

# Artist on a quest for cultural and personal identity

IN CHINESE-AUSTRALIAN painter Dong Wang Fan's meta-phoric world, human figures float free of time. A soldier of Mao's People's Liberation Army, chest festooned with medals, is chatting with a Botticelli Madonna wrapped up in a traditional Chinese gown. Beside them rests a languid Chinese nobleman, taken out on one of the numerous drinking parties given

by his host, Han Xizai, an officer of Emperor Li Yu (967-75). Court painter Gu Hongzong, who depicted the erotic life of Han Xizai, is one of Dong Wang Fan's favourites.

All three figures in Dong Wang Fan's painting are watching two Caucasian athletes wrestle fiercely, their Nike boots on.

A traditional Chinese bearded face emerges beside one of the two

fighters, turning their intertwined bodies into some strange three-headed creature. In Dong Wang Fan's world, traditional references have been swept away.

Getting rid of them has enabled the Chinese-born painter to go on a quest for his own cultural identity. And mixed cultural identity is what his exhibit, 'Descendants', currently at the Asia Australia Arts Centre, is about.

"It is about who I am, who I was, who I will be," Dong says.

This straightforward statement should not deceive. Dong is anxious about who he really is. He prefers adjectives like 'confused', 'blurred' and 'ambiguous' to describe his surroundings.

His mixed feelings materialise in his art through the use of contrasting techniques, such as traditional Chinese drawings and carvings and computer image manipulation or photography.

Since his arrival in Australia, Dong has explored the relationships between bodies and space through the use of shifting perspectives. This has enabled him to translate his preoccupation with changing social and technological environments into his paintings.

He explains that what you see in a painting depends on a combination of four elements - the viewer, the standing point, the objects, the background.

"If you move one of these four elements, you just get something different. It's all illusion," he says. Illusion is crucial to his art. He admits he does not always know himself where he is. "Sometimes I open my eyes and I don't know if I'm in Australia or China."

Of course, he has ties to Australia that he would not deny. His first years in Sydney were mainly a

struggle to survive, doing all sorts of jobs. With assistance from friends, he also completed a Doctorate of Creative Arts at the University of Wollongong. After graduation, he had his first solo exhibition in Wollongong.

'Descendants' is his first exhibition in the inner city, following a 2000 group exhibition at the Na-

centre was not easy to project. People in Chinatown just wanted another centre devoted to traditional Chinese art. Concessions had to be made, and the first exhibition at the centre was about 150 years of Chinatown's history.

Although the centre will continue with displays relating to traditional culture, its primary purpose is

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tional Gallery of Australia.

He has Australian citizenship, but lives in a Chinese-speaking neighbourhood in Croydon that he jokingly calls Little Shanghai.

The Chinese-Australian art community he belongs to has evolved much over the last decade. In the 1980s, the work of such prominent members of the community as Australia-born William Yang and Lindy Lee did not reflect much of their Chinese heritage.

Later, there was a shift in the way they expressed their identity. Melissa Chiu, the director of the Asia Australia Arts Centre, explains that this change was independent from the Tiananmen events.

"It was merely a result of the change in Australian thinking. In the early 90s and throughout the decade, Australia wanted to become part of the Asian world," she says.

The recently opened Asia Australia Arts Centre promotes emerging artists. Melissa Chiu says it was conceived as an answer to the Asia-Australia debate of the nineties.

"We were quite annoyed that it was an Anglo-Australian debate," she says. This specific role of the

the support of living artists, according to Melissa Chiu.

It aims to give Asian-Australians a greater voice in the art world in particular and the cultural and social scene in general.

Since the Chinese community has been quite vocal about the Pauline Hanson issue, Melissa Chiu considers this might be a time of change.

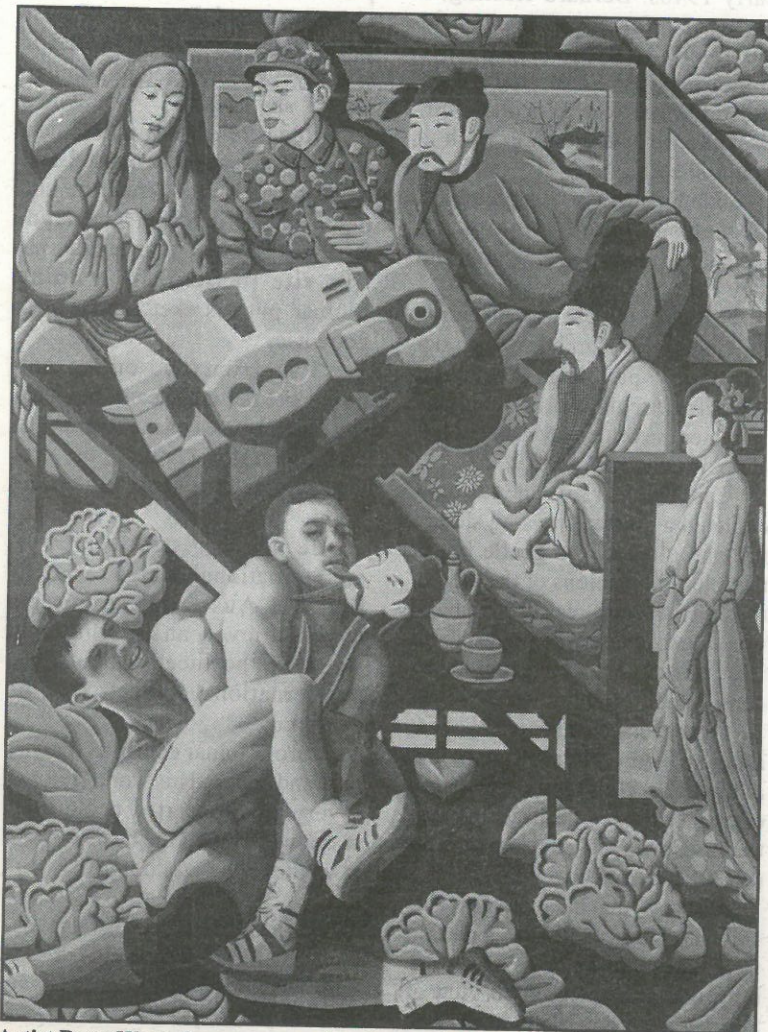
For a long time, economic well-being has been its primary, not to say exclusive, preoccupation. Now, more and more of them get hooked on politics.

Melissa Chiu believes it is only a matter of time before Asian-Australian identity becomes an integral part of Australian society.

Dong Wang Fan agrees. There are times when he feels quite comfortable with the Australian part in him.

For instance, when he reckons that his freedom to create is much wider now than when he was working as an established artist in China or when he confesses that Australian artists understand his art much better than the Chinese.

FRANCOISE STEVENSON



Artist Dong Wang Fang sweeps aside the traditional. Photograph courtesy of Dong Wang Fang.