

Artist Featured: Cai Zhisong (China)
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LOCAL ART

ODE TO THE MAINLAND

Hailed as the next Ju Ming, Chinese sculptor Cai Zhisong is breaking new ground for Asian artists in the international arena, reports **Andrea Heng**



ALL PHOTOS: SOTHEBY'S

AT HIS INTERNATIONAL debut at the Paris Autumn Salon in 2001, 31-year-old sculptor Cai Zhisong astounded art aficionados worldwide and broke new ground for sculptures in the field. The Paris Autumn Salon had extended its invitation to Chinese artists for the first time in its 100-year history, subsequently awarding Cai the prestigious Taylor Prize for his piece titled *Homeland Wind* — part of a series called *Ode To Motherland* — making him the first and only Chinese artist to receive the honour.

Since his entry into the international world of art, Cai's work has attracted more global attention and from there, his career has rocketed. His first auction piece — spotted by specialist Evelyn Li from Sotheby's — was offered at Sotheby's Fall

Auction last year and fetched US\$35,000 from a Singaporean buyer — more than double its estimated price. A second piece — a similar sculpture purchased by his third largest collector, the owner of The New Majestic, Loh Lik Peng — was auctioned off in April.

Coupling deep visual effects with creative fascination, Cai explains his driving force: "The modern art world has always advocated plural development. However, genuine plural development is not easy to realise. The unitary trend is actually omnipresent in today's seemingly artistic diversity. A monism is dominated by Western civilisation, backed by Western economic strength, expanding worldwide to form a culture of the strong."

With his work, Cai aims to have "a break in this unitary trend" and believes that "artists have a responsibility to transform the best of their history and culture into modern spiritual products".

Cai's work has travelled round the world and is even collected by various art museums in China, the Shanghai Westin Hotel and personal collectors.

Three of his magnificent pieces were brought in specially for the recent ArtSingapore 2006 exhibition by locally-based Asian Art Options, an art consultancy dedicated to contemporary Asian art whose aim was to present a mixed media theme for the event. *Ode to Motherland No. 5* along with another large masterpiece by the artist, who is represented by Asian Art

BELOW & ABOVE: **The Taylor Prize-winning *Homeland Wind***



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Options in Singapore and around Asia, provided a preview to his upcoming show in Shanghai at the Shine Art Place in the Mongshan District from November 15 to 25 this year.

Cai, from Liaoning province in China, began his artistic journey at a young age, attending art classes in the evening after school. After only a year, he was singled out as a distinguished student whose sublime work was often put on display. He revelled in his ambition to become a sculptor and took the necessary examinations to gain entry into the Sculpture Department of the China Central Academy of Fine Arts.

After failing twice, Cai holed up in his room for an entire year to practise his painting skills. Disaster struck just before his third and final attempt at the examination when his eyesight diminished due to acute keratitis, but he ploughed on and finally succeeded in becoming a student at the academy in 1992.

The artist spent his five years at the academy living and breathing art. While other students indulged in recreational activities, the hardworking Cai remained undistracted, focusing intensely on his passion. During this time, he discovered a process of modelling clay to depict details of human body parts through trial-and-error — by his fourth year, he had created his own series of masterpieces.

Cai Zhisong's work has been described as "subtly contemporary", yet it also features elements representative of China in its historical heyday. His technique and creative virtue often result in painstakingly-made sculptures with the most intricate of details — proof of his perseverance.

"What I will do is to smash the monoism and create another modern art style. That is — it not only can present our oriental national temperament but also can contain the modern art language that has thousands of years Chinese culture details.

Towards the end of 1999, Cai embarked on his most ambitious project yet — the *Motherland* series. Inspiration first hit when he sculpted an ancient warrior's head from materials such as resin, copper sheets, copper thread and



sackcloth. This was a milestone period in his career as it marked the beginning of many more stunning designs to come. He continued to create undressed warriors and servants, gradually evolving into separate series of dressed warriors and servants in *Ode to Motherland* and *Customs of Motherland* respectively.

Ode to Motherland and *Customs of Motherland* were inspired by the elegance of Chinese classical poetry, their cultural meanings depicted via human figures sporting different identities and varying traits — Cai's way of reminiscing and reminding others of the vigour of the Qin dynasty (which were the Spring and Autumn seasons and the Warring States periods between 770 to 221 BC) lost in China's colourful history.

"My interest in the past is unequal," Cai explained in a *China Daily* article. "Everything we call heritage should be considered precious. I continually attempt to create artwork derived from our past legacy. I am Chinese, so the source of my inspiration lies in that origin."

The first piece from the *Motherland* series was the Taylor Prize-winning *Homeland Wind*. Inspired by images from 2,500 years ago, the sculpture took Cai six months to complete, weaving traditional Chinese plastic art with the artistic expressions of the West to portray an understated contrast between the East and West; caught in between the past and present like a time capsule. For



ABOVE: The hardworking Cai Zhisong
TOP: *Ode to Motherland* No. 5

Homeland Wind, Cai used thin copper sheets to shape the human figure and its outfit as well as plaited thin copper wires to form its hair. This character sculpture evokes a sense of loss for ancient China, yet it's seemingly optimistic in keeping its traditional roots — a signature Cai move.

Now teaching at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing — the same place he graduated from years ago — Cai remains determined and passionate about his work. With a personal slogan for his art — "Carrying forward the national traditions" — he claims that *Homeland Wind* is just an introduction to what is to come. "I will finish the rest of the series one by one and achieve still more innovations and breakthroughs in artistic theory and practice," he says. ■