

Cover Essay

Homage to Our Future

This issue's cover art is a portrait of Luoyuang Wei, a young girl from Lipu, Guangxi Province, China. Our featured artist, her father, paints in the true naïve style—he has never received formal training in art and paints as a hobby at his farm on the edge of town. Mr. Shangzheng Wei's painting is one that any parent can understand. It makes a simple, bold statement: "Here is my daughter, our future". Its pure figurative nature draws our eye directly to the subject and the statement that it makes. The scenery melts away, the detail becomes irrelevant, and we're left with a confidence that is curiously satisfying and unpretentious.

Yet, like any good piece of naïve art, there is a depth to this image that isn't obvious at first read. Luoyuang has been staged in a taro field, in front of luscious leaves that speak of nature's bounty, next to a pile of large, perfect taro roots. The sky is blue, the soil rich, and her hair thick. She's dressed in her party dress, but with the sandals and hat of a fieldworker. Each of these features has deep cultural relevance. Her dress is red—the luckiest color. Her peasant hat and fieldworker's sandals pay due respect to her roots in rural China, albeit that she is the daughter of an educated, successful farmer and relatively wealthy. The taro theme pays homage to Lipu's special geography close to Guilin and Yangshuo, famous for its magnificent limestone karst hills and to dishes like stuffed Li river snails, beerfish and the famous festival speciality Lipu taro looped roll. The latter is sensational, alternate slices of melt-in-your-mouth belly pork, fermented bean curd and taro covered in a golden gravy glaze. These subjects combine to make a painting that is aspirational in every way—it projects health, wealth and future success.

This powerful vision strikes home in the West, even if some of the meaning is not instantly understood. What strikes us more than anything is the confidence in our young friends face, even as she holds the taro somewhat nervously. Like a latter-day Mona Lisa, she looks beyond the viewer and leaves us wondering what this young citizen of the future is thinking. It is a child's confidence, one not yet ruined by any creeping self-doubt that comes later on as they tackle the world's complexity and cynicism. This is the essence of what makes naïve art so intriguing. It refreshes our artistic palette. By drawing us back to simpler times, to the subject rather than our subjective interpretation, it reminds us of our own child's view and gives us the space to move freely again and imagine all possible futures.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Shangzheng Wei was born in 1962 in Guilin, China and developed a love of painting at an early age. In 1981, he graduated from school in Guangxi and began work at COFCO, a foodstuffs company in China. He currently manages a successful business farming wildlife in captivity (bamboo rats, civets, porcupines) for sale to restaurants, and is highlighted in David Quamen's book "Spillover: Animal infections and the next human pandemic" (W.W. Norton & Co. 2012). In his spare time, he practiced painting figures using oil paints. Shangzheng participates frequently in local exhibitions and has won numerous awards that acknowledge his artistic skill.

ON THE COVER

“Homage” (2012) by Shangzheng Wei. Oil paint on canvas, 4 ft × 3 ft.

