

CHEN YUJUN

Curator: Cui Cancan

Opening: 2019.3.9 4pm

Duration: 2019.3.9 - 4.28

Location: Tang Contemporary Art Beijing 1st & 2nd Space

Tang Contemporary Art is proud to announce the opening of “Chen Yujun”, a major solo exhibition for the artist, across both of the gallery’s Beijing spaces on March 9, 2019. Curated by Cui Cancan, this is Chen Yujun’s most important solo show in ten years, presenting an artist’s practice of layered experiences and media in paintings, woodcuts, collages, and installations.

In the first space, Chen recreates and interlocks spaces from cultural and social perspectives, presenting different threads and stages in his work since 2008. The second space centers on religion and nature, showcasing another dimension to Chen’s work. Viewers bring the interior of the first exhibition space outside with them, toward an untouchable nature and the myriad things that surround us all.

Preface

The human silhouettes on the exhibition poster fit with the frank emotions in Chen Yujun’s work. In many of his pieces, he explores multiple threads in parallel. Sometimes he is an isolated person engaging with easel painting, spatial installation, and multi-media; sometimes he is a family of several silhouettes born off his hometown of Mulan River, his time abroad in Malaysia, his life in Hangzhou, and his studio in Shanghai.

Compared to other artists of his generation, Chen Yujun makes work that contains complex information manifested in varied styles and a broad range of media. Rather than calling him a painter, it might be better to say that he realizes creative freedom. Since 2008, Chen has extended his painting practice, using picture books, wooden boards, newspapers, objects, and installations; experiences are layered with experiences, and language tests language. He has a diverse array of skills; he knows all of these media and techniques by heart. He needs time to confront new possibilities, close fissures between languages, and travel long distances across barriers and obstacles; the challenges follow as a matter of course.

Chen Yujun’s work has a thick, strange accent and a sense of mystery. Other fusions and implications, but also long distances, lie within his numerous scenes and symbols, such as Islamic patterns and Nanyang-style houses, European interiors and dense forests, a flash in the night and shoes in a corner. The environment in which he grew up certainly afforded him a textual source for boundless imagination. Because so many people immigrated to Southeast Asia, Putian became a place with a unique coexistence of diverse cultures, originating from a vision of the foreign lands of Southeast Asia. Later, Chen went to Hangzhou, then moved to Shanghai, and regional changes broadened his themes and subjects. At times, scenes from his memory would appear, mixed with new accents, specific moments, Asian culture in the Berlin suburbs, graffiti in Brooklyn, or museums for immigrant cultures in Los Angeles. All of these elements are indistinct, yet subtly linked in Chen Yujun’s work.

Intertwined Spaces

In the first gallery, spaces are recreated and intertwined based on cultural and social narratives, presenting the different threads and stages in Chen Yujun’s work since 2008. A temporary structure occupies the center of the room, and the works surrounding it on all sides reference different creative paths and outlets. Like a large vine-covered tree, it reaches out with roots and tendrils in all directions. In this centralized vision, all of Chen’s experimental directions and advancements gradually become clearer. The circular structure in the exhibition may be a metaphor for his creative career. It is a diffuse process without beginning or end, full of variable and echoing relationships.

Many spaces of varying sizes are arranged around this circular structure. Asia Welcomes You is the viewer’s first hint in this space. A dense exoticism and a mixture of visual experiences draw viewers into a place of ambiguity, which also hints at the earliest kernel of Chen Yujun’s style. By the time Asia Welcomes You appears repeatedly, it has become clearer that space will be the most important visual concept in Chen’s later practice.

A series of brown works on one of the side walls forms the axis of Chen’s recent spatial practice. Compared to his Asia series, this series removes complex narratives, and only retains some of the simplest, most essential elements. He pours so much energy into a pair of shoes or a green plant; sometimes the images are so simple he just utilizes brown to sketch the piece, while other times, he creates the spatial structure itself. Space gave him more room to grow, and it became the only subject of his paintings. The Brown series provided Chen with a better grammar or passageway from space to architecture, from compositions and links to the new reality they constitute.

The inverted pyramid is comprised of broken structures, overlapping images, and a wooden door. This narrative sensibility is vaguely discernible in many of Chen Yujun’s works, but a sense of theater is another aspect of his oeuvre. Continued Scenes once again returns to that complexity, with the layering of watercolors, woodcuts, collages, and many other methods. Together, it and the drawing series show us another thread, one of constant investigation and numerous experiments with materials. Small works made in various materials are scattered around the exhibition hall. They link different series, while also providing the energy that drives them forward. The graphic structures in Family Politics hint at the spatial dependency of these circles and the ways in which they assess one another. Since 2008, Chen Yujun has juxtaposed and advanced these different threads, using simple and natural states to showcase their richness and complexity. He has exhausted these various methods and racked his brain, attempting to find different outlets for painting, which have led to everyday, experimental, and solemn concepts or crude destruction.

The first exhibition hall ends with a picture taken in 2016. The picture contains an incomplete detail—a pair of white trousers and a pair of white leather shoes. Under it, Chen places a rug that symbolizes familial warmth. We don't learn about the figure in the picture. What accent do they have? Who are they? Like white itself, the figure can be everything and nothing.

All Things Have a Spirit

The second space presents another dimension in Chen Yujun's work through the lenses of religion and nature. Viewers bring the interior of the first exhibition space outside with them, shifting from a human-centric narrative toward untouchable nature and the myriad things that surround us all. For these myriad things, there is no boundary between nature and culture, and the world is no longer strictly divided into subjects and objects; stones, trees, animals, and sunlight are self-sufficient, almost protagonists.

Since 2008, Chen Yujun has continued to return to his hometown, which has a way of life decidedly different from that of modern cities. In the flow of the Mulan River and the mist spreading over the forest at dawn, an awesome power envelops the individual, who finds himself in a world of mystical changes. In Chen's new work, this special experience has an unusual radiance. A four-part painting rising like a ladder draws the viewer to a massive tree that has a mottled surface with glints of spirit. The tree trunk breaks the boundaries of the frame, with some indiscernible objects hanging in high branches that pass faintly in the lightning from a thunderstorm. Mistaken House offers another scene. A home resting in forking branches seems to come from life in a primitive tribe, with several lines forming a tent-like structure. Mobility and an affection for nature are the keys to this series.

A massive work on paper occupies the center of the exhibition hall. It took six years to make, comprised of dozens of single works made during different periods. Initially, Chen simply depicted a corner of a dense forest, where a tree trunk grows toward the sunlight. Over a long period of time, the sheets continued to increase in number and extend outward; the forest stretches to the horizon, growing from Chen's brush. It is only when the exhibition begins that the growth stops temporarily. In contrast to his past explorations of space, this majestically sized and immensely time-consuming work brings us back to the setting that he wanted to present—a person in the forest, encircled by nature. It feels as if the trees have countless staring eyes. In this forest, stones roll, rain strikes, and trees fall, as all people and things move through the cycle of life.

Stones appear repeatedly in Chen Yujun's works, but they look different in different series. In *Wavering Belief*, stones are an initial element that is constantly reconfigured. Abandoned newspapers and other materials from everyday life blunt the edges and corners of the stones, becoming part of the abstract sensibility of the work. The passage of time wears down the boundaries between stones and the trivialities of life; they have a similar fate as unparalleled real symbols. Wood has become a special, customary symbol in Chen's creative system; it can be found everywhere in the second space. Wood that has been left underwater for several hundred years, like the longan tree trunk, has a particular face and set of beliefs that nature has given it. Every wrinkle or ring is a trace of the intersection of time and space. Primitive, natural imagery makes the second space feel like another civilization; it rejects monotheism and embraces polytheism, returning to the beginning of the world, when all things had power. All religious belief stems from this, that first investiture of inanimate objects with life, soul, or spirit.

The first and second spaces both have an identical door. It stands isolated in the center of the exhibition hall, and opening it leads to a world that we can never understand. We could compare it to a mirror covered with a mosaic comprised of information; it constantly accepts new information, just as Chen Yujun travels from Putian to Hangzhou, Shanghai, and elsewhere. Many unfamiliar cities appear in it, and it has also been worked for a long time. Those paintings, works on paper, models, and installations meet and permeate one another like the stones, rain, trees, and light. The two spaces are like two ends of a scale; they are constantly placing weight on one another, and they are constantly producing space. This space conveys the core of Chen Yujun's near-decade of work: the idea that the entire world's existence relies on the production and imagination of spaces.

Text / Cui Cancan

About Artist

Chen Yujun was born in 1976 in Putian, Fujian province. In 1999, he graduated from the multi-media art department at the China Academy of Art and stayed at the academy to teach. He currently lives and works in Shanghai. Chen has held solo exhibitions at art institutions around the world, and his work is in the collections of M+, the Brooklyn Museum, Yuz Museum, the White Rabbit Collection, Arario Museum, Long Museum, He Xiangning Art Museum, and the DSL Collection.

Please contact the gallery in advance to arrange an interview.

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