

People

Photos: Reuters

Kennedy Centre honours arts legends

Luminaries from the worlds of music and film were feted by US President Barack Obama and a black-tie audience of artists and political heavyweights at this year's Kennedy Centre Honours.



Kennedy Schlossberg, Obama said the five were a living reminder that "the arts are not somehow apart from our national life".

"The arts are at the heart of our national life. These five remarkable performers have helped us sustain and strengthen our nation." Reuters

Bowie's son wins British film awards

As a child, he was called Zowie Bowie. These days it's the far more sensible Duncan Jones, and on Sunday he emerged triumphantly from the very large shadow of his father when he picked up two

prizes at the British independent film awards.

Forty years after the first Moon landing and 40 years after his dad, David Bowie (left with Duncan), released *Space Oddity*, Jones' retro sci-fi film *Moon* was named best picture at a ceremony in central London while Jones himself won best debut director, *The Guardian* reported.

His film stars Sam Rockwell as the solitary caretaker of a helium-3 mining plant on the moon with his only companion, it seems, a talking computer system called Gerty, voiced by Kevin Spacey.



Cohen sued over Bruno film libel

A Palestinian grocer and peace activist is suing British comedian Sacha Baron Cohen for US\$115 million in libel damages over his depiction in the film *Bruno*.

Ayman Abu Aita claims the film has ruined his life.

In one of the scenes in *Bruno*, Cohen's character claims he has travelled to the Ein El-Hilweh refugee camp in Lebanon to meet a leader of the Al-Aqsa Brigades. A

caption describes Abu Aita as "Terrorist group leader, Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade".

In fact, the scene was filmed at a hotel in the West Bank in an area under Israeli control, next to an Israeli army base.

Abu Aita said he is an opponent of terrorists and was tricked into meeting Cohen, thinking he was a German producing a film about the Palestinian cause. *Agencies*

Fans to bid fond farewell to Clancy

Irish music fans are expected to line the streets to bid farewell to folk great Liam Clancy, who died in hospital on Friday at the age of 74.

The County Tipperary-born performer was the last surviving member of the Clancy Brothers, dubbed as Ireland's first pop stars, who were credited with bringing Irish traditional music to a world audience in the 1960s.

International artists including Bob Dylan have acknowledged their major influence on the music scene.

Clancy (left), who had been suffering from a six-month-long respiratory illness, was surrounded by his wife Kim and daughters Siobhan and Fiona when he died. He had spoken by telephone with his musician son Donal earlier in the day while his other son Eban was returning home from Britain.

The funeral will be held in St Mary's Church Dunganran, close to Ring, County Waterford where the singer had been living since the 80s. *Press Association*



**Contact Us** Features editor: Winnie Chung Assistant features editor: Choong Tet Sieu Arts editor: Kevin Kwong kevin.kwong@scmp.com Books editor: Stephen McCarty stephen.mccarty@scmp.com Fashion editor: Divia Harilela divia.harilela@scmp.com Film editor: Clarence Tsui clarence.tsui@scmp.com Food & Wine editor: Susan Jung susan.jung@scmp.com Interiors editor: Charmaine Chan charmaine.chan@scmp.com Motoring editor: William Wadsworth william.wadsworth@scmp.com Travel editor: Nicholas Walton nicholas.walton@scmp.com General inquiries: features@scmp.com

show them the money 7x2 4C

SCMP has more making active news than any other Hong Kong newspaper

show them the money 8x2 4C

SCMP has more making active news than any other Hong Kong newspaper

South China Morning Post

Beijing artist Xing Danwen explores personal alienation amid rapid urban development in her photographic works. Photo: David Wong



ARTS Model citizen

A photographic exhibition explores the everyday dramas of big city isolation, writes Kevin Kwong

There is much drama in Xing Danwen's photography series *Urban Fiction* – murder, adultery and suicide – although none of it is immediately apparent. The characters, who were digitally added onto the images, are so small they get lost in the vast concrete landscape. Details of each story become apparent only on close examination.

"I feel that the individual is small and weak in a city, a man-made world, and everyone is anonymous," says Xing. "They build such complex relationships with the city and between [themselves]."

Urbanisation is a major theme that runs through the Beijing-based artist's oeuvre. *Urban Fiction* is a commentary on how urban development is turning big mainland cities into characterless concrete jungles. The series – and *Duplication*, another that looks at the effects of modernisation – is on show at Ooi Botos Gallery in an exhibition titled "In a Perfect World ..."

Xing has been interested in urban subjects since her own living environment in Beijing underwent a drastic change in the mid-1990s. The city's increasing affluence meant old buildings and courtyards were making way for big commercial and residential developments.

She began to wonder about the impact of such changes on locals: what is a better life for them? What were their expectations? While living conditions in the courtyards were not ideal – it was common for several families to share a public bathroom and kitchen – at least they lived in close-knit communities.

"So when they move away, they might not be able to meet their neighbours whom they used to live with as a family," says Xing.

A decade later *Urban Fiction* offers answers to some of these questions. As the urban population gets richer, more people can afford to move into high rises and more are built.

Now, she says, people live in cubes that are squeezed together, separated only by thin walls. And instead of leading to greater closeness, this physical proximity more often results in psychological distance and loneliness.

"Beijing is now a lot more developed. We live in modern spaces and have, to some level,

development where a drama is being played out. To heighten the authenticity of her work, Xing used maquettes, or miniature models, of real developments that were being built or had been completed in Beijing as backgrounds. At the start, it was difficult to get the developers to part with them.

"I thought about building my own, but I realised the meaning of it would be different. It would be my own fantasy rather than the reality," she says. "These miniatures are representations of real building projects. So that's very interesting."

These modern living spaces are marketed as the ultimate dream for city people, but "what happens after they realise this dream? Are they happier or not?" says Xing.

All the characters in the series are of the artist herself. In one scene, she is a runaway bride, in another a murderer. "I [could be] a white-collar office worker brought to despair by job pressures and spiritual emptiness or a young girl who, in a moment of unrestrained rage, killed her lover ... these images represent the state of urban life today."

The individual is small and weak in a city, a man-made world ... everyone is anonymous

Xing Danwen

Xing is big on drama. She was recently asked whether she enjoys nature. "I like nature but I don't feel I could be stimulated or inspired artistically by it. Beautiful natural surroundings give me a feeling of calm, but they don't give me the energy to be creative."

"So I answered, I like disasters. I like disasters created by human beings and I think that tragedy inspires me to be innovative ... I like the beauty of tragedy and I [want to] create my fiction based on my playful ideas."

Xing was initially trained as a painter – she graduated from the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing in 1992 – but learned how to use a camera because she was fascinated by the medium of photography.

After working as a photojournalist in the 1990s – an experience that she says made her more socially aware – Xing attended the School of Visual Arts in New York on an Asian Cultural Council grant, graduating with a master's degree in fine arts in 2001.

Her works have challenged traditional concepts of Chinese society and female identity. She has exhibited at, and is collected by,

major museums, including the Whitney Museum of American Art and the International Centre for Photography in New York and Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris.

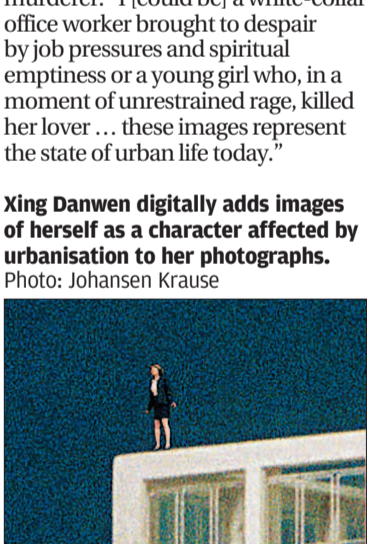
Xing says her fantasies are never too far from reality. *Urban Fiction* was her major work between 2004 and 2006, but she decided not to conclude the project because she still has many images she would like to add. She also remains interested in architecture.

She admits that the themes of urbanisation, modernisation and globalisation comprise well-trodden ground for mainland artists. But that is why exploring these issues continues to be challenging.

"Being an artist you have to be aware of how to create something original and new. There is so much talent in the world ... It's difficult to be different, but it becomes a challenge," says Xing.

"The joy and fun is to create and find an original voice and contribute something new to the artistic language. [Artists] should really struggle for that and it is not easy."

The artist says her focus is on human existence and behaviour and pays attention to the smallest details in life. "I'm interested in things that may not be dramatic to others, but that I find dramatic. An ordinary, common story could become something 'chewy or tasty' that people living the same experience may find resonance in."



Xing Danwen digitally adds images of herself as a character affected by urbanisation to her photographs. Photo: Johansen Krause

This was an unusually large-scale production for the company, with an original score by local composer Chan Hing-yan and the participation of students from the HK Academy for Performing Arts. The choreography was by Tsao, Helen Lai, Xing Liang and five of the company's dancers. While it was a nice idea to involve more company members in the anniversary year, having so many voices made for inconsistency in style.

The powerful opening sequence by Xing created the sense of an eternal cycle of life to good effect as the dancers circled the stage

continuously, stopping from time to time to interact or dance alone.

The second section illustrating the five elements (water, fire, wood, metal and earth) was choreographed by Lai Tak-wai, Luo Fan, Noel Pong, Dominic Wong and Yang Yizi. Well performed by the students, it looked like a 19th century ballet divertissement, a resemblance accentuated by Edmond Wong's tacky costumes.

Helen Lai opened the third section with a solo for Lam Po, which developed into a brief duet with Qiao Yang (below, left, with Lam). This was one of the highlights, as were the linking sections for the two dancers earlier on.

Poet Li Bai Asian Performing Arts of Colorado HK Cultural Centre Grand Theatre Reviewed: Dec 4

While the Hong Kong Philharmonic was roistering through a Li Bai drinking poem in Mahler's *Song of the Earth* at the Cultural Centre Concert Hall on Friday, the theatre was coincidentally exposing the Tang dynasty man of letters as a weary old soak, about to come to a watery end in Guo Wenjing's splendid 2007 chamber opera, *Poet Li Bai*.

Mahler invested angst and huge forces in the poetry; *Poet Li Bai* is a model of profound simplicity. Li Bai lives in exile on a boat, consoling himself in wine and communing with the moon; flashback to better times at the Imperial Court where he is fawned over before being discarded; rebound to the final take where he surrenders himself in confusion not to the moon, but to its reflection in the water.

The five-act, 90-minute work is like porcelain: each aspect of the production is delicately wrought.

The music is suffused with oriental flavours and gentleness on the ear; the opening of the third act (Li Bai at the Imperial Palace) is pure Cecile B. DeMille. The Opera Hong Kong Chorus excelled in a multifaceted role, while the



principal soloists combined flawless technique with subtle acting.

As Li Bai, Tian Haojiang's gripping bass voice commanded the stage, flipping to falsetto with acrobatic precision; tenor Chi Liming (above, right, with Tian) was a full-bodied Wine; soprano Zhou Xiaolin, as Moon, floated her lines beautifully; Peking opera tenor Jiang Qihu was on form as Poetry and Magistrate.

Direction, sets, costumes and lighting were all telling in their simplicity, throwing the spotlight onto the libretto by Diana Liao and Xu Ying in which not a word is wasted. Under Yip Wing-sie, the Hong Kong Sinfonietta gave impressive support from the pit.

**Sam Olliver**

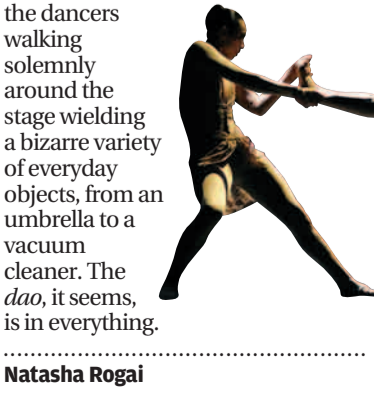
show them the money 8x2 4C

SCMP has more making active news than any other Hong Kong newspaper

show them the money 8x2 4C

SCMP has more making active news than any other Hong Kong newspaper

South China Morning Post



Natasha Rogai