

# Beijing-born artist heading home to show off Australian culture

## PIP CHRISTMASS

"I've had four different titles since I came to live here," Beijing-born artist Guan Wei told an Australian journalist back in 2004.

"At first I was called a Chinese artist. Then Chinese-Australian, then Australian-Chinese. Now they call me an Australian artist. I think that shows how my work has changed and how Australians have come to accept it."

The artist, who was born in 1957, is a descendant of Manchu nobility dating back to the Qing dynasty. While Guan says his ancestry is an important part of his sense of self, his canvases, often executed on a grand scale, are by no means your typically delicate, historical Chinese landscape paintings.

Since his move to Australia, he has begun to incorporate elements of Australiana into his work but neither are his paintings typically rough and ready representations of the harsh

Australian landscape. Instead, Guan's work combines elements of Eastern and Western mythology and symbolism, resulting in a unique, idiosyncratic style that has seen him garner significant attention in the Australian art world during the past decade.

Walk into the Art Gallery of New South Wales, for example, and one of Guan's large Zodiac canvases takes pride of place in the foyer alongside one of James Angus' skewed, twisted Bugatti sculptures.

Or visit the Victorian Bureau of Meteorology in Collins Street, Melbourne and you will see his enormous commissioned work, an 18m x 6m painting called Feng Shui, which comprises 120 panels and required a team of assistants to install.

Guan's father began to teach him how to draw when he was five years old. After graduating from Beijing's Capital University, he became an art



At home: Guan Wei in his studio.

teacher, at the same time getting actively involved in the contemporary Chinese art scene.

His first visit to Australia was in 1989 to undertake a two-month residency at the Tasmanian School of Art. Not long after his return to China, he was in the unenviable position of watching as the Tiananmen Square massacre unfolded. A year later, he was applying for permanent residency in Australia under the Distinguished Talent Scheme.

"After a year living in Australia I started to change some of the symbols in my work," Guan explains. "The old symbols, the use of Chinese characters and acupuncture points were too unfamiliar for the Australian audience, so I started to use some Western symbols in my new paintings."

He didn't entirely erase the "Chineseness" of his work, however, painting works in which a small Ned Kelly figure — based on Sidney Nolan's

famous works — can be seen escaping from military figures set in Chinese landscapes.

Elsewhere, local flora and fauna began to make their way on to Guan's canvases and his colour palette also became brighter, reflecting the intensity of the Australian landscape and horizon.

Now, after having lived in Australia for 18 years, Guan is moving back to China.

"First, I began to identify with Australian people and culture, and then Australian audiences began to identify with my works and my culture," he says. "Now I am moving back to China as an Australian artist to show Australian culture and identity to Chinese people and the world through my pictures."

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**Guan Wei: Zodiac is at Turner Galleries, Northbridge, until December 17.**

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