

Gu Xiong

BARRICADE OF BICYCLES - JUNE 4TH 1989 & CAFETERIA #1

Gu Xiong

BY CHRISTOPHER BRAYSHAW

Artist's Statement (1994)

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By Christopher Brayshaw, 1999

Gu Xiong was born in 1953 in Chongqing, Sichuan Province, in the People's Republic of China. He received his Bachelor of Fine Art (1982) and Master of Fine Art (1985) from the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute. In the early 1990s, he was invited to Canada to attend an artists' residency at the Walter Phillips Gallery, Banff, by senior Vancouver curator Alvin Balkind. Soon thereafter, Gu immigrated to Canada with his young family. For several years, he worked at the University of British Columbia, first as a food service worker and later as a printmaking technician

Gu Xiong
Barricade of Bicycles - June 4th 1989,
1993 (detail)

silkscreen print on paper, 46/50
(47.5 x 86.3 cm)
SAG 1996.04.01

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Photographs by Cameron Heryet



An Open Book

a catalogue of artworks from the Surrey Art Gallery's Permanent Collection

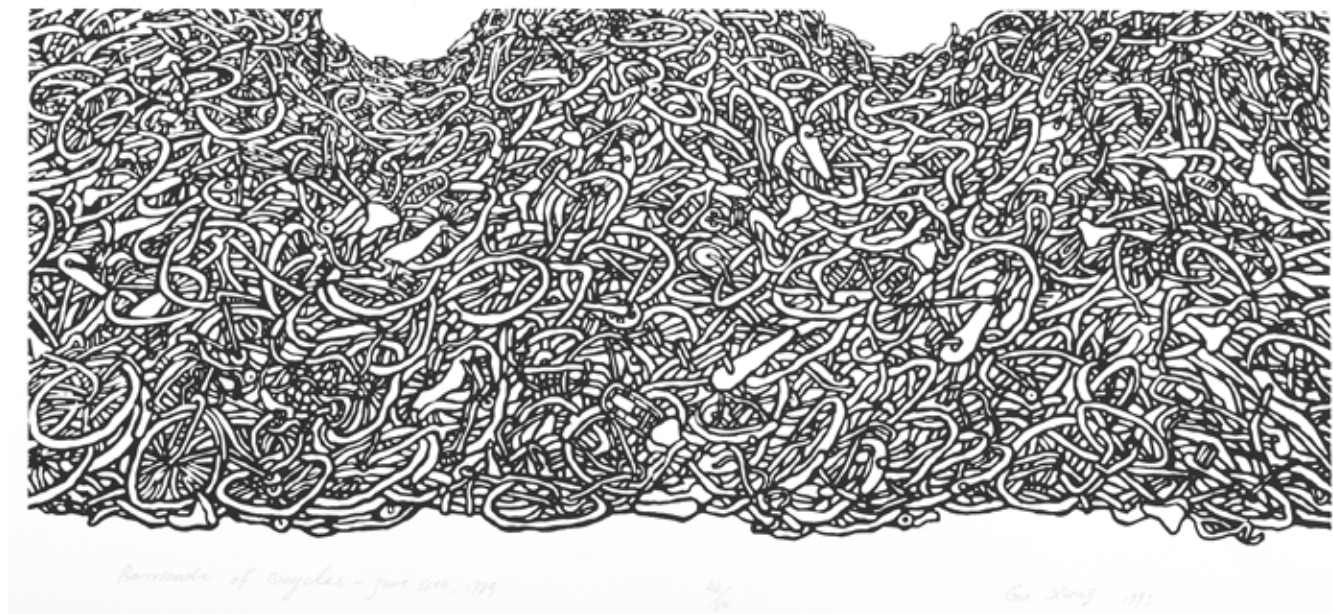
for the Fine Arts Department. Gu has exhibited his paintings, prints, and performance-based works in a wide variety of regional and international contexts, including exhibitions at the Walter Phillips Gallery; Vancouver Art Gallery; Western Front Lodge, Vancouver; Open Space Gallery, Victoria; Diane Farris Gallery, Vancouver; and the 1995 Kwangju Biennale, Kwangju, Korea.

Whereas many artists treat printmaking as a conceptually separate area from their main art practice, for Gu Xiong, printmaking, like sketching, is a way of testing out ideas which he may later realize as a painting or a site-specific installation.

Often, Gu's prints have a critical relationship to Western art history. For example, the print *Barricade of Bicycles* (1993), commemorates the Chinese killed by PRC (People's Republic of China) soldiers in Tiananmen Square in 1989. The print is also the basis for Xiong's site-specific, mixed media installation of the same name, which was installed at North Vancouver's Presentation House Gallery in the

summer of 1999 as part of the group exhibition *War Zones*. Each bicycle represents a human body, but the way the bicycles are flattened and dispersed across the page recalls the large-scale abstract expressionist compositions of American painter Jackson Pollock.

Similarly, the crushed cans and cutlery depicted in *Cafeteria #1* (1993) reference Andy Warhol's Pop Art experiments. In both cases, Gu injects his appropriated forms with a kind of subjectivity which brushes his art-historical sources "against the grain." For example, Warhol's prints and drawings of near-identical crushed cans and bottles were symbols of capitalism's endemic spread through all aspects of human life. Warhol, significantly, took no position as to whether this transformation was good or bad, but was simply content to represent it. An artist's job, he implied, was to simply present a historical situation, without passing explicit judgement on it. Gu turns Warhol's indifference on its head; for him, the cans and bottles are the residue of a lifestyle he was forced to deal with daily, while working at



Gu Xiong, *Barricade of Bicycles - June 4th 1989*, 1993, silkscreen print on paper, 46/50 (47.5 x 86.3 cm), SAG 1996.04.01 Acquired with the support of the Canada Council for the Arts Acquisition Assistance program / et avec l'aide du programme d'aide aux acquisitions du Conseil des Arts du Canada. Photograph by Cameron Heryet.

a repetitive, intellectually unchallenging job at UBC, one far removed from his early life experiences in the People's Republic of China and his formal training as an artist and an art educator. In this situation, Gu Xiong could not afford the luxury, as could Warhol, of the appearance of neutrality. In all of his work to date, Gu foregrounds his own subjectivity, making explicit his own intellectual development and his thoughtful hybridisation of Chinese and Western aesthetics and art history.

Artist's Statement (1993)

Barricade of Bicycles - June 4th 1989

Between May 20th and June 4th, 1989, in Beijing, people made a lot of barricades to stop the Army entering Tiananmen Square. The barricade of bicycles was one of them.

One bicycle is one person. Many bicycles are together. There is unity. It is people's power.

Tanks can roll over the barricades of bicycles, but people's inner power is not conquered.

People's power is eternal.



Gu Xiong, *Cafeteria #1*, 1993 silkscreen print on paper, 39/50 (38.8 x 58.8 cm) SAG 1996.04.02 Acquired with the support of the Canada Council for the Arts Acquisition Assistance program / et avec l'aide du programme d'aide aux acquisitions du Conseil des Arts du Canada. Photograph by Cameron Heryet.

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