



FAN DONGWANG Shifting Perspectives: Paintings 1995 - 2015



Fan Dongwang's evocative works have at their base an inherent understanding of traditional Chinese iconography, transformed by vibrant, almost surreal electric colour that renders with equal power the imperial dragon or the stately Australian Gum tree and speaks with fresh confidence to a contemporary community.

Dongwang's sensitivity and knowledge of tradition and form, colour and ideology, evokes awareness of cultural fusion, one where his reverence and respect for disparate iconic values can set a new agenda.

The University Gallery is delighted to exhibit these works, seen for the first time in Newcastle. These beautifully rendered visual works encourage us to transcend traditional notions of identity and challenge new audiences to continue conversations around the reality of the Australian landscape.

Gillean Shaw, Art Curator, the University Gallery

ABOVE: Fan Dongwang, *Dragon in Water Triptych (Left and Middle)*, 2013, pencil on paper, 100 x 70cm

## Introduction - Dr Rod Pattenden



The great necessity of this global century has become the negotiation of difference between cultures. The condition of our daily life is shaped by the affect of trade deals, economic zones, the traffic of goods and services, and the hunger for expanding markets. The accelerating exchange between cultures creates conditions that are often marked by a clash of images. The flash and sizzle of these exchanges are evidence of a deeper clash of ideologies and social horizons. They mark the boundaries of once protected categories of proud national stories and secure destinies. In this global world no culture remains unchallenged by this conflict of signs that all compete towards the unattainable promise of a stable centre or a truer perspective.

Fan Dongwang has made this fluid space where images hunger for legitimacy his area of investigation. Born in China he trained at the Shanghai School of Arts and Crafts with a rigorous classical training that also introduced him to the contemporary currents of art awakening in China in the 1980s. He pursued post-graduate study in Australia and has lived in Sydney since 1990, where his work has reached its maturity in large scale fields of patterned colour that explore the contested territory of the spaces between cultures. The importance of his work lies in this hybrid territory, as it does not sit easily within the story of Australian art, or the developing categories of contemporary art in China. He is an important artist, who has made his home between the once clear boundaries of national identity, complicating them, and setting them towards new and emerging appearances.

In recent works he has been exploring the classical form of the dragon as it undergoes transformation through fluid states. An icon of Chinese identity, the dragon belongs within a worldview where this creature finds balance in watery states, such as in air, cloud, the river or the ocean. Dragons are symbols of ecological balance that remind those in power that their responsibility is to achieve balance not domination. The artist explores the ironic associations of this overused and often clichéd form to complicate the apparent ascendancy of China and its influence in the region through trade, mining and investment.

ABOVE: Fan Dongwang, *Dragon in Water Triptych (Right)*, 2013, pencil on paper, 100 x 70cm



This survey of Fan Dongwang's works demonstrates the rigorous education he has undergone in traditional Chinese artistic forms, from carefully rendered classical paintings to brushed calligraphy. But it was his training in low relief carving using wood, ivory or jade, that would be the point of departure for his new work in Australia. These works brought him recognition among a group of Chinese artists in the 1990s. These works are filled with carefully rendered forms that are undergoing transformation, from classical gendered torsos to creatures drawn from pop culture and science fiction that explore the physical possibilities of the transformation of the human form. Full of bright decorations they nevertheless maintain an anxious space looking towards the possible outcomes for the human species in the age of economics and technology. These are technically proficient works that demonstrate his crafting of condensed space and pop art coloration as well as a sensitivity to the empty promises of progress marching across of Asia. Transformer like forms also appear in three-dimensional wall pieces. They all seek to reach out to inhabit the real space of the viewer with the promise of transformation.

LEFT: Fan Dongwang,  
*Descendant - Multi-Shadows*,  
1996, acrylic paint on canvas,  
124 x 181cm

RIGHT: Fan Dongwang,  
*Descendant Bodies #1 (Blue)*,  
1997, acrylic paint on canvas,  
178 x 254cm



The artist's scholarly approach to his work was further sustained by a period of research for a Doctorate in Creative Arts (Wollongong University). This research explored the nature of shadows and perspective in Chinese and western art traditions. The large five-panel work 'Shifting Perspectives' offers a complex summary of these investigations and is a significant artistic achievement. The work is structured around a traditional composition but is punctuated by sections that swap back and forth between traditional and contemporary perspectives. A Chinese court scene is punctuated by a reference to a religious scene painted by the Renaissance artist Botticelli, and then in turn a struggling group of Chinese tourists rush for tickets, or is it red books, outside the Sydney Opera House. In a more disconcerting gesture the shadows of each element are rendered in a different manner, making it impossible to stand in front of this work and to establish a commanding view. The work keeps falling apart into its distinct and competing elements. Its bright chromatic coloration pops and sparkles with competing perspectives. There is no centre. There is no resting place.

ABOVE: Fan Dongwang, *Shifting Perspective & Body*, 1999-2001, acrylic paint on canvas, 244 x 900cm

Five panels, subtitles of each panel:

LEFT: *Double Screens*

CENTRE LEFT: *Bardi Madonna*

CENTRE: *March*

CENTRE RIGHT: *Performance*

RIGHT: *Discourse*



In more recent works he has directly explored the complex identity of Chinese power and influence in Asia. The figure of the dragon is an iconic identifier of Chinese economic and cultural power in the region. In these works the artist focuses in on the head of the dragon in the manner of a portrait and renders it with both graphic affect and dynamic coloration that punches out into the three dimensional space of the viewer. It is this pulsing electric presence of this image built up with carefully layered bands of graduating colour which serves to weaken its power as an image of imperial grandeur. These dragons are pop icons that populate the western imagination as signs of playful novelty or confirmation of the exotic nature of eastern cultures. But hovering within this play of colour and form is the anxiety rendered by the presence of the dragon. It is still present, casting its shadow across the region. This is the century where the dragon in all its chromatic vibrancy has found its ascendancy.

LEFT: Fan Dongwang, *Dragon Head (Orange)*, 2002, acrylic paint on canvas, 180 x 180cm

CENTRE: Fan Dongwang, *Dragon*, 2010, acrylic paint on canvas, 180 x 180cm

RIGHT: Fan Dongwang, *Dragon Head (Yellow)*, 2001, acrylic paint on canvas, 180 x 180cm



In the final series of works the artist turns to the Australian landscape and tackles one of our enduring visual emblems, the gum tree. This straggly white vertical line continues to punctuate the horizon of the landscape in every art show in Australia, making it an enduring icon. In these works Fan Dongwang renders them anew with a sliding sense of space reminiscent of the floating landscapes of Chinese panel paintings, where land, air and cloud create atmospheres for the human journey of place and destination. The artist has observed the spotted colours of the bark during its change of season. But the trees themselves seem to take on the character of creatures, at times strangely reminiscent of a dragon. The simple subject of gum trees finds new life from an artist who works in a space strung between cultures. Fan Dongwang offers a unique perspective as a scholar sensitive to the cultural collisions that are forming our future. Australia is adrift in the shifting seas of Asia. These works demonstrate that there is no firm and stable land ahead.

ABOVE: Fan Dongwang, *Gum Tree Triptych*, 2013, acrylic paint on canvas, 180 x 388cm



ABOVE: Artist Fan Dongwang, Photo courtesy of the artist

FRONT COVER: Fan Dongwang, *Dragon*, 2010, acrylic paint on canvas, 180 x 180cm



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