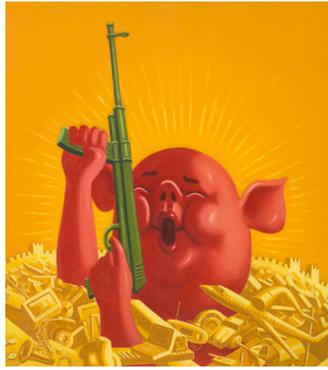


Li Dapeng



In the West, a pig is associated with greed, sloth, gluttony and depravity. However, in the Chinese tradition, a pig may symbolise prosperity and fortune. This multiplicity of interpretation is deployed in Li Dapeng's anthropomorphised oil on canvas portraits.

Understanding the pig as an abhorrent figure, Li's *Standard head* and *The gilded age* may be read as political statements. In *Standard head* the pig wears a communist cap with the red star. Its bright red face, bulging cheeks and pouting mouth suggest a repellent image of the communist. *Standard head* was created in 1997, when many of Li's peers were creating cynical realist paintings, a contemporary movement in Chinese art that began in the 1990s, embodying a satirical perspective on Chinese politics, the Cultural Revolution and communism. Li's use of bright colours may also be reminiscent of political pop, a term coined in 1992 by critic Li Xianting describing a group of 1990s Chinese artists who synthesised Cultural Revolution propaganda imagery with the style of 1960s American pop art. By appropriating the bright colours and large scale of pop art, these large-scale paintings use irony to critique superficial consumerism.

In *The gilded age*, a triumphant pig wielding a green machine gun emerges from a golden pile of eclectic objects distorted in scale to look like toys—an aeroplane, television screens, satellites, mobile phones and the Great Wall of China. These symbols are icons of civilisation, progress and innovation and therefore the pig is a sign of prosperity. Yet its exaggerated pomposity adds ambiguity to the victory of the moment. Rapid economic growth in China made it the second largest economy in the first decade of the 21st century at the expense of social equality and environmental damage. In this context, the pig's rambunctious nature may not be a sign of celebration of these achievements but rather a commentary on mindless greed.

Similar ambiguity is present in Li's smaller works *The Year of the Pig* and *Painter*, which depict an astronaut and a painter respectively on canvases under one metre square. In isolation, these could be considered apolitical, innocuous cartoon images. However, Li may also be mocking the overblown status of these pursuits and the concessions often made in the name of art and science. While truly honourable, these collective aspirations are also part of a brutish race for prestige and luxury.

Soo-Min Shim, 2022

Clockwise from top left

Painter, 2007
oil on canvas

The gilded age, 2003
oil on canvas

Standard head, 1997
oil on canvas

The Year of the Pig, 2007
oil on canvas

La Trobe University, Geoff Raby Collection of Chinese Art.
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