

# Bodhisattva Pudica: The Nudes of Jimmy Ong

**I**n the millennia long history of China's painting traditions, the unclothed human figure is practically unknown. Its few appearances are limited almost entirely to the withered and twisted bodies of sufferers in hell, or as a dissected diagram of a medical chart. Even in pornography, the figures have usually remained swathed in fabric with only the pertinent bits on display to indicate presence and action. The nature of such images is to provide cheap and easy titillation, and often the depiction of the exposed body parts bears less relation to the real thing than does toilet wall graffiti in a secondary school.

As, until the middle of the last century, abstraction of form was alien to the European visual arts, so the idealisation and celebration of the nude was unknown within the Chinese world. Yet, although the West can certainly claim responsibility for renewing Chinese artists' interest in the human figure, and even for the techniques now often employed in its depiction, the human figure in Chinese art remains distinctly other from its Western cousin.

The figures that roam Jimmy Ong's stark and surreal charcoal drawings bring this fact into high contrast. Generally within Western art, the nude body, whether idealised, abstracted or grotesque, is usually the primary focus of the gaze - as if posed for a portrait.

Ong's rough, earthy figures certainly veer towards the grotesque, but it is their relationship to each other which takes precedence - in other words they do not engage the viewer in an examination of their person but of their behaviour. In a recent untitled work (which has unofficially been titled 'O') a man crouches on all fours with his fingers and toes grappling those of a woman in a mirror image beneath him - thereby creating the eponymous shape. At first glance it can read simply as an image of male/female procreation, but the longer one looks at it the more it seems that each figure is actually gazing at their reflection in a polished surface. Take the hair and breasts off the woman and the penis off the man, and indeed they would be mirror images, albeit ones that can intertwine their fingers and toes. The conundrum of the image is only deepened by the artist's own comments. Previous works include a portrait of himself pregnant, and he is on record saying 'I'm the woman in the picture', in reference to a group of his charcoal drawings of a few years ago.

Ong's images are not thought provoking in the way of many works on paper which can be easily put away in a portfolio. His works are often two metres in height, so that his stark and uncompromising figures often give the feeling that they could easily inhabit your space as well as that of the picture plane. Cosy is not a Jimmy Ong sensation; he sends the viewer both an intellectual and emotional

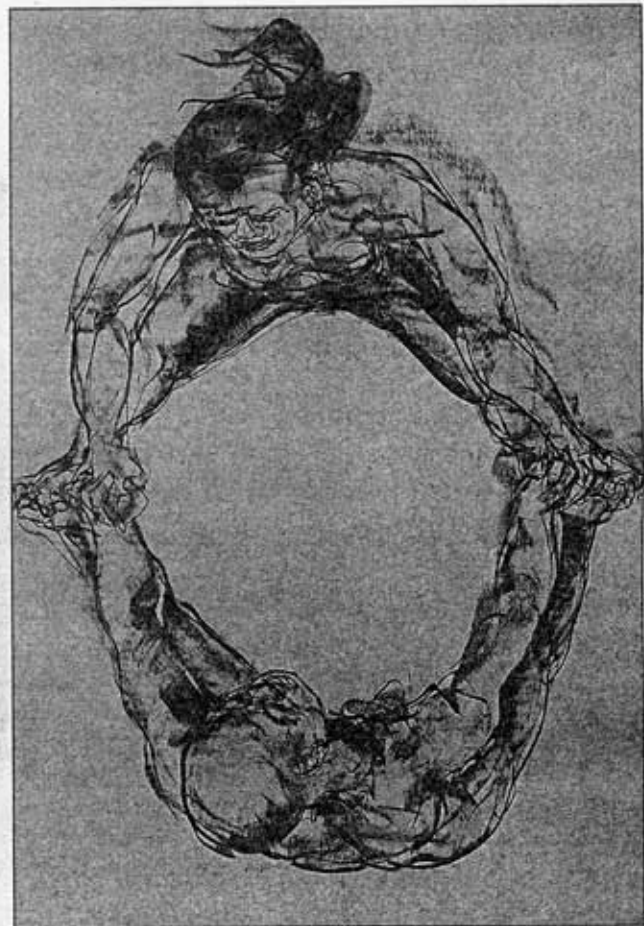
challenge. Two other recent works, *Sew Bodhisattva* and *Undo Deity*, draw on the popular cult of the goddess in Chinese culture to create images of what Singapore art historian Peter Lee has qualified as 'women creating, altering and refining the figure of man.' In the first instance the naked bodhisattva (a Buddhist deity of originally male gender which was subsequently feminised in East Asia) holds the limp and even boneless skin of a man draped over one arm, while applying stitches to him with her free hand. Her stance of one leg raised to the knee of the other recalls the female tantric adepts (Dakini) of Tibetan and Mongolian Buddhist tradition, while there are also echoes of the *Pieta* in her cradling of the man and her essentially 'motherly' attention to her sewing project. The completely undignified presence of the male strips him, however, of any Christ-like pretensions. Dignity is not the man's lot in the even more enigmatic *Undo Deity*, where a Dakini type figure sits astride a crouching male figure in a posture of the most aggressive domination. Her face immediately evokes those wrathful deities in tantric Buddhist painting shown trampling on the enemies of Buddhism - enemies who once subdued then become Buddhism's greatest devotees.

Cross gender politics are not the only issues explored by these nudes. Ong's 1999 works include a new element - infants. Usually equipped with old men's faces,

they clamber over, cling to and crawl around the adults. What they represent is equally ambiguous and many-layered. Their aged visages certainly recall the similarity of new-born infants to the old, but it also resonates with traditional Chinese images of the Daoist paradise, where all the great sages live together in immortal immaturity - regained after long lives. Cherished yet mildly monstrous, Ong's babies seem the natural products of the adult figures - bearing the seeds of their contradictory selves and uncertain relationships.

Although Ong makes obvious references in his titles and imagery to Buddhist imagery and Chinese culture, what relevance do the issues he seems to be tackling have to a Chinese community and especially to that of his native Singapore? Certainly Ong and other Asian artists of the post-war generations are choosing subjects never before depicted within their traditional visual arts. In Chinese painting, a complex psychology was not communicated by figures but landscape. But the human condition is universal, and what has not before been represented visually, has had ample exploration in Chinese literature of the twentieth century. More pertinently it has always been present in the daily lives of the people, and for one man who grew up in a shophouse of Singapore's old Chinatown it has continued to manifest itself into a personal vision dramatically realised in charcoal on paper.

Jimmy Ong's most recent works



*Untitled (O)* by Jimmy Ong (b. 1964), charcoal on paper, 195 x 116 cm. Photographs courtesy of Plum Blossoms International Ltd.

can be found through Plum Blossoms International Ltd (Hong Kong and Singapore) and are the subject of the catalogue *Alter-Altar* (Plum Blossoms, 1999). He is also represented at Dagmar Gallery in Santa Monica and some of his

works will also be on the block at the upcoming Christie's Singapore sale of Southeast Asian Contemporary Art. A retrospective of his work can be found on the internet at [www.jimmyong.com](http://www.jimmyong.com). DONALD DINWIDDIE