

The Art of the Plausibly Absurd

by

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Just as one appears to have reached that sublime state of semi-rational maturity that avows the absolute viability and intrinsic vulnerability of all human expression, when suddenly another dead branch from the politically simian tree of social ignorance falls the innocent but unwary optimist.

This particular “widow-maker” caught quite a few people off guard, and the gears of absurdity began to grind away almost at once. In short, the Chinese have now decided that it’s politically fashionable to arrest offending ART as well as the offending artist, if they can find the wretch. The whole approach has something of a redundant flare, but the absurdity of the methodology has its charms as well.

This all came to pass when Mr. Simon Raab, a prodigious American painter and sculptor of secure reputation and impeccable credentials, discovered that his art had been detained, (arrested) along with several other people for questioning by the officers of state security.

State sponsored censorship of the arts above and beyond that already required of the press in China, is another one of those falling limbs that anoint the “absurdly obvious.” One would have thought the Chinese, with centuries of political sophistication, would feel confident enough in their cultural heritage not to stumble over so many fallen branches, and thereby embarrass the nation and themselves with pointless justifications of hollow principles.

Unfortunately, it is all painfully serendipitous for the numerous victims of this fruitless discrimination, but in the official scheme of things, they simply don’t matter. Each represents but another minor phalanx of the artistically curious. Nonetheless, the lump on the head hurts all the same.

I find it emotionally distressing to reflect that the Chinese government, or at least its present leadership, are still so anxious about what they perceive to be the power art to either unveil official deception or influence others to do so. Art’s functions go beyond critical appraisal. One way or another it all gets down to shades of self-deception, which is, as we all know, something most humans are very fond of sponsoring in their own lives, and “seconding” in others of like minds.

Chinese government censorship of the arts is hardly a novel concept. After all, the Chinese more or less invented printing, and immediately assessed the potential power that this craft implied. From then on all those who cared to print and publish, did so with official sanctions already in place, or not at all. Politically creative or suggestive works of fiction, and even benevolent philosophical treatises were often subjected to months or years of official scrutiny and censorship before they ever saw the face of the printer's block. Paintings, calligraphy, sculpture, silks, pottery, and so forth, were also subject to close official inspection for any number of spurious reasons.

For the many cultures that have always valued demonstrative wealth, the Chinese were always masters of social censorship that has historically even determined who could wear what, and when, and where. One forgets that the Chinese practically invented the exorbitant exposition of wealth and power, and did so by gathering the most gifted craftsmen together under direct employment to their sponsor (in affect artisans creating what they were told to create), and thereby enhancing an environment of cultural and political exclusivity and privilege. To control art is to master a plausible public image or sentiment, which brings us once more around to the function of self-deception. Here a plausibly objective view of all art would have to acknowledge that whether personal or public, it's all propaganda one way or another.

In this regard Chinese officialdom never tires of quixotic intellectual self-humiliation when they attempt to influence what their people can see, or hear, or read, and what foreign influences should be excluded from all public exposure. There is, however, a basic problem with this long held premise, and that resides in the fact that it never really works. Art will always find ways and means to channel cultural reflections and public opinion in any way it can. That is what art is really meant to do. The artist carries the critical eye for that particular time and place, and passes it on. One would hope that others are witnessing and recording as well. But sadly it makes little difference since the Chinese government has the implied right to inhibit popular consumption. But try as one might, nothing can make that tactic function for long, and nothing really remains hidden from a curious public for any appreciable time.

In fact, the exercise usually garners the opposite reaction from all quarters. In the case of Simon Raab's sculptures and paintings, and despite the fact that a number of the works share the theme of incarceration and Tibetan prayer flags, the exhibit had already been officially cleared for exposition in China. When the art arrived it was inspected again, one would suppose by more official censors, and suddenly another cyclopean branch fell. With remarkable dedication towards the public good, all Raab's artwork, and almost everybody having something remotely to do with its importation, was taken into custody. The absurdity of it all is pure

precision. To arrest art because it discusses incarceration, is to generate and increase interest from an audience that might never have known anything of the work except for the official Chinese response. Patent absurdity, like automobile accidents, always draws spectators. Raab's remarkable paintings, as well as his subject matter, have now both served "hard time," which will probably broaden the artist's audience considerably. What provenance! This is what makes art history so entertaining.

My father once observed that every time some morally offended community decided to ban, or burn his books, the sales always went way up everywhere else. To be banned in Boston was great for business. But to be banned in Fargo or Freemont isn't like being considered anathema to billions of Chinese. That takes real talent.