Inside Out: New Chinese Art is an exciting exhibition of contemporary art produced by over 60 artists from mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong and the overseas Chinese artist community. These artists work in a period when cultural and artistic traditions are being challenged in a rapidly changing political and economic environment. Consisting of nearly 90 works created from 1985 to 2000, Inside Out includes paintings, sculpture, photographs, installations, videos and prints by some of the world’s leading artists. These artists have responded to their political/social environment in a number of ways. Find the following works of art in the exhibition. They can be considered under the following thematic headings.

art and text: calligraphy and meaning

China’s pictographic script has been an important tool for personal and artistic communication and administration for thousands of years. From around 1984 artists in mainland China began to create new characters, which are seen to challenge the foundations of Chinese civilisation.

Xu Bing’s Book from the Sky 1987–91 is an installation of books spread on the floor and scrolls suspended from the ceiling. For this work Xu invented 4,000 characters which have no literal meaning. They were individually carved on wooden blocks in reverse and printed by hand. The process took 4 years. Xu has created a contemplative space filled with words that can not be understood by anyone.


Gu’s installation is a room containing tables and chairs. In the seats of the chairs are monitors showing images of the sky, which suggest peace and harmony. The screens, which form the walls and ceiling, are made from human hair. The artist collected the hair from the floor sweepings of barber shops all over the world. By using human hair and unreadable scripts Gu attempts to eliminate cultural boundaries.

Song Dong Printing on water 1996 For this performance Song sat in the Lhasa River in Tibet and stamped the water with a seal inscribed with the Chinese character for water. Was this futile attempt to make a print a comment on China’s dominance over Tibet?

QUESTION How might you use language for social or political comment?
cultural identity and change

Artists refer to traditional Chinese cultural practice, reinventing objects in surprising materials.

**Cai Guo-Qiang**’s *Crystal Tower 2000* is constructed of 900kg of rock crystal, resin and Chinese medicinal powder made from ground crystals. Placed in an important position in the gallery, the tower releases energy like a giant acupuncture needle. Pagodas were traditionally used as watchtowers, memorials and for keeping relics.

**Wang Jin** *The dream of China: Dragon robe 1997* Made from polyvinyl chloride and fishing line, this robe refers to those worn by Chinese emperors. It has been carefully embroidered with fishing line imitating the dragon pattern, a traditional symbol of power. Perhaps the translucent medium is a comment on the disappearance of tradition.

**QUESTION:** What Australian cultural icons could you reinvent using modern materials?

consumerism

As the economy of mainland China boomed in the early 1990s a new urban middle class emerged. Oil painters clinically dissected the values and activities of this new class, exposing beneath the glitter of wealth the fading of idealism, the breakdown of old family ties and the alienation of the individual.

**Wang Guangyi** *Great castigation series: Coca-Cola 1993* Wang combines imagery from the Cultural Revolution and big business suggesting communist propaganda and capitalist advertising are both forms of mass indoctrination. Wang’s biting humour satirises these systems, implying that the individual is not free under either one.

**QUESTION:** How would you ridicule the commercial world we live in?

family issues: changing values and social comment

The role of the family has always been important in Chinese culture. Political movements have challenged the relationship between the generations and the right to have more than one child.

**Zhang Xiaogang** *Bloodline: Family portrait no.2 1994* The parents focus their attention on their only child who seems to be draining the blood from their expressionless faces. Red is the colour of love for Zhang; a fine red thread connects the hearts of the three figures. This work critiques China’s one-child policy and captures the deep alienation and loss of individuality that has pervaded Chinese society in the Communist era.

**Chen Shun-chu** *Family parade 1995–96* On the floor are ranks of photographs of his family members in metal frames. They are isolated from each other and yet unified by being related to the artist. The large photographs on the wall demonstrate Chen’s despair about the dislocation of his family lured to the commercial world of mainland Taiwan. He attempts to relocate his family by placing their photographs on the abandoned buildings of his home town in Pescadores, Taiwan.

**QUESTION:** How would you represent the link between your family and your home?

gender issues

The following female artists explore gender issues in relation to women’s historical role in Chinese society.

**Lin Tian-miao** *Bound and unbound 1995–97* Lin’s work deals with the tedious of women’s lives in both traditional and modern society. She wrapped everyday household objects in thread, finding the process tedious and boring but also strangely meditative. The giant scissors projected on the nearby screen threaten to undermine her work.

**Chen Hui-chiao** *Thoughts of flowers go deeper than looking 1993* Chen’s work plays on the association between yin ‘soft’ and yang ‘hard’; roses (beauty and love) and acupuncture pins (pain and healing). By piercing the roses with pins the artist contrasts tenderness, passion and beauty with danger and pain.

**QUESTION:** Think about the role of women in your society. What symbolic elements would you use to capture this role?