

frieze

Zhu Yu

Long March Space

In 2000, the artist Zhu Yu shocked the world with *Dinner – Eating People*, a series of photographs documenting the artist calmly procuring, preparing and devouring what was identified as a six-month-old stillborn human foetus. The piece was intended for ‘Fuck Off’, the infamous exhibition organized by Feng Boyi and Ai Weiwei as an aggressive alternative to the Third Shanghai Biennale, which they felt had been tailored to prove how well Chinese artists could conform to the expectations of international audiences. While Zhu’s photographs were pulled at the last minute for fear of censors, the images took on another existence after being picked up by international media as supposed evidence of an outrageous ‘baby-eating’ trend in China. The clarification that these photos were part of an art performance did little to allay the widespread indignation.

But *Dinner – Eating People* was not a performance. Zhu insists that he framed the piece as ‘conceptual photography’, scripting it as cinematography rather than as an action. The images belonged to a larger series experimenting with the use of human flesh in art, partially in response to the shock tactics prevalent in the Chinese art scene at the time, but also as a genuine inquiry into the tyranny of ‘morality’ over human behaviour. (Such tactics were identified and formalized in the exhibitions ‘Post-Sense Sensibility: Alien Bodies and Delusion’ in 1999 and ‘Infatuated with Injury’ in 2000, which both packaged an engagement with the abject – human cadavers, animal carcasses, etc. – as a declaration of independence from the Western art market.) Zhu was not entirely unprepared for the public reaction; following an earlier work in which he made jam out of human brains, he staged his own trial for ‘Abuses of Human Corpses’ (in which, unsurprisingly, the artist triumphed). In 2004, satisfied that he had thoroughly exhausted this line of questioning (garnering a reputation as one of the world’s most reviled artists in the process), Zhu turned to painting. His subject matter became human remains of a different type: the scraps of leftover food on unwashed dinner plates.

About this review

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By *Kate Sutton*



Zhu Yu, 'Separation', 2015, exhibition view

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Zhu Yu, *Stain PO1*, 2015, oil on canvas, 80 x 60 cm

Curated by Colin Chinnery (a frieze contributing editor), 'Separation' surveyed over a decade of Zhu's painting in an attempt to forge a new narrative for the artist. Even without any knowledge of Zhu's scandalous past, the exhibition structure – which wound a set path through the gallery – suggested gestation. It opened with 'Stains' (2008–ongoing), a series of oil on canvas works depicting used teacups seen from above, their rims lined with faint residue. Easily mistaken for ink paintings, the whispery early 'Stains' appear as zygotic masses, swirling in sky-blue sacs of embryonic fluid. As the series develops, the residue starts to suggest the forms of human organs, boulders or broken figurines swaddled in tarpaulin, like garden sculptures wrapped up for winter. Midway through the exhibition, the 'Stains' gave way to four photorealistic paintings of pebbles. The concrete calcification of millennia of waste, the stones glisten as if wet and appear cool to the touch, while casting warm shadows on the emptied colour field below.

The final gallery was dedicated to the artist's 'Leftover' paintings (2003–ongoing): systematic scenes of dirty plates,

also rendered from a bird's-eye-view. Set on monochromatic backgrounds of dusty rose or faded cornflower, the ceramic surfaces gleam with pools of oil, laced with the stray capillaries of unwanted noodles. The 'greasiness' of the images evokes a visceral response almost as stomach-churning as the explicit imagery of *Dinner – Eating People*. In the accompanying text, Zhu stated that the goal of this exhibition (as perhaps suggested by its title) was to forge a complete 'product' out of his last decade of work. 'Separation' may have been meant as a declaration of the artist's independence from his past but, like the tannin left in teacups, some residues are not so easily removed.

Kate Sutton

Frieze

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