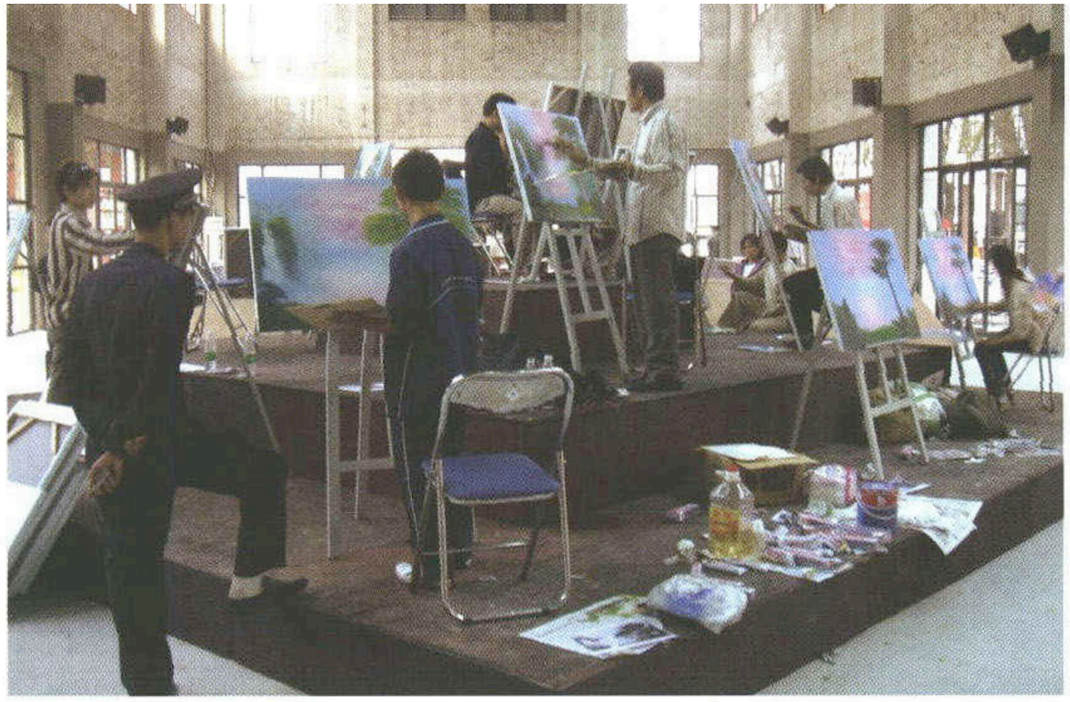
This page: **View of Dafen, Shenzhen, China, 2007.** Photo: Song Chao.
Opposite page: **View of Dafen, Shenzhen, China, 2007.** Photo: Luluc Huang.

Original Copies

PHILIP TINARI ON THE DAFEN OIL PAINTING VILLAGE

AS A CITY, SHENZHEN was almost literally painted into existence. In 1979, "Deng Xiaoping drew a circle"—or so goes the cliché immortalized in an early-'80s pop song—around a fishing village abutting Hong Kong, and proclaimed a zone of free markets for a China then beginning to awaken from its socialist reverie. Nearly thirty years later, it is a site of production on a most extraordinary scale, and the locus of a unique urban condition only possible in a place where the average resident is even younger than the fledgling city itself. Its factories turn out everything from pharmaceuticals to air conditioners; its designers invent the logos that will finally give their nation its own brands; its Window of the World theme park—where visitors amble among replicas of Angkor Wat, the Brasília parliament building, and more than a hundred other famous tourist attractions—takes the Coney Island simulacra with which Rem Koolhaas began his late-'70s urban manifesto *Delirious New York* to previously unthinkable levels. And on the outskirts of this city of dreams lies the village of Dafen, a place where the notion of

This page: **Vendor, Dafen, Shenzhen, China, 2007.** Photo: Song Chao. Opposite page, from top: **Liu Ding, *Samples from the Transition—Products*, 2005.** Performance view, 2nd Guangzhou Triennial, 2007. **Christian Jankowski, *Liberty*. 2007**, acrylic and oil on canvas, 52 ½ x 78". From "The China Painters," 2007.



painting as production is pushed to its conceptual outer limits.

The Dafen Oil Painting Village—its name, in accordance with official terminology, specifies "oil painting" in order to distinguish the art practiced here from "national painting," a term denoting more traditional Chinese methods—lies just north of what is called the second line, a quasi-border that once enforced a separation between the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone proper and its surrounding districts. To reach the village, one drives through a defunct checkpoint staffed by the occasional police officer standing amid the traffic islands watching the cars stream by. Having crossed this fake border, one enters Shenzhen's Longgang district, perhaps the single most productive locale in all of China, with a GDP said to outstrip those of entire northwestern provinces. After a journey of a few miles, Dafen suddenly appears to the left of an eight-lane highway. It is a village only in the sense that it is a distinct pocket in an urban fabric that radiates in all directions—a "village-in-the-city," as the architectural lingo would have it, but really just a dense warren of alleyways and six- and seven-story concrete buildings containing nothing but apartments and workshops dedicated to oil painting.

HERE, ART LINKS UP WITH THE MARKET. HERE, TALENT AND FORTUNE INTERCHANGE. So pronounces a banner gracing one of Dafen's thoroughfares with a logic all too familiar to the art world. The statement could certainly be adopted as the slogan of any major art fair, and is an apt descriptor of the state of affairs in China, where the convergence of art and market, and the conversion of works into capital based on valuations of "talent," have become the sine qua nons of a frenzied moment. At Dafen, in less than one quarter of a square mile, some seven hundred galleries and five thousand artists convert oils and canvas into oils on canvas, realizing commissions from around the world. Open storefront workshops are hung salon style with montages of images that mock traditional taste hierarchies with a vigor sublimated into routine. In a single stall, schlock seascapes bound for cruise-ship gift shops and beach-house living rooms might vie for space with portraits of George Bush, Osama bin Laden, and Hu Jintao. Also typically in the mix are copies of modernist standards by artists from Vincent van Gogh to Tamara de Lempicka; tiny icons of the "Five Friendlies," the cartoon mascots of the 2008 Beijing Olympics; and, increasingly, imitations of works by contemporary Chinese painters like Wang Guangyi and Yue Minjun culled from the pages of Hong Kong auction catalogues. Bulk orders for hundreds of generic landscapes, canonical images, and even made-to-order minimalism tailored to the color schemes of interior designers in South Florida are filled by the day. Here, anything can be transformed from pixels into brushstrokes with a single e-mail. Pix2Oils is the name of one of the village's most successful galleries, owned by an Australian and his Chinese wife who have developed a website of the same name where, say, a lovelorn California management consultant can have a digital photo of himself and his girlfriend transformed into art in just a few days' time—satisfaction guaranteed. Many are the young women, Chinese and Western alike, whose visages have been colored and quadrupled in the style of a Warhol silk-screen portrait, first by the ubiquitous software preinstalled on their MacBooks, then by the painters of Dafen. These works hang briefly on display among sunflowers and waterfalls, battle scenes and poker-playing dogs, waiting for the courier service to take them away.

Dafen, perhaps not surprisingly, has proved itself highly susceptible to narration (in both the mainstream media and the art press) and to incorporation into bigger-picture discourses about both the state of art and the state of China. "Painting sweatshop," the thumbnail phrase generally first invoked, is a facile equation, one that frames the "painting workers" (as the help-wanted signs hanging in nearly every window phrase it) as drones on an assembly line of visual production. Questions of intellectual property surface quickly in most commentaries ("Own Original Chinese Copies of Real Western Art!" trumpeted one *New York Times* headline), which typically contend that Dafen is a hotbed of forgeries and knockoffs. The twin images of anonymous Chinese workers slaving away to make objects of every sort and of avaricious Chinese pirates copying the fruits of Western ingenuity loom large in the global collective unconscious at the moment, so such slippage seems almost inevitable. But upon even casual inspection, these analogies fall apart. Production in Dafen is more modular than mechanized: The system is less one of stern factory managers issuing production quotas than of commissions winding their way through the byzantine social networks that bind client to intermediary to workshop. Pigments, supports, and, indeed, painterly acumen are all meticulously classified according to quality, and single orders are often pieced together from the output of numerous small-scale studios. The shibboleth of rote, mindless copying is similarly challenged by an indigenous value chain that prizes "original creation" above all: Adapted works "in the style of" a known master command better prices than straight replicas, and at the high end, Dafen paintings are sold, like other artworks, under the name of the person who made them.

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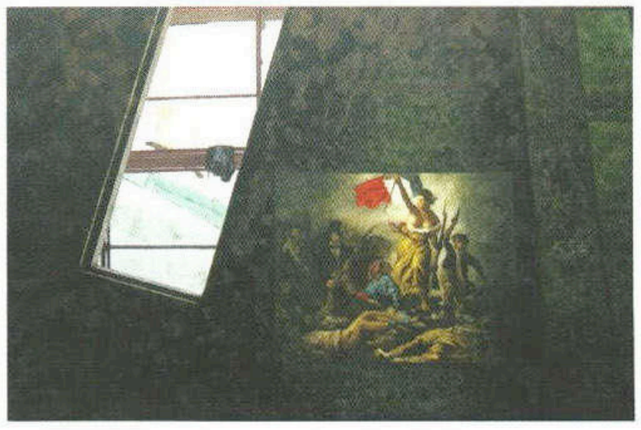
Appropriately enough, more complicated, nuanced, and, occasionally, problematic responses to Dafen might be found outside the media in the work of other artists. Chinese artist Liu Ding offered his take on the village, *Samples from the Transition—Products*, 2005, at the Second Guangzhou Triennial. (The exhibition's thematic focus was the Pearl River Delta, which includes Shenzhen.) For this project, Liu hired a group of artists from Dafen and set them to work on a three-tiered wooden stage. The thirteen participants painted furiously throughout the triennial's opening, producing copy upon copy of the same painting—a fluorescent waterfall-and-tree landscape starring two alighting cranes. The hierarchy implied by the tiers admitted that Dafen's workers are not an undifferentiated population, but individuals participating in a system that offers some hope of advancement. It also



PRODUCTION NOTES

Monica Bonvicini

MY INSTALLATIONS REQUIRE the expertise of people from very different backgrounds, which has been inspiring on many levels. It is crucial for me to interact with people who are not involved in the art world, although it has led to some humorous misunderstandings and has sometimes been stressful—try telling a guy at a building supply company what you need without his explaining to you, a young lady, why you need this or that instead. Or, "Hey, Mark, the lady here needs a very long screw . . ." The first time I installed *Wallfuckin'*, 1995, the entire construction crew was staring in ecstasy at the video of the naked woman masturbating on the wall, and for a moment I thought about making the work accessible only to women.

When I covered the floor of the Vienna Secession with drywall for *Plastered*, 1998, the Austrian company that donated the material sent a truck full of the wrong panels. This was after months of communication, during which they had confirmed the number, size, and color of the materials I needed, but still they delivered a thousand square meters of brown panels, no doubt thinking that they were just right for putting on the floor—after all, what do women artists know about construction? But I had them drive back and bring me the gray panels I had ordered.

The construction workers I asked to change a Sol LeWitt cube into *Das Eismeer* by Caspar David Friedrich (for *Minimal Romantik*, at the 2005 Venice Biennale) were at first irritated by the lack of guidance from my side, but then they wanted simply to make something "beautiful." It's always interesting to discover what people outside the art world think art is or should look like. This goes for architects, construction workers, metalworkers, advertising agents, actors, filmmakers, and sex-toy retailers: Their comments and suggestions are normally quite special compared with those of art-world veterans.

Over the past few years I have established relationships with a few industrial materials companies and with two small businesses in Berlin that specialize in the production and installation of art. I also produce works in the studio with assistants. Whichever the case, I follow the fabrication process from beginning to end. I am quite a control freak, and I can have long discussions over the smallest screw. Sometimes there is really nothing more hard-core to talk about. □

obliquely mocked the implicit hierarchies to which artists on the biennial circuit are themselves subject. However, because the painters were displayed for an international audience like so many sideshow performers, possessing neither voice nor agency, the work could be charged with veering again toward the stereotype of the mindless minion—and if Liu was taking up the problem of exploitation here, he was doing so by brushing a bit too close to exploitation himself. The pictures produced at the triennial were later exhibited at Frankfurt's L.A. Galerie, framed in gold and hung floor to ceiling on bright red walls; visitors could contemplate them while perched on elaborately upholstered furniture. This presentation was apparently intended to critique both Chinese fantasies of opulence and European fantasies of China. But here again, things seemed too simple: Dafen "readymades," sanctioned as art through their presence in the gallery, like any number of post-Duchampian ploys.

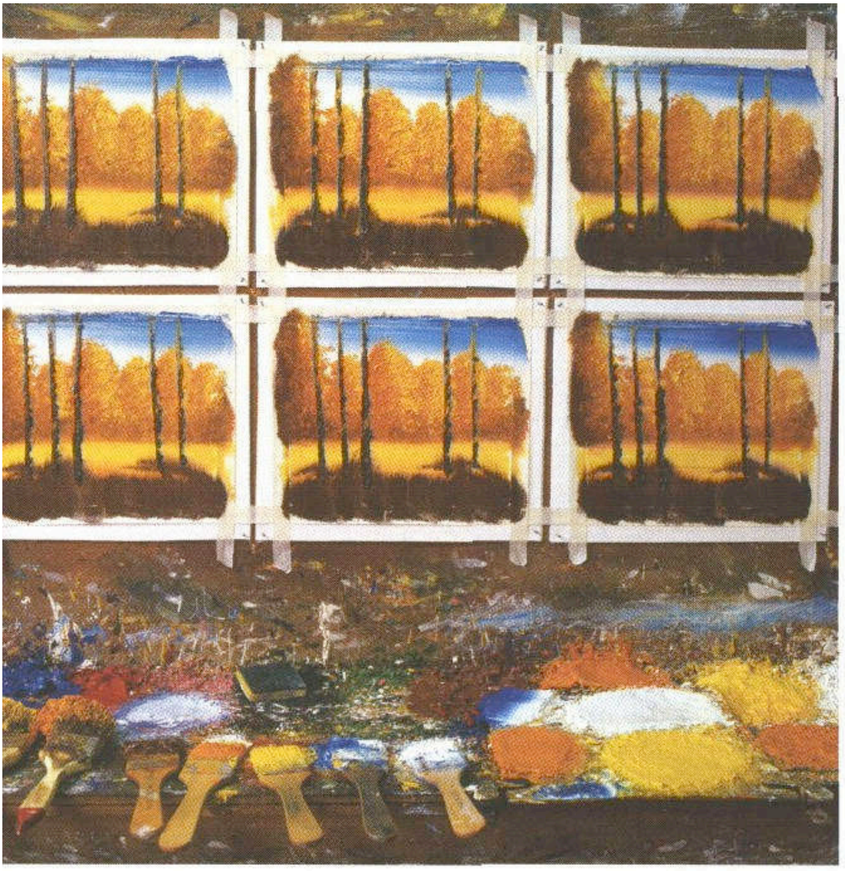
Dafen's question for the "real art world" seems to be less about the boundaries of "real" art than about the specificities of its production—a question to which Christian Jankowski's "China Painters," shown earlier this year at Maccarone in New York, offers a more sophisticated answer. The artist's interest in Dafen was piqued by an article in a Hong Kong newspaper; having learned that a museum was under construction in the village, he traveled there to meet the architects and to photograph the site. He then showed the photos to seventeen local artists and asked each to create, in effect, a painting-within-a-painting: Each was commissioned to render a view of the museum's interior (entirely based on the selected photo) as though it were hung with an imaginary canvas of his or her own devising. The stark differences among the resultant paintings reveal the variety of mind-sets and aesthetics to be found in the village. One painter chose a brightly lit wall on which to hang an image of a three-legged jade urn based on

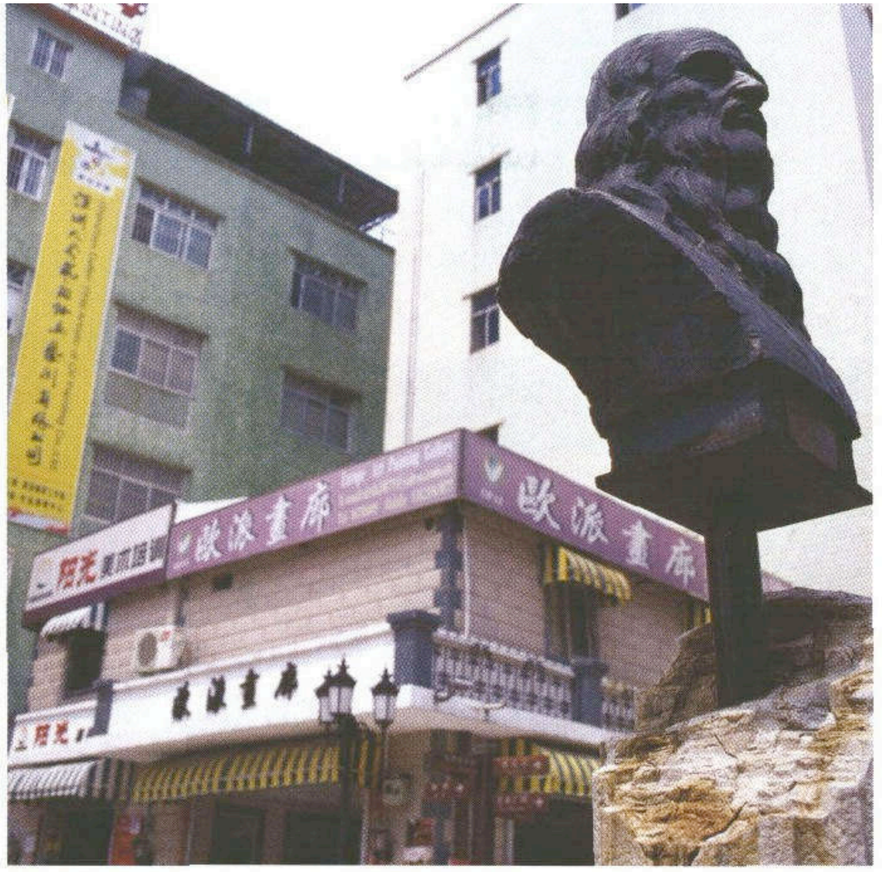
The figure of the sign painter—an anonymous technician—is perhaps the metaphor most actively at play in this village. Yet the idiosyncratic visions of the painters complicate the default narrative.

a picture he had come across in an old Christie's Hong Kong catalogue. Another placed Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* in a dark corner obscured by scaffolding—a not-so-subtle political critique of the regime. Perhaps the most innovative of the bunch fantasized an image that could symbolize Dafen as it is viewed by the Communist Party: a "sexy painting machine" (per the work's title), shaped like a woman's left leg and breast, spewing out a portrait of Salvador Dalí. Some of the canvases were signed by the actual painters, but all were sold as work by Jankowski. And like most Dafen paintings, they were completed, covered with a layer of cellophane, rolled up, and sent by courier to their destination, all within a few weeks of being commissioned.

Jankowski is certainly not the first painter to outsource labor for conceptual ends, though his gesture takes on a particular political inflection in an era marked by the globalization of both the art world and industrial production. Marcel Duchamp famously used a sign painter in the execution of his final painting, the great *Tu m'*, 1918; and, perhaps more apposite, in John Baldessari's twelve "Commissioned Paintings" of 1969–70, the artist hired painters he had found at a county fair to depict photographs he had taken of a hand pointing at ordinary objects—images that made reference to Al Held's assertion that "all conceptual art is just pointing at things." Once the hands had been rendered on canvas, a sign painter added text crediting each work to the Baldessari "employee" who had created it. Dafen is essentially that county fair to the umpteenth power, as Jankowski's project suggests, and the figure of the sign painter—an anonymous technician who executes a project conceived by someone else—is perhaps the metaphor most actively at play in this village. Yet the

This page: **Construction of Monica Bonvicini's *Minimal Romantik*, 2005, 51st Venice Biennale**. Photo: Sergio Martucci. © Monica Bonvicini/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Opposite page: **Views of Dafen, Shenzhen, China, 2007**. Photos: Song Chao.

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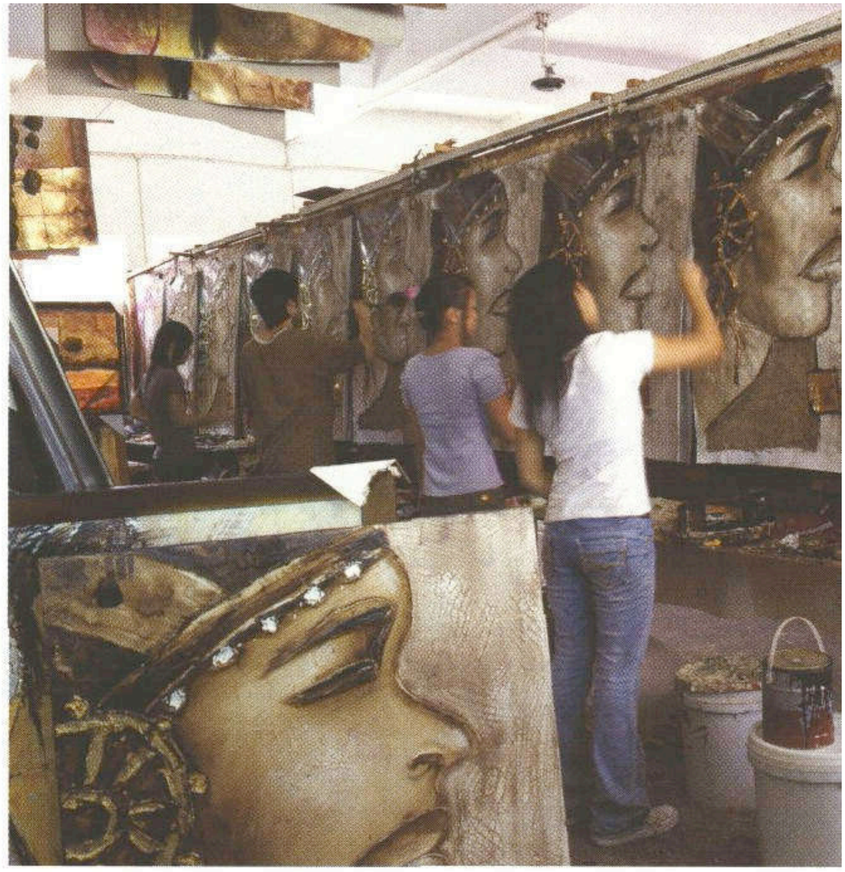
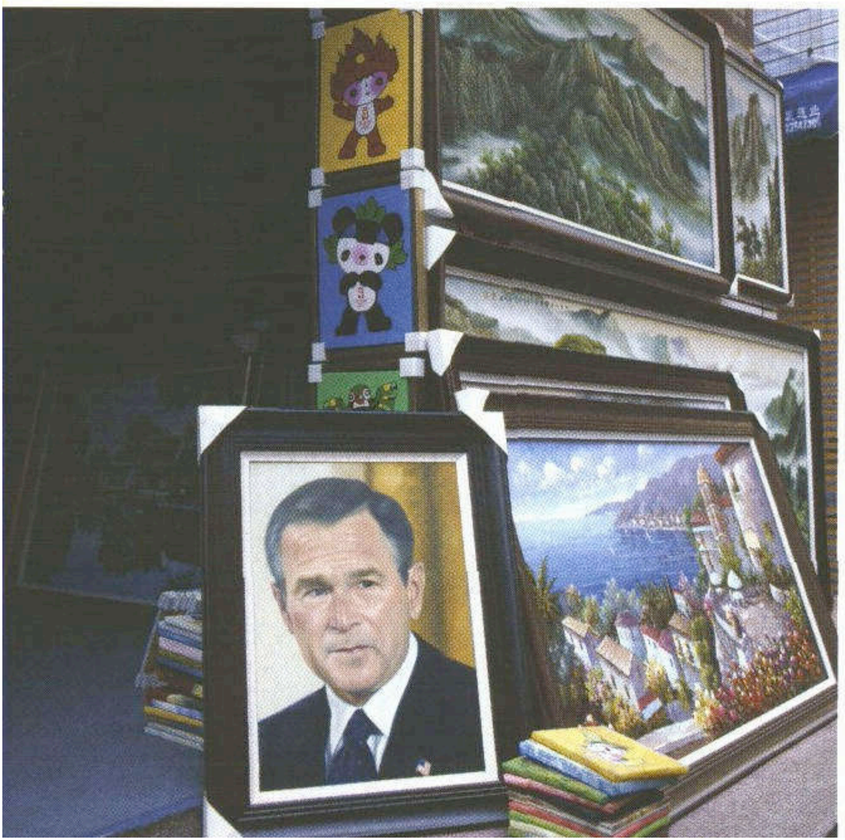



大芬油畫村
DA FEN OIL PAINTING VILLAGE

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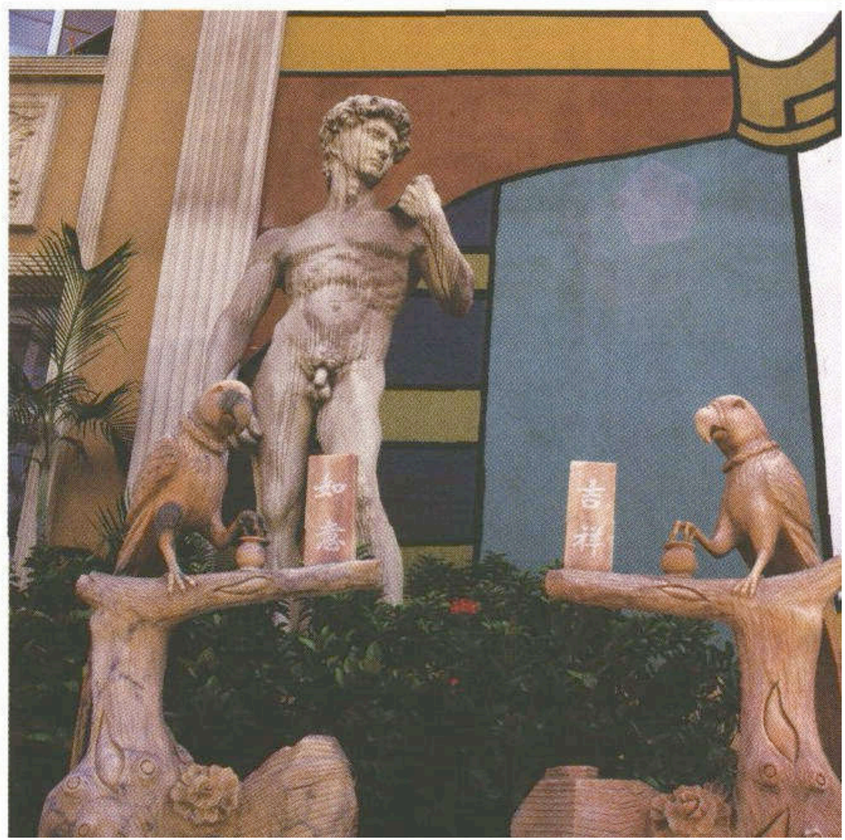

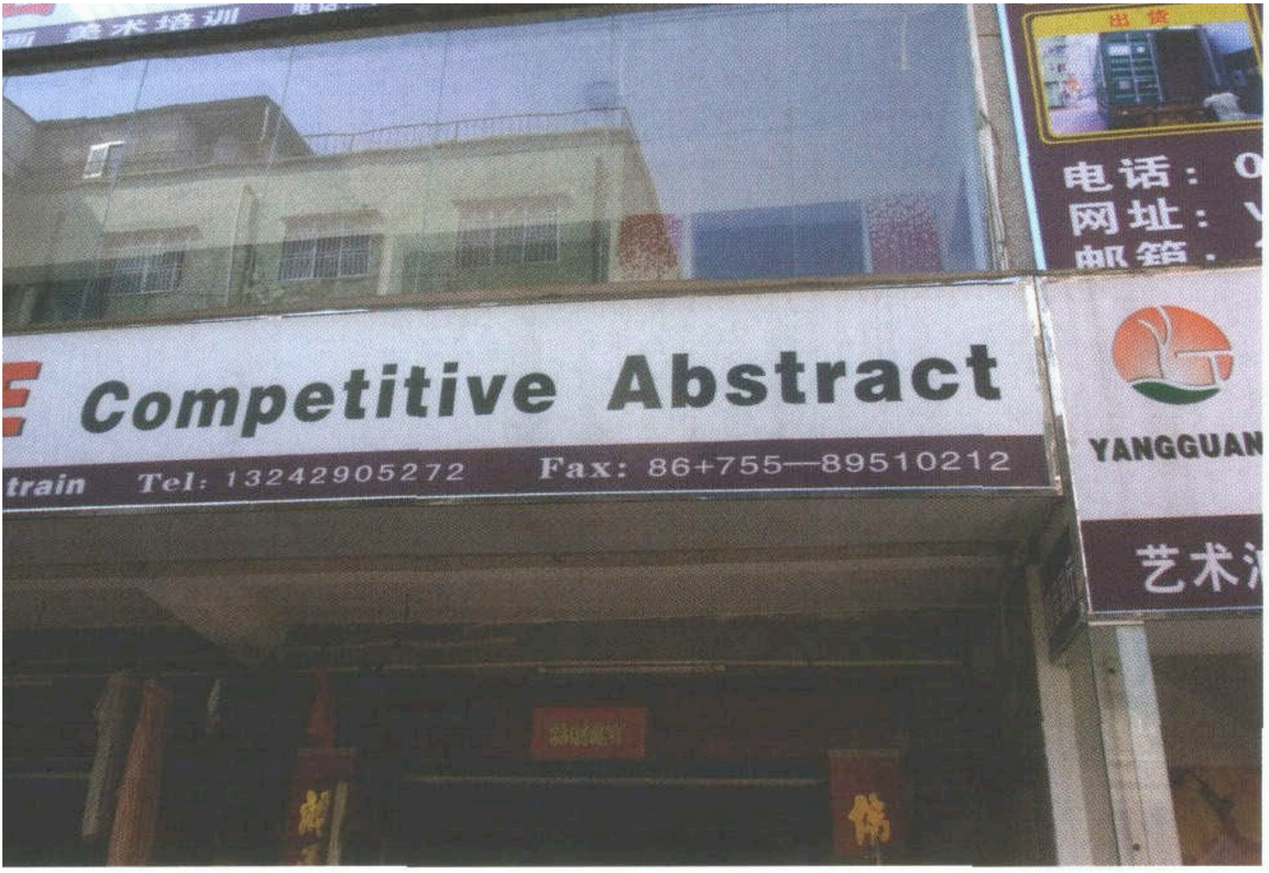

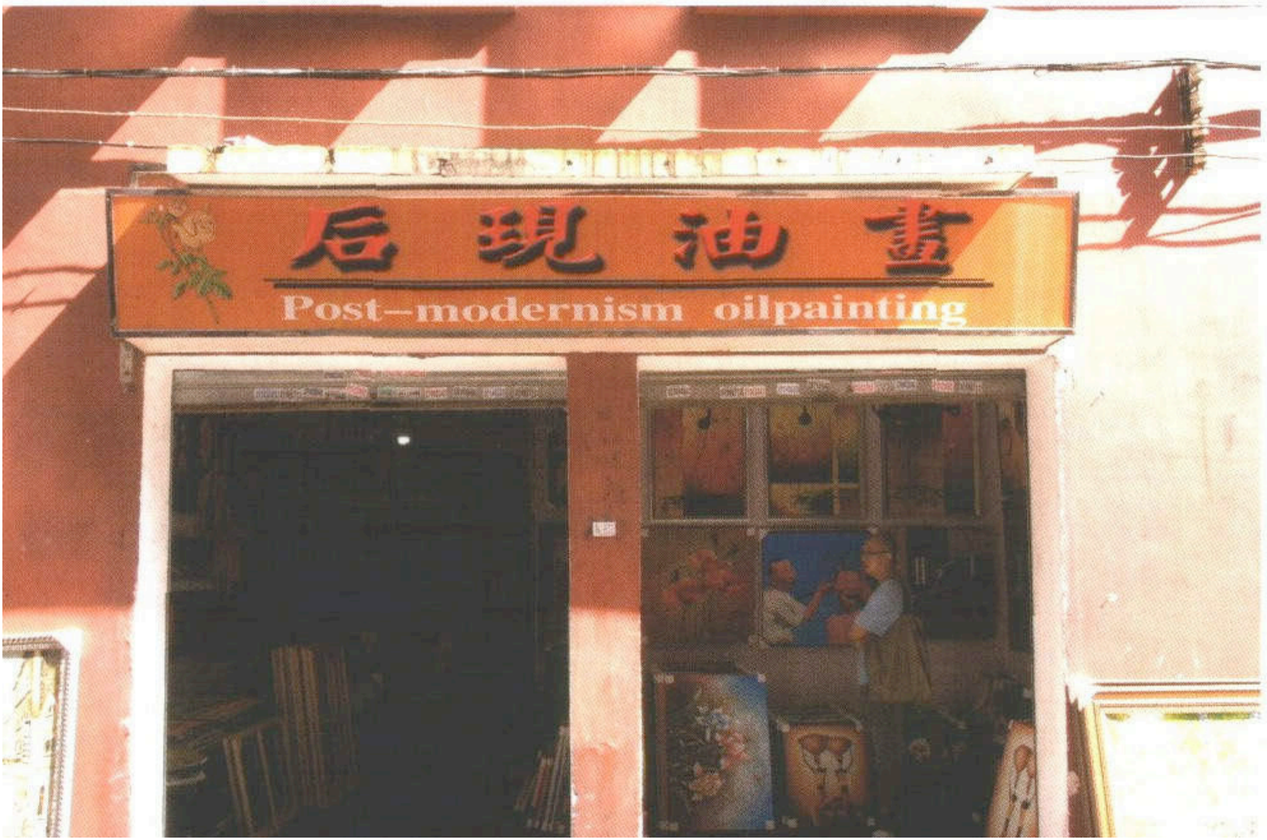

idiosyncratic visions of the various participants in "The China Painters" effectively elaborate on the agency of the "sign painter," thereby complicating the default narrative of Dafen as an assembly line.

The individual stories of most Dafen painters do the same. Take, for example, He Liangfeng. Born in 1980, he graduated from the Shaoxing Arts and Literature College in the southeastern province of Zhejiang. Seven years ago, after a brief stint as a high school art teacher, he set up his stall in Dafen with his wife, Wu Xiaoling, also a Shaoxing graduate. Today the couple employs five painters in a facility a brief walk from the center of the village. He sees himself as an artist rather than as a craftsman, and is proud of the way his renderings of works by famous artists depart from their sources. Showing me recent paintings on his computer (which runs a counterfeit version of Windows XP, as does nearly every artist's computer on which I've viewed works since 2002), he pointed to a group in the style of Wang Yuping, a Central Academy professor and member of the early-'90s "New Generation" group, known for his neo-expressionist paintings of fish. "You see," he said, flipping through the images, "this is not actually a copy of a work by Wang Yuping, but an innovation on him. Among Wang Yuping's fish you will not find this fish!" But he was proudest of another painting, copied from the Chinese artist Liu Ye, a Dafen favorite whose cartoonish images of young girls and bunnies intently staring at iconic modernist paintings were on view at Sperone Westwater in New York last fall. He had edited a well-known Liu picture of a girl about to

A number of midcareer artists have taken advantage of the fact that paintings in China can be fabricated with ease and in bulk, and have incorporated *Dafen-inspired* techniques into their own conceptual practices.

slaughter a pig, replacing her knife with a handful of vegetables. "It's much happier like this," he informed me. "Customers prefer it this way."

Amid shoptalk about how he chooses the right grade of canvas for each client (a cotton hybrid is fine for standard-issue decorative paintings, but he prefers pure linen for his original works), He aired his views on the state of art criticism: "You see, in the old system, you had painters, professors, and critics. The professors had given up their own hopes but were cultivating the next generation. The critics were where you went for approval. They don't mean anything anymore. Today, if I paint this, and someone buys it, that means *it's easy to sell.*" This last sentence is just one degree less tautological in Chinese than it sounds in English.

Like a number of Dafen painters I met, He used to work as a museum preparator—suggesting a degree of institutional sophistication that does not jibe with the supposition, put forward by several reviewers of "The China Painters," that Jankowski's collaborators "had never been inside a museum." Even the museum in which the painters were asked to envision their work has been repeatedly described in the Western press as a foolish totalitarian brainstorm, a ludicrous attempt to inject culture into a place beyond cultural redemption. In reality, the Dafen Art Museum, designed by Meng Yan, Liu Xiaodu, and Wang Hui, of the Shenzhen- and Beijing-based architectural collective Urbanus (best known for its research into the village-in-the-city phenomenon), is one of the more interesting products of *the recent* Chinese building boom. It is a well-considered intervention

This page: **Views of Dafen, Shenzhen, China, 2007.** Photos: Song Chao. Opposite page: **Urs Fischer, *Untitled (Branches)*, 2005,** cast aluminum, candles, chains, and motors 20' 4" x 27' 2" x 19' 6".

whose architects were clearly conscious of the absurdities of putting a museum in such a painting-ridden context. Situated on a piazza that separates it from the village proper, the museum is stratified into three levels, with a ground-floor bazaar intended to host art-fair-style booths selling paintings identical to those outside its walls. The rooftop terrace mimics the gridded layout of the village's narrow streets, with a forest of smaller square volumes intended for use as artists' studios and cafés. Pedestrian bridges connect the terrace to the school where most of the painters' children study and to a high-end condo complex. Only the middle level provides the traditional white-cube experience. And the facade, in a Jankowski-esque nod to those who work in its shadow, is punctuated by rectangular niches that the architects hope to see filled with frescoes by the winners of Dafen's annual painting competition.

Indeed, the museum is simply the grandest in a long series of state interventions aimed at championing Dafen as a "National Model Base of Cultural Industry" (as a plaque in the village proclaims). Seeing "cultural industry" as a viable economic model, the district government in 1998 set about upgrading Dafen in an attempt to control the chaos that generally characterizes villages-in-the-city. The officials lined the streets with pedestrian-friendly paving blocks, erected a giant sign shaped like an easel, and placed a bust of Leonardo da Vinci (whose Chinese moniker, Dafenqi, incidentally begins with two characters nearly identical to those that name the village) at the main intersection. Other plaques recount the village's creation myth, which turns on a Hong Kong painter named Huang Jiang who is said to have arrived in 1989. "He rented residential buildings and hired art students and artists for the creation, reproduction, collection, and export of oil paintings," we are told, "and soon, Dafen Oil Paintings had become a famous cultural brand in China and abroad." Delegations of municipal and provincial officials from around the country regularly tour the village, looking to create their own Dafens back home.

While this goal may sound risible, miniature Dafens in fact pervade the Chinese art world. Departing from the more traditional studio system now in vogue—whereby most senior painters employ teams of young assistants who are recent graduates of the art academies—a number of midcareer artists have taken advantage of the fact that paintings in China can be fabricated with ease and in bulk, and have incorporated Dafen-inspired techniques into their own conceptual practices. Take Yan Lei, an artist whose early conceptual works included a mischievous mail-art project, done in collaboration with Hong Hao, that involved sending fake invitations to Documenta 10 to a hundred Beijing artists. These days, Yan's output consists largely of paintings based on digital photographs printed onto canvas and, in a knowing nod to Baldessari, painted out by assistants, many of whom have no background in art at all. Or take Yang Yong, perhaps Shenzhen's best-known "real" artist, who made his name with photos of women posing like fashion models at construction sites, before shifting to the production of brightly colored, photo-based, thoroughly Dafen-esque realist paintings. After a long day roaming the village, I visited his studio, adjacent to that of Urbanus in the city's high-art enclave in the tree-lined Overseas Chinese Town district. There, assistants struggled to adjust a projected image of an airport so that it filled the canvas onto which it would be painted. To its left hung a purple-hued painting, completed just a few days earlier, of a foot kicking a ball: a Pix2Oils transfer of a still from Douglas Gordon and Philippe Parreno's *Zidane*. □

PHILIP TINARI IS A WRITER BASED IN BEIJING. (SEE CONTRIBUTORS.)

PRODUCTION NOTES

Urs Fischer

HAVING ASSISTANTS IS HORRIBLE. You need a certain intimacy to operate, but the people who work for you want to know what to do, and some days you just don't know what that is. They expect things from you: They want to be successful, or just want a job, or think you're stupid. You're running a small business, which takes a lot of energy. Hiring people outside the studio isn't the same. They work; they have a place; they're fulfilled with what they do. I usually work with old friends, and because we have a history, we can do things very simply. You don't start from scratch. The person who builds my robotic parts was a graphic designer who inherited a precision ruler company from his grandfather. We don't need to talk much, because we have equal standards. Some of my pieces I can order over the phone.

At the moment, I'm having a huge custom-made printer built, because I can't find one that does what I want. I'm not an engineer or a programmer, so I have to work with other people. There's a place that makes inks especially for me, and another that tests the samples by blasting them with UV light. Artists like Donald Judd and Carl Andre opened up a new language by taking things from industry. But I don't necessarily want to talk in that language; I'm not a purist in that sense. The high-tech work runs parallel to doing something very crappy in the studio. I don't think it's necessary to decide between one and the other anymore. Sometimes it's good to have the help of people who aren't specialized, because I'm not specialized either, so you figure it out together. It can be useful to be misled by technical problems. A dilettante approach can leave more open than mastery. You can kill a work with production.

There's a laziness about Andre that I really like. In his early sculptures, it looks like he started and then got too tired to make a Brancusi. He just attacks a material, whether he's cutting blocks of wood or extruding ceramic mounds. It's vulgar; it's direct; you just put it there. It's very different from "making" something. Once Andre started stacking things, he didn't even have to make a cut. You take these materials and you don't have to force them into a form. When I made my piece for the 2006 Whitney Biennial, I thought about it for a long time and then just took two branches off a bush. My side took thirty minutes, and then other people made the cast and the motor. The production doesn't matter in terms of craft or who does what. You do what you do; you get what you need; you do what you need. It's kind of the same when I pick up the phone. □