

Guo Fengyi

by Eric Sutphin



Guo Fengyi: Master Guan, n.d., ink on rice paper, 96 1/8 by 26 1/4 inches; at Andrew Edlin.

Guo Fengyi's ink drawings of fantastical creatures are completely alive, as might be expected from an artist whose work began with studies of qi, or life-energy. Born in the Xi'an province of China in 1942, Guo retired from her factory job at age 39 and turned to qigong—a Chinese practice meant to balance qi through physical movements, breathing techniques and meditation—to cope with severe arthritis. As a result, she began to have visions, which she started using as the basis for drawings. Guo was a self-taught artist (although she rejected the designation of “artist” during her lifetime) and gained recognition when, in 2002, she collaborated on site-specific works with Judy Chicago for the Long March Project, a multi-venue event in China. She died in 2010.

Guo's figures allude to Chinese dragons, puppets (a staple in Chinese performing arts) and mythological beasts. In the main gallery of her show at Andrew Edlin, one encountered five framed ink-on-cloth drawings on scrolls and five large unframed drawings on rice paper. Nüwa (2005), at roughly 13½ feet tall and around 2 feet wide, offers a sea dragon-like creature composed of feathery marks in red, gold and green ink on rice paper. The face looks mostly benevolent, though the eyes appear to glow yellow and tiny flames escape from the nostrils. This and another large drawing on rice paper were hung so that their figures' fan-shaped tails extended across low platforms on the floor, underscoring the creatures' beingness. Within the

elaborate line work of Guo's various figures, secondary faces often appear like strange, embryonic apparitions emerging from their hosts. In the drawings on scrolls, the cloth supports make the ink lines less crisp than those in the paper-based work, giving the images the look of woodblock prints. This is especially the case with *Full Moon on the 15th* (1990). Here, the figure is an abstracted jade-colored angel: a series of forms resembling flower bulbs creates a body from which flamelike wings point upward toward a dramatic cluster of red and yellow flowers that emits a burst of rays.

In the rear gallery hung mostly small framed drawings. Among them was *Practicing Qigong* (1989), which shows a feminine figure ensconced within a bright pink lotus bud-shaped form. Numbers and letters encircle the bud, and two pink stamp-size squares containing Chinese characters appear in the upper right and lower left corners. In most of the works on view, including this one, the vertical axes of the central forms are emphasized (by lines, by geometric forms, by the aforementioned secondary faces) in a way that is perhaps meant to correlate to the positioning of the body's dantian—the "energy centers" targeted by qigong. In Guo's numinous giants, this evocation of energy combines with her restless but methodical mark-making to convey a sense of constant replenishment and regeneration.

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