

Chinese Painting: Zhang Xiaogang, Fang Lijun, Feng Mengbo

中國繪畫：張曉剛，方力鈞，馮夢波

The exhibition of the large-format paintings of three of the most significant Chinese painters of the middle generation, and of these, it is mainly Zhang Xiaogang who today stands at the pinnacle of the imaginary ladder not only in China, but also in the Euro-American art world. Even though all three painters emanate from the heritage of the European painting tradition, their work is unambiguously formed from Chinese reality and sensitivity.

In the dramaturgy of Galerie Rudolfinum, the formation of the Asian-Pacific area, and mainly of China in its current form, plays a significant role. From the first exhibition of current Chinese painting in 1997, which even then included the works of (among others) Zhang Xiaogang and Feng Mengbo, the Czech public has had the opportunity to see four exceedingly expansive projects at Galerii Rudolfinum, which included the creations of more than sixty Chinese artists from the areas of painting, video-art and art photography. The majority of these artists later belonged to some of the most frequent names of many large displays in some of the most renowned European and American galleries and museums. The actual exhibition is dedicated – in accordance with the growing significance of this phenomenon on the world scene – to current Chinese painting. Thanks to its diverse roots and points of origin, this form of Chinese painting occupies a very specific place in painting without the customary references to the past (in European terms), but consequently the unaccustomed, and that much more expected future.

The present-day Prague exhibition is conceived as a display of present creations. For each of the authors, key paintings from the 1990s are accented. These paintings are indigenous of private Chinese collections which characterize the fundamental aim of the works. Subsequently, there is a large area dedicated to the newest paintings. It is necessary to emphasize that all three painters conceived and created their most important works specifically for the Prague exhibition, and for the specific spaces in Galerie Rudolfinum, and that each of the authors was keenly aware of the significance of this project.

The painting of **Zhang Xiaogang** (* 1958), inspired by a family photograph from the time of the Cultural Revolution, but also by, for example, the European tradition of surrealism, examines the notion of identity in the Chinese culture of collectivism. His work focuses on the concept of “family” – concrete as well as expanded to the widest society, and Zhang’s portraits depict the unending genealogical line of imaginary forefathers and predecessors who are very similar to each other. The author also brought the concept of memory, a moment caught in the flow of time in its newest form, to the empty landscape and interiors through which the past flowed and remained but a nostalgic memory.

At the end of the 1980s, **Fang Lijun** (* 1963), one of the leading representatives of the so-called cynical realism, predominantly recast his personal childhood experiences into figural scenes of apparently harmonic calmness, but hiding the malicious reaction to domestic political events. The start of the new millennium brings his creation from local, genre scenes so far as to a monumental, flaming pathos of tumultuous scenes somewhere in the middle of a cloud between the sky and the earth, above the billowy sea elements. The new reality of his relieved hedonism in our environment unwillingly refers to transcendent reality of baroque ceiling frescos.

During the mid 1990s, from his painting origins in the spirit of political pop, Feng Mengbo (* 1966) moved the main crux of his creation to computer-generated video sequences. The line of these works, often criticizing the cynicism of computer games and aimed at utilizing their formal procedures, recently ended in a return to painting. Their foundation is a computer-designed image structure finished in reality by classic painting. The newest series of landscapes is an exceedingly richly overlaid account of the history of Chinese painting disciplines.

Since the 1980s in China, a certain revolution has occurred in art, in approaches to themes, in loosening of ties mainly toward a wider group responsibility, which was still generally attributed to art until the 1990's. It was maintained wholly by the artists without question and it was considered to be *conditio sine qua non*. The smooth and harmonic flow of the world without intervention from the outside was an ideal, the subject of unending discussions as well as the impulse of the constant search for guides and paths to it within the widest collective consensus. From the view of local history, the 1980s were the last period during which the old Chinese principle of generally felt obligation of the individual to contribute, through his art, the benefit of the whole, still functioned. Historically, they were always extraordinary men, of whatever background, who, when they saw the path of how to repair the erroneous process or state, to repair the order and bring it to harmony, they didn't hesitate, and often at the risk of their own life, because they were not always positively understood, brought to the court, or even directly to the emperor their proposals, in which they suggested necessary changes. They were looking for a way to bring the world of Confucian principles back into harmony. Throughout this, they were aware that were being arrogant, because the best method is not to interfere with the course of things. On June 4, 1989, the massacre at Tiananmen Square was "only" a negative reaction of state power to group student protests, which were also, at its heart, an attempt to start the positive process of reformation. About twenty years have gone by, and we see that the results were, and are, very radical, irrevocable and even fatal. If we were to speak solely of painting, a somewhat poisonous blooming Cynical realism began at the very start of the 1990s, and the Political Pop, which was, according to Chinese standards, exceedingly, scathingly critical tendencies to come to terms with the recent past. However, after June 4th, the icy and frightful silence, which was felt throughout the whole of China, also led to a deep divide; one could even call it broken history, when China turned in on itself on a mass scale, it dramatized, confined and separated personal from public matters. This state, which is still evident today, is connected to the quite new and extremely inviting possibility to take care of oneself in terms of being financially secure and is the basis for today's way of life. Painting, especially that which draws from contact with the West, found an exceedingly expanded area, even unending possibilities of individual expression. Also, it was free of the need of a wide social consensus. And if it could not be found in the home country, then there was no need to despair, because immense opportunities opened up in Euro-American art world thanks to a larger permeability of Chinese borders.

For the Chinese, it is very hard to justify why they selected this or that from the rich cache of European culture. It is possible to clearly imagine the situation, when someone undergoes certain schooling at an academy in China, where even today, one can still encounter something as archaic as the remains of academic realism from the end of the 19th century that they continue to try to work in this custom. It is because, for this person, it was the first positive reference that was offered to them at school, and secondly, it is for them without any other connotation and emotional burdens; they know nothing of a historical context, they do not suffer from ideological resentments, and it does not bother them that for certain reasons and historical development, this style is perhaps considered, moderately speaking, to be surpassed in Europe. Additionally, a line of masterpieces of European culture were propagated in China on bulletin boards and poster as icons of European art, but they were wholly removed from the relation, the time period and the form of presentation inserted into an entirely different context. Straightforward and often only an emotional connection to the presented European sample would, thanks to a frequent non-prejudicial thought process, often manifest itself as a natural path. However, at this moment begins the most interesting, but also worst demonstrable moment of new relation; i.e. the method and level of rewriting, code regeneration, reworking of the initial model, and the process of adjuring works, of which we know quite a lot into something in which we sense a barrier of something different that we can hardly grasp. That models of Chinese culture are so completely diverse from European ones is a generally known fact. However, in what exact way it is diverse, and what to call it, is the greatest problem. If we are to move along the boundaries, i.e. if we can see that a certain painting is accepted by the Chinese themselves, then after the mentioned boundary, we are still at home. But from this point we begin to grope, because neither the recipients themselves, nor the processors of our impulse are able to give us the key to our understanding and they grope as well. The question is then why do they pick apart what they accept?

According to what key, and finally, how do they re-code, prepare and transform the selected sample. The only thing left to do is ask why they do it.

Petr Nedoma, from the essay „Above waves, and in the clouds’ on the work of Fang Lijun from the catalogue Chinese Painting: Zhang Xiaogang, Fang Lijun, Feng Mengbo. Published by KANT, Prague 2008.

The exhibition is organised in collaboration with Hanart TZ Gallery, Hong Kong.

Exhibition curators Chang Tsong-zung, Petr Nedoma

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