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'Site 2801' a gripping installation at the Crocker Art Museum

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A phalanx of ancient Chinese warriors fills the historic ballroom in the old wing of the Crocker Art Museum. Interspersed among them are contemporary soldiers in battle fatigues like those worn in Afghanistan. The middle rows of warriors carry missiles in which bloody babies lie on beds of roses.

"Site 2801" is an impressive installation by Gong Yuebin, a Chinese artist who now lives in Sacramento. Up through April 29, it is one of the largest installations ever mounted at the Crocker.

Born in 1960, Gong was the child of educators who belonged to the intellectual class. As such, they were ordered to abandon their city home and become agricultural workers in the countryside in 1959. Six years later, the Cultural Revolution in which Mao Zedong tried to eradicate Western influences was in full sway.



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"In these turbulent times, Gong, and millions of children like him, starved and lived in fear," wrote Crocker curator Scott Shields in the exhibition catalog.

"As human beings," Gong remembers, "my family and I ... completely lost our dignity and security, surviving under unbearable pressure and stress."

Those experiences inform his artwork today, though after the Cultural Revolution ended Gong was able to study art and worked as an art teacher for seven years and subsequently became an art editor for the Guangzhou Radio and Television Station. After a medical crisis, he returned to his early ambitions to be a fine artist in 2004 and immigrated to the United States with his family. He has a studio at 915 20th St.; information is at gongyuebin.com.

His focus now is on conceptually based sculptural installations of which "Site 2801" is the latest and most ambitious. Gong had the warriors fabricated in China from models he made with clay.

Most of them mimic the famous terra cotta warriors that China's first emperor made for his tomb, though Gong has altered their costumes and expressions somewhat, besides adding the contemporary soldiers, missiles and infants. Arranged in 12 rows, they march silently bearing their burden, which metaphorically represents both the futility of warfare, which has continued over the ages, and hopes for the future.

"Site 2801" makes a dramatic showing at the Crocker, especially when viewed from the third-floor balcony which allows you to look down on the regiment as if you were in China at Lishan Mountain where the original terra cotta army was excavated.

"In this massive installation," Shields writes, "viewers are asked to become archeologists of the future by confronting an incongruous and satirical juxtaposition of humanity's past and present."

Emerging Chinese artists

While Gong's artwork is morally and politically oriented, the 10 emerging artists from China included in "Hanging in the Balance" at the Center for Contemporary Art, Sacramento, adopt a more ironic, ambiguous and mostly apolitical stance.

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Their offerings range from Cao Shumo's enlargements of microscopic images of tooth plaque blown up so they resemble traditional Chinese paintings of plant forms and insects, in some cases, and astronomical photos of planets, in others, to Jia Zhixing's hilarious, large-scale color photos of students in their dormitory rooms in China.

The most conventional works in the show in terms of media are Chen Wei's dark-edged drawings of objects and figures, including a hooded man who shines a flashlight on the ground. These minimalist drawings are quirky and unsettling, as is Yang Jian's video "Shape of a Soul," in which the fumes from a crematorium are used to form a heart-shaped piece of blown glass.

The bulk of works in the show are short videos ranging from Ma Wen's conflation of protests and religious ceremonies to Zhifei Yang's hypnotically beautiful film of a woman sleeping on a huge pillow in various land- and cityscapes.

Like Gong, these artists are a product of the China they grew up in (most were born in the 1980s) and their work reflects the monumental changes China has gone through since being opened to the West. All of these artists have done graduate work, in many cases abroad, and fit nicely into a sensibility that might be described as "International Graduate School."

The contrast between their visions and that of Gong, who harks back to an earlier ethos though he uses contemporary means, is fascinating.

Gong Yuebin: Site 2801

What: Gong's conceptual sculpture using China's well-known terra cotta warriors as a means to explore the futility of war and hope for the future.

When: 10 a.m to 5 p.m. Tuesday-Sunday, 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. Thursday, through April 29

Where: Crocker Art Museum, 216 O St., Sacramento

Cost: \$10 general, \$8 seniors and college students, \$7 for youths 7 to 17, free for members and children 6 and younger.

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Contact: (916) 808-7000, www.crockerartmuseum.org

Hanging in the Balance: Ten Emerging Chinese Artists

What: The ironic, ambiguous and apolitical pieces of these 10 Chinese artists put Gong's work in perspective.


Where: Center for Contemporary Art, Sacramento, 1519 19th St.

When: Noon to 5 p.m. Tuesday-Sunday through April 1

Cost: Free

Contact: (916) 498-9811, www.ccasac.org

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