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# Workshop of the world, fine arts division

*By James Fallows*

Maybe this is the reason I ended up as a reporter: unless I've seen something with my own eyes, it's hard for me to think of it as real. Yes, of course, everyone is like this to some degree. And yes, of course, I believe in the Straits of Gibraltar and Antarctica, even though I haven't seen either of them. But I think there are people who can sketch out realms in their minds without personally having visited them. This would be a convenient skill for, say, a novelist. I understood, in concept, what the Panama Canal was like, or Cape Horn, or an electronics factory in China. But it was only after I actually saw them that I was able to think, Ah! *Now* I get what people have been talking about. For later discussion: whether a relative weakness of imaginative function is a feature or a bug in a journalist. Which brings us to the Dafen "art factory village" outside Shenzhen, in southern China. I had heard a lot about Dafen, including in a very good story by Evan Osnos of the Chicago Tribune early this year. (The story seems no longer to be on the Tribune's site. For reference, it was published on February 13, 2007. **Update:** now on line [here](#).) But only this weekend did I see it, guided by Liam Casey, the Irish "Mr. China" I described a few months ago in [an article](#) about Shenzhen's more conventional factories. Now that I've seen it -- my lord! The main point is: in one sprawling area are many hundreds of individual art factories, in which teams of artists crank out hand-painted replicas of any sort of picture you can imagine. European old masters. Andy Warhol. Gustav Klimt. Classic Chinese landscapes. Manet. Audubon. Botero. The super-hot and faddish contemporary Chinese artist Yue Minjun, whose paintings and sculptures all feature people wearing enormous grins. Thomas Kinkade, the "Painter of Light." Walter Keane, the "Painter of Mawkish Big-Eyed Kids." This and more is on sale, priced more or less by the square meter. We saw suppliers delivering huge rolls of canvas, to be converted into "commodity art" -- which is what the English sign on one store said. A few pictures below (click for larger versions.) But if you're anything like me, you'll need to go see it for yourself. **Typical street scene in Dafen:**



Reassuring



information about the supply chain:

Warhol; wildlife





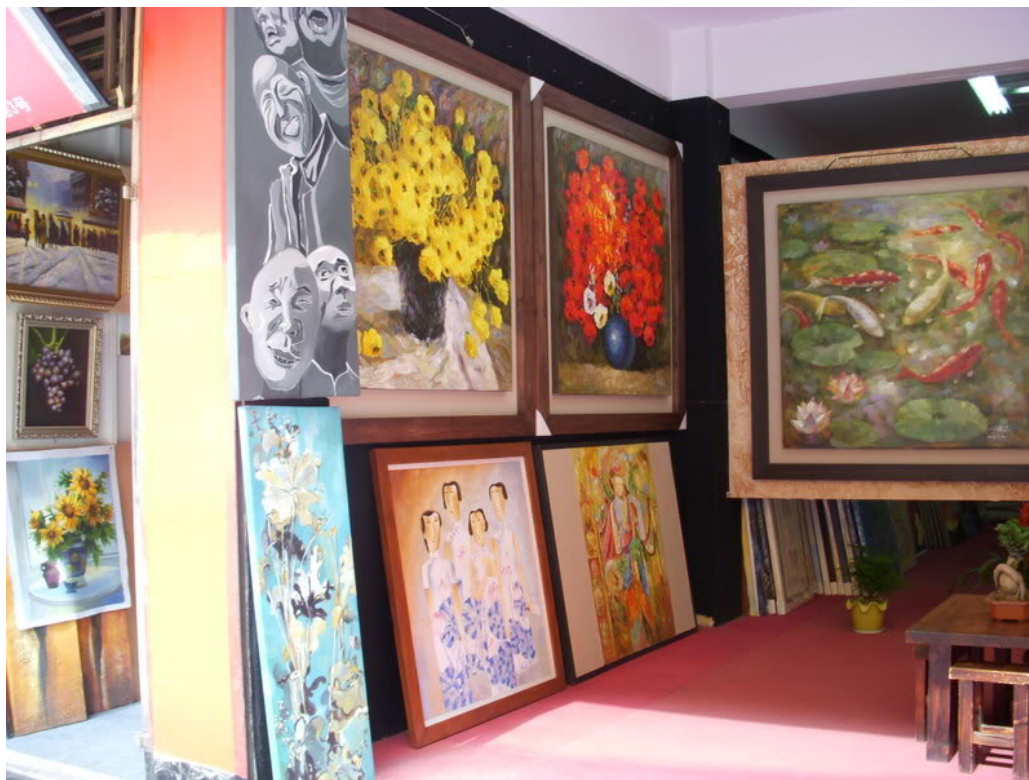
**kitsch; Buddhist art:**

**One artist, many genres:**



**Ditto:**





Buddha, Venus, Hu



Jintao:

Great Leaders

**series**, including: Deng Xiaoping, Hu Jintao, Stalin, Ho Chi Minh (I assume)(**no** - see below)\*, the young Mao, and two of my fellow Americans.



**Update:** \*Reader Ernest Chan points out that the picture is not of Ho Chi Minh; it's actually of the Chinese painter [Qi Baishi](#). Thanks for the correction, and I'm glad I said "I assume." Also, in context, you can understand the mistake!

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