

# Fluid bridges to China

The experience of being Chinese in Australia differs greatly for the three artists in a new Sydney exhibition, writes Rosalie Higgs

**T**HE international art world may be agog at the flood of new work by artists living in China, grappling with the world's fastest-growing economy and huge social changes, but here cross-cultural influences are providing fertile ground for Chinese-Australian artists.

Greg Leong, Suzan Liu and Pamela Mei-Leng See take very different, very personal and sometimes ambivalent approaches to the experience of being Chinese in Australia, in the exhibition Heavenly Bodies at Swaney's Gallery 4a.

Launceston-based Leong was born in Hong Kong in 1946. He is an established artist and academic, known for his textile work. He uses Australian and Chinese emblems to explore the relationships and tensions that affect Chinese-Australians. He points out that there has been a Chinese influence on Australia for centuries and it is part of the modern Australian nation.

Leong is showing three of his witty, subversive photographic collages, featuring brown-up images of empress dowager Cixi held aloft by hunny blond European men. There are other subtle additions, such as wrestling poses arranged across the background.

Two of his exquisitely detailed costumes are also on show. These are a yellow satin cheongsam, *The Waitress Uniform from the Ding Kam Chinese Aussie Meat Pie Palace*, and a gold opera costume with portraits of Australian country singers (including Australian of the Year Lee Kennaghan) and Chinese transvestite opera singers on the bodice. "The work is about how difficult it is to integrate these different cultures," Leong says. "You can't just put it on, you can't just wear it because people won't accept it."

"What is an authentic Australian? What is an Australian now? Our last prime minister thought that the true Australian was the harridan. That immediately cuts out everybody other than Anglo-Irish, Irish-Anglo men. Even all women were excluded, and that has upset me for a very long time."

Leong plays on the vernacular: "Take the expression *fair dinkum*," he says. "Dinkum is from the Chinese *ding kam*, which means real gold and came from miners in the goldfields. The Oxford Australian Dictionary says it's not

really true, that the expression probably comes from an Irish word, but I've seized on that to look at the question of authenticity, of what is a true Australian."

His mother was born in Hobart in 1918 and accepted neither by white Australia nor by the Chinese. "Her experience was intense," Leong says.

"I grew up in Hong Kong, my father was from Singapore, my parents spoke in English so the servants wouldn't understand what they were discussing. So I was very dislocated from my own community, and coming here I wanted to belong to the culture my mother had come from and yet had not been accepted by; my work often appropriates Australian icons to make them my own."

Leong's experience is very different from that of 25-year-old Sydney artist Lin, a second generation Chinese-Australian.

For Heavenly Bodies she has created a spare installation of a quilted puff, cloud, a searing skyscape and videos of herself dancing around the heavens like the mythical character Monkey, her Australian version of a Japanese television program based on an ancient Chinese novel.



**What is an authentic Australian?:** From left, Suzan Liu, Greg Leong and Pamela Mei-Leng See explore cross-cultural influences in Heavenly Bodies holding large poppies, as executed in stainless

Picture: Vanessa Hunter

thought of dressing up in traditional clothes, but I wouldn't feel comfortable," she says with a smile.

Liu's work is contemporary and theory-based. "I am influenced by many discourses, including postmodernism, philosophy, pop culture, and esoterics," she says.

"The large installations are often manifes-tations of the inner world: mind, fantasy, a channel for unresolved themes to be explored and romanticised."

She loves illusion, too. "I believe that an element of magic, and wonder, is very important to the artistic experience."

Liu's parents were artists who arrived from China after the Cultural Revolution. They encouraged her to follow her own path. It was an unusual parental attitude: the children of immigrants are often pressured to succeed as engineers, architects or doctors.

Her father was a social realist painter and art teacher who kept his head down to survive during the Cultural Revolution.

"The kind of avoided public abuse and imprisonment by teaching how to paint pictures of Mao (Zedong)," she says. "He was all for the Red Book but he was more neutral,

communism, completely, and she had a really tough time. Anything with communist iconography, she'll just scribble on it or tear it out, destroy it."

"An old friend sent her a book of his work and she was really proud that he was doing so well, but flipping through the pages, whenever there is a picture of Mao, she just gets her Textra and crosses it out."

"And she'll never go back."

Lin has been to China twice. "I plan to go back and do some serious studies, but it was a huge culture shock. People kept saying, 'Why are you doing that, that's not Chinese.' I don't feel the connection that Leong and See have. If anything it's a bit of a novelty for me to explore in my work, which is why it's kind of attenuated."

Brisbane-based artist See, 29, practises a contemporary form of paper-cutting and has spent years working and studying in China, including a stint late last year at a Beijing foundry, where she was encouraged to enlarge the paper designs and produce them in metal.

*Aspiration*, her linear representation of baby boys — traditionally a symbol of luck —

holding large poppies, is executed in stainless

steel (she calls the babies "opiate boys"). And dozens of smaller red paper cut-outs decorate the downstairs gallery at 4a, a special edition for the Chinese New Year. Visitors to the exhibition can take home one of the 1000 she created.

Interpretations of See's work depend on where she is. In China her artwork is largely read for its commentary on cultural and commercial colonialism, or as part of Beijing's burgeoning pop-artsch school. In Australia, the work is understood in the context of migration.

"It's very special to be able to work and show in China and be assessed by that audience, because I think they are qualified in many ways," See says.

"What makes my work distinctly different from traditional folk artists is they're quite localised, and the traditional papercuts have symbolic meaning and are there to attract good luck."

See is working on a series called *Interventions*, with patterns of introduced plant species that become noxious weeds in the bush. "I think that all of us as Asian artists, even using mediums that are quite traditional, are

to the rest of the world."

See's family left China twice. They moved to Malaysia just before the Long March period, and later emigrated to Queensland. "My papercuts for the show here are about history in terms of migrant stories," she says.

Her work questions notions of authenticity: what is Chinese and what is Australian, when there are "all these restaurants with fusion food, oriental noodles and so on?"

"What's interesting is that if you go to China you find that culture is fluid, and a lot of the aspects that we play with now as artists have already changed in China."

"I think it's important to note that during Mao's reign in China so many aspects of culture deteriorated, so that when we come back people are rediscovering things through the diaspora returning," she says.

"So what is really Chinese? It's not just about what is really Australian."

"They're fluid things and it's wrong to suggest that there's something wrong with new culture and its changes."

Heavenly Bodies is at Gallery 4a, Sydney, until March 1.