

Head quakes and heartaches



To go or not Toguo Artists Guo and Toguo widen our horizons

Babies, wolves, angels and demons – **Stacey Duff** eyes them all in a new show that rings all too human

At Hadrien de Montferrand Gallery in 798, two artists – one African, one Chinese – have put up a show that ultimately takes human nature as its common ground.

The works-on-paper show marks the Beijing debut for Cameroon-born artist Barthélémy Toguo. Toguo, 42, trained in the Ivory Coast, Germany and France, where he recently acquired citizenship. But as a citizen of the world he did not cater this series of drawings to a local audience. 'I try to explore universal things in my art,' says Toguo. 'My art is not just about African problems – it's universal.'

Toguo says that his current series of ink drawings, entitled *Devils' Heads*, 'show how men can be vicious – like wolves – to other men'. Executed on 300g Arches paper, the devils' heads each appear in silhouette, either in profile or head on. Tacks appear stuck into their flesh – they are vicious but wounded. 'My art is an exploration of all of life's manifestations,' says Toguo, 'the nice and the bad, beauty and suffering.'

Chengdu-based painter Guo Wei, 49, says he has participated in group shows where the artists slung-and-hung their pieces side-by-side without developing any dialogue between works. 'This time,' says a rather

cheerful, laid-back Guo, 'I wanted my paintings to respond to the other artist.' In what appears to be in polar opposite to Toguo's devilish heads, Guo has depicted the heads of infants, as if juxtaposing evil and innocence.

But it's not that black and white. Many of the infants have panged expressions. Their bodies appear maimed. They're often crying.

Sometimes their expressions are so ambivalent that one doubts the goodness of their nature – and where their nature is leading them. Guo, who speaks of his babies as riddles, says, 'We don't know the answer to these conundrums, whether each child is a devil or an angel, because the children are still growing.' He adds, 'I can only hope they grow into angels.'

Weaving between French and broken English, a similar note of compassion runs through Toguo's voice that artists see both the good with the bad, the vicious with the sweet – and what he sees is what he draws. 'Even if we are white, or yellow, or black, the most important thing is the universal,' says Toguo, who has opened a foundation for artists in his native Cameroon. Guo and Toguo have graced us here with a refreshing collaboration in a city where universals are often ditched for provincial discussions of what is Chinese and what is not.

Guo Wei and Barthélémy Toguo are showing at Hadrien de Montferrand until Sunday 14. See listings.

