



Links

At one of China's biggest art museums, first American exhibit features FSU artists

BY LIBBY FAIRHURST

In an out-of-this-world experience they describe as “monumental” and “mind-blowing,” three intrepid artists from Florida State University have become the first Americans to exhibit at one of the largest provincial museums in China.

Billed as representative of art in America, the FSU trio and their solo exhibits in various mediums — black-and-white photography, a room-size ceramics installation and surrealist oil paintings — occupied three adjacent galleries at the Ningbo Museum of Art in Zhejiang, near Shanghai, in the People's Republic of China, for 10 groundbreaking days in June.

Chinese audiences were fascinated by the triple exhibit's format, methodology and smattering of daring themes, said FSU Associate Professor of Art Holly Hanessian, a creator of large-scale ceramic work. Her fellow FSU travelers included newly hired Assistant Professor of Art Carrie Ann Baade, known for surrealist paintings based on iconic images drawn from old European masterpieces, and graduate student Andrew Ross, formerly a commercial photographer.

The Ningbo Museum director nicknamed them “the Mayflowers.”

“We certainly felt a bit like the Mayflower, taking our entire haul of precious cargo over on the plane,” Baade said. She called the logistics of transporting and installing the ambitious exhibition and negotiating layers of bureaucracy “a large-scale problem-solving extravaganza” — but praised the Ningbo Museum staff for its efforts to surmount the language barrier and cultural differences. “They had a strong desire to work internationally and embrace our needs,” Baade said.

The first-ever American exhibit at China's Ningbo Museum of Art represents yet another exceptional achievement at the national and international levels — in the past 12 months alone — for FSU's increasingly prominent art realm. Recently, one of its art education



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professors won higher education's Art Educator of the Year award, and two other faculty artists earned the prestigious Joan Mitchell Award for their widely acclaimed work.

"It appears to me that Florida State's art department is building a 'dream team' that will make it one of the country's top state programs," Baade said.

Hanessian's exhibit — titled "Fortuity!" — showcased her unique approach to the medium of ceramics in a room-size installation exploring her family's relationship to her adopted

Chinese daughter. Some of Hanessian's earlier work already was part of the permanent collection at Yixing Museum in Yixing, China, but the June exhibit was her first solo show in the country and the first-ever installation — in which the gallery itself becomes the artwork — at the Ningbo Museum.

"Ceramics have a long, honored history in China, and are as highly valued as paintings, which is incredibly satisfying to an American ceramic artist," Hanessian said.

Transporting her fragile work, however, was a "shipping conundrum," she said. "I had to pull a rabbit out of a hat, or rather, an entire ceramics show out of one crate. But as a result, I plan to curate three shows in China in 2008, and in 2009, I hope to return to work there for a time."

Ross is a Master of Fine Arts candidate in studio art with a concentration in photography. His solo exhibit at Ningbo Museum comprised a series of dream-like black-and-white photographs titled "Transience." In addition to the recent exhibition and for the second consecutive summer, Ross taught a course at China's Taiyuan Normal University — which now has named him an Honorary Professor in Art and invited him to return year after year.

"The Chinese people are hungry for all things Western, so this is a wonderful time for an American to visit, teach and exhibit there," Ross said. He plans to apply for a Fulbright fellowship to enable him to spend a year photographing in China after earning his degree in 2008. "Just as I have shown my photographic artworks from America in China, I hope to share my images from China here, and eventually bring both sets together as a single body of work," he said.

Baade's solo exhibit at Ningbo — colorful oil paintings titled "Virtues and Vices" — was a standout for Chinese viewers accustomed to the medium's conservative slant in their country.

"It was exhilarating to meet contemporary artists in China who are finding their voices as individuals," she said. "A staggering amount of their art is speaking out against Mao and communism. It struck me that all the artists and art teachers I met were male, but at a student art expo I attended, most of the college-age art students were female, so the tide is turning."

Back at home, the FSU art department's recent spate of national recognitions may well continue. Baade has been nominated for the highly competitive United States Artists Fellowship; the 2007 winner will be announced in the fall.

"It is a huge honor for two faculty members to have simultaneous solo exhibitions at a major museum in China, and for one of our graduate students to both teach and exhibit abroad," said Joe Sanders, chairman of FSU's art department. "These milestones reflect the caliber of FSU's College of Visual Arts, Theatre and Dance, and our commitment to international cultural exchange."

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