

ART

# Chinese artist is whimsical, and serious

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PROVIDENCE — Traditionally, August is chill-out time in the art world. It's a month when many artists leave town, many galleries shut down and even museums seem to move at a slower pace, as though trying to conserve energy until after Labor Day.

This year, however, at least one gallery is bucking the trend.

For the past few weeks, a team of curators and gallery workers have been busy transforming Brown University's David Winton Bell Gallery into something that vaguely resembles a futuristic disco, complete with a giant mirrored disco ball.

The project, which also includes the remains of a small cart, a pile of cast-plaster hands and a series of large plaster-covered panels, is the work of Jin Shan, a young Chinese artist who's making his American debut here on Saturday.

Titled "My dad is Li Gang!" the installation is designed to be both visually playful (hence the disco-ball

effect) and politically provocative (more on that in a moment), according to Bell Gallery curator Ian Alden Russell.

"One of the things that really attracted me to Jin was his sense of humor," said Russell, who first met the artist during a trip to China last year. "Like a lot of young artists in China these days, he's very politically active and engaged. But he also has a great sense of humor, and I think that's something almost anyone can relate to."

Jin, who's based in Shanghai but who's spending the next few weeks in Providence, agreed that humor plays a key role many of his pieces. Speaking in clear if halting English, he said he wanted the Bell show to be "as much fun as possible."

"I think humor can help draw you in," he explained.

As an example, Jin pointed to one of the show's most eye-catching elements — a big mirror-covered sculpture that, from a certain angle at least, looks like what you might get if you asked a team of NASA scientists to design a high-tech disco ball.

Jin said he got the idea for the sculpture after seeing a picture of the Tiangong I, a satellite that's considered the prototype for a Chinese-made manned space station.

"Here was this thing that was supposed to be a big technological triumph for China," Jin said. "And all I could think of was that it looked a big disco ball."

Yet Jin's humor also masks a more caustic view of modern Chinese society. The show's title, for example, is a reference to a notorious 2010 incident, in which a drunk driver struck two female students at China's Hebei University, killing one.

After fleeing the scene, the driver was arrested by local police. However, in an attempt to intimidate his captors, the man reportedly shouted "Go ahead, My dad is Li Gang!" — a reference to a powerful local bureaucrat.

Initially, it appeared that the driver, Li Qiming, might actually go free. But after Chinese artists, bloggers and political activists mounted a furious campaign on behalf of the students' families, Li Qiming was sentenced to six years in prison.

Jin said the incident sparked such outrage not only because of its violent nature, but because it illustrated the stark differences between China's political elites (many of whom have strong Communist Party ties) and the rest of Chinese society.

"In China, there are really two worlds — the world of the elites and the world of everybody else," he explained. "If you have the right connections, you can do almost anything. You start a business, get a government contract, send your children to school in the

West, even avoid going to prison. Without the connections, you're nobody."

The Bell show highlights these differences in several ways, Jin said.

The satellite/disco ball, for instance, can be seen as a symbol China's technological prowess. Yet for Jin, it's also a sign of the country's misplaced priorities, as billions are spent on projects that offer little real benefit to average Chinese.

In a further blow to Chinese pride, the satellite appears to have crash landed inside the gallery. In the process, it's damaged several other objects, including a small cart (actually a wax copy of a popular Chinese delivery cart) and a series of

Jin Shan, a young Chinese artist, is making his American debut at the Winton Bell Gallery on Saturday with an exhibit called "My Dad is Li Gang."



cast-plaster hands.

Jin said the cart and the hands are both references to China's working class — the kind of people who have so far been bypassed by China's economic boom.

Ironically, Jin said that his father had once worked as a professional artist. Among his specialties: painting scenery for Chinese operas and cranking out portraits of Chinese leaders, including Mao Tse Tung.

"He was good artist," Jin said of his father. "He wanted to paint other things, but that's what he had to do to survive. At least things are a little better for artists today."

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**"My dad is Li Gang!"** opens Saturday, Sept. 1 at the David Winton Bell Gallery, List Art Center, 64 College St. in Providence. (Note: an artist talk and reception will be held on Friday, beginning at 5:30 p.m.) For more information, call (401) 863-2932