

Remarks by Madeleine O’Dea at the opening of Guo Jian’s exhibition, Lenscape, at Vermilion Art, October 10, 2024

10 years ago I went to visit Guo Jian in his hometown of Duyun, in far southern China. It was around Qing Ming festival, the time of year when Chinese people around the world honour their ancestors. Guo Jian had travelled to his old home to “sweep the grave” of his grandfather.

Back then Guo Jian was at the beginning of a new artistic project, developing the ideas and the techniques that would lead him to create the major works that you see around you tonight.

These works speak deeply of Guo Jian’s concern about the environmental and cultural degradation being wrought by China’s drive for development at all costs. And as I discovered on that visit 10 years ago, the inspiration for them was close to home.

Guo Jian’s hometown Duyun is in Guizhou, a remote province that is famous for its dramatic beauty, its limestone peaks, and deep green forests. But its remoteness and rugged landscape have provided no protection from the drive for development.

Local politicians there dreamed of creating a megacity from Duyun. When the hills that surrounded the old town proved to be an obstacle, battalions of earthmovers moved in to carve them away. And soon a landscape of peaks was turned into a forest of anonymous skyscrapers.

On one day during my visit, Guo Jian took me with him as he set out with his camera to gather images for his work. I had hoped that he might show me some beauty spots that had somehow survived, but I was to be disappointed. We walked along an old canal that snaked through the city, as he picked through the tides of rubbish on its banks. He carefully photographed discarded packaging that featured Chinese celebrities, spokesmodels for instant noodles, medications, and beauty products. The contrast between the smiling polished faces of the celebrities and the rubbish tip that they had helped create was an irony that Guo Jian saw and fed into his work.

Their faces are now amongst the thousands that he uses to construct the works you see here today. Each of the works performs a sly trick of the eye. From a distance they appear to be classical landscapes, manifestations of high Chinese culture, but up close we see they are constructed from the detritus of a modern culture, a culture that privileges the needs of humans above every other consideration. In this way, Guo Jian points to a sad irony in contemporary Chinese life.

If you look at a traditional Chinese landscape, one of the most notable things is how inconsequential, how tiny humans appear to be beside the splendour of the natural world. Human figures are often so tiny that you struggle to find them at all. But in these

works of Guo Jian's humans lurk in every pixel, whether they are making up a flower, a bird, a tree, or a mountain.

In this way Guo Jian shows us something profound, the way in which humans have taken over nature, pursuing their dominion at the expense of any sense of natural harmony. The scene is still beautiful at a distance, but it has been fundamentally corrupted. Up close, it invites us to think of how the old balance between humanity and nature has been lost, and to wonder how it can again be achieved.

In the works that are based on traditional paintings of human life, erotic, and domestic, and of classical myths he takes his ideas a step further, showing how even the most beautiful features of human life and the magic of myth can be debased by consumerism and waste.

All these works are technically brilliant, reflecting the painstaking process Guo Jian has developed to achieve his vision. But they also express his profound appreciation of classical Chinese art. It is good to remember that Guo Jian's artistic training was in the techniques of traditional Chinese painting. This has given him a deep sense of the aesthetic of these classic scenes.

I'd like to finish by inviting you to consider these works in all their exquisite detail. Appreciate them from a distance, the beauty and harmony they express and then move in to consider what they are confronting us with: the fragility of our world and our culture in the face of a drive to pursue development at all costs, the tide of waste that underpins our consumerism, and the urgent need to reconsider how humankind should fit into the world.

I'm delighted to declare this exhibition open.

Thank you