

WHAT RAY HUGHES TAUGHT US ABOUT ART

Eulogy The great bon vivant's most significant legacy is his introduction of contemporary Chinese art to Australia, writes Geoff Raby.



AFRGA1 A026

■ This is an expanded version of the eulogy delivered by Geoff Raby, Australia's former ambassador to China, at Ray Hughes' funeral.

One could say many wonderful things about Ray Hughes, but one thing was for sure, Ray could wear colour! He loved his burnt red, Chinese bespoke suits, made during his frequent visits to Beijing, yellow shirts and rainbow-cockatoo coloured ties.

Hughes was the quintessential, bohemian, dishevelled, bon vivant art dealer. A parody of the profession, yet absolutely authentic, rigorous, tough, imaginative and disciplined in his work. With his passing, earlier this month, Australia lost one of its great characters. He was someone who embodied the Australian spirit of individualism, dry wit, sharp intelligence, irreverence and a healthy disregard for authority.

As such, he was the most unlikely person to have chanced upon the nascent Chinese contemporary art scene in the late 1990s. Yet his introduction of contemporary Chinese art to Australia is his most significant legacy.



Ray Hughes championed the work of Guo Jian (left, from Geoff Raby's collection) and Qi Zhi Long. PHOTO (ABOVE): BRENDAN ESPOSITO

He opened for Australians a window into the vibrant, exciting, iconoclastic, and commercially protean world of the emerging Chinese contemporary art scene. He loved going to China. He relished hunting out obscure artists in dusty hutongs and on the semi-rural outskirts of China's newly emerging mega-cities. He was at home in the transformation that was sweeping across China from the late 1990s.

He lived in and loved the moment of creative destruction occurring in China and understood his artists were capturing, docu-

menting, expressing and explaining it to themselves and the world. He saw them as the Turners of their time, bearing witness to the rise of the dark satanic mills. He was right, of course, and he found huge commercial success as a result.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Ray pioneered the introduction of Chinese contemporary art into Australia. As ever, he was fearless in taste and in pushing boundaries. He loved the quirky, naughty, humorous, disturbing and dark things in his painters. He was far ahead of the curve when it came to contemporary Chinese art.

He introduced many unknown Chinese artists to Australia in those early years, who later went on to become major international names.

Some of these were Liu Xiaodong, who Ray loved because his work, such as the three naked transvestites romping on a bed, was so confronting; or the Luo Brothers, mocking the early emergence of Chinese commercial culture in a communist-run state; or Li Jin - one of Ray's absolute favourites, with his self-deprecating wicked sense of humour, executed in the highly disciplined traditional Chinese and Taoist styles; or Qi Zhi Long with his large portraits of innocent, beautiful, cultural revolution girls, their tranquil faces belying a life lived in turmoil; or Yang Jin Song who, in a very Ray sort of way, told the truth about the turbulence, dislocation and greed of runaway economic development in China through images of rotting fish and half-eaten watermelons in a landscape of cranes and demolished buildings.

And there was Guo Jian, who took social-

ist realist propaganda art and, painting beautiful canvasses, used it with audacious humour to send up the PLA's protecting the one party-state of China with all its corruption.

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull owns one of these and once had it hanging in his parliamentary office. Turnbull's relationship with China then was very different than it is today. Ray Hughes would be dismayed at the opportunism, paranoia and near-hysteria of the current political mood in Australia towards China.

The painting Turnbull bought in 2010 from the artist in his studio was called *The Day Before I Went Away* and is a classic in cynical realism's trademark cartoon style. Its central character in PLA military uniform is Song Zu Yin, then one of China's most popular entertainers who each year was the star of the official New Year's Gala on state-run CCTV television. But she was more famous for being the rumoured lover of former China leader Jiang Zemin.

At the time, none of us knew how prescient the title of the work would be. Four years later, Guo Jian, an Australian citizen, was arrested, held in prison for two weeks, then expelled to Australia with nothing but the clothes he was wearing for an artistic work he did to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the killings in Tiananmen Square by the PLA.

Guo Jian, himself a former PLA soldier, had made a diorama of Tiananmen Square, then covered it in 60 kilograms of minced pork meat, letting it rot and stink in his tin studio in the early summer heat of Beijing and then invited the *Financial Times* to write



Ray Hughes was the quintessential, bohemian, dishevelled art dealer, yet absolutely authentic, rigorous, tough, imaginative and disciplined in his work. PHOTO: JIM RICE

a story on it. Guo Jian was arrested the day after the story was published. Ray Hughes loved the audacity of this. Art was doing what it should be doing: challenging and confronting authority and polite society.

On one memorable day, the then Chinese Ambassador to Australia, the very stylish and popular Mme Fu Ying, visited the Hughes Gallery. Ray was waiting to meet her, resplendent in an almost pressed suit and apparently sober even though it was after lunch on a Saturday afternoon. He was so proud and excited to be showing her around and she swooned over Ray saying that this was the first time she had ever seen contemporary Chinese art.

Ray sought to probe, in the politest way,

where politeness and Ray Hughes are virtually an oxymoron, Mme Fu's cosmopolitanism. She was like no other Chinese ambassador before her. Smart, modern, a public figure and media savvy.

There were some awkward moments such as when Mme Fu was standing in front of the massive portrait by Liu Xiaodong of three naked transvestites prancing on a bed. Even the gruff, acerbic, quick-tongued Ray Hughes was left staring into space, lost for words to ease the awkwardness of the moment, shifting uncomfortably from foot to foot.

Ray pushed her to comment on a series of Luo Brothers drawings in pencil of portraits of adults and children in Cultural Revolution uniforms, wearing badges, red armbands and all the other propaganda paraphernalia. She was blunt and said she did not like them. Pressed on why, she said they were how the foreigners viewed the Cultural Revolution.

At that, the glint in his eye, to those who knew him, showed that he thought he had found the limits, very narrow ones to him, of the ambassador's tolerance of the avant-garde. But then she turned to the giant Qi Zhilong portraits of beautiful young Cultural Revolution women and said those she liked because they captured what it was like to be youthful during the Cultural Revolution.

She spoke at length about her own personal experiences with passion and honesty and even a sense of loss. Ray was very moved. Once again, he was deeply touched by China, its stories, its people and most of all by its contemporary art. □