

Guan Wei: Dow Island 2002.

David Williams

Guan Wei first came to Australia as artist-in-residence at the University of Tasmania, School of Art, Hobart in 1989. Again sponsored by the University of Tasmania he returned in 1990. Since then he has established the major reputation anticipated in his application for permanent residency under Australia's Distinguished Talent Scheme. 2003 is Guan Wei's fourth residency at ANU School of Art. The first was in 1991 when the School presented an exhibition of work titled 'Wo' De Yishu, *Nesting - the Art of Idleness*,¹ painted in Hobart in 1990, and prepared a modest catalogue, probably the first for Guan Wei in Australia. The second residency was in the summer of 1994, when he painted his *Sausage* and *The Great War of the Eggplant* series exploring the subtleties of cultural dislocation. They were exhibited at the Drill Hall Gallery. The third residency was in 1998, when he completed *Revisionary*, also shown at the Drill Hall Gallery. A predominantly blue coloured work, the painting uses the Chinese scroll and perspective traditions as the basis of its composition which comprises 20 narrow vertical canvases plus side panels.

Like all visiting artists, Guan Wei's presence has greatly enhanced the teaching and learning environment for our visual arts students. During the residencies, we have seen Guan Wei's imagery develop from the late 1980s work created in the context of China's underground movements in art and literature, to the confident, highly distinctive work informed by his new life in Australia, his reflective mind and wonderful sense of humour. His late 1980s Beijing grey and red acupuncture-point paintings, his *Test Tube Baby* (1992) images derived from literary references to Chinese folklore, the *Treasure Hunt* series (1995), which depicts the shortcomings of value tradeoffs, *Zen Garden* (1999) depicting the lotus, tadpole and the Buddha's hand, and *Dow: Island*, all attest to Guan Wei's philosophy that a work of art should appeal not only to the eye, but also to the mind. Guan Wei's *Feng Shui (Third Asia-Pacific Triennial, 1999)* demonstrates his interest in further extending the work beyond the gallery wall with a floor and ceiling installation. The installation evokes thought about the preciousness of balanced relationships and the search for answers to the big questions of life. Guan Wei has set down three requirements for himself in all of his

paintings – wisdom, humour and knowledge: wisdom which is about choices and informs the composition of the work, humour which makes the pictures lively and fun and allows for an intimate feeling with the viewer, and knowledge which imbues the work and its concept with a depth of meaning. These requirements are always interconnected and evolving²and remain partially linked to a sensibility born out of a Chinese heritage.

Being an artist-in-residence has provided an ideal opportunity to see at first hand the working processes and attitudes of a very successful professional artist. He is an exemplar for art school students. Guan Wei is a prolific worker. Each painting is carefully planned and developed in sketchbook format and then faithfully scaled-up and translated to the series of canvases. Each one contributes ambiguous clues to his carefully organized multi-panel compositions. Equally important as the sketch books in developing these ideas are Guan Wei's diaries. His writing in Chinese records everyday activities and impressions, together with thoughts and inspirations derived from his reading and reflection on Western and Buddhist philosophy. These ideas and his imagination underpin his paintings, always in series and always concerned with the pursuit of wisdom and knowledge – questions of principle, morality, balance and harmony. These qualities and the interconnections between Guan Wei's reading, writing and painting mark him as an artist and an intellectual. His ability to visually articulate universal themes, issues and ideas is his special gift to the visual arts.

Guan Wei's contribution to the exhibition *Witnessing to Silence* is his 2002 work *Dow: Island*. The work pays close attention to human destiny. Environmental damage, conflict, large numbers of immigrants and refugees around the world, breaches of human rights, and religious intolerance are all issues contributing to a state of crisis and misery.³ *Dow: Island* is a very large 48-panel canvas painting. It is the largest painting Guan Wei has done to date. Each panel measures 102 x 51 cms and the total space for the work including the 7 cm space between each row and each panel, measures 320 x 921 cms. It's unmistakably Guan Wei's work with its very flat, painted surface and narrative expressing emotion about the human condition and



Guan Wei, Dow 島 Island, 2002 (detail), acrylic on canvas (48 panels), 317 x 013 cm installed. Image courtesy the artist and Sherman Galleries, Sydney.

concerns of our time. The painting hangs in three rows with the bottom row 40 cm above the floor. In the original installation, not replicated at the Drill Hall Gallery, one ton of sand was spread in front of the painting. About 20 objects were installed on the sand mound created by the artist, including bits of crockery, bottles, glasses, a clock and a TV set showed a continuous video of waves crashing on the imaginary beach.

Reading the painting from left to right or more appropriately west to east, *Dow: Island* takes us through a range of human emotions. The composition references antique eastern and western mediaeval maps, which are completely unreliable and inaccurate. The islands are a figment of the artist's imagination. Set in a great sea of an infinite variety of blues, Guan Wei's little amoebic, fragile figures are ever present on the canvas and are on a seemingly impossible journey. They inhabit the three main islands – Calamity in the west, Trepidation and Aspiration in the east. On Calamity, there is fear and in great anxiety, people appear to have taken to small boats in a desperate attempt to find a better place. Perhaps they have been spooked by the submarine lurking menacingly offshore to the west. On Trepidation the figures huddle and gesture towards the unknown and on Aspiration, as they emerge from the water and strike land, there is an anticipation of a sense of naïve optimism and hope for the future. While these islands suggest a landmass possibly large enough to sustain a new community, to the south in the lower part of the picture, is the lure of something much bigger and more promising. The Enchanted Coast, which looks vaguely like the north coast of the Australian continent, awaits discovery, settlement and a new life. However it is guarded by a group of large, aggressive looking birds. In China black birds signify bad luck and all indications are this will be an inhospitable land. Dotted around the larger islands are many smaller ones hardly big enough on which to get a toehold. In any event, they are inhabited by huge solitary birds or mythical creatures, which at a single glance leave no room for any intruder or boat landing.

Guan Wei's Chinese heritage is there in the technique he uses to express the expanse of water. The image uses endlessly repeated lines evident in classical Chinese temple murals and architectural decorations.

This water is dominating, endless and mysterious. The contrasting cloud forms refer to traditional Japanese screen painting and provide a softening counterpoint to the water.

They represent a balance symbolizing hope and good luck.⁴ Meanwhile, in the precarious waters around the islands swim menacing sea monsters, which surface occasionally to take the air stirred up by the wind blowing in simultaneously from west and east. This wind is buffeting the small boats in the west near Calamity. To these fragile craft, Guan Wei's figures cling and gesticulate as if to attract attention and the forlorn hope of rescue. Curiously the symbol of the wind, the cartoon-like face with its puffed out cheeks expelling air into the atmosphere, also suggests a positive natural energy.⁵ Four wind symbols are used as a device to balance the composition – all are blowing air gently into the picture. One is placed at the bottom left and one at the top right, complemented by two others placed equidistant in the centre row. Guan Wei developed the painting in the months leading up to the 2001 Australian federal election to include drowning figures as a protest over the Australian government's response to asylum seekers trying to reach Australia and the exploitation of the subsequently discredited 'children overboard' scandal.⁶

In writing about *Dow: Island*, Edmund Capon commented that Guan Wei, now immersed in two cultures, is a questioner of both and open to the world. He has developed a unique visual language with its simplicity and sophistication. For Guan Wei, his art is not only a vehicle for his imagination....but equally a vehicle for the expression of real concerns and attitudes.

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¹ 'Wo' De Yishu, *Nesting – the Art of Idleness*, Translation by Linda Jaivin and Geremie Barme, Catalogue notes, 1991.

² Guan Wei translated by Ben Donaldson, Postwest, No 19, 2001.

³ Guan Wei in conversation at ANU School of Art May, 2003

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Melanie Eastburn, on Guan Wei, in Ivor Indyk (ed.), *Eggplant Dreaming*, Heat 5. New Series, 2003.