

ARTS+CULTURE



I'D HATE TO BE THE BAMBOO THAT MEETS THIS PANDA. ART BY BEIJING PENZI

ART ATTACK

MARILYN MAI IS SHAKING HER CANS

Picture a wall, gleaming pearly white, the smell of fresh paint rising off it like a morning dew. You stand with a fresh can of spray in your hand, a slick **Montana 94** in matte Stereo Pink, perhaps? You tighten your mask; this wall is your oyster.

Imagine the impulse, the magnetic tug of the bare surface, as if the pigments in your can are conspiring to form a million electric cords, and the wall is an endless sea of roving outlets. You want to plug them in, turn them on, see what happens when the electricity flows.

Is this the urge that takes hold of a tagger? That spurs them on despite shouts of "vandal!" or "sellout!?" Let's ponder this psychology in the context of Beijing. Sure, some of the thrill of artists like **SOOS** and his **Beijing Penzi** crew, or the newer **Kwanyin Clan**, might be dampened

because they're backed by corporations like Adidas. But there's also newness. A chance to lay claim to virgin walls, no matter whether it's illegal or commissioned. And somehow, this impulse to make one's mark isn't just in the minds of the graffiti artists who roam the streets.

Really, it's everywhere. I've seen the gleam in so many eyes, from businesspeople to students, opera directors to migrant workers. As dirty as Beijing can be, it's also a fresh, white wall.

So who's spraying in?

The **NCPA's** only four years old, but its reputation already circles the globe as one of the hottest performing arts destinations. That's why I'm always hearing about some "first production by such and such hot-shot director." This month, **Stephen Lawless** from the UK gets his writing on the wall with Johann Strauss Jr's

Die Fledermaus. Even better, he's getting Chinese comedian **Chen Peisi** involved, for a localized twist on the operetta. See our Feature, p57.

Kevin Spacey and **Christian Bale** are shaking their cans at the domestic film industry. We eagerly await release dates for *Inseparable* and *The 13 Women of Nanjing*, respectively.

Meanwhile, **Rachel DeWoskin** was one of our city's first big expat celebs, winning Chinese hearts through her role on a soap opera. She's since turned out a memoir and two novels, and is rolling back through town for a repeat tag. See p58.

And so it'll go – people from all over the world flowing in to leave their masterpieces. Some will endure, others will get buffed, until layer by layer, this fresh white wall becomes a gritty but beautiful palimpsest.

SNAPSHOTS

ART

As June kicks off, many Beijing-based galleries will make their way back from **ART HK 2011** (Hong Kong's biggest international art fair). In town, art power couple **Song Dong** and **Yin Xiuzhen** premiere new works for their "**Chopsticks**" series (see Feature, p56), marking their first-ever Beijing premiere, despite both being based here. At the **UCCA**, see new exhibits by Swiss artist **Not Vital** and Chinese neon/laser artist **Li Hui**, and await a new project by social artist **Weng Fen**. Also look for new products in the UCCA Store developed by artists Liu Xiaodong, Zhang Xiaogang and Ma Liang, to name a few.

CINEMA

The **summer blockbuster** rush begins. First up is *Pirates of the Caribbean: On Stranger Tides*, the fourth in the series and our chance to decide who's better: **Keira Knightley** or **Penelope Cruz**. (Personally, I'd rather **Johnny Depp** just play the female lead.) Next up is *Kung Fu Panda 2: The Kaboom of Doom*, where you can encounter an array of digestive humor amid animated martial arts and **Jack Black's** signature self-deprecation. If you're seeking a full lobotomy, *Fast Five* will be playing here, too. Chinese releases include *A Beautiful Life* (*Bu Zai Rang Ni Gudun*) starring **Shu Qi** (from *If You Are the One*).

IN PRINT

Aspiring novelists should take note: The deadline for applications to the 2012-2013 **M Literary Residency** is July 1, 2011, so this is the last month to submit your samples. The residency offers two three-month slots – one in **Shanghai** and the other off the beaten path in **Bangalore, India** – and covers transportation costs, housing and meals. On June 1, The Bookworm brings back one of our favorite events from the Literary Festival: the **Translation Slam**. This time, Jonathan Reichtman faces off against Canaan Morse to translate a Chinese text by news columnist Li Haipeng.

STAGE

Fans of lush ivory-tickling, this is the month for you. **Piano aux Jacobins** (part of the ongoing Festival Croisements) features two French pianists playing Beethoven, Chopin and Liszt, followed by a French jazz pianist (Jun 3-5). At the **NCPA**, a new production of the Orphan of Zhao story comes to fruition in **Chinese Orphan** (Jun 20-23). We're confident the opera itself won't be nearly as bland as the title (though I guess it wouldn't take much). Later in the month, catch a startling blend of hip-hop dance, ballet and *taijiquan* in a show called **Modern** (June 24-25), directed and choreographed by Anthony Egéa.



LET'S STICK TOGETHER

TWO OF BEIJING'S BIGGEST HOMEGROWN ARTISTS UNVEIL NEW TANDEM SHOW

by Elizabeth Parke

It sounds like the beginning of a bad joke: "What do you get with only one chopstick?" [*Hungry?* –Ed.] Yet at the hands of two of today's most acclaimed artists, Song Dong and Yin Xiuzhen, it's not a joke, but rather a clear statement of their artistic practices. The husband-and-wife pair claim that, like chopsticks, each of them is useless without the other.

Chambers Fine Art, a pioneer in exhibiting Chinese contemporary art in New York, exhibited Song and Yin's works in 2002 and 2006, both shows using "chopsticks" as their themes. This month, the Chambers Beijing gallery, which opened in 2007, will premiere the third incarnation of "Chopsticks." Though Beijing serves as their base and is a consistent and central focus in both artists' practice, this exhibit actually presents a unique opportunity to see new works by the artists in their home city.

One of the most intriguing aspects of this series is that Song and Yin create works independently and in secret; when the shows premiere, the artists themselves are seeing each others' pieces for the first time. Often they unveil work both vastly different and eerily similar.

For example, in 2006 Song's metal chopstick investigated the north-south axis of Beijing. In contrast, Yin's chopstick was made of stockings stuffed with foam, but it too examined the city's

central axis. Other than the dimensions of the chopsticks, the artists hadn't consulted each other about what they were creating.

Outside of this series of exhibits, Song and Yin are inspired by each other and work together in their shared studio, but their end products reveal marked material, conceptual and aesthetic distinctions. For example, in her series "Traveling Cities" Yin creates models of cities that are fashioned from found scrap fabric and old suitcases. The cities to which she's alluding aren't always recognizable in

SONG AND YIN CREATE WORKS INDEPENDENTLY AND IN SECRET

her childlike sculptings, but hidden clues affixed to the suitcase hint at the various locales. Fabric and found objects are a consistent theme in Yin's work. She focuses on the embodied and the present, choosing to exhibit detritus that through her interventions continue to exist even after the original owner has discarded it.

Yin's use of material objects sits in contrast to Song's more fleeting and performative works. Explorations of the changing states of water run continually through his art. In one piece from January, he breathed for 40 minutes until he

formed a patch of ice. He also keeps a diary, one he writes in water.

Due to the secrecy of the projects, even the exhibit's organizers don't know what to expect, which quite frankly demonstrates a staggering amount of trust. The only detail the artists have discussed is that the project will be broken into 12 parts, with each artist creating three pairs of chopsticks. One pair will be given to their daughter as a gift for her eighth birthday.

This upcoming exhibit gives weight and a sense of arrival to the idealistic tone of the earlier shows. During the 2002 exhibit Song and Yin celebrated their tenth wedding anniversary. Now, nine years later, the couple has endured. In fact, they have thrived in the viciously competitive contemporary art world. And both have secured international praise: Song Dong will show work at the upcoming Venice Biennale and Yin has a solo show at Alexander Ochs Galleries Berlin this summer.

The June exhibit, featuring all new works, is an exceptional chance to see what these hometown art stars will produce. Don't let the cute factor of their "chopstick-dom" keep you away.

"Chopsticks" is on show at Chambers Fine Art Beijing from Jun 11 to Jul 30.

ART: LIU QINGHE

RED GATE GALLERY



For the first time, Liu Qinghe fuses his style of painting, rooted in classical Chinese methods, with a Western printmaking technique to produce a series of etchings. These works primarily feature his signature motif: partially naked female bodies, configured vaguely through minimalist calligraphic brushstrokes. Though hinting at an ethereal eroticism, these figures can instead appear lewd. His stronger works center less on

bizarre naked figures and more on exploring the face as a palette for a blend of emotions. A highlight is "Dike," an etching of ten ambiguously gendered children, their bodies submerged in water. In their exposed faces, Qinghe crafts a spectrum of melancholy, from gripping fear to disgust to quiet resignation and vulnerability. This paradigmatic work showcases his ability to imbue each rare brushstroke with an expressive, poetic spirit. *Raymond Braun*

Liu Qinghe's new works are on display at Red Gate Gallery from June 4-26.

BOOKS: THE FOREMOST GOOD FORTUNE

SUSAN CONLEY



You've seen Susan Conley before. At Jenny Lou's with a cartload of imported cereals, or at Yashow paying too much for fake shoes. You've overheard her conversations and thought: There she goes, another expat wife rushing back to her posh high-rise apartment. But here's a conversation you missed: As she prepares to have a lump removed from her breast, her 5-year-old son hands her a drawing and says, "Imagine you're this

butterfly during the surgery, OK? Then, whenever you want, you can just fly away." Told in bare yet vivid writing, moments like this disarm us, drawing us into Conley's brutally frank memoir. Far from your typical expat vanity project, *TFGF* offers surprising depth and clarity on just what it means to live outside our comfort zones. *Marilyn Mai*

Susan Conley appears at *The Bookworm* on June 14. Look for a full interview in the June issue of *beijingers*.

FILM: THE LOST BLADESMAN

ALAN MAK + FELIX CHONG



The good news: This latest historical action epic, written and directed by the duo that brought you *Infernal Affairs*, is more "bladesman" than "lost." Hong Kong badass Donnie Yen plays Guan Yu, the noble general from *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* who takes down six generals through five mountain passes using his iconic weapon, the *guan dao*. It starts slow, but it's worth the wait to watch Yen face a barrage of assorted

Chinese weaponry. The bad news: Living up to the legacy of the now-deified Guan Yu proves too much for Yen at times, though Jiang Wen, cast as the conflicted warlord Cao Cao, helps carry the trickier scenes. Some will deem this a worthy entry for the martial arts canon, though true aficionados may cry foul. *Josh Ong*

The *Lost Bladesman* (Guan Yunchang) is playing in cinemas around town.

STAGE: CHINESE ORPHAN

NCPA



This Yuan dynasty drama begins with a massacre of the entire aristocratic Zhao clan, then details the plans of the lone survivor to exact revenge on his family's killers. Its epic political and filial themes have made it a favorite for adaptations by the likes of Voltaire and the folks at the Lincoln Center. Last year, Chen Kaige presented a severely muddled take in his film *Sacrifice* (proof that Ge You's face does not automatically a good movie

make). Luckily, playwright Zou Jingzhi's staged version is here to offer the Orphan of Zhao some redemption. Expect a more classicist Chinese approach, since this production is part of a celebration for the Communist Party's 90th anniversary. (No pressure though, Zou.) *Marilyn Mai*

Chinese Orphan will be performed at the NCPA on June 20-23.



BAT MEN

DIE FLEDERMAUS TAKES FLIGHT IN CHINESE

by Marilyn Mai

Two guys meet for some drinks and one of them finds himself abandoned on the street in an embarrassing bat costume. A year later, "The Bat" seeks revenge on his ignoble friend through an elaborate hoax that ends in jail time and a dissolved marriage.

No, it's not *The Hangover, Part II*. It's the plot of Johann Strauss Jr.'s *Die Fledermaus*, staged this month by British director Stephen Lawless. This production has been localized for the Beijing audience, with the operetta's arias sung in German but the dialogue spoken in Chinese.

Even more exciting, Chinese comedian Chen Peisi – known for his deliciously visceral noodle-slurping in several CCTV Spring Festival Gala skits – has been cast as the scene-stealing jailer Frosch in the last act.

Read on as director Lawless tells us more about the challenges of bilingual comedy and makes a case for Beijing's rise as a global performing arts destination.

"Humor, like a good wine, doesn't last a century, doesn't last for decades. Humor changes very quickly. So I'm trying to be loyal to the piece but still trying to make the comedy work for right now – that's the tricky part."

"[Chen Peisi is] wonderful. His way of performing is very physical. It reminds me of some of the great

commedia dell'arte actors from Italy. This is the third production of *Fledermaus* I've done, and he's very possibly the best Frosch we've had."

"I remember seeing a *Fledermaus* in Vienna not so long ago, and the old people in the theater laughed at maybe 12 jokes, which were the same 12 jokes they've always laughed at and for the rest of the time it was silence. And I hope – I'm sure – that's not the case with this one, because Peisi tells me it's not the case."

"In the original German script there are a lot of phrases involving puns. Which is something I've just discovered happens a lot in Chinese! So that's what we're trying to use."

"With *Fledermaus*, you have to try and get what makes it special, which is this interplay between music and dialogue. Opera houses have tried to turn it into an opera, but it was originally intended to be more anarchic, much more innovative than that."

"God, the food's good here. I mean, that's got to be a plus. I'm doing *Der Rosenkavalier* at the Bolshoi in Moscow next year ... trust me, the food won't be nearly as good."

Die Fledermaus goes to bat Jun 3-6 at the NCPA.



SIZE MATTERS

THE SMALL WORLD OF HIGH SCHOOL

by Marilyn Mai

Rachel DeWoskin made a name for herself as a sex goddess on a Chinese soap opera, then parlayed that into a sharp, funny memoir followed by two nuanced novels. The latest, *Big Girl Small*, traverses the perils of high school from the "shorter" perspective of singer Judy Lohden. Read on as DeWoskin shares her thoughts.

On how Judy Lohden's character came to her

"I watched *The Wizard of Oz* so many times with my 4-year-old, and felt tremendous empathy for the little people in that movie. I wondered what it would feel like for my daughter if she were a dwarf. What if she wanted to be Judy Garland, but involuntarily identified with the little people? This thought plagued me, so I wrote a book about a girl who is small, wildly talented, different from everyone else and brave."



On what dish her new book resembles

"Hot pot, because it's crazy and spicy and complicated; because it's do-it-yourself; and because it's feasting for hours with friends, listening, watching the color of cooking crawl up individual slices of food. I'd hope my book is as delicious, as full of contradiction and heat. But hold the duck blood, please."

On her book being compared to John Hughes' movies

"I'll take it!"

... and her favorite John Hughes scene

"How about that beautiful part in *Breakfast Club* when Ally Sheedy asks Molly Ringwald, 'Why are you being so nice to me?' And Molly Ringwald says, 'Because you're letting me.'"

On reaching a Chinese audience

"I would love Chinese versions of my books. China gave me a place to grow up, taught me a new language and a million new ways of looking at the world. (Not to mention fed me fabulous food and provided an endless supply of life experience and pirated DVDs). I just signed up for a Weibo account, so I can be in written touch with Chinese readers of all sorts of books."

On Beijing, then vs. now

"I try not to noble-savage my Chinese friends by begrudging China its modernity or Frappuccinos. To me there's something unsavory about Westerners pining for a version of China that was less *shufu* and free for its citizens. I loved Beijing in the 1990s, even before you could get MAC make-up and new releases in fiction, and I love it now. More art, more books by Chinese writers distributed globally, more freedom, more access, more exchange programs for kids, onward with our engagement!"

Rachel DeWoskin appears at *The Bookworm* on Jun 28 to discuss *Big Girl Small*.

PHILIP TINARI

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF, LEAP MAGAZINE

The book on my shelf with the most sentimental value is our first volume of *LEAP*—six issues and 1,312 pages of blood, sweat and brains.

The last book I bought was Sam Lipsyte's *The Ask*, a Brooklyn novel about a failed-artist-turned college-development-officer veering toward middle age. He's wittier than Shteyngart, and less grating. (Although I bought *Super Sad True Love Story* too ...)

The book I pretend to have read is *Dream of the Red Chamber*, albeit not actively. We all need a few good gaping holes in our cultural literacy, right?

My favorite book from childhood is *The Guinness Book of World Records*. The illusion of comprehensiveness was so much easier to convey on paper before the Internet came along.

The book that changed my life was Joan Didion's *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*. Realizing as a college sophomore that you could write essays like that was pretty huge.

The character in a book I'd like to be? I Am Adam Gellin.

Have I ever judged a book by its cover? Bill Brown's delectable illustrations for the Back Bay editions of Evelyn Waugh are among the best reasons for doing so.

The last book I read was *Just Kids* by Patti Smith, a shameless but

gratifying art-world tearjerker.

The book I'd like to see adapted as a film is Jonathan Spence's *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*, starring Roberto Benigni as Ricci, Jiang Wen as Xu Guangqi, and the rehabilitated Zhang Ziyi as a literati Jesuit-temptress.

The book I've enjoyed having with me on my travels? Reading Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* on the Mongolian steppe (smooth not striated, baby) was an intellectual high, albeit in a very undergraduate, 1999 sort of way. These days, an issue of Brooklyn literary journal *n+1* or Berlin style bible *032c* makes the EWR-PEK hop fly by, even in economy.

The fictional world I'd most like to be part of is David Lodge's *Small World*. Jet-setting was so much sexier back when deconstruction was a new idea.

The book I'd most like to see translated into Chinese is Tom Wolfe's *From Bauhaus to Our House*, an antidote to the trickle-down modernism that pollutes so many contemporary Chinese interiors. The passage about Yale architecture students using their diaper money to buy Barcelona chairs is priceless.

Fiction or non-fiction? Dichotomies are sooo last century.

LEAP is the international art magazine of contemporary China. Size them up at www.leapleap.com.



PHOTOS: JUDY ZHOU AND COURTESY OF RACHEL DEWOSKIN