

PRESS RELEASE

“Zhao Gang”

Booth 7, West Bund Art & Design, Shanghai

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For the West Bund Art & Design Fair, Long March Space (Booth 7) presents Zhao Gang’s first solo exhibition after representing the artist. The choice selection features historically important artworks by Zhao, including seminal works from the eighties, as well as ones from different artistic periods in the thirty years that ensued. Taking the format of a solo exhibition, it sorts through a number of significant themes and motifs in Zhao’s practice, presenting the defining characteristics of which as a unique case in contemporary Chinese art.

The early stages in Zhao’s art practice already proved remarkable—at age 18, he had participated in the Stars exhibition that kicked off his career, and subsequently left China to study in Maastricht in the Netherlands. Since 1976, Zhao’s ingenious paint brush conjures up a variety of existentialist forms: an evening landscape viewed from a tall building, his silhouette seen from behind, and abstract-expressionist paintings populated with obscure imagery. Vacillating between light and shadow, the lighting in these paintings appears gentle and smooth, bearing a quality that could only be found in his peer unofficial painters at the time. His abstract images often gave off a feeling of loss of gravity and temporary suspension. The so-called unofficial art that blossomed as part of the new cultural landscape during this period came out of the death of conventional realism. The critics, such as Michael Murray and Michael Sullivan, tend to associate their thematic imagery of ruins with the rebirth of culture. One may say that this kind of rebirth corresponds to the patricidal impulse that drove these artists to separate themselves from the realism-dominated narratives found in old forms of official art.

Such artistic trajectory has carried on even after Zhao left Beijing in 1983, and was continued up to the early nineties. At that time, many of the so-called unofficial artists had moved abroad. For American society in the 90s, Zhao was more or less seen as an orphan of the Cold War, a historical legacy. After the artist relocated to New York, he took up the trajectory of “rebirth” that came out of the Stars Group and reworked it from “a new perspective”.

The second rebirth in Zhao’s painting took place around 1995, and thereafter became the basis of his artistic style. Within it, some past principles were preserved, yet his prolificacy only made these themes and motifs more flexible: for example, he started to intentionally stress on the spatial orientation of painting; some base colors would cover the outlining thread in the forefront; or, harsh brushstrokes were directly applied to the canvas, standing against instead of blending in with the depicted images. In a series of works initiated in 1996, Zhao use oil paint to transfer depictions of houses and erotic sceneries found in Song Dynasty

Address: 798 Art District, 4 Jiuxianqiao Rd., Chaoyang District, Beijing

Mailing: Long March Space. Mailbox 8503, Beijing. P.R. China 100015

地址：北京市朝阳区酒仙桥路4号798艺术区 | 邮址：北京市8503信箱长征空间 邮编100015

boundary paintings onto canvases. He had no interest in finding the equilibrium between the two mediums of painting. Instead, the previously delicate brushwork was replaced by traces of incongruous pigments that testified to the displacement between the content and its habitual medium. This disequilibrium also relates to the cultural context giving rise to these different materials. The method of negation, in stripping things away from their genealogy, leaves behind traces of identity, a sort of dubious existence. The subjects that Zhao chose to portray, more or less retain qualities in his earlier career. For example, he made a series of semi-autobiographical works depicting immigrant workers from various enclaves of Chinatown, entitled *Spy Portrait*. After Zhao returned to Beijing in 2006, he skillfully employed the psychology of self-negation, identifying it with self-deprecation. From political underdogs to themes rarely touched upon by mainstream history, foreign clans who perished and never were to rise again, to intellectuals banished to herd sheep at the border, the artist showed deep appreciation for characters who suffered failure when success was within reach. Female bodies tormented by sickness, Zhao described them as “sick man”. The deformation of the body is a form of sickness, and, in coinciding with the form of Zhao’s brushstrokes, evokes the historically derogatory term used to describe the Chinese nation, “Sick Man of Asia”.

When Zhao returned to China in 2006, he started organizing a series of memories regarding the “Cultural Revolution”. The Chineseness that he mobilized allowed audiences outside of China to connect with his personal experiences when reading his work. In the eyes of Zhao’s contemporary Chinese peers, these works could not have been made from the local Chinese perspectives. It was more akin to a particular cultural capital shared by Chinese immigrants abroad. At least after the Beijing Olympics in 2008, red memory was no longer seen as a positive element by producers of visual art local to China, though even after Zhao’s return to China, he still upheld such undervalued “hybrid” painting identity. Embodying the so-called singular-plural, Zhao always kept his works on the boundary separating the inside and outside of identity. To use the words of art critic Feng Boyi, that fine line occupies the “critical juncture points of Chinese history” (Feng, 2006).

Generally speaking, the subjects that Zhao deals with in his work involve largely biographical components. Themes such as the landscapes in peripheral areas, the human body, and still-life are projections of independent artists’ petty-bourgeois sentiments back in the 70s in China. At that time, to concern oneself with these materials was to rebel against official realism (in order to more closely approximate the styles found in catalogs of Western art that were trending among artists at the time, some even organized trips to Qingdao to paint landscapes featuring German architecture, or in one case Zhao invite an Uyghur lady from Xinjiang to model for him). Thirty years on, the subjects that Zhao depicts now have long lost their provocativeness. Today, taking up his brush again to paint bonsais and landscapes, Zhao always attempts to leave behind unsavory brushstrokes. It conveys the cruel mockery that an era has played on him. Yet to put these feelings back onto the painterly field, is to allow the audience to experience the effrontery that these images have had for their time.

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About the artist

Zhao Gang (b. 1961, Beijing) currently lives and works in New York and Beijing. He made his artistic debut as a member of the Stars Group, one of the first avant-garde artist groups to open the era of contemporary art in China, when he was 18 years old. Shortly thereafter he pursued formal art education in Europe then New York, graduated from State Academy of Fine Art, Maastricht, the Netherlands; Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, USA; MFA, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, USA. Later after that, Zhao Gang lived for over two decades beyond seas, developing a diverse body of work as his perspective became distinctively international. Since returning to Beijing in 2006, Zhao Gang has turned his ever-expanding focus toward the entanglement of his personal past with Chinese history and his unique position, at once a native and a newcomer, in China today. His selected museum solo exhibitions include: *The Road to Serfdom II*, Museo de Arte Contemporáneo, Santiago, Chile; *Paramour's Garden*, Suzhou Museum, Suzhou, China, 2015; *The Road to Serfdom*, Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing, China, 2015; *Sick Man: Zhao Gang*, Today Art Museum, Beijing, China, 2011. His selected group exhibitions include: *The Door*, P.S.1 Institute of the Arts/Blum Helman Gallery, New York, USA, 1990. He participated in important biennial/triennial exhibitions such as Guangzhou Triennial, 2008; PERFORMA 07, New York; and Yokohama Triennial, 2005.

Media enquiries

press@longmarchspace.com

+86(0)10 5978 976

Address: 798 Art District, 4 Jiuxianqiao Rd., Chaoyang District, Beijing

Mailing: Long March Space. Mailbox 8503, Beijing. P.R. China 100015

地址: 北京市朝阳区酒仙桥路4号798艺术区 | 邮址: 北京市8503信箱长征空间 邮编 100015