

Ah Xian Fading Book (detail) 1996  
toner on rice paper, dimensions variable



**Culture Graft** is the title of an exhibition featuring the work of three Chinese-Australian artists: Ah Xian, Wang Zhiyuan and Guan Wei. The title of this exhibition is intended to suggest the difficult and sometimes contradictory processes of acculturation—one aspect of the experience of migration—by using the botanical technique of grafting as a metaphor. The definition of graft describes the coming together of two separate strands, which meld and grow together to become one. In the context of the exhibition this metaphor highlights a tension between different cultures (Chinese and Australian) making a clear distinction between the past and present. Ah Xian, Wang Zhiyuan and Guan Wei migrated to Australia from China in the early 1990s and now reside in Sydney. In their work, which ranges from digital prints to sculptural objects, the past is identified with China while the present is fixed in Australia. Yet it would be incorrect to assume that the work in *Culture Graft* is about a nostalgia for a Chinese past. What makes Ah Xian's, Wang Zhiyuan's and Guan Wei's work powerful and relevant is the way that it resonates with Chinese signifiers in an unmistakably local idiom.

Ah Xian's use of mechanical forms of reproduction, such as photocopies and facsimiles, illustrates a connection between technology and death. His *Fading Book* series, for instance, utilise Chinese calligraphy books (concertina style) as a ready-made format for

Wang Zhiyuan Untitled 1998  
metal sheet, 96 x 85 cm



investigations into mortality. The first books, exhibited in 1996, featured images of the Mona Lisa, the Buddha and a self-portrait. Each book contained a single image reproduced continuously from the beginning to the end, the image getting weaker with each reproduction. Ah Xian's fading books in *Culture Graft* include images of four women: Mother Theresa, Princess Diana, Cicciolina and the artist's mother. These books continue Ah Xian's use of popular icons to evoke questions of mortality. By including the image of his mother, Ah Xian is also dismissing the philosophical and physical boundaries between the public and the private sphere. In spite of a possible reference to Ian Burn's xerox books, Ah Xian's fading books are less of a conceptual dictum than a glib comment on the futility of modern life.

Wang Zhiyuan's humorous and slightly off-beat wall relief works from 1997 depict a melange of strangely contorted human and animal bodies. These flesh-coloured paintings on plywood resemble cartoon creatures struggling to emerge from a dream. More recently, Wang Zhiyuan has begun to experiment in metal, creating delicate renditions of reality and myth. Dragon tails are shown alongside cloud formations, set against a background of yellow. In a similar blurring of the irreconcilable, Wang Zhiyuan's work in *Culture Graft* comprises two stories written in Chinese. The large texts appear in bold

black characters across the wall. A small translation in English accompanies the work. Through this narrative, Wang Zhiyuan engages with the tradition of storytelling as a way of both recounting the past and predicting the future. The Old Fable represents the past located, for him, in China while the New Century Childrens Story is about Australia.

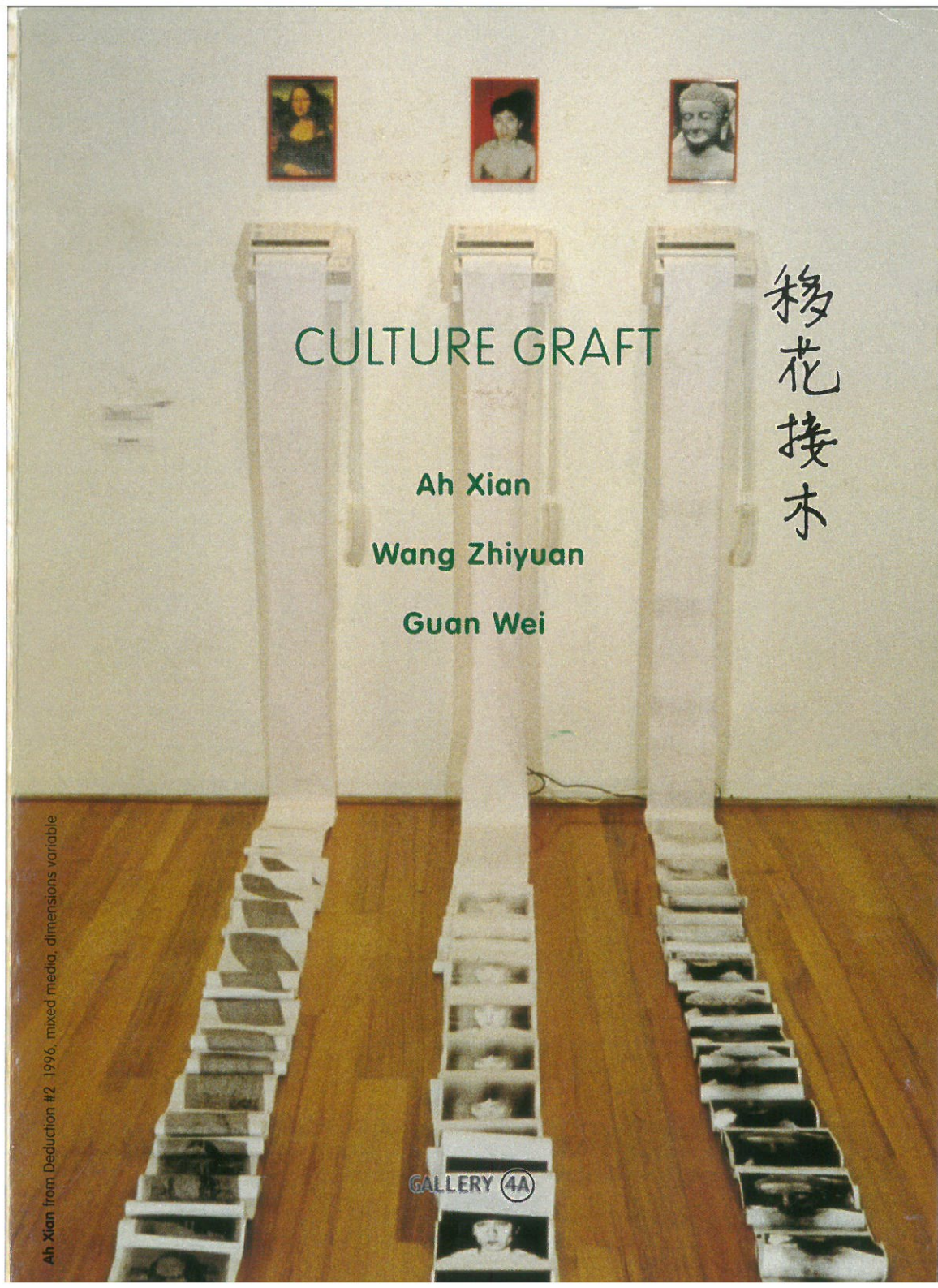
Guan Wei's whimsical paintings also utilise narrative to tell humorous yet compelling stories about a vast range of subjects. Themes of migration pervade both the form and content of his paintings, present through the use of pictures of travel, the juxtaposition of Chinese and Australian imagery as well as references to European and Chinese painting techniques. In one particular series of paintings titled *The Great War of the Eggplant* (1993) Guan Wei portrayed in a Surrealistic style the eggplant (which was brought to China from Europe) as a food, a weapon and an aesthetic object. In a similar use of food, Guan Wei's installation *Glory Family* (1998) consists of a series of fake pink sausages resting on white cotton cushions. Each sausage is lit by a single desk lamp giving the impression that we are viewing important specimens or museum objects. Behind this tableau are a series of books with covers that have been altered to feature sausages. The meaning is ambiguous, but seems to offer a parody of the relationship between food, family and cultural identity in Chinese society, while again drawing on a kind of absurdist, Surrealist sense of humour.

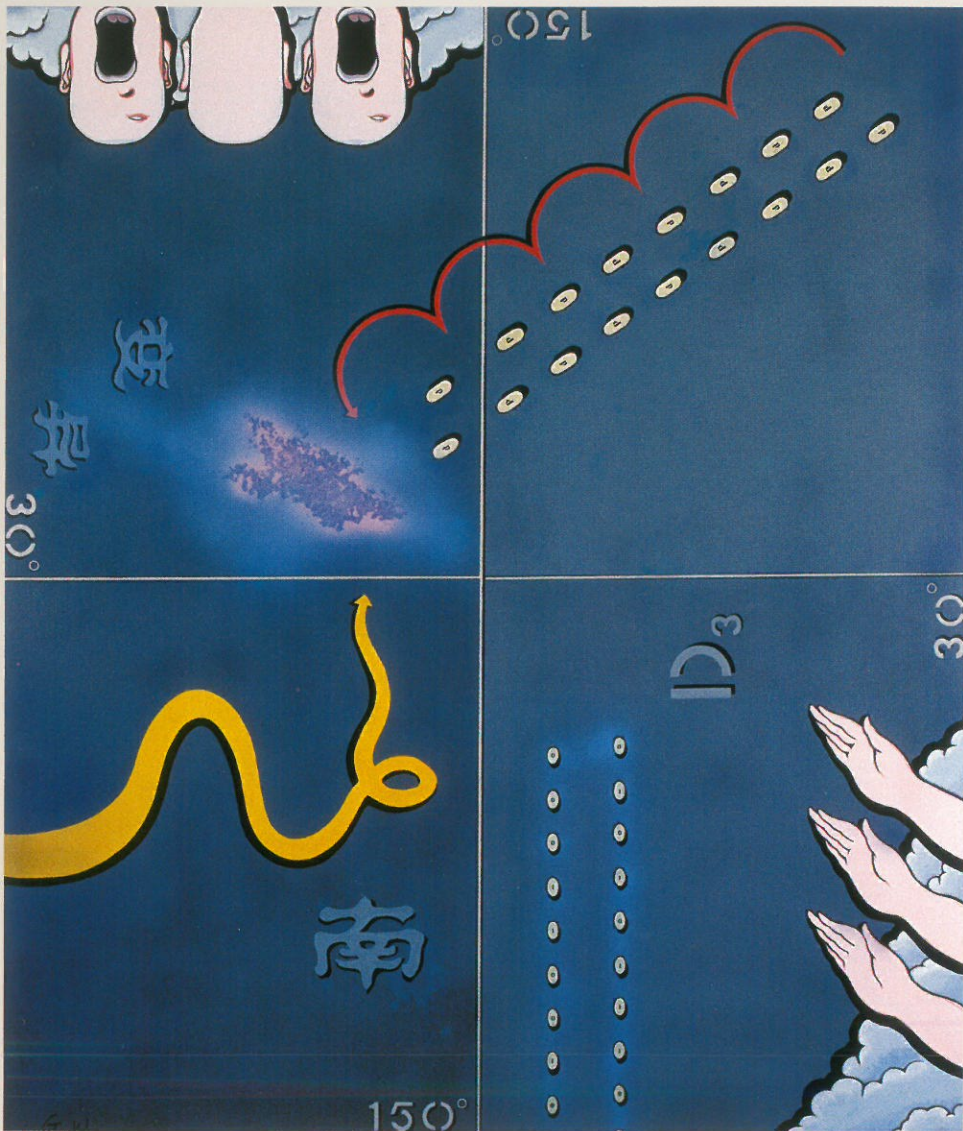
MELISSA CHIU

**Guan Wei** was born in Beijing, China in 1957. In 1989 he visited Australia as Artist-in-Residence at the Tasmanian School of Art. Since migrating to Australia he has shown his work in numerous group exhibitions such as *Beyond China* (1998) Campbelltown Regional Gallery, *Localities of Desire* (1994) Museum of Contemporary Art, *Compost Exhibition* (1996) Adelaide Biennial and *Perspecta* (1995) Art Gallery of New South Wales. Guan Wei has also shown his work in solo exhibitions at Red Gate Gallery, Beijing, Sherman Goodhope Galleries, Drill Hall Gallery in Canberra and Hanart TZ Gallery, Hong Kong.

**Ah Xian** was born in Beijing, China in 1960. He has participated in group exhibitions in Australia including *Construction in ProcessVI—The Bridge* (1998) Melbourne, *Above and Beyond*, (1996-7) a national touring exhibition, *Flagging the Republic* (1996) Sherman Galleries, Sydney. He has also participated in exhibitions overseas in Paris, New York, Shanghai and Beijing.

**Wang Zhiyuan** was born in 1958 in China. Since arriving in the early 1990s in Australia he has shown his work in group exhibitions such as the Sulman Art Prize Exhibition (1994) Art Gallery of NSW, Macquarie University (1996) Sydney, *In and Out* an international touring exhibition to Sydney, Melbourne, Perth, Tasmania, Canberra, Hong Kong and Beijing.





**Guan Wei** Anonymous Invader No.2, 1997  
acrylic on canvas, 140 x 120 cm

LIST OF WORKS

**Ah Xian**

Fading Book Series—Princess Diana 1998  
toner on cloth bound book

**Ah Xian**

Fading Book Series—Mother Theresa 1998  
toner on cloth bound book

**Ah Xian**

Fading Book Series—Cicciolina 1998  
toner on cloth bound book

**Ah Xian**

Fading Book Series—My Mother 1998  
toner on cloth bound book

**Wang Zhiyuan**

The Old Fable 1998  
paper  
courtesy Ray Hughes Gallery, Sydney

**Wang Zhiyuan**

The New Century Childrens Story 1998  
paper  
courtesy Ray Hughes Gallery, Sydney

**Guan Wei**

Glory Family 1998  
felt, cotton, sand, deskclamps, books, acrylic on canvas painting  
courtesy Sherman Galleries, Sydney

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*A Carnivale Event*



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