

# Serene Yellow Earth is compelling

By ALEX PATTERSON

Beginning with beautifully composed shots of some of the most bizarre desert landscapes east of the Grand Canyon, the acclaimed new film from the People's Republic of China gently lures the viewer into a fascinating foreign world. Rightly called "the most impressive film from mainland China unveiled so far in the West," *Yellow Earth* is quiet, delicate, unmistakably Eastern in its serenity, and surprisingly compelling.

*Yellow Earth* received its North American premiere at last summer's Montreal Film Festival where it competed with another recent Chinese feature, *Border Town*. While *Border Town* was so Eastern that many Westerners found it merely bewildering, *Yellow Earth* is not only comprehensible but enjoyable. Consequently, there are no present plans for the distribution of *Border Town* in North America, but *Yellow Earth* has opened here to good reviews and should find many friends among both Orientals and Occidentals.

The story of a young girl's fear of her imminent arranged marriage is told simply and directly, and goes easy on the Communist propaganda. Unlike the Peking Opera's repertoire of political musicals—legendary for both their ideological rigidity and their capacity for putting foreigners to sleep—this movie is neither about a noble struggle to overthrow evil landowners, nor is it about increases in tractor production. Instead, it's an innocent—even chaste—kind of love story, with the agit-prop relegated to

simmering comfortably on the back burner.

Into an impoverished village in the northern province of Shaanxi in the spring of 1939 walks a mysterious, grey-uniformed official from the city. Gu Qing is collecting folk songs on his travels, on commission from the Chinese Army for their war with Japan. Though he arouses some suspicion among the villagers, he is allowed to lodge in the shack of the pretty 13-year-old Cui Qiao (Xue Bai), her dense younger brother and her grizzled father.

This gang of four constitutes the main cast of the film, and all of them deliver convincing, understated performances. Tan Tuo, who possesses a ventriloquist's talent for speaking without moving his lips; is especially fine as the ox-driving Dad. This ploughman's lunch consists of a meagre ration of rice complete with chaff. Gu Qing—who is spreading the news about Mao while he transcribes the local songs—tells him that the future-Chairman wants to see the day when peasants will eat chaffless rice. He also mentions that in the south, young women wear their hair short and marry of their own choice, with no interference from age matchmakers. How are you going to keep young Cui Qiao down on the farm now that she knows of these modernizations? *Yellow Earth* could be subtitled *The One About the Travelling Revolutionary and the Farmer's Daughter*.

Gu Qing's visit, while friendly, represents a challenge to the customs of centuries, and introduces into the

film the themes of change versus tradition, reason versus superstition, love versus expedience and socialism versus feudalism. These conflicts are neatly handled by first-time director Chen Kaige, who before this had been serving his apprenticeship in Chinese television. He has also brought to his film some inventive camerawork, fluid editing and even

some decadent Western lyricism and slow motion. The folk dances on the girl's wedding day—scores of celebrants identically dressed in blue cloth, white headbands and red sashes banging drums and high-kicking like Little Red Rockettes—are excitingly captured. The colors are bright and the quality is high—and, yes, the earth really is yellow.



As the actors speak in the Mandarin dialect, subtitles are thoughtfully provided in both English and Chinese.

## L'art: think about it . . .

By J. MARK SPROUL

You don't have to be bilingual to appreciate *L'art Pense*, an exhibition of work by twelve Franco-Ontarian artists showing at the Glendon Gallery until March 23.

Circulated by the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts' Extension Services on behalf of the Societe d'Esthetique du Quebec, *L'art Pense* (art thinks) includes work in a wide variety of mediums. Painting, photography and sculpture are only some of the mediums used by the artists to create work which challenges the intellect of the viewer. While all the artists come from French-speaking backgrounds, the culture from which their work emerges bears little significance to the viewer's experience. Language and cultural barriers are non-existent in the thinking exercise presented by the exhibition.

A multi-media work by artist Sorel Cohen, entitled *An Extended*

and *Continuous Metaphor*, #15, embodies the spirit of *L'art Pense*. The work is a sequential, photographic metaphor. The first photo shows the artist viewing a painted, almost shadowlike portrait of herself in a different attitude. The second photo of the sequence is a photo of the artist posing, while a second image of her paints this pose onto a shadowlike canvas. The last photo of the sequence shows the artist viewing a shadowy image of herself in the distance, with an easel standing in shadows next to this image. All the painted images face forward, while the clear, contemplative photos of the artist face the shadow-figures, back turned to the viewer. The multiplicity of thoughts available in viewing the images individually and collectively ultimately suggest a metaphor appropriate to the entire exhibit. The artist contemplates his/her art while contemplating the relationships between him/herself, the viewer and the medium.

Another piece that deals with these relationships is *Nailing Bibles* by Rober Racine. Two open bibles are nailed to a piece of plywood with a connecting piece of plexiglass nailed to the two adjacent pages. A piece of used typewriter correcting paper hangs between the bibles and the plexiglass is covered with white writing. The bibles are in French but if the individual words have little meaning for the viewer the work as a whole provides more than ample food for thought.

Another work by Racine focuses on a page of a French dictionary. Words have been cut out of certain parts and a mirror shows through from behind so that a search for the absent words reveals the spectator looking at him/herself. The missing words are not the specific concern. It is ourselves and our relationship to language that is the topic of the piece. This not only relates ourselves to the art, it relates to our understanding of the world since we interpret the world with a representation of symbols. Since these symbols are generally arbitrary for most languages, what does it matter if you don't understand a specific language?

*L'art Pense* opened concurrently with the Visual Arts Franco-Ontarian conference which was held on Glendon campus February 20-22. Sponsored by the Ontario Arts Council, the conference provided a forum for Ontario's Francophone artists to meet and discuss issues such as broader exposure and modes of representation in their art. While the conference drew together artists of a particular culture, the collective work of *L'art Pense* crosses the boundaries of culture and language, proving not only that 'art thinks' but that art can make one think.

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