

MISS MAO TRYING TO POISE HERSELF AT THE TOP OF LENIN'S HEAD
Gao Brothers (Beijing, China)

WHO MADE THIS SCULPTURE? This sculpture was made by artists, Gao Zhen (born in 1956) and Gao Qiang (born in 1962) brothers based in Beijing. Known only as the “Gao Brothers,” they have been collaborating on painting, installation, performance, sculpture, photography and writing since the mid 1980s. Both brothers were born in Jinan, Shandong Province, to a family tragically affected by the Cultural Revolution. Their father was executed in 1968 due to his “intellectual & bourgeois” tendencies. As children, all six of the Gao brothers had to share one bed. Their work is part of the New Wave Movement of Modern Art in China and is highly



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controversial. Between 1989 and 2003, due to family history and the controversial nature of their art they were not allowed to leave China. They contemplated leaving illegally when they were invited to show in the Venice Biennale and could not get a passport. “Back when we were planning to leave the country illegally, we thought about turning the whole process into a work of art. But we decided against it. In the end we did not want to take that kind of risk. Perhaps it would have been a success, but then we would not have been able to return to China. That would have been even more unbearable; after all, this was our place. Later we were allowed to go anywhere in the world without having to worry about not being able to return.” The Gao Brothers politically dissident artwork has made them blacklisted in China. Though their work is exhibited outside of China it has never been publicly displayed in China.

WHAT IDEAS ARE BEING EXPLORED IN THIS WORK?

This controversial, super-sized stainless steel sculpture is part of a Miss Mao series produced by the Gao Brothers. This sculpture features two iconic figures in shiny polished stainless steel, a diminutive Miss Mao delicately balancing on the head of Vladimir Lenin, the Russian revolutionary whose monumental ideas of Socialism profoundly influenced Chinese political history. This sculpture can be “read” as a political narrative, as well as a reflection on the current nostalgic attitude toward Mao and the past. The position and scale of the two figures simultaneously questions and ridicules their relative positions in an undeniable communist commentary. The Gao Brothers have consciously chosen to play the role of social critic and therefore they walk a careful line in terms of politics. The Beijing authorities, after seeing works on display in the Gao Brother studio exhibition in 2008 demanded that they cover up the Miss Mao sculptures.



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HOW WAS THIS SCULPTURE MADE? The making of this sculpture was a process that took the Gao Brothers more than two years to complete. First a small clay model was made of Lenin’s head. This realistic, detailed clay model was used to form a full-scale fiberglass model, which was carefully formed and smoothed before the finishing shield of stainless steel was applied to the surface. The stainless steel was applied in sections, which can still be seen on the finished work. Due to the size of the piece the Gao Brothers had to work on scaffolding in their studio. The figure of Mao, as a child and with female anatomy was cast separately and then attached to the top section of Lenin’s head.

THE WEIGHT OF THIS ARTWORK IS 4,000 KG (8,800 LB) AND THE DIMENSION IS 650 CM/21 FT. (H) X 420 CM/13.8 FT. (D) X 600 CM/19.7 FT. (W).



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WHAT IDEAS ARE BEING EXPLORED BY THESE

ARTISTS? The cast resin heads shown here depict Mao as a woman, as he was called the mother of China. All are over-sized, shiny and smooth and with a highly exaggerated nose, bulging eyes, and a mocking smile. Each is painted a different bright colour, pink, green, blue, yellow, red, and silver. These visual qualities make the heads appear as “kitsch”, cheap souvenirs or as 3-dimensional cartoon characters. In these grotesque forms the Gao Brothers satirically mock Mao by portraying him as female and child-like.

“During the Cultural Revolution time in China, Chinese people were forced to believe that Mao was a mother of the country, although it’s not true. That’s why we make Miss Mao’s nose like Pinocchio’s. And the red color can be simply understood as a national color. Many Chinese artists even in contemporary art, they use the color for representing his

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE AN AVANT-GARDE

ARTIST? As avant-garde artists the Gao brothers use guerrilla tactics, such as holding secret exhibitions, keeping parts of a sculpture such as the head of Mao Zedong in one location with the body in another when they do a work that the Chinese Government deems offensive or too political. Some of their work is considered pornographic. There are censorship limits in most societies—especially where cultural taboos are challenged. The Gao Brothers push these boundaries—which makes them avant-garde artists. Their exhibitions have been closed in the past, their studio raided and some pieces have even been confiscated by the Government authorities. Because of the controversy surrounding any degradation of Mao’s image the Gao Brothers have to keep the head of Mao Zedong in a separate location—putting the body and head together only at times when they do clandestine exhibits. When authorities come to their studio they see only a headless body which can’t be identified as a specific person.



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national identity or inserting a certain political message.” (Gao Brothers)

The Chinese government has increasingly become more tolerant of the themes and expressions of the work of contemporary artists, for example nudity once forbidden is more acceptable. Although artists are increasingly free to deal with social and political topics, and parodying the Cultural Revolution is a frequent subject, art that explicitly criticizes Chinese leaders or traditional symbols of China are still out of bounds



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Can you identify all the infamous people in this manipulated image titled, *The Interview* by the Gao Brothers?

TO LEARN MORE:

www.gaobrothers.net/

www.artzinechina.com/display_vol_aid589_en.html

Glossary

CULTURAL REVOLUTION IN CHINA—The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, a period between 1966 and 1976 of widespread social and political upheaval in the People’s Republic of China. It was orchestrated by Mao Zedong, then Chairman of the Communist Party of China who mobilized the population through controlling the thoughts and actions of China’s youth. The movement quickly spread to the military, urban workers, and the party leadership itself. Mao’s vision was to create a China where peasants, workers and educated people were all working to realize a classless society. Considered elitist schools and colleges were closed. Red Guards were mobilized to purge those who Mao deemed as having “intellectual & bourgeois” tendencies. No-one was safe from criticism, harassment, punishment and execution. Writers, artists, economist, professors, anyone deemed to have developed a superior attitude was labeled an enemy of the party and the people.

To learn more go to: <http://library.thinkquest.org/26469/cultural-revolution/>

To learn more about Mao Zedong go to: www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/mao_zedong.shtml

DISSIDENT—A person who openly expresses dissatisfaction or challenges the established policy of a government. The acts of a dissident can be carried out through many forms of expression including: artistic works, writings, cartoons, satire, mocking or outright civil disobedience. Repressive governments have sought to punish political dissidents.

VLADIMIR LENIN—One of the leading political figures and revolutionary thinkers of the 20th century, who masterminded the Bolshevik take-over of power in Russia in 1917, and was the architect and first head of the USSR.

To learn more go to: www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic.../lenin_vladimir.shtml

NEW WAVE ART MOVEMENT—The ‘85 Movement’ was an avant-garde art movement of artistic and social transformation which flourished in China between 1985 and 1989. When Party officials objected to the term “movement” the name ‘85 Art New Wave’ was adopted. Between 1985 and 1986, close to eighty self-organized avant-garde art groups, including more than 2,250 young artists, emerged mounting exhibitions, holding conferences and writing manifestos and articles about their art. By 1989 the movement had become even more provocative and conceptual in direction, with Chinese artists breaking free from decades of social realism. The Movement produced some of the most important and innovative works of contemporary Chinese art.

WHO PUT THIS SCULPTURE ON DISPLAY IN RICHMOND? This sculpture is part of Vancouver Biennale 2009-2011 Exhibition. The Vancouver Biennale is a non-profit charitable organization that celebrates art in public space. Each exhibition transforms the urban landscape into an Open Air Museum, creating globally inspired cultural experiences where people live, work, play and transit. The Biennale features internationally renowned and emerging Contemporary artists that represent a diversity of cultural perspectives and artistic disciplines including sculpture, new media, performance works and film. The objective is to use great art as a catalyst to transformative learning and social action.

The Vancouver Biennale also creates supporting public programs, events and publications including the award-winning BIG IDEAS Education program, the International Artist Residency Program inspired by Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream", the CineFest LIVE documentary film festival and the Tour de Biennale and BIKennale arts & culture cycling events.

TO LEARN MORE you can search the terms **BIENNALE**, **PUBLIC ART** or **OUTDOOR SCULPTURE PARKS** on-line. Also Visit the Vancouver Biennale website at www.vancouverbiennale.com

IMAGE CREDITS:

- 1 Artists; CNReviews.com
- 2 *Miss Mao*; Dan Fairchild
- 3 *Miss Mao* (detail); Dan Fairchild
- 4 Portrait of Lenin; Moxargongroup.blogspot.com
- 5 *Miss Mao*; you-make-money-not-art
- 6 Artist performance during award ceremony of the Kandinsky Prize in Moscow December 10, 2008; Sergei Karpukhin, Reuters
- 7 *The Interview* (C-print); Galerie Paris-Beijing

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