not only do they present an art audience with representations made by producers from non-Western racial and ethnic backgrounds cognizant of the westernized frameworks that often colonize the globalized context, but they each display the traces of their own ethnic cultural lineages in ways that beg scrutiny. And, like the 'malapropism' on the t-shirt aforementioned, the works of the artists under discussion here can be shown to *say* and also to *not say* what they mean.

Three Asian-born Artists

The works of Xu Bing, Ed Pien and Gu Xiong share in the fascinating and often entertaining work of bringing to light some of the factors inherent in social, cultural and linguistic translation. In doing so, each artist is also involved in the nuanced activity of moving between historical and contemporary aesthetic strategies in order to interrogate the way meaning is produced through materials-based iterations against a backdrop of public culture. It is beyond the scope of this essay to fully situate the works of Xu Bing, Ed Pien and Gu Xiong within the

broad expanses of their own respective practices—each of which has spanned more than twenty years—so instead the essay presents but a sampling from the oeuvres of these important contemporary artists.

Xu Bing and Gu Xiong are both originally from Mainland China and now live primarily in North America (Xu Bing in New York and Gu Xiong in Vancouver); Ed Pien is from Taiwan and was raised in Canada. All three of the artists mobilize Western-influenced art methodologies and refer to traditional Chinese/Asian art styles to make canny revelations about the nature of communication and thus to comment on linguistic and material translation in contemporary life.

Backgrounds

Xu Bing was born in Chongqing in 1955, eleven years before the Cultural Revolution. The son of intellectuals, he grew up amidst a literate class—his father was the chairman of the History Department at Beijing University—and he excelled at careful and beautiful traditional writing. As a young man Xu Bing received early recognition for his abilities as a writer capable of doing blackboard newsletters and producing 'big character posters.' But Xu Bing also became aware at an early age that his father was subject to persecution—branded as a political reactionary within some of those same kinds of posters, during the early days of the Revolution.¹ So, along with developing considerable command and control of visual texts, Xu Bing was exposed

to the power of the visible word to control and oppress his father during his early life. As will be discussed later, this combination of mastery and critical insight informed his unorthodox works, typified by their insistent political and social impact.

Gu Xiong was also born in Chongqing in 1953, but whereas Xu Bing moved to a larger city soon after his birth (to Beijing, prior to the Cultural Revolution), Gu Xiong remained in the comparatively isolated mountain city birthplace for his early years. After the period of relocation to the countryside during the revolution, Gu Xiong returned to study at the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute. Upon graduating with an MFA, Gu Xiong was hired to teach as a professor at the Institute. However, his initial years of academic prestige were followed by a period as an artist-in-residence in Banff, Canada, during which his early impressions and assumptions about Western cultural life were formed. These ideas were both confirmed and painfully challenged for Gu Xiong upon emigrating to Canada—where he was soon found working as a busboy in the cafeteria at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. Like Xu Bing, Gu Xiong's lived experiences intersected with his aesthetic choices to ultimately inform his work. Often that work reflects upon the material surroundings of his Chinese upbringing in ways that show his background to be both familiar and distinct in relation to the trappings of his adopted Western home.

Ed Pien was born in 1958 in Taiwan and

emigrated with his family to Canada eleven years later. At the same time that Xu Bing and Gu Xiong were on the verge of a period of 'exile' in rural China, Pien experienced, in the late '60s, another form of alienation and displacement—amidst a life that may have held the *promise* of the sorts of liberal freedoms Chairman Mao was preaching against in China. Raised during his middle years in London, Ontario, Pien eventually followed the route of many North American artists and sought training in university art programs that later was supplemented by residencies and research periods in Europe and Asia. Therefore, his complex history as a child in Asia; his status as a member of a minority in the West; and experience as an art student of 'the world' would eventually come to inform a non-documentary practice that owes something to Asian painting and drawing traditions, and something further to Western historical imagery.² Yet memories of his early childhood in Taiwan and recollections of life as an adolescent in Canada also clearly coalesce in works by Pien in images that are disturbing and beautiful.

Critical and Theoretical Strategies

Writer Tila Kellman, in the essay on the work of Ed Pien entitled, "In the Realm of Others and My Self," draws attention to the practice of writing in Asian cultures as it intersects with pictorial expression:

In Asian cultures that use ideograms in order to write, people use

many of the same brush strokes to write and to paint. Not surprisingly, calligraphy in these cultures is a prestigious art form. In the West, in contrast, painting or drawing and writing are systematically separate. Pien's loose brush technique instantly recalls formalized Asian usage, but parodies the latter by rejecting formalized execution and proceeding as subconscious play.³

Kellman's explanation, which acknowledges some of the scholarship on the relationships between Asian text and image traditions, draws attention to a significant quality in the art of Ed Pien that is echoed in the works of the other artists. All three invoke traditional means and methods but do so with a sense of irony and play that partially belies the intentions of the original practice. Nevertheless—and perhaps unlike some Western artists who parody the strategies of their forebears—Xu Bing, Gu Xiong and Ed Pien each display a deftness with material practice that resists accusations that they are merely invested in a critique or dismissal of the earlier approaches. Indeed, each demonstrates a reflexive commitment to the 'tradition' in order to situate his works outside the mainstream of both post-modern Western practice (which is often typified by the pastiches of the 1980s), and also conventional Chinese/Asian art history. Instead the artists locate themselves within a global terrain where past and present operate in dialogue—as do East and West.

Multiple theories that encourage

a consideration of the function of *translation* in reading visual works come readily to mind as we consider the three artists in question, especially with regard to the manner whereby their works speak to potential divisions and fusions amidst diverse contexts in the globalized world. Perhaps the most significant of these ideas on translation concerns the fact that viewers bring to a work the predetermined visual and linguistic frameworks that inform colloquial readings in everyday life, and these come to influence interpretations of unfamiliar 'languages.' So, an engagement with Xu Bing's work assumes certain forms of textual recognition but anticipates a ready skepticism with respect to the ultimate linguistic legibility of his iterations. Gu Xiong, by comparison, in his Socialist Realist inspired images, speaks visually in rather 'plain language, yet the works operate according to the logic of the euphemism such that they represent the generalized object they describe and invoke it as an index of culture simultaneously: signifier, signified and its 'other' coalesce. Ed Pien's work relies less on linguistically oriented translation structures and instead advances a materialist syntax over-determined by language-based operations. His brush drawings thus rely on their lineage as meta-linguistic iterations while undercutting the ostensible codifications to which their antecedents point.

From the standpoint of recent art history, it should be noted here that the tensions and opportunities for conceptual practitioners to engage



Figure 1 Gu Xiong, 1985. Snoring, woodcut; by permission of the artist

with the written word through visual experimentation were significantly extended in Chinese contemporary art in the period following the Cultural Revolution. Because so many artists had been surrounded by propaganda texts when they were young, many of them eventually set about negotiating the validity of large-scale text-based works as forms of artistic expression. Wenda Gu wrote poster-sized characters devoid of context in the mid-1980's, and made monumental paintings based on a single 'character' by altering and combining existing characters.⁴ Such works displayed

language as a visible site of expression, both social and aesthetic. And it is at such a nexus, and in light of the productive "troubling" of meaning-making materials and strategies—including translation—that we may effectively engage the works of the artists at hand.

Xu Bing and Gu Xiong: Woodcuts

As has been discussed in other texts on the artists,⁵ in the 1970s Gu Xiong and Xu Bing were both sent to remote areas of China as laborers in accordance with the re-education policies

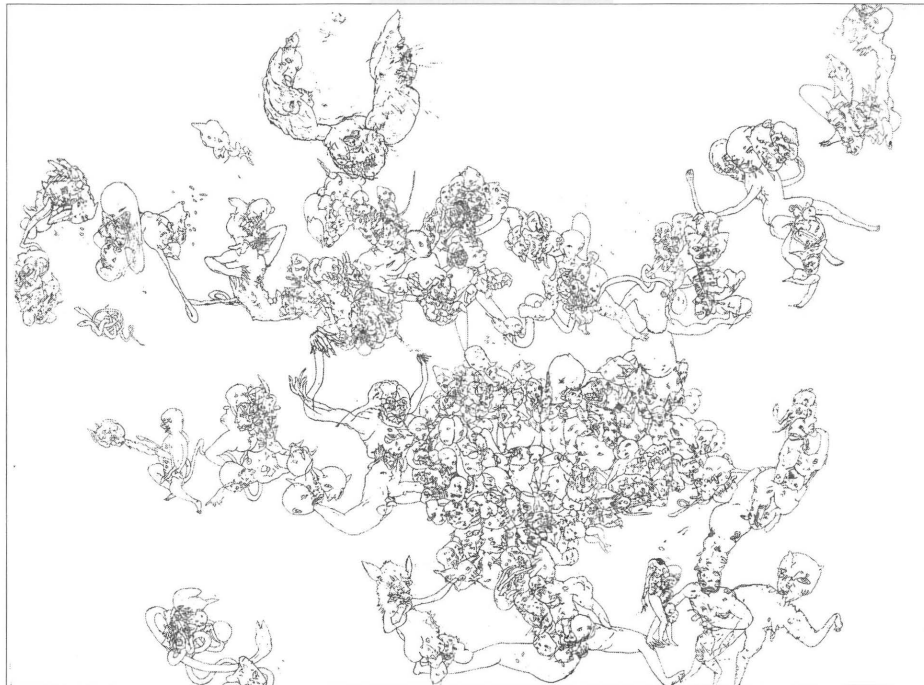


Figure 2 Ed Pien. 2007. The Creation of the World, ink on paper; by permission of the artist

established by Chairman Mao in 1968 as part of the Cultural Revolution. During their time at those enforced postings, both artists recorded their experiences visually within numerous individual drawings and sketchbooks. Those images later became source materials for art works produced during Fine Arts studies that followed their respective periods laboring in the rural countryside. Interestingly, Gu Xiong and Xu Bing had no direct knowledge of one another in the 70's, (this would come later when they met in 1981, and would be reinforced at the time of the important *China/Avant Garde Art Show* in Beijing in 1989), but each artist experienced a similar pattern of artistic development that included producing

woodcuts according to the classical Chinese tradition. In both *Woodblock Print* (1985) by Xu Bing, and *Snoring* (1985) (figure 1) by Gu Xiong, there is evidence of careful control over the hand-cutting and printing of wood matrix. Each work bears a graphic style that, while mannered according to a traditional formal syntax, foretells sensibilities that recur in the later less conventional works by each artist. With Xu Bing, the agitated graphic marks that describe a birds-eye view of rich fields also hint at the fields of text that will later typify the astounding, *Book from the Sky* (1987-91). Gu Xiong's woodcut work shows a more boldly contrasting graphic approach that will later be used to powerful

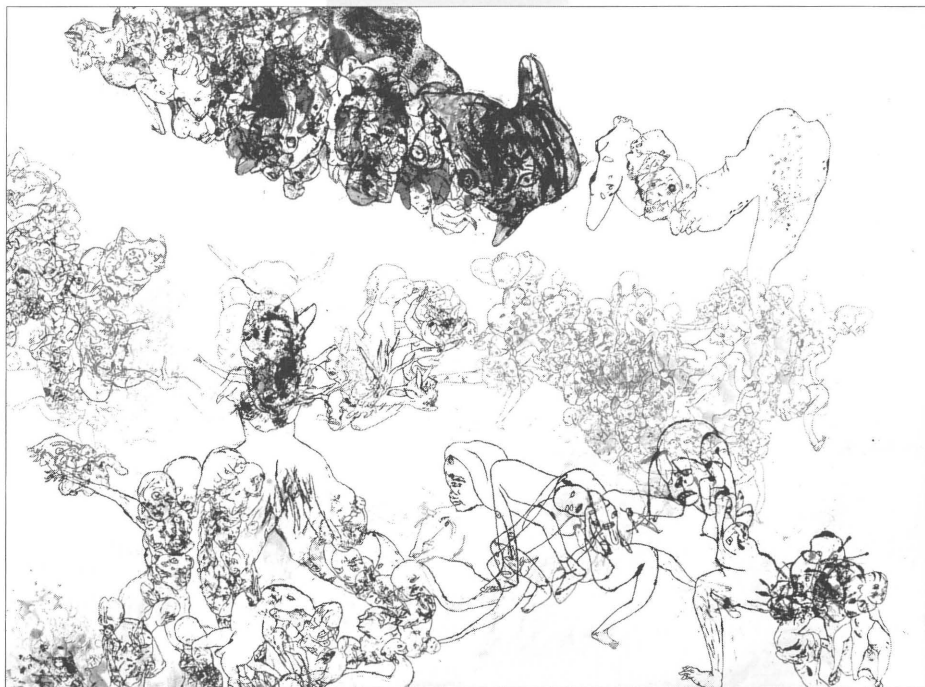


Figure 3 Ed Pien. 2007. *New Conjuror*, ink on paper; by permission of the artist

effect in paintings based on the *Bar-ricade of Bicycles* (1990) installations for which he became known throughout Canada and abroad after he emigrated from China in 1989.

Ed Pien: Ink Drawings

In the brush and ink drawings of Ed Pien a re-working of the tradition of brush painting and references to ghost paintings and to hell scrolls intersect to invent a remarkable and fresh pictorial expression. Beginning in the 1990s, Pien experimented with small-scale drawings of invented faces using ink. He developed these by drawing on layered rice paper, allowing the traces of one drawing to seep through the paper to create a 'ghost' on the next—

which would then inspire the drawing that was to come after it. This method shows a compelling hybrid of Eastern and Western approaches. Dedicated to 'mastering' an artistic form through repetition, Pien engaged with 'chance' and with the unplanned image as a means to bringing the as-yet-unseen into being.

In more recent ink drawings that are both larger in scale and more visually complex, Pien has extended the layer-drawing approach within the expanse of the work to develop a pictorial syntax that, while it is indebted to Asian traditions, is exceedingly contemporary in sensibility and intent. In *The Creation of the World* (2007) (figure



Figure 4 Xu Bing. 2001. Square Word Calligraphy: Quotations from Chairman Mao, ink on paper (detail); by permission of Xu Bing Studio



Figure 5 Xu Bing, 1994-1996. Square Word Calligraphy Classroom; by permission of Xu Bing Studio

2), repeated and ostensibly multiplying figures, at once perverse and complex, appear to be reproducing themselves with cancerous fervor; there is the faint sense here that they do so both at the hand of the artist and of their own volition. Similarly, in *New Conjurer* (2007) (figure 3) figures of extravagant form tumble over and out of one another, their interconnectedness inferring the sense that the *story* and its pictorial telling is a massive web from which a singular truth might never be unraveled. Like a joined-up, run-on sentence, the work's calligraphic excess seems the visual equivalent of a cacophonous though remarkably articulate din.

Unlike some of Xu Bing and Gu Xiong's earliest projects, Ed Pien's earlier works seem less invested in adhering closely

to the dictates of tradition. Yet, like those artists, his motivation regarding much of his oeuvre appears rooted in an attempt to invoke a historical standard and to demonstrate a mastery of it—and to conceptually unmake that approach in the service of an invested critical undertaking. Pien's ink drawings are marvels of 'craftsmanship,' yet their potential to disturb the 'master,' with all that that implies, is inarguable.

Xu Bing—Book from the Sky and Square Word Calligraphy

Two significant projects by Xu Bing may be considered in light of questions of translation such as those invoked earlier in this essay. One is the mammoth *Book from the Sky* installation. That piece, originally consisting

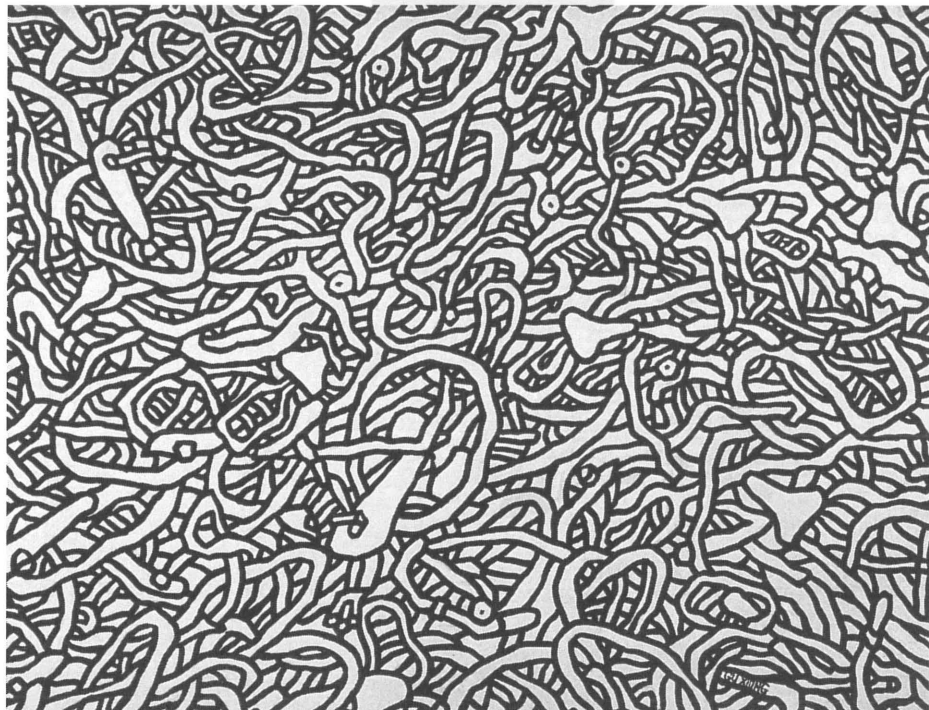


Figure 6 Gu Xiong. 1995. *Crushed Bicycles*, oil on canvas; by permission of the artist

of several 80-foot-long scrolls that swag across a gallery ceiling, a wall covered with contemporary Chinese newspapers and a floor filled with traditional hand-bound books, is important on many counts. Its deployment of 4000 hand-carved though meaningless characters resembling Chinese text that the artist made over a period of several years in the late '80s guarantees the work's currency within the wider cultural debates of the contemporary intellectual world.⁶ Further, it is important for the mixture of extreme effort to produce the work, and its conceptual absurdity (the text is, after all, completely meaningless), which made it the subject of hostile

criticism by Chinese authorities when first shown in 1988. As such, it contributed in important ways to debates on cultural modernism in China. The ambitious work not only brought Xu Bing to international attention, but also established his thinking regarding the nature of generating meaning through textual language. With *Book from the Sky*, a grand public statement using books and scrolls for their associations with knowledge and authority is undercut to become preposterous, even as it is a vast and astounding spectacle.

Xu Bing's engagement with the visible and conceptual characteristics of writ-



Figure 7 Gu Xiong. 1994. Crushed Coca-Cola Cans, oil on canvas; by permission of the artist

ten language acquires irony and offers a source of humor and playfulness in the Square Word Calligraphy pieces he began producing in 1994. Two large-scale scroll works, *Square Word Calligraphy: Quotations from Chairman Mao* (2001) appear at first to be comprised of Chinese characters (figure 4). Closer inspection reveals that, instead, the works are covered with glyphs made of brush-drawn letters from the Latin alphabet contrived to resemble Chinese. A reader of English who encounters the pieces moves from the initial assumption of being 'shut out' by the work to an attitude of being drawn into a game of deciphering, as if decoding stylized anagrams. So Mao's

dogmatic treatises on Communist doctrine gradually become readable, and inevitably seem both more sinister and more absurd than one might have initially thought. In an inversion of apparent linguistic and cultural priority, a reader of Chinese finds the scrolls illegible and is ultimately relieved of the necessity to engage with the history and meanings to which the pieces refer.

The accompanying *Square World Calligraphy Classroom* (1994-96) allows viewers a further opportunity to access the meaning—and meaninglessness—of the calligraphy project. This installation, outfitted with purpose-built



Figure 8 Gu Xiong. 1995. Here, There, Everywhere (detail), charcoal on canvas; by permission of the artist

desks and accompanied by instruction manuals, red-line tracing books and an instructional video, beckons viewers to insert themselves into the activity of calligraphy production. The work's participatory quality furthers the possibility for one to understand the calligraphy project as historical in its inferences, and also as something very much of the 'present' in its dynamism and malleability. Therefore, by entering into this project of Xu Bing, one comes to think about aspects of language and translation through avenues that are conceptually open and expansive (figure 5).

Gu Xiong – Barricade of Bicycles and Here, There and Everywhere

A particularly significant installation work by Gu Xiong which is important to this discussion is the *Barricade of Bicycles*, made by the artist immediately following his emigration to Canada in 1989 after the Tiananmen

Square incident. Many will recall the horrifying images of that historical event in China, in which protesting students, with a barricade of their own bicycles, were crushed by military tanks in a show of brutal force. As a homage and creative response to the occurrence, in 1990 Gu Xiong constructed a gallery installation that replicated the massive original barricade,⁷ utilizing hundreds of bicycles donated by members of the public. Following from that Gu Xiong created several important 'crushed bicycles' paintings using a stark black and white graphic approach. The works are at once abstractly beautiful in their strong reminiscence of traditional woodcuts, while still exhibiting intense evocations of violence. As such, they function as aesthetically engaging yet highly charged critiques. A later painted work, *Crushed Bicycles* (1995) (figure 6) has a quiet insistence whereby the legibility of bicycle forms comes slowly but forcefully into view.

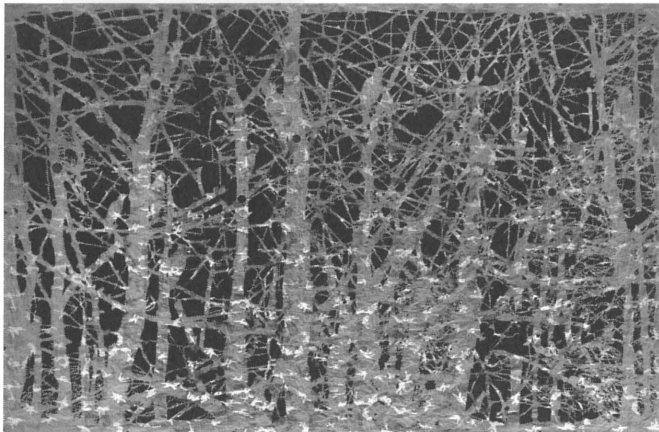


Figure 9 Ed Pien, 2007. Noise in the Forest, cut tarpaulin; by permission of the artist

A similar sensibility characterizes *Crushed Coca-Cola Cans* (1994) (figure 7). In these other works, the artist further utilizes his critical means to visually record the detritus of Western consumer society in a series of paintings that are pictorially compelling and also function as forceful yet playful commentaries. Indeed, Gu Xiong's biography enters into the works in that they are intended to refer to his experience of feeling 'crushed' when, as a new immigrant, he took a job as a busboy in the cafeteria at the University of British Columbia.

A sprawling installation of sixteen drawings by Gu Xiong, taken from an even larger project from 1995 entitled *Here, There, Everywhere* is accompanied by texts written by the artist that provide narrative points of entry so that viewers may connect with some highly compelling moments from his early immigrant experience. The titles of the drawings include *Rice Cooker*,

A Red-haired Girl and *A Friend Forever*, (see examples figure 8) and hint at the sorts of incidents and the particularities that typify an introductory experience in a new and unfamiliar culture. The drawings are rendered carefully in charcoal on canvas using a Socialist Realist-influenced style; that sensibility, which is normally associated with didacticism and indoctrination, is here used surprisingly to communicate about the confusing yet often ephemeral aspects of an individual immigrant's story. It is notable that despite the effect of the extended text accompaniments, the images take on a character that invests them with the qualities of signs or symbols. So, with this body of images and through their accompanying narratives, the artist has invented a set of richly layered 'texts' that provide insights into a significant period of his life, done in a manner that is instantaneous but also unfolds slowly and in a narratively compelling manner.

Ed Pien – The Papercuts

Chinese paper-cuts can be dated to the northern and southern Dynasties (A.D. 385-581); their history is almost as long as the history of paper, also an invention of the Chinese in the Han Dynasty. Similar to needlepoint in the Victorian Era, the art of paper-cuts was the purview of women. The subject matter varied from domestic scenes to flowers, decorative patterning and religious symbolism. As diverse as the subject matter, so too was the use of these delicate sheets of paper; they were used to decorate women's hair, they were hung in windows, given as gifts, used as patterns for shoe embroidery or buried with the dead.⁸

Ed Pien's large paper cuts are, according to the artist's own admission, intended to retreat from associations with domestic craft, and they succeed at this at least partly on the basis of their intentional use of scale. Beginning in about 2005, the artist made what might appear to be an intuitively understandable shift in his work; moving from the production of ink drawings to the extravagantly scaled and detailed cut paper pieces. Based on fantastical forms within the natural world and making reference to floral terrain gone wild, the paper cuts extend the practice of the artist beyond that of taking an approach that is insistently additive, to one that is almost perversely subtractive. In doing so, the works appear to further his commitment to graphical language

as capable of both subtlety and spectacle, and here do so in a manner whereby the pictorial form and the material object are fully integrated. The 'figure' has become the object; the ground for the picture is the gallery wall—or, by implication, the world. Through this shift of means that does not essentially diverge from earlier intentions, the artist has realized an approach that is deeply connected to an everyday Chinese craft practice while being fully rooted in the contemporary art of the present. The paper-cuts are as timely and complex as any number of important contemporary works that employ graphical sensibilities (think of Julie Mehretu's astounding painting/drawing works), but are also indebted to an historical Chinese approach. So their engagement with the potential 'now' and 'then' of art is complete.

The recent exhibition, *Ed Pien: Tangled Garden*, at Canada House in London, UK, was a significant display of a number of Pien's most ambitious paper-cuts. Produced on ink-stained Shoji paper or on store-bought tarpaulin material, the works envelop the viewer—as have several of Pien's drawing installations including *In the Realm of Others*—yet they manage to retain a lightness and a quality of simplified craftsmanship that harkens to their everyday, historical antecedents. *Noise in the Forest (2007) (figure 9)*, presents a legible image of birds set among a tangle of elongated branches cut into a tarpaulin, yet a quality of subtle menace prevails—and is reinforced

by the presence of occasional red or blue dots that the artist has painted at random amidst the birds and branches. The dots appear as canny references to preoccupations with flatness with which Modernist paintings from the West are so often associated. But they also act to remind us of targets or the crosshairs one might see through the site on a rifle. Further, they play against the artificial yet seemingly organic design of the camouflage pattern on the tarp in a way that insists on a remarkable integration of figure and ground, subject and object—and the *found* and the *fabricated*. Pien displays other equally compelling works in cut-paper, many of them stretching over more than ten feet horizontally. In each, historical craft and the methodologies of a contemporary-minded conceptually driven artist intersects to produce a compelling object.

Conclusion

The works of the artists presented here invite us to engage in acts of reading visual and textual signs and as such demand we consider the complex and varied nature of what it is to *mean* in culture—and also to speculate concerning the materials of our meaning-making enterprises. Through the works of the three artists, Xu Bing, Gu Xiong and Ed Pien, we come to understand something both more intense and more subtle about the mechanisms that foster our connections and disconnections within culture, especially amidst increasing globalization. Such understanding is invaluable given that our encounters with one another are,

though sometimes brief, compelling and continuous.

ENDNOTES

1

Erickson, Britta. 2001. *Words without Meaning, Meaning without Words: The Art of Xu Bing*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, p. 16.

2

Kellman, Tila. 2006. *Ed Pien: In a Realm of Others*. Lethbridge, AL: The Southern Alberta Art Gallery, p.43.

3

Kellman, *Ed Pien*, p. 44.

4

Erickson, Britta. 2005. *On the Edge: Contemporary Chinese Artists Encounter the West*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, p. 19.

5

See Erickson, 2001, *Words without Meaning* and John O'Brian, 1999 in *Gu Xiong: The River*. Victoria, BC: The Art Gallery of Greater Victoria.

6

Xu Bing's work has been discussed extensively, in relation to writings on language and culture by Derrida and Foucault. In 2000, the Albany Public Library organized *Book-Ends: Imag'in'ing the Book – the Work of Xu Bing*. A public discussion between Derrida and Xu Bing was held in conjunction with the exhibition.

7

One of the works, *Enclosure III*, was produced at Open Studio Gallery, Victoria, B.C., using approximately 300 donated bicycles.

8

Jansma, Linda. 2006. *Ed Pien: In a Realm of Others*. Lethbridge, AL: The Southern Alberta Art Gallery, p. 36.