

Ceramic men show sculptor's humor

By Kevin Lynch

The Capital Times

"I like to joke and this is black humor!" says Chinese sculptor Xiaoping Luo with a glint in his eye. He gestures toward the lineup of ceramic men standing before him.

These familiar faces all wear feckless grins as if they're all playing along with a huge nasty prank. It's like a police lineup of suspects who all happen to be world leaders.

Of course the underlying joke is deadly serious.

"You see, they are also surrounded by red, which in China is the most lovely color,"

Luo purrs. "But there is another meaning. When people make war there is blood everywhere."

Luo's satirical ceramic figures, collectively titled the "Times Square Series," are part of a large exhibit of Chinese art on display at the Promega

Biopharmaceutical Technology Center, 5445 E. Cheryl Parkway, through June 10. The show includes ceramic teapots by Luo and his wife, Junya Shao, and traditional Chinese brush paintings and calligraphy by members of Madison's Chinese Fine Arts Association.

Luo's lineup of 3-foot-tall political suspects includes George Bush, Saddam Hussein, Osama bin Laden, Bill Clinton, Jiang Zemin, Kofi Annan, Ariel Sharon and Yasser Arafat,

dubiously flashing the peace symbol.

A separate piece in the "Times Square Series" depicts life-size heads of George Bush and Saddam Hussein. Bush wears a bellicose expression on his face, befitting the most aggressive power figure in international politics. Both men are flashing the peace sign with their hands but they seem to be sinking into a void.

What is unusual about the leaders is that they are dressed in Chinese peasant clothing, which is a tradition at international conferences in China, Luo explains.

"When they all get together the talk is very funny, and very stupid," he says.

But there is a more philosophical motive and viewpoint just beneath the surface of Luo's satirical edginess.

In fact, these little ceramic men are less grotesque caricatures than doll-like figures. By remaking these embodiments of global conflict into harmless,

comical toys, Luo expresses a desire for a peaceful ingenuous vision more typical of innocent children.

But clearly this postmodern realist is not indulging in wishful thinking either.

"Chances are that we cannot change the world," Luo says. "As an artist, using my artistic license, I can contribute to this feeling of loss. I can bring them together. I have

See **SCULPTOR**, Page 4B



humor



Chinese sculptor Xiaoping Luo (above) created a satirical series of ceramic sculptures depicting world leaders; on display at the Promega Center through June 10. George Bush and Saddam Hussein (left) appear to be sinking into the void of their own overreaching arrogance in this sculpture by Xiaoping Luo.

Sculptor

■ Continued from Page 1B

brought them to Times Square and asked them to lay down their arms, to stop conflicts and terrorist activities, and to abandon their power politics.

"They may never be able to agree with each other and that is acceptable," he says. "We may never know their true thoughts, but it does not matter. We are only striving for one joyful smile before we leave for home — one last sweet dream."

That hopeful, dreamlike lyricism is a distinct part of this artist's personality, and it is beautifully embodied in a sculpture of a sleeping woman that sits near the lineup of leaders. She has a forlorn, faintly blissful expression on her face, which rests on her arms. She seems to express the longing of ordinary humans for a peaceful world.

Luo shows more of his poetic side in the fine ceramic teapots on display with pots by his wife Shao. There's also a touch of the surreal in their work, with a few teapots sporting human fingers for the legs and handle.

The Chinese Fine Art Asso-

ciation boasts an exquisite array of work at Promega, mostly of landscapes and nature imagery, executed superbly in traditional Chinese brush strokes, which are as controlled as they are unfettered in spirit.

Of special note are large scrolls, hanging on the balcony level. These works were entered in an international watercolor ink competition and several won awards.

Organized in 1999 by five nonprofessional artists, the Madison group now has 30 members. The artists learned traditional techniques from Madison-based Yueh-mei Cheng, Taiwan-born master of Chinese art.

The group was formed because "art is very solitary, but we learn art together this way," says association spokesperson Vina Yang. "This way we have incentive as a group and we have fun. We want to portray this as a cultural exchange for everyone to enjoy. We often paint things in our daily life, from our own back yard. This brings us closer to our neighbors and our community."

Nonprofessional artists are welcome to join the association. Interested persons may contact Vina Yang at 798-1005 or write to CFAA, PO Box 56184, Madison WI 53705.

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