

ARTS+CULTURE



IF ONLY ALL SOLDIERS COULD DO THAT. THE RED DETACHMENT OF WOMEN (MAY 25-27)

ART ATTACK

MARILYN MAI IS DITCHING HER LONG UNDERWEAR

One of the few **predictable things** about Beijing is **Chinese weather-related behavior**. When the temperature drops in November, every Chinese friend I hang out with will suggest hot pot for dinner. Two weeks later, they'll ask if my heat has come on. In their opinion, no one is ever dressed warmly enough. And if perchance it hits 70 degrees before May comes around, people *will* stare at you for wearing a **T-shirt on the subway**. Need we mention the **sun-shielding paraphernalia** that blanket the city in July and August?

Pair this collective mentality with the fact that May has traditionally been a big month for culture in China (the **May Fourth Movement**, **Lu Xun** and all that), and there you have your explanation for why so many events are planned for this month. So get out your sunbrellas,

tuck that *jiaotong ka* securely into your back pocket, grab a hawthorn popsicle or two and be off.

For starters, the 11th annual **Meet in Beijing Arts Festival** kicked off at the end of April, but will be going strong for most of May. Catch acts from all over the world, including Flemish pianist and **composer of China-themed rhapsodies** Peter Ritzen (May 6); Australian Liszt-master Leslie Howard (May 14); the **BYU Chamber Orchestra** (May 4); Australian avant-garde music trio **Misinterpretato** (May 15); and China's own National Ballet performing **The Red Detachment of Women**, the socialist drama that "shook the entire foundation of bourgeois art" (May 25-27).

Meanwhile, if you missed the events for **Caochangdi Photo-spring**, you can still catch the exhibits, many of which last through June. Check out **iconic French**

filmmaker Chris Marker's still photography at Jing Yi Art Space, Wang Chuan's study on **dragon ubiquity** at Pékin Fine Arts and "**Africa: See You, See Me**" at Li Space. Unrelated to the Photospring, Wim Delvoye – that **tattooer of pigs** both dead and alive – has a fascinating new exhibit at Galerie Urs Meile. And don't forget to check out **Affordable Art Beijing**, the art fair for the rest of us (see Feature, p49).

Budding filmmakers should take note that the **48 Hour Film Project** kicks off in Beijing on May 20, where you'll be handed an assignment and given just two days to complete it. See www.48hourfilm.com/beijing for more details.

Now, since you'll be doing quite a bit of running around, make sure to **drink plenty of water**. But not cold water. And don't stand right in front of the air conditioning!

SNAPSHOTS

ART

The **Gwangju Design Biennale** (GB) takes place in Korea this coming fall. It's earning respect as one of Asia's most thoughtfully curated visual arts events, and this year the organizers have planned a series of talks called Academies in several major international cities. The **Beijing Academy** took place last month, with thought-provoking presentations and engaging discussion. Learn more about the Biennale at www.gb.or.kr. In town, check out new exhibits at **Red Gate Gallery**, **Galerie Urs Meile**, and new Sanlitun gallery **Babu Space**.

CINEMA

Outdoor movie screenings might sound romantic, but Beijing's stifling heat and predatory mosquitoes make them few and far between. **Electric Shadows** gives it a go, screening *Some Like it Hot* on The Bookworm's rooftop on May 15. Meanwhile, **Culture Yard** is showing Shanghai and Billy Wilder films on Tuesdays and Sundays (respectively) this month, and BC MOMA has several screenings of works by **Zhu Wen** (starting May 6), **Li Yu** (starting May 8) and young filmmaker **Liu Jie** (starting May 1). In theaters, catch Chinese period actions *The Lost Bladesman* (*Guan Yunchang*) and *The Warring States* (*Zhan Guo*), and nerd fantasy flick *Sucker Punch*.

IN PRINT

It's a good year for Chinese literature. **Bi Feiyu** won the **Man Asian Literary Prize**, and two other Chinese novelists, **Wang Anyi** (*The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*) and **Su Tong** (*Wives and Concubines*), have been nominated for the **Man Booker International Prize** – a first for Chinese writers. Penguin China has a green light to publish an English translation of **Sheng Keyi's Northern Girls**, due out mid-2012. Also, Book Swap and Board Games celebrates its third anniversary by letting you take home three books for trading in just one on May 7 (see Events for details).

STAGE

The **NCPA** kicks off its **May Festival** with one of the world's best violinists, **Anne-Sophie Mutter**, performing on May 2. Opera lovers can see **Puccini's Tosca**, directed by the world-famous Giancarlo del Monaco (May 12-15) and ballet buffs can catch the sensational **Balletto di Roma's** take on kiddie lovers **Romeo & Juliet** (May 25-26). Beijing Playhouse will be staging *Love, Sex, and the IRS* later this year. They're hosting an informal unstaged reading of the script on May 22 – a great way to gear up for the auditions in June.



ARTIST SIMON BIRCH'S CONCEPTUAL CIRCUS COMES TO TOWN

by Marilyn Mai

Simon Birch's "Hope & Glory" is one of the largest-scale and most expensive multimedia installations ever to hit China. The ambitious project incorporates architecture, music, photography, film, design and actors, which probably explains why it gained traction with Hong Kong cultural grants that usually ignore the visual arts.

We asked the artist to describe the exhibit for us in a few unconventional ways:

As a movie title? *The Greatest Show on Earth* by Cecil B. DeMille. Hmm, easy enough to decipher: "Hope & Glory" is meant to be a spectacle, calling upon circus-like themes and visuals.

As a piece of music? *Psyence Fiction* by Unkle. Here, he's referring to the critically acclaimed triphop album that gets a little help from members of The Beastie Boys, Radiohead, Metallica and The Verve. That tells us the show is eclectic, highly collaborative and maybe a little heady.

As a fruit? *A pomegranate*. This one's tricky: Is the show seedy, nutrient-rich and visually aggressive?

And in six words? *Laughing with mouth full of blood*. Wow, very strong imagery. Maybe we'll get to this one later ...

For now, read on as Birch tells us more about himself and his work.

You've held down jobs as a construction worker, DJ, party planner, and now painter/artist. Can you connect the dots for us?

Making things: whether it was tightening bolts on the Tsing Ma Bridge, constructing a climbing gym in Australia, applying paint on canvas, or welding steel for the "Heavy is the Head that Wears the Crown" installation in "Hope & Glory." There's a strong performance dimension to my

work, as well; music has been a big influence and remains a consistent part of much that I create. But always, problem-solving in creativity.

What might a Beijing resident see in your exhibit that others might not?

I think everyone approaches the show differently. The Beijing resident will probably respond to the scale in a different way because Beijing is large-scale. Extraordinary transformations are taking place in the PRC, and I hope that Beijing residents will find an echo of their own experiences in the transformations I've imagined in the conceptual circus.

"LIFE IS A BREATH BETWEEN TWO SCREAMS"

"Hope & Glory" involved all sorts of creative types. How did that go?

Collaborating with so many creative people gave me valuable new insights. There's also been a positive legacy because the network we built up has transmuted into Future Industries, an art project which is pioneering new ways of representing and exhibiting artists in Asia and internationally.

If contemporary art were dying but you could save it by making a fan out of a single non-art-lover, how would you accomplish this?

I'd take him to the Des Moines Art Center in Iowa to see Francis Bacon's *Study after Velasquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X*. I guarantee he'd finally understand art is the only mirror that tells the truth: Life is a breath between two screams.

Describe your ideal exhibition space.

A large, portable cube that could easily move from the middle of New York to a hill tribe in Papua New Guinea.

You got paid to do dangerous things in construction work. What's the most dangerous thing about art?

Risk. Every second, as an artist, you're making decisions that could backfire. It's only afterwards you realize how close you were to the edge. One's heart is exposed to be loved or stabbed.

What has been inspiring you lately?

Flesh! At the moment I'm working on an exhibition of new paintings, so I'm finding inspiration in the human form. When I'm not painting I'm making sketches for a large-scale installation project and finding inspiration there from the architecture of Lebbeus Woods. He's a reminder that the best architecture is never built.

Tell us about your upcoming projects.

The next 18 months are going to be busy. I have a show of new paintings, "Laughing with a Mouth Full of Blood" [Aha! – Ed.], which opens in May at the Hong Kong Museum of Medical Sciences. I'm also involved in a project in London and at the end of the year we're planning a show in LA. Then there's a major installation piece I am building; it will be very architectural and large-scale with a multimedia dimension, and poses challenges that are both artistic and technical. So, you could say I've got my work cut out.

"Hope & Glory" will be on show at G-Dot Art Space from May 2-Jun 30.

ART: "YELLOW SIGNAL"

UCCA



Eight video screens are erected onto four gateways, depicting everyday situations in China: a ping-pong match, a medical exam. But the actors' blank-faced performances, combined with the darkened room, heavy background music, and the oppressive height of the gateways, makes what you're observing feel momentous and even ominous. Nervous laughter punctuates the exhibit room, leaving visitors feeling

off-balance. And this is just Chapter 1. The next three installments, which run consecutively until June 26, promise to be just as interesting. The second, "We know what we are doing..." will fill the giant room with a basketball hoop maze. Will the result be bizarre or whimsical? Or both? No matter what, *Yellow Signal* succeeds in slowing down traffic – making people stay in the moment to connect with their surroundings. *Phoenix Tso*

See "Yellow Signal" at the UCCA: Chapter 2 (until May 15), Chapter 3 (until Jun 8), and Chapter 4 (until Jun 26).

BOOK: PLEASE LOOK AFTER MOM

KYUNG-SOOK SHIN



There's Catholic guilt, there's Jewish guilt, and then there's the mother of them all: Korean filial guilt. This is the engine driving Kyung-Sook Shin's latest novel, which follows an elderly woman's four thankless adult children and her once-adulterous husband as they search the city for their missing matriarch. In the process, they take turns grieving over how they've mistreated her, and Shin's strange second-person narration allows her to tell

one sob story after another while simultaneously lecturing her characters. Despite the heavy-handed moralizing and maudlin melodrama, the writing is sharp, and the family's experiences in Seoul's jungle of steel and glass resonate easily with a similarly shifting Beijing. Best of all, we can promise anyone who reads this will never forget Mother's Day again. *Marilyn Mai*

Please Look After Mom is available at *The Bookworm*.

FILM: DON'T GO BREAKING MY HEART 单身男女

JOHNNIE TO



Fans of Johnnie To's action flicks will have to set aside some expectations to enjoy his latest, which caters very obviously to the rom-com-loving Chinese mainland. Starring Louis Koo and Daniel Wu as the dueling rich, handsome suitors to Gao Yuanyuan's cute but almost too likeable damsel in urban distress, the movie features enough romancing and over-the-top marriage proposals to rival the careers of Jennifer Aniston and

Reese Witherspoon combined. True to To's style, the visuals are interesting and the writing is clever, but towards the end, you feel like you're watching an indecisive friend hem and haw over a hamburger vs. a toenail. Worth a watch for the laugh-out-loud comedic timing, but beware the Bermuda Love Triangle. *Marilyn Mai*

Don't Go Breaking My Heart is showing in cinemas around town.

STAGE: NANTA COOKIN'

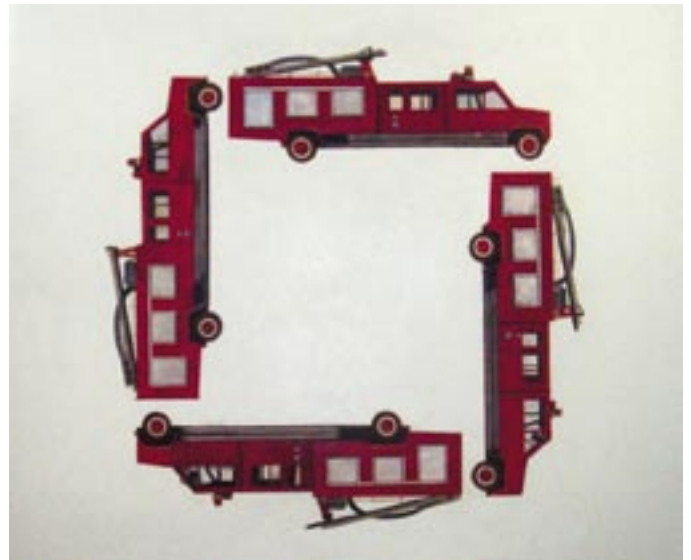
POLY THEATRE



Korea's longest-running musical doesn't have subtitles but you'll understand it perfectly. Because apparently, clanging pots and pans are a universal language, as evidenced by the show winning Best Performance at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in 1999. Impressive for its non-verbal narrative, NANTA Cookin' dazzles with acrobatic stunts, magic tricks, pantomime and kitchenware percussion. It follows three chefs who are ordered

by their angry manager to cook up a wedding banquet. Caught unawares, they rush to complete their task before the looming deadline, all the while training the manager's hapless, bumbling nephew. What follows is 90 minutes of chaos and comedy in equal measure. Audience participation is key, so go have fun and by all means make a racket. *Carly Chun*

NANTA Cookin' makes noise at the Poly Theatre on May 17-18.



FIRE SALE

AFFORDABLE ART BEIJING'S HOT STUFF

by Elizabeth Parke

Given that artist Zhang Xiaogang just sold a triptych for USD 10 million at the latest Sotheby's auction, you might think getting a foothold in China's ballooning art market is a little bit of a reach. Here's where Affordable Art Beijing (AAB) comes in, offering you the chance to buy the next generation's art, starting at a couple hundred *kuai*. You never know, you might find a piece that will fund your kid's college education down the road. Then again, if that's too much pressure, you can also just choose something that looks good on your wall.

Now in its sixth year, AAB has made a name as the art fair that the rest of us can, well, afford, while also becoming a much-needed platform for emerging artists to get exposure. This means more people and more artwork (over a thousand pieces this year), which can make spotting the good ones a bit like a hunt for buried treasure – amongst a hundred other hunters. Here are some highlights to give you a head start:

Chen Zhuo's "Firetruck" (pictured) has a pared-down, toy-like aesthetic, and manages to be playful while also recalling the city's never-ending traffic jams.

Lin Shu's vertigo-inducing photograph "Zhen No. 2" convincingly blurs the boundaries between digital art and Northern Song dynasty ink painting. The shaky grey tones evoke

the calligraphic lines of a mountain form, but at the same time also suggest the artist's play with a double exposure. Either way the result is striking. Lin describes his work as both private and populist: "I start by making work for myself, but the end result is for the public."

Li Baoxun's "Stifled" is oil paint on canvas, but the paint is textured so it looks like crumpled paper, perhaps mimicking the crumbling mental state of the huddled, roly-poly figure in the foreground. The looming grey wall above him heightens the sense of

suffocation that, without a clear narrative, creates a visual conundrum. "Stifled" leaves the viewer wondering, which is what demanding art should do. This one might make for depressing wall art, but hey, some of us are into that.

All three artists offer a variety of media, content, and approaches, representing the mishmash one will inevitably find at AAB. So, whether you're looking to invest in budding contemporary artists or just sick of your bare walls, AAB is worth a look. Just don't get stuck in line behind one of those fire trucks.

Affordable Art Beijing takes over 798 Space on May 14. Win tickets to the VIP Preview on May 13 by telling us who you would commission to paint your portrait. Email answers to win@thebeijinger.com.

IT MANAGES TO BE
PLAYFUL WHILE
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CITY'S NEVER-ENDING
TRAFFIC JAMS

STRANGE FATES

AND EVEN STRANGER FRIENDSHIPS

by Marilyn Mai

What do you get when you mix a surly non-Mandarin-speaking Westerner with a Hunanese shepherd, throw in some psychedelic yin-yang combat and a good ol' alien abduction amidst desert snowfall, and then serve them all on the bleak Inner Mongolian grasslands? Apparently you get *Thomas Mao*, a highly conceptual, visually exhilarating film courtesy of poet/novelist Zhu Wen.

A lesser-known Sixth Generation filmmaker, Zhu has a well-stocked toolbox for creating unique visual worlds and populating them with original characters. Besides his literary talents, the filmmaker is also an experienced electrical engineer. The exposure to industry and technology made film an easy transition for him.

We asked how his approach to writing differs from his approach to filmmaking, and he confessed, "The biggest difference is that when I started writing, I was an adolescent. But when I started making films, I was already an adult. So it's just like romance – your first love always seems special. But really, filming is a form of writing. It's really hard to compare the two and they're both great for allowing me to express myself."

In this case, he chose to express his thoughts about culture clash by exploring the interactions between his real-life friends, painter Mao Yan and Luxembourgian diplomat

Thomas Rohdewald. Besides inspiring the film, the pair also star as the main protagonists. "Can you think of anything more unusual? One guy takes note of this stranger and they end up maintaining a consistent friendship for over ten years. And it's a relationship that bears the brushmarks of their souls – hard to explain and very mysterious," says Zhu.

"When they'd known each other for five years, I pondered it all the time. During filming, it had been ten years and I was still pondering. How did these two earn their *luanfen*?" Zhu's exploration of unlikely friendships goes back to his essay, "A Boat Crossing," where he plays on Buddhist ideas of *luanfen*, or relational fate, suggesting that each chance encounter is earned through three lifetimes of discipline.

By the end of the short and action-packed *Thomas Mao*, Zhu has wormed a disconcerting thought into his audience's minds: What is fiction, and what is real? Can we really control our fates?

When faced with the existential questions posed by such thrilling cinematic fare, what favorite theater snack does Zhu Wen turn to for comfort? "My nails."

Bite your nails at Thomas Mao, which screens on May 6, 14-15, 21-22 and 28 at BC MOMA.



NICOLA BELLER CARBONE

SOPRANO

The book on my shelf with the most sentimental value is *The Complete Poems of Rainer Maria Rilke*. There is an incredible recording by Oscar Werner (an Austrian actor of the '50s) in which he recites the Rilke poems, and it is the most beautiful thing I've ever heard.

The bookshelf I'd most like a peek at is Lady Gaga's. I wonder if pop divas today have any interest in literature; perhaps I'd be surprised and find Schopenhauer's complete works on her bookshelf.

The book I pretend to have read but haven't really is Goethe's *Faust*.

The book I hide from others is Chuck Palahniuk's *Invisible Monsters*. One of the most disgusting books I've ever read, with a horrible vision of a society absolutely manipulated by the ideals of beauty, with no inner values. It's the negation of a desire to mature, learn, grow, to become somebody "wiser" – really the negation of life.

My three favorite books are Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, John Irving's *The World According to Garp* and Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

My favorite book from childhood is *Hotel New Hampshire*, by John Irving. It is so full of fantasy and absolutely tolerant of all kinds of human beings; it's very, very funny, and so tender. His portrait of Vienna with its prostitutes, so humanly described, really impressed and still impresses me.

A character in a book who I'd like to be is *la presidenta* in Gioconda Belli's *El País de las Mujeres*, which describes a fictional Latin country in which women take over power. She is very feminine and sensual, yet at the same time powerful, intellectual, able to lead a whole country and convince men to take over the housework and childcare. But she's also full of doubts and emotional needs. A wonderful character.

Of the major characters I've sung, I think Salome would make the best novelist, because she's an introverted neurotic teenager with nobody to talk to, in a family without values or love. So she would feel the inner desire to express and liberate herself. The extraverted Tosca would prefer to make her statement on stage, needing the immediate applause.

The book I wish I had written is Calderón de la Barca's *Life Is a Dream*.

A book I'd like to see adapted as a film is Julio Cortázar's *Rayuela (Hopscotch)*. He has this kaleidoscopic writing style; you can read it in order as printed, or following his instructions, you can jump around from page 35 to 6, to 89 and so on.

The fictional world I'd most like to be part of is one of Haruki Murakami's surrealistic worlds like in *Dance Dance Dance* or *Tokyo Blues*.

Carbone sings Tosca at the NCPA on May 12 & 14; Sun Xiuwei performs the part on May 13 & 15.