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Image Credit: Courtesy of Soap Factory

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Three artists tackle state control at the Soap Factory.

“We cannot live in a pure art world,” says Meng Tang from across the table at a local coffee shop. She tends to search carefully for the right words, and her quiet nature suggests a paradoxical passion and conviction. While she’s careful to point out that she doesn’t consider herself an activist, in the next breath she points out the inspirational power of art—as well as its role in the ongoing turmoil in her Chinese homeland.

Meng is one of three artists exhibited in the Soap Factory’s *Three Artists: Guo Gai, Meng Tang, Slinko*. Her *Impression: Babel* is a video installation that reflects her cross-cultural experience as a Chinese woman living in Minnesota: In a single enclosed space, figures on video speak in five different languages, a jumble of messages and voices influenced by China’s recent crackdown on artists and government dissent.

Since this year’s Jasmine Revolution in the Middle East, a series of pro-democracy protests have emerged throughout China. The government’s reaction has ranged from arresting protestors and artists to Internet censorship (a Google search for the word “jasmine” is blocked). “It’s the elephant in the room,” says Meng. “It is my responsibility, my obligation as an artist to do something.” The balance is delicate: Art is an implicitly potent and effective medium to promote social change. With the political climate in China seemingly precarious, the government’s reaction to protests demonstrates this power.



Accompanying Meng's installation is Guo Gai's overtly political photography, presented alongside his new choral composition *Lament*, which draws upon his disapproval of the Chinese government's reaction to recent natural and economic disasters. Guo's participation in a pro-democracy protest recently led to his arrest and prolonged detainment; as a result, it's effectively impossible for him to obtain a visa to attend the exhibition. Co-curator Tom Rose first saw Guo's work in Beijing five years ago.

"It hit me like a fist," Rose says. "What he's proposing in these images is much more about the way a bureaucratic structure imposes, and in many ways forces itself, upon culture." The exhibition's political subtext represents a new direction for the Soap Factory—to a point. "I don't necessarily look at or think about the political. I make myself more aware of the conditions conducive to the production of art," adds Rose.

Within China itself, inflammatory artist Ai Weiwei has become a potent symbol of the struggle between China's government and its culture and population. Cyber-control aside, Ai has utilized the Internet as an avenue for prankster rebellion (he's represented at the Soap Factory only in spirit). His Twitter account has close to 90,000 followers, and 60,000 tweets. Ai was arrested earlier this spring (ostensibly for tax evasion) and has since been released on the condition that he keep publicly quiet; his last tweet was the day of his arrest.

From our outside vantage, it's easy to pass judgment. But the Chinese-American relationship is convoluted at best. "In the West, we have this incredibly conflicted view," says Ben Heywood, the Soap Factory's executive director and co-curator of the exhibition. "China lends us money and manufactures a large amount of what we consume. Yet it's a country we consider oppressive politically. We can no longer argue that a repressive, undemocratic state is bad for business."

Nataliya Slinko's *Make-Believe*, works in abstract sculpture, diverges from the other two works' Sino-conscious focus, yet finds a parallel in the artist's disillusionment growing up in the Soviet Union and her stance on current (authoritarian) Russian politics. "Taking another look at the communist era presents an opportunity to re-examine signs of Soviet ideology as it continues to serve new socio-economic structures," she says. "The sense of unity, power, nationalism, the ever-present machinery of surveillance and censorship, and the near complete absence of democratic elections are all inherited from the previous political machine."

All three bodies of work in this exhibition confront, in one way or another, the ramifications for art and life in tightly controlled societies that aim to tamp down communication. “We’re looking at some radical transitions that are changing culture and society,” adds Rose. “We are at this particular point in the beginning of the 21st century—not unlike the beginning of the 20th century, in which we changed from an early industrial age—where information is travelling at the speed of light. There’s more information out there than people can take in. It’s wildly exciting.”

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