

# ARTS+Culture



FRANK GEHRY ARCHITECTURED ABOUT DANCE. HOW'S THAT FOR YOU?

## ART ATTACK

MARILYN MAI IS KNITTING ABOUT PEKING OPERA

In the haze of sleepy memories from my **college music classes** (I was a bit narcoleptic), a one-liner from our self-important musicology professor rings out – louder than his holey tweed, worn elbow pads, misplaced “I voted!” sticker and huge pot belly: “Writing about music is like **dancing about architecture.**”

Often people react, “That’s dumb. Why can’t we dance about architecture?” Um, we can. I think that’s the point. The meandering quote isn’t denying the feasibility of either task. It’s simply stating that to describe one **creative outlet** using another is a challenge, and one can rarely expect a precise “result.”

This is the exact challenge I face every time I sit down, deadlines looming, to knock a **misbehaving pile of words** into a half-page feature about opera. Or wrestle a film

director’s thoughts from one language to another, then shape them to illuminate his moving pictures. When I’m battling writer’s block and pesky clichés, it helps to remember this isn’t meant to be straightforward by any means.

Let this thought liberate you, too. This month, after you watch *Last Train Home* at the **BC MOMA** (Jul 16 & 17), sure, go talk to your friends about it. But then maybe you can all **draw a picture** too. Or, if you catch American poet Cathy Bowman’s presentation of **oral poetry** at The Bookworm, try going home, dusting off that guitar, and playing a response. Maybe you’ll discover a **sweet new chord.**

Biking your way to an outdoor screening at **Three Shadows Photography** should really get your wheels turning (pun shamefully in-

tended). After watching the chilling *Night of the Hunter*, you can warm yourself up with a darkly-themed **quilt-making session.** Try writing a sonnet or two after attending any one of the classical or jazz piano concerts this month. Or, after hearing **Beijing Postcards’** talk on our city’s Imperial Axis, you can build your own installation art piece based on the concept. Oh wait, artist **Song Dong** already did that. See his finished product at Chambers Fine Art, then respond with some Japanese woodblocking.

We could even get really creative with this. Try cooking about **digital art** (molecular gastronomy, perhaps?), singing about **carpentry** (what the Carpenters *should* have done) or doing a **performance art** piece about pottery (no, not like in *Ghost*).

## SNAPSHOTS

### ART

As the flurry surrounding Art HK, Art Basel, and the Venice Biennale dies down, we’re looking for some local stimulation. Congratulations to **Magician Space** for one of their artists winning the new Art Futures award at the Hong Kong fair – a nice vote of confidence for Beijing’s still-developing gallery culture. Check them out in 798. Also, word on the street is that the **798 Biennale** is slated to happen again this summer. No concrete details before going to print, but we’re keeping our eyes peeled. Watch our Art Attack updates on TheBeijinger.com for the latest.

### CINEMA

Too **green** (or cheap) to run your AC all day? Movie theaters are the perfect loophole. **Pixar** sequel *Cars 2* was intended for release at the end of June, but a delay is rumored. Speaking of delays, it seems the star-studded epic *Founding of a Party* (flip the page for our review) is responsible for pushing back the release dates for the new **Transformers** (whew) and the final **Harry Potter** (nooo!). Not being delayed: *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* (*Xuehua Mi Shan*), the film adaptation to **Lisa See’s** tear-jerker novel (out Jun 24), and Peter Chan’s stylish *Wuxia*, starring **Donnie Yen**, Takeshi Kaneshiro and Tang Wei (Jul 4).

### IN PRINT

Artist/filmmaker/curator Ou Ning’s much-buzzed literary magazine *Chutzpah* (*Tiannan* in Chinese) just published an accompanying pamphlet called **Peregrine**, featuring translations of some of the essays and other works from the original Chinese into English. You can download the pdf at Paper-republic.org. Meanwhile, those who missed the sold-out **Jonathan Watts** talk during The Bookworm Literary Festival are getting another shot. See our interview with him on p48, then see him in the flesh at his upcoming talk (Jul 7).

### STAGE

You may have spied some ticket listings for *Legally Blonde: The Musical* this July, but alas, the production has been pushed back to next year. Good news is, while sniffing out **Elle Wood’s** designer-perfumed trail, we learned about three more exciting acts coming soon: *Reel to Real: The Movies Musical* (Sep 2011), *Peony Pavilion: The Musical* (Nov 2011) and most exciting of all, **Kung Fu Panda: The Arena Spectacular** (Spring 2012)! For now, catch Les Grands Ballet Canadiens de Montreal with their original production “**Minus One**” (Jul 20-21). Also enjoy pianists Jean Muller (Luxembourg’s finest, we’re told) on July 16 and Chen Sa (our very own) on July 8.

# TWO GENERATIONS

RED GATE'S 20TH IS A CHANCE TO LOOK BOTH WAYS

by Marilyn Mai



If there's anything China's first private contemporary art gallery can offer, it's perspective. On a rare blue-sky day in Beijing, I ascended the steps of the old city wall at Dongbianmen before reaching Red Gate Gallery's namesake vermilion doors. Looking out, I could see the entire CBD, the low-rise swath inside the Second Ring to its west, and a tiny helicopter hovering among pillars of clouds. "That's only the second I've seen in over 20 years," gallery owner Brian Wallace tells me. "I wonder if it's going to the CCTV building; it has a heliport, you know."

As the pinnacle of a months-long 20th anniversary celebration, Red Gate is presenting "20 Years," a show in which they've invited 11 of their longest-standing artists to each nominate a younger artist. They'll exhibit their works side by side in an obvious but still appealing symbolic gesture: to celebrate past accomplishments while also looking forward to what's ahead.

We sat down with two of these artists – Guan Wei of the old guard and his nominee, the new multimedia artist and photographer Wu Daxin – to hear how their experiences encapsulate the past (and future) decades of Beijing's art scene.

Guan Wei, whose lonely, affecting paintings draw on themes of nautical discovery and rewritten histories, has climbed all the requisite rungs of the Beijing artist's ladder: he trained during the '80s, left the country as things heated up later in the decade, became a revered art star in his new homeland,

then returned to Beijing just before the Olympics. He's even had his studio on the outskirts of Beijing demolished. Twice. In fact, he was asked to move out the week before we met. "They gave me one week's notice .... I'm in the market for a new space."

For him, leaving and coming back were both natural choices. "I went to Australia because they invited me, for an artist residency program." And why did he come back? "Overstimulation. Every time, there were so many more galleries, so many more exhibits, and my friends' studios just kept getting bigger and bigger."

Wu Daxin agrees. He made his first art piece by freezing a hundred-dollar bill (yes, it's all about the Benjamins) in the walk-in fridge of a friend's Sichuan restaurant in New York. When the close-up of the frozen bill sold at his first show, he was

struck by the possibility of actually living off his art. Then, when Wu visited Beijing during the Olympics, he was blown away by the scale of the art scene: tons and tons of art magazines, curators, galleries. "The market ... it's like a magnet. Every artist is drawn to it."

"The other thing: China is cheap. You can do things on a bigger scale. In NY, a studio is prohibitively

expensive. And hiring 30 people to help put a piece together? Only if you're a superstar. But in

China you don't have to be a superstar to produce the work you want." He tested this theory when he built an ice sculpture of a church on the Great Wall. As a "nobody," he hired a cadre of migrant workers to help carry gallons of water to the site. So what he's telling us is that art has exploded in China for the same reasons manufacturing has: cheap materials and cheap labor.

"But it's not just the market," Guan Wei pipes in. "There's an atmosphere here. Take my studio getting demol-

ished; it's a form of calamity. It forces me to fight, because I never know what will happen tomorrow. This unpredictability, it creates these bursts of energy that are irresistible."

So what do they see as they look out over the next 20 years? The young artist is practical: "What I observed in America is there's this very complete system," says Wu. "Museums, galleries, collectors, artists. If in 20 years, China can have that complete and mature of a system, that would be good. And more importantly, that the public would pay more attention to contemporary art." Guan Wei's response bears the weight of his experiences: "I hope things keep getting better. Higher quality, more varied and meaningful art. That's the hope. But this is the thing about China: who knows, everything could just disappear. But that would be interesting, too."

"20 Years" is on show at Red Gate Gallery from Jul 2 to Aug 24.



"FRAGMENTED HISTORY" BY GUAN WEI



"ASHLEY'S HEART" BY WU DAXIN

ART: "FIRST SPRING THUNDER"

ALEXANDER OCHS GALLERIES

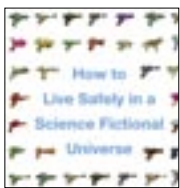


In her new solo show, Hung Liu's extra-large canvases attest to her training as a mural painter at CAFA, withstanding the dominance of the vast white cube. One gallery features new mixed media works. Beginning with a digital print on canvas, Liu paints, then coats the canvases with a high-gloss resin, creating a luscious (liquid) surface trapping layers of color and images underneath. Liu's resin works are seductive, but her painting "Helmsman" demands more from us; it depicts a hardworking riverboat captain in a style reminiscent of socialist realism, juxtaposed with an ancient Chinese-style map of the Yangtze. The painting's message, form and style force the viewer to linger and explore the tortuous river and its effects on its inhabitants. *Elizabeth Parke*

"First Spring Thunder" is on exhibit at Alexander Ochs Gallery through Jul 17.

BOOKS: HOW TO LIVE SAFELY IN A SCIENCE FICTIONAL UNIVERSE

CHARLES YU



It's a rare book that can – within the space of a single paragraph – make me laugh, cry and get brain strain. Yu's protagonist, also named Charles Yu (just one hint of this novel's "meta-ness") is a time-machine repairman with a father lost in time and a mother living a 60-minute holographic loop of a quiet family dinner. Marry this achingly lonely setup with the author's hyper-metaphorical pontifications on time travel and a few ironic twists, and you get smart, fun-to-read literary prose about family and the hope and disappointment of the immigrant experience. Passages about the isolation of an overly ambitious father in the wake of his many failures rang truer than the nerdier sci-fi segments, which I found alienating at times. But true meta-geeks (Hofstadter fans, that means you) would probably disagree. *Marilyn Mai*

How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe is available at *The Bookworm*.

FILM: THE FOUNDING OF A PARTY

HUANG JIANXIN + HAN SANPING



This film is everything you'd expect it to be. Its war scenes recall *Saving Private Ryan*, its romance rivals *Casablanca*. As promised, its weighty list of Chinese stars carries the film. Chow Yun-fat is a passionate Yuan Shikai, Andy Lau woos the ladies as Cai E and Fan Bingbing melts into her role as the Empress Dowager, as does Han Geng as a towering Deng Xiaoping. And of course, Liu Ye makes the film as a fleshy, stoic and

well-educated Mao. Did I mention there were angry Frenchmen? An epic soundtrack? And enough drama-fueled plots to make you scream at the screen with delight? If this film were a person, it would be the life of the Party. *Carly Chun*

The Founding of a Party is playing in cinemas across town.

STAGE: CHEN SA

NCPA



Liszt's legacy of extreme virtuosity gets a lot of reverberation here in China, so it's no wonder we're celebrating the 200th anniversary of his birth with a string of world-class pianists at the NCPA's "Liszt Feast." Chongqing-born Chen Sa may be one of the younger pianists to honor the Hungarian composer, but she promises to bring musicality that's way beyond her 32 years. Having won prizes in both the Leeds International Piano Competition and the International Frederick Chopin Piano Competition, Chen is most often praised for her elegant legato lines (comparable to pianists with 40 years' more experience), finely calibrated dynamics and beautiful tone, all of which lend her Liszt interpretations a rare complexity and depth. *Marilyn Mai*

Chen Sa performs works by Liszt at the NCPA on Jul 8.

RAIL LIFE DRAMA

HOP ONTO THE MIGRANT EXPRESS

by Marilyn Mai

Fan Lixin caught the documentary bug when he worked as a cameraman for CCTV-9. After years of hopping between remote impoverished regions and the lights and comfort of Beijing, he began asking himself unanswerable questions about the wealth gap.

Earlier in his life, he'd watched fellow urbanites show unabashed disdain for migrant workers on a bus. Shocked and saddened by it, Fan schooled himself on the economic, social and political issues undergirding the migrant experience. All this nursed an irresistible impulse: "I thought if I could go out with my camera and dive into a migrant family's real life, portray their real experiences, maybe people in the city could feel more strongly about the suffering of their fellow countrymen, and realize that we should not look down upon them."

He decided to follow Zhang Changhua and Chen Suqin, a couple who left their village and family in the early 1990s to work in a factory in Guangzhou.

When Fan met them at their factory in the late summer of 2006, Suqin shared candidly about the moment she decided to leave. The family had trailed behind her, crying, asking her to stay. Her daughter had been only eight months old at the time. Suqin told Fan, "I knew I had to go make money, so I gave my baby to my mom and I hardened my heart and left with my husband."

Moved by her story, Fan decided to follow this family, a filming process that ended up taking three years.

*Last Train Home* has received critical acclaim abroad, but Fan

thought it beyond his wildest dreams to show it to audiences here. He was pleasantly surprised to receive a screening license from SARFT, enabling its first theatrical showing at BC MOMA this month. Fan calls this a "sneak preview," as they're hoping for a broader release early next year.

He has kept in constant touch with the family. "Their daughter is in vocational school studying to be a make-up artist, and their son got into a really good high school in his hometown." Financially, they still struggle, so Fan hopes a release in China will bring more support for the family – but also for migrant workers

"I THINK THE TRAIN IS A GREAT METAPHOR FOR CHINA"

in general. He also hopes it awakens in middle-class city dwellers the realization that

often the only thing differentiating them from migrant workers is birthplace and luck.

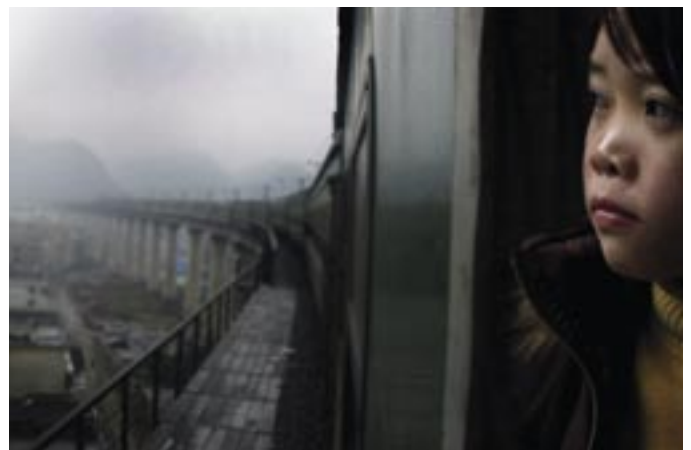
"I think the train is a great metaphor for China. It's fast-forwarding, but there are classes, sharp contrasts between conditions for the rich and poor. But they all still believe this train is going to take them to where they want to be."

FAN LIXIN'S PLAYLIST

Companion Songs to *Last Train Home*

- "Freedom" by Joe Hisaishi
- "Fugui and Jiazhen" (富贵与家珍) by Zhao Ji Ping
- "Playing Love" by Ennio Morricone
- "Tianya Genü" (天涯歌女) by Zhou Xuan
- "Nocturne in C-sharp Minor" by Frederic Chopin

*Hop on the Last Train Home* at BC MOMA on Jul 16 & 17.



# WATTS GOING ON

THE GUARDIAN'S ENVIRONMENTAL CRUSADER

by Marilyn Mai

Jonathan Watts' book, *When a Billion Chinese Jump*, has been a clarion call to the world on the realities of China's environment. Here, the *Guardian* correspondent tells us how people are taking the news.

### On responses to his book

"The most enthusiastic were in China and the UK, where most of the questions were about the environment and climate change. The focus in the US was more on the political and economic implications of resource scarcity. I hadn't anticipated how much interest the topic would generate in Wall Street and Washington. The shortage of water – which I identify as the most pressing concern in China – is clearly rising on the global agenda."

### On the thornier side of consumption

"I emphasize the need to restore consumption to healthy levels rather than pushing for unsustainable growth. That upsets some people. When I first did a talk to a group of financiers, one of them came up to me afterwards and said, 'Nice presentation, but your message on consumption is never going to fly.'"

### On whether progress has been better/worse/faster/slower than anticipated

"All of the above! Writing about the environment is like shooting at a target that is moving rapidly in several directions. Progress has been

somewhat better than I expected in terms of investment in renewable energy, development of high-speed rail and the expansion of targets for air quality. But river and coastal pollution remains appalling, soil quality continues to deteriorate, wildlife protection is utterly inadequate and we are only now becoming aware of the scale of heavy metal poisoning. Throw in signs of worsening climate change and the likelihood of a surge in dam building and coal consumption and I think the overall picture is still bleak."

### On eye-opening environmental "field trips" to take in Beijing

"Head out to any of the many waste dumps on the outskirts of the city – an area that photojournalist Wang Jiuliang calls "the seventh ring road." Wang has mapped the rubbish tips with GPS and Google Earth. Alternatively, visit Miyun Reservoir, which is a beautiful area, but suffering from falling water levels as Beijing's thirst increases and the northern droughts persist."

#### JONATHAN WATT'S PLAYLIST Songs To Save the Planet To

"What a Wonderful World"  
by Louis Armstrong  
"Across the Universe" by The Beatles  
"Mr. Blue Sky"  
by Electric Light Orchestra  
"The Big Aftaid" by 65daysofstatic  
"I Love the World"  
by New Model Army

Recycle, reduce, reuse with Jonathan Watts at *The Bookworm* on Jul 7.



# JEAN MULLER

CLASSICAL PIANIST

**The book on my shelf with the most sentimental value** is a rare, aged edition of Molière's and Racine's works, all dusty and smelling like an old mysterious library.

**The composer whose bookshelf I'd most like a peek at** is Franz Liszt's, definitely, since the man had an enormous appetite for all kinds of things and was a quite gifted writer himself.

**The author that reminds me most of Liszt** is Goethe; they have in common their tremendous stature of mind, the ambivalence between hedonism and religion, and the interest for the Faustian mythology.

**The book I pretend to have read** is *Foucault's Pendulum* by Umberto Eco. I tried, though ...

**My favorite book from childhood** is *The Neverending Story* by Michael Ende, which was published in 1979, also the year of my birth. It is still going on ...

**The book that changed my life** is *Perfume* by Patrick Süskind.

**The composer who might have written the soundtrack** to that book: I wish Alexander Scriabin could have done that.

**Literature that most reminds me of a Chopin nocturne?** Rimbaud's poems. Like Chopin's nocturnes, they are pure poetry, perfumes, impressions and just magical.

**The character in a book I'd most like to be** is Tom Bombadil in the *Lord of the Rings*.

**The last book I bought** was Michel Houellebecq's *La Carte et Le Territoire*.

**The last book I read** was Amélie Nothomb's *Fear and Trembling*.

**Book I wish I hadn't read?** Many, but gratefully I have forgotten.

**Have I ever judged a book by its cover?** Once a book is opened, the cover is just not a part of my book experience.

**The book I'd like to see adapted as a film** is the *Dark Tower* cycle by Stephen King. The big screen could really add an extra dimension to this epic story.

**My favorite line from a book** is from *Der Zauberberg* by Thomas Mann: "But his name was Muller and he was not worth mentioning."

#### JEAN MULLER'S PLAYLIST Songs That Tell a Story

"Für Elise" by L. van Beethoven  
"Nocturne for the Left Hand, Op. 9"  
by A. Scriabin  
"Flesh" (from the album *Get a Grip*)  
by Aerosmith  
"Dance of the Dead" (*Totentanz*)  
by F. Liszt  
"Eyes On Me" (*Final Fantasy VIII*)

Jean Muller plays for his fans at the NCPA on Jul 16.