

Artists from Shenzhen and Seattle find Common Language in Prints

Judith van Praag

Gently lifting large relief prints from a chest of art drawers onto the adjacent worktable in her studio, Barbara Robertson, Vice President of Seattle Print Art (SPA) said she didn't know if all of the six invited Chinese artists would be here for the opening of their show at Gallery 110 in Pioneer Square.

"They're professors with jobs in China, and yet the Embassy treats all [people] as if they're farmers who'll want to stay here," she said.

Her surprise isn't hard to understand. After all, she has experienced in person how, these days, artists have it pretty good in the fast growing city of Shenzhen, where companies and businesses subsidize art installations, art schools and all kinds of projects.

How ironic it is, that at a time when the Chinese government allows traveling, and when the aim of the organizers of the upcoming artists exchange, "Common Language: Shenzhen/ Seattle", is to encourage understanding between cultures and nations, the American government makes it hard for some to take advantage of regained freedoms.

In 2002 the China Workers Center for International Exchange of Bellevue, Wash. sponsored the visit of a Washington State delegation to Beijing, Tianjiin, Xi'an, Wuhan, Nanjing, Suzhou, and Shanghai. Catherine Gill and Barbara Pitts, founders of Art Partners International (API), enjoyed a residency, gave workshops and presented work of Northwest artists to students at Chinese partner schools.

In 2004, API reciprocated by organizing "Three Pathways" and bringing three Chinese Master Printers to the Pacific Northwest. API's aim: "Encourage a deeper understanding of different cultures by creating a network of people, one on one."

During their whirlwind tour of our state, Zhang Guanghui, Jin Bao Ping and Chen Qi showed their prints, presented workshops and made valuable connections with folks in the local printers community. During one of the exchange events, Barbara engaged in a conversation with Jin Bao Ping (professor at the College of Art and Design at Shenzhen University) about the artists' common language—printing, and possibilities for a continuation of the exchange. And indeed, in 2005, invited by Jin Bao Ping's university, a delegation of eleven artists traveled to China for the opening of an exhibition including 62 prints of work by SPA members in ShenZhen, one of the biggest modern cities of China.

This summer Jin Bao Ping returns to Seattle, accompanied by four of the six invited colleagues from Guangdong Province. For, just before this story went to press, Barbara Robertson reported that two of the artists whose work you'll be able to view in Gallery 110 didn't get a visa and decided not to reapply, at least for now. After all, the art exchange between China and the Pacific Northwest may become a recurring series of events.

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