

THE PARKETT SERIES WITH CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS / DIE PARKETT-REIHE MIT GEGENWARTSKÜNSTLERN

# PARKETT

NO. 96 · 2015

CHF 55 / € 39 / US \$ 45

EDITIONS  
FOR  
PARKETT

INSERT:  
ISABELLE  
CORNARO

MARC CAMILLE  
CHAIMOWICZ

PAMELA  
ROSENKRANZ

JOHN  
WATERS

XU  
ZHEN

# XU ZHEN



XU ZHEN, ETERNITY – SUI DYNASTY GOLD GILDED AND PAINTED STANDING  
BODHISATTVA, VENUS DE VIENNE, 2014, glass fiber reinforced concrete, marble grains,  
sandstone grains, mineral pigments, marble, metal, each  $43\frac{1}{4} \times 33\frac{1}{2} \times 140\frac{1}{2}$ ,"  
produced by MadeIn Company / EWIGKEIT – VERGOLDETER UND BEMALTER  
STEHENDER BODHISATTVA, SUI DYNASTIE, VENUS DE VIENNE, glasfaserverstärkter  
Beton, Marmorkörner, mineralische Pigmente, Marmor, Metall, je  $110 \times 85 \times 357$  cm.  
(ALL IMAGES COURTESY OF THE ARTIST)

# MOVING IN A BIGGER DIRECTION

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XU ZHEN & PHILIP TINARI

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**PHILIP TINARI:** You launched MadeIn Company in 2009, and four years later, the company (re-) released “Xu Zhen” as a brand. To use your own formulation, if the studio is a company and your works are various product lines, how do you judge the company’s returns?

**XU ZHEN:** An art company is not a regular company, but it’s also not an artist’s studio, so results are hard to measure. It’s like Apple, which announces its earnings every quarter but is not only interested in how much money it makes—Apple wants to have a cultural impact, for people to not only pay attention to its products but adopt its style. Our returns are still very small, and will probably remain so for some time. We have always sought to do things methodically, with a management system, a performance-assessment system, and a financial calculus that takes

into account how much cash we have and how many projects we hope to undertake. The biggest problem is that art constantly changes the models by which it operates. So even if you prepare everything systematically, it is possible that a creative idea might change, and then you need to alter the entire system. For this reason, it is still difficult to find metrics, financial or otherwise, for anything other than specific aspects of our work. Overall, we are still in an exploratory phase.

**PT:** In the past, you and MadeIn Company have opened a gallery, operated a website, organized exhibitions of other artists, and made publications. Is MadeIn now more focused on producing art?

**XZ:** Actually, we are in the process of moving in a bigger direction. In the next few years, we might establish a MadeIn Museum of Art. But that would first require there to be a MadeIn Foundation. For that, we need a strong financial footing. I think it is still a matter of time, as the conditions do not yet seem ripe.

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*PHILIP TINARI* is director of the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing.

**PT:** Many new, mostly private museums have recently opened in China, and in particular, in Shanghai—and still more are planned. You have worked with many of these new institutions. How do you see the development of art institutions here in Shanghai, and in China more generally?

**XZ:** In the process of working with them, you encounter all sorts of new money and new people, and these people bring their own new values. In the best scenario, people like us might be able to turn this novelty into something progressive. The contemporary art scene in China is in the midst of a transition from an extremely small, underground circle to a larger audience. Art is gradually becoming integrated into society. This is normal and even necessary; only in this way can art's market and viewership grow, and artists become strangely important.

Those who have been in the scene since the 1980s and '90s complain or struggle with the notion that everyone wasn't so pragmatic before, that these new players have created this situation, that society has changed fast and now people only care about their interests. But I have always believed that art should keep moving forward. If getting something done today requires drastic costs, perhaps that's just a characteristic of our moment. It's a simple matter of investment and returns, and if you think the outlays are too high, then go and do what Gu Dexin did a few years ago and stop making work—there's no other way.

I'm not overly nostalgic. In ten years' time, we will be sitting here discussing 2015. Yesterday I was reading an article about Beijing in the early '90s, when there was the artist village in Yuanmingyuan. It was quite moving. The writer said, "I don't envy the people of that time, but I envy that time." And from where we sit now, how relaxed that moment looks! A bunch of people getting together to make art, and nothing else—how wonderful! But this is just like how love is represented in pop songs, when the reality of marriage is altogether different. I think contemporary art today is more like a marriage.

**PT:** You caught the tail end of the underground era of contemporary Chinese art. At that time, there was definitely a sense that art could challenge, could rebel against the mainstream values of Chinese

society, against the official cultural system, and indeed against one-party rule. Do you feel that spirit still exists?

**XZ:** I do. Because when I ask myself why I do what I do, it's still about the same thing, some sort of romantic notion. It's just that the means of expression have changed, and most important, the costs. Today an artist needs to make huge outlays to have the same impact he could have twenty years ago with just a small office. Why? Because the circumstances of production have changed. So we look busier today, but in essence, we are the same as ever.

**PT:** What is that "romantic notion"?

**XZ:** The expression of individual values. The individual's demand to be heard and respected. The joy that accrues from seeking it.

**PT:** A theme that I note throughout your work is the unlikely juxtaposition of contradictory symbols or states, and the sense of displacement thus formed. For example, I'm thinking of the routine of calisthenics you launched under the title *PHYSIQUE OF CONSCIOUSNESS* (2013), in which gestures of devotion and cultivation from a wide range of cultures and civilizations are put together into a single routine. It seems like a kind of creed, an ambiguous manifesto.

**XZ:** Yes, and it comes from personal experience. In my own house, we are Buddhist; other friends are Christian or Daoist. The more religions I come into contact with, the more I feel they are all correct. Yet I still feel empty, that life is ultimately meaningless. So I started thinking about whether there might be a way of putting all these things together, even if they would individually never want this to happen. That was the impetus for this work. The idea was to put things together on the level of physical activity. You could say this work is deeply religious, or deeply political, but you can also choose not to discuss those aspects and instead see it as an act of intellectual, anthropological classification. I am not the sort of artist who knows any one field intimately; I think mostly in terms of overall directions, and so I am well suited to make these sorts of comparative propositions. I am comfortable with innovating in terms of the larger structure, and not thinking too much about the finer details. That is my creative method. I feel that a work like this is a product of this contemporary moment,



XU ZHEN, *PHYSIQUE OF CONSCIOUSNESS MUSEUM*, 2014, Sapele wood, C-print, acrylic glass, glass, dimensions variable, produced by MadelN Company, exhibition view, "Xu Zhen – A MadelN Company Production," Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing, 2014 / *MUSEUM DER KONSTITUTION DES BEWUSSTSEINS*, Sapelli-Holz, C-Print, Acrylglas, Glas, Masse variabel, Ausstellungsansicht.

but it will not go out of fashion. And you will find that many of our works are moving in this same direction—contemporary creation, but hopefully of the sort that will not be filtered out by history, that can remain. Last year, I had a conversation with art historian Lu Mingjun about this shift from making particular works of art to something more akin to articulating a cultural sensibility.

**PT:** There is a lot of talk about “post-Internet art” right now. Do you feel the concept has any connection to what you do?

**XZ:** Everyone around me seems to have spent much of last year discussing two concepts—post-Internet and postproduction. Post-Internet finds easy acceptance among young artists because it looks so easy to replicate. Take something and break it down, spray

on it, paste something on the wall, draw a line—it's as if the term has given everyone the key to a new way of art-making. But as I said to my colleagues, we've been doing this stuff for years, even if we never codified it as a particular artistic movement. We are always working toward finished products, thinking little about the processes leading up to them. But if you look at our "TRUE IMAGE" (2010–) series, or the *PHYSIQUE OF CONSCIOUSNESS MUSEUM* (2013–)—a set of images mounted on acrylic boards and displayed in museum cases—they all seem quite post-Internet. I'm sure that this year there will be many more post-Internet works. I know young Chinese artists who have pivoted completely in that direction.

**PT:** And what about postproduction?

**XZ:** The concept comes from a book by Nicolas Bourriaud, who writes about how artists today use readymades in their creations. He sees the postproduction notion of the readymade as different from Duchamp's more absolute understanding, instead looking at combinations of different objects. This

notion perhaps already seems dated—the book was written in 2002—but it was just translated into Chinese this year, so everyone read it, and perhaps we have all processed it already. Post-Internet still needs to be digested, because its most important element is that it becomes so difficult to distinguish who made which work, or for that matter, if a work was made by a Chinese or a foreign artist. And this is very important for a new generation of artists here, who don't see a huge difference between themselves and artists from outside China.

**PT:** That's interesting, if only because contemporary art from China has historically relied on symbols and narratives that have some sort of direct connection to Chinese reality, Chinese traditions, Chinese politics. And it seems that this becomes less and less relevant as artists in China become more knowledgeable about dynamics beyond China and more incorporated into global networks.

**XZ:** Yes, and this page will definitely be turned. The generation of Huang Yong Ping, which came of age

XU ZHEN, *PHYSIQUE OF CONSCIOUSNESS MUSEUM – EPISTOMIA*, 2014, Saple wood, C-print, acrylic glass, glass, 67 x 39 1/2 x 67", produced by Madeln Company / *PHYSIK DES BEWUSSTSEINSMUSEUMS – EPISTOMIA*, Sapelli-Holz, C-Print, Acrylglas, Glas, 170 x 100 x 170 cm.



in the '80s and then moved to the West after 1989, firmly believes that we are Chinese, you are European, those others are American. But perhaps our generation is saying, sorry, we are all the same, and we're interested in completely different questions. This is a big shift.

You can see this in MadeIn's work. Previously, we made quite a number of works in different forms. You couldn't call them experimental, but they were less material. And perhaps now we are more interested in materiality, in rendering a logical verdict on the existence of the object. In obvious ways, we have upped our technical requirements for fabrication. Many people think this has to do with commercial pressures, but I consider it more a matter of requirements for the ontological presence of the artwork.

**PT:** That idea makes me think of Jeff Koons: The main argument advanced in his favor is that he turns material requirements into a kind of experimental practice, seeks perfection with a religious fervor, uses production as a way of refining and elaborating his concepts.

**XZ:** I feel like Koons's importance has not yet been truly felt. I have always believed that in a pragmatic art world, he is at the top. Others find him commercial, and their understanding stops on this level. The explanations you just mentioned are great, but many people don't bother to consider them. I think much of what he does is philosophical. If you polish something to that degree, if your requirements are that high, this is no longer a simple commercial question but an ontological one. I thought his retrospective

in New York last year, at the Whitney Museum, was an amazing exhibition. The Whitney looked a bit sad—it seems so gray inside—but this did not have any influence on the logic of the exhibition. The other day, the director of the Pompidou came by and asked me directly, "What is the difference between you and Koons?" I replied that Koons is an artist with a studio while we are a company; this is still different. And then he asked whether I thought Koons or Hirst was the greater artist. We spent much of last year researching these people, and I think Koons is the greater artist by far. Of course, Hirst made his shark, his cows, and with them brought up an entire generation of British art and that is amazing, but I still think more of Koons. His philosophy is incredibly consistent, and it's frightening the extent to which there are no superfluous works in his oeuvre. He's like a small child with a scarily high IQ. From those vacuum cleaners in his series "THE NEW" (1980–87) onward, everything is so complete. That's how I see it, but many people in China don't agree.

**PT:** Another artist I thought it might be interesting to talk about with you is Sigmar Polke.

**XZ:** Polke started from the perspective of "I," wanting to express something through art, whereas for Koons, the self seems to become unimportant. That is the direction I hope to move in. If you look at Polke's styles, they changed a great deal over the years; I used to find that incredibly impressive, but from a perspective of cultural strength and absoluteness, that diversity becomes a kind of flatness. Many people love his work, but perhaps no one loves it abso-



XU ZHEN, MADEIN CURVED VASE – BLUE AND JUN YAO GLAZED LOTUS SEEDPOD VASE, QIANLONG PERIOD, QING DYNASTY, 2014, porcelain, 6 1/4" x 6 1/4" x 12 1/4", produced by MadeIn Company, exhibition view, Long Museum, Shanghai, 2014 / MADEIN GEBOGENE VASE – LOTOSSAMEN-HÜLSEN-VASE, BLAU UND JUN-YAO-GLASIERT, QIANLONG-PERIODE, QING-DYNASTIE, Porzellan, 17 x 17 x 31 cm, Ausstellungsansicht.



XU ZHEN, *ETERNITY – NORTHERN QI STANDING BUDDHA, AMAZON AND EARBARIAN*, 2014, glass fiber reinforced concrete, marble grains, metal, gold foil, each 119 1/4 x 39 1/8 x 133 1/4", produced by Madeln Company, exhibition view, Long Museum, Shanghai, 2014 / *EWIGKEIT – STEHENDER BUDDHA, NÖRDLICHE QI, AMAZONE UND BARBAR*, glasfaserverstärkter Beton, Marmorkörner, Metall, Goldfolie, je 304 x 100 x 340 cm, Ausstellungsansicht.

lutely. Whereas with Koons, those who like the work, love it; and those who dislike it, hate it. So I consider him and Polke two different cultural forms.

**PT:** This desire to avoid self-expression seems like the impetus behind the "UNDER HEAVEN" (2012–) series, for which you apply pigment to the support with a cake decorator's bag and nozzle, to create paintings that look like gaudy birthday cakes.

**XZ:** Yes, and that's why I've become so interested in this idea of artworks as product lines. We are working on catalogues now to introduce our different series

of works, our product lines. They look and feel like automobile sales brochures.

**PT:** This drive toward outright corporatization is also a stylistic and aesthetic question. If you really want to achieve the look and texture of advertising, then the quality of the paper, the character of the layout, the feel of the texts all need to be considered.

**XZ:** We will gradually start to outsource this work to advertising companies. We just began a month ago, establishing an advertising division inside our own company, and changing our graphic design and



XU ZHEN, EUROPEAN  
THOUSAND-ARMS CLASSICAL  
SCULPTURE, 2014, glass fiber  
reinforced concrete, marble grains,  
mineral pigments, marble, metal,  
53 3/4 x 14 3/4 x 5 1/2'; produced by  
Madeln Company, exhibition view,  
Long Museum, Shanghai, 2014 /  
EUROPÄISCHE KLASSISCHE  
TAUSEND-HAND-SKULPTUR,  
glasfaserverstärkter Beton,  
Marmorkörner, Mineral-Pigmente,  
Marmor, Metall, 16,43 x 4,5 x 1,7 m,  
Ausstellungsansicht.



writing style accordingly. I find this a lot of fun. We tried to work with advertising companies from the beginning, but it has been difficult. They don't know what we want to do. Lately, we have been working on an advertisement for the "UNDER HEAVEN" paintings, but this also becomes a work of video art. And the posters we make might be photographic works in their own right. This is interesting—the many possibilities of so many different styles and ways of thinking.

PT: What does classical civilization, Western or Chinese, mean to you? It appears as a straw man in so many of your recent works, most recently the "ETERNITY" (2013–) series, where you juxtapose replicas of famous examples of Greek and Northern Wei sculptures—literally neck to neck—and yet I get the sense from our conversations that it's not something you feel particularly burdened by, or acutely compelled to overthrow. XZ: I don't think it needs to be overthrown. Like we were saying before, my overwhelming impression of



our current moment is that there are no clear national boundaries, and that perhaps my own values and those of my collaborators are not particularly Chinese. I don't really even think about these questions anymore, but when curators and museum people come to the studio, they often remark how what we are doing is unlike what they see elsewhere in China. I think that's great, because the way I work isn't very Chinese. People all over the world eat and drink and use more or less the same things, and many Chinese

traditions are long gone from our lives. Some people find this sad, but it's reality. And perhaps that's the biggest problem for our generation—we don't really even know what culture is. We are not infatuated with anything. I could never say that I love Chinese painting. I might like it, but not with any overwhelming passion. I believe that our generation is tasked with doing things, with making things, with creating. That is our special characteristic. As for what we specifically go about making—that seems less important.