

Student Sample Essay I:

The trip to the Spencer Art Museum was my first time there and allowed me to see many great art pieces, specifically those representing East Asian culture. I enjoyed a lot of the pieces, however the one that stuck out most to me was Wu Chi-Tsung's Still Life Orchid. The piece includes a still life video of an orchid shrouded in mist projected on to a plain white background. The video of the orchid starts as very unclear and eventually comes in to focus, showing the detail of the flower. Before being This stuck out to me for a few reasons. Orchids have permeated Chinese culture through a variety of mediums such as art, literature, medicine, and folk legends. They are one of the most recognizable objects in Chinese art, and to recognize this, the Smithsonian Gardens have created a collection of 9,000 orchid plants named *Orchids: A View from the East*. In art the orchid signifies skill from the artist. The long leaves and intricate flowers with rich colors require a well-trained artist. This piece exhibits an interesting cultural critique of Chinese culture. The piece could be described as a meeting of traditional and modern. The traditional aspect being the classical depiction of an orchid and the modern being the way in which it is shown. The still life video projected digitally brings an aspect of modernity to the work. Additionally, the mist in the video coming in going out of focus illustrates the passing of time from the past to the current. This plays well in to what we have discussed thus far in class through the changing of culture in modern China. Everything in China has changed in the past two decades. The primary economic industries have shifted from agriculture to manufacturing to services and technology currently. Along with that we have seen one of the greatest increases in wealth and standard of living in the history of world. Because of this, the way people live has

changed drastically. This work by Wu Chi-Tsung beautifully demonstrates the blend of a traditional, agrarian way of life that China was accustomed to for centuries with the modern, technologically advanced culture that China is today.

Student Sample Essay II:

On our trip to Spencer Art Museum, the Chinese works ranged from themes of zen and inner peace to criticizing the hierarchy created by the ability to read. This essay will be a reflection of my most poignant experience at the museum.

The piece that stuck out to me the most was *Metamorphoses* by Gu Wenda (2004). It is composed primarily of human hair. The interesting thing is, the European hair was created using Asian hair, and the Asian hair was created using European hair. This symbolizes a blending of Eastern and Western cultures and creates a resonance across their perceived boundaries. The resonance created is very strong because usually looking at hair color and texture is one of the defining ways to differentiate an Asian person from a European person. The hair was used to create both the canvas and the fake Chinese symbols formed on it. To a person who has lived a sheltered American life and never taken the time to look at real Chinese writing, the characters might seem authentic. However, to people who have studied Chinese will recognize that they are not real characters, and people who are literate in Chinese may feel frustrated when they look at it because they are not real words, but they use different aspects and radicals to synthesize these fake characters. This was done, said our guide, by the artist to critique the power structure created by the ability of some people to read. Even though the thought of an artwork being made out of hair seemed really gross to me, the way it combined Asian and

European hair and created fake characters to make a statement about differences and hierarchies was very interesting.

This connects to what we learned in class about pluralism, social transformation, and transnational exchanges in China. The people living in small agricultural societies may not have the ability to read while people living in urban centers can. Additionally, in an effort to increase national literacy, especially in adults, the PRC made simplified Chinese official in mainland China during the 1950s, so perhaps this hierarchy that the artist criticizes is diminishing. Finally, the use of both European and Asian hair represents that the cultures across oceans are becoming increasingly connected as globalism continues to grow.

Student Sample Essay III:

Xu Bing's Book from the Sky

Xu Bing is a contemporary Chinese artist having received his Master's Degree in Fine Arts from the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing in 1987. This particular piece of art was first publicly exhibited in October of 1988, receiving great criticism from both artistic critics as well as fellow artists. These criticisms were raised for reasons ranging from a belief portrayed in the news that the rebellious nature of his piece was simply for the sake of rebellion, holding no greater meaning, to the artistic community calling it "too traditional and academic". Having been trained in traditional calligraphy and printing, Xu Bing used his great knowledge of Chinese characters to truly pervert them into the most frustrating, unreadable gibberish that could be mustered. Using the simplified radicals that had made the Chinese system of writing so accessible to the public, Xu Bing would turn this notion on its head to create something inaccessible and viscerally frustrating. This exposes the true power of language and writing in Chinese culture, a force which could bring such rapid cultural change- such as those seen in the Cultural Revolution's propaganda posters and slogans- could also create such deep discomfort in a reader that could almost, but not quite, comprehend it. A further call out to the Cultural Revolution's reliance on the power of words, the prints for the Book from the Sky were done in Caiyu township using the very same traditional printing factory used for the state sponsored reprints of classical texts during the Cultural Revolution. Xu Bing himself had explained the meaning of the piece as "[exposing] the fact that Chinese literary culture is [now] boring and tedious".