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REPORT AIR DATE: April 19, 2012

Newly Cast Terra Cotta Warriors Look to More Peaceful Future in 2801

SUMMARY

Artist Gong Yuebin grew up during China's Cultural Revolution and it shows. His piece "Site 2801," on display at Crocker Art Museum in Sacramento, Calif., reflects a re-imagined terra cotta army – 200 warriors interspersed with 10 modern-looking soldiers, symbolizing an unchanged feeling of militarism. Spencer Michels reports.



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Transcript

JEFFREY BROWN: And to the story of an artist who uses the past to create an archaeological dig of the future.

NewsHour correspondent Spencer Michels explains.

SPENCER MICHELS: Half-a-mile from California's state capitol, in a storefront studio in Sacramento, a 52-year old artist from China has replicated 2,200-year-old-warriors discovered in an ancient tomb.

Gong Yuebin, who came to the U.S. in 2004 speaking

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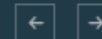
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PHOTO BY MARTIN GOMMEL

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no English, has fashioned a exhibition that uses the past to comment on the future. Those ancient terra-cotta soldiers, 8,000 of them, were discovered by farmers in China in 1974, buried in the tomb of China's first emperor in 210 B.C. and meant to protect him in the afterlife.

The carefully-crafted army, including horses and chariots, has drawn thousands of tourists to the site, and some of the objects themselves have been exhibited in America and elsewhere.

Gong Yuebin was a teenager when the soldiers were discovered. And their large military presence inspired him even then.

GONG YUEBIN, artist: This project, I have been thinking from my childhood experience until now. Now I'm standing on the world stage.

SPENCER MICHELS: He lived through China's cultural revolution, when his own family was ordered to the countryside. They had little food, and lived in fear, as the government cracked down on intellectuals and political opponents.

Gong survived and eventually went to an art academy, where he produced traditional paintings on silk. But his life experiences had instilled in him a desire to go beyond the expected. Today, he is using his own newly-created army of terra-cotta soldiers to make social commentary on war and greed and government.

GONG YUEBIN: People kill each other. And then comes revenge. And this could go on forever. Desire and greed from those in control, that is a big problem.

SPENCER MICHELS: All that translated into plans and models for the creation of 210 terra-cotta soldiers, most of them, but not all, very similar to the ancient warriors.

Gong took his idea to Sacramento's Crocker Art Museum, the oldest museum in the West, and pitched it to Scott Shields, chief curator.

SCOTT SHIELDS, Crocker Art Museum: I went over and I saw what he was doing, and I thought, we have to show this piece. The first thing that really interested me in this piece was the sheer scale of it and the ambition behind it

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interested me in this piece was the sheer scale of it and the ambition behind it. It's a huge undertaking.

SPENCER MICHELS: It took a year to mold the soldiers and have them manufactured, somewhat ironically, in China.

Today, the exhibit is housed in the ballroom of the Crocker gallery, and it's a striking image and a bit of a puzzle, 200 warriors from the past and 10 modern soldiers hidden among them, with dilapidated nuclear missiles cradling newborn babies carried on high by entire troupe.

SCOTT SHIELDS: I think it's about empire-building, and it's about man's inhumanity to man, and I think that's all part of what he's trying to say, is that, look, you know, 2,200 years have gone by, and we haven't changed all that much, and we need to do better.

SPENCER MICHELS: Gong's idea is that, 800 years from now, archaeologists will unearth his soldiers made from clay dug from the same mountain as the ancient warriors and try to learn about the past from them.

SCOTT SHIELDS: By titling the piece "Site 2801," he wants us to stand from the vantage point of the future and look to the past, and the past being our present.

SPENCER MICHELS: The past is very much a part of Chinese art, according to Pat Chirapravati, associate professor of Asian art at Sacramento State University, who greatly admires Gong Yuebin's work.

PAT CHIRAPRAVATI, Sacramento State University: You know traditional Chinese way of learning is to copy the past. So, if you want to be a painter, you started painting bamboo until you become one with the bamboo. You copy the old master, and then gradually you would add your own style onto it.

So I think Yuebin did what traditional Chinese supposed to do, is to copy the past and project the new symbols into his work.

SPENCER MICHELS: Chirapravati says the ancient tomb soldiers found in China symbolize the control of power by a great emperor.

PAT CHIRAPRAVATI: What Yuebin was trying to do is to represent so many generations of power. the control of power. the control of people.

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generations of power, the control of power, the control of people.

SPENCER MICHELS: In the new work, the babies housed in the missiles represent hope. But, she says, the new exhibit is more complex than a simple anti-war, anti-greed message.

PAT CHIRAPRAVATI: I think it's more like conceptual art. You know, he sells his concept by the use of previous symbols that we kind of know. So, once you look at it, you know. But, at the same time, you don't know, because you try to figure it out, what he's trying to say.

SPENCER MICHELS: At gatherings like this talk for museum docents, Gong is often asked what his display says and how his own background shapes what he is trying to convey.

GONG YUEBIN: Babies symbolize hope.

SPENCER MICHELS: But for all the interpretations, it's the visual experience of seeing Yuebin Gong's work displayed at full force that leaves the most lasting impression, even for art teacher Pat Chirapravati.

PAT CHIRAPRAVATI: The first thing I said to myself was, wow, this is beautiful.

SPENCER MICHELS: Site 2801 remains at the Crocker Museum through April.

JUDY WOODRUFF: Spencer has more on the Site 2801 exhibit and other large-scale works by artist Gong Yuebin in a blog post on our website.

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