

# Zhao Zhao: The answer is in the wind / A long day

Curator: Cui Cancan

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Tang Contemporary Art Beijing 1st&2nd Space

Tang Contemporary Art is proud to announce the opening of Zhao Zhao's two exhibitions, entitled "The answer is in the wind" and "A long day", held in the gallery's Beijing 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> spaces on March 11. Curated by Cui Cancan, the exhibition features more than 100 pieces of works, and presents Zhao Zhao's artistic clues from 2016 to date.

## Zhao Zhao's One Day

Cui Cancan

Here is a rhapsody of Zhao Zhao's exhibition. It might be a novel, an autobiography, travel literature, or the philosophical work of an artist pursuing truth. It is a story of Zhao Zhao's creation over seven years, with four chapters, "Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance," "The Answer is in the Wind," "Western Trilogy," and "A Long Day."

### Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance

In 1968, Robert Maynard Pirsig, suffering from Schizophrenia, embarked on a journey across the United States from East to West, then wrote *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, which has influenced generations. At that time, he had no idea that he would be liberated from Western philosophy's binary opposition and dichotomy model. Several years later, the philosophical thoughts he left for the world are now the basis of cultural diversity in the USA.

The book tells stories about highways, weather, conversations at night in hotels, motorcycle maintenance, repairing techniques, and other details in everyday life during the trip. In the evenings and early mornings, he considered and discussed various topics, from philosophy since Socrates, contemporary realities, science and art, knowledge and value, spirit and material, classical and modern life. The frenzied thoughts tortured Pirsig to the point of collapse, and he kept writing them down to find inner peace, such as through conversations with his friends and himself. They did not stop until the end of the travel. The moment Pirsig saw the ocean, he found the truth of life and reconciled with himself.

Zen and the motorcycle, two unrelated and even incompatible things produced an incredible connection during this trip. In the book, motorcycle maintenance is the metaphor for the objective outside-world, and Zen embodies subjectivity. Pirsig repeatedly stressed "the attitude toward the machine" against those who rejected technology and lied to themselves in reality. He stated how to discover an individual's subjectivity and the spiritual world during repairing and adapting to the motorcycle - a modern industrial production, in the reality where technology is changing us. "The Buddha, the Godhead, resides quite as comfortably in the circuits of a digital computer or the gears of a cycle transmission as he does at the top of a mountain or in the petals of a flower."

Millions of sales made it a mega-bestseller in the 1970s. This book brought the mysterious Zen, an Eastern method to transcend the world, to the western people. Zen was like a cure for the 1970s USA, which was full of Rock 'N' Roll, psychedelic drugs, the liberation of the body, the mystics who escaped Western rational discipline, the naturalists and environmentalists who stayed away from the urban, the biker gangs, the homeless, and the dreadlocks who abhorred finance and capital. They were confused and depressed about the rapid technological changes and humanism conflicts. The boring reality world could not make them feel at home. However, they were extremely romantic, longing for peace and unity. Although they chose nihilism and escaped reality, they accepted every stranger they met on the trip with unconditional love.

The title of Zhao Zhao's new artwork, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* comes from this novel. Zhao Zhao presents us with a similar scene to the book. There is a giant drawing with Chinese grotto statues, seemingly the embodiment of Zen, and a vintage motorcycle in front of the painting. The warm aura and coldness of the machine make this work complete. This handmade assembled motorcycle has a very accurate structure and mechanical principles. It is a combination of the technological and industrial eras, along with the popular aesthetic in pop art and the modern construction in minimalism. The statues in the painting reveal emotional ups and downs and spiritual auras in a dazzling pink fog. It symbolizes humanism traditions, incompatible with mechanical rationals.

However, Zen does not exist in the statues. Zen is not an image or symbol. Motorcycle maintenance is not merely about mechanical indifference but gathers emotions and retro thoughts on the long trip. There is an intimate relationship between rider and motorcycle, like nomads sharing a bound with their horses, hunters with their falcons and hounds. Pirsig had to integrate with it in various weathers to deal with different conditions. In the process of repairing the motorcycle, it was the problem that needed to be solved every single day, and karma needed to be faced in life.

The motorcycle is a metaphor for subjectivity, which needs to solve the changes in the objective reality. Repeated repairing and adjustment become a normal situation in the relationship between the subject and the object. Therefore, ancient Eastern grottos and the 1980s motorcycle meet in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. It also combines the traditional skills for two-dimensional paintings and the three-dimensional industrial product to build a relationship with no limit in time and space.

In this relationship, Zen is not an isolated existence. It is neither the painting nor the motorcycle. Zen is in a contradiction between these two things. In neither this manner nor that manner, it solves the conflicts between the subject and the object in everyday practice. Or to say, such contradiction summarizes Zhao Zhao's past works. It can be seen everywhere in the past seven years. The difference in age between an industrial-era screw and an ancient Chinese jade cong tube is 7,000 years. Although they share similar forms, they have entirely different functions, meanings, and fates.

Zhao Zhao does not explain the meaning of Zen in one work. Instead, he leads us to the world beyond with the story of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, guides us to break the binary opposition model in an individual's insolvable dilemma and real difficulties, and opens up the possibility for us to self-reflect and eventually obtain the path to integrate a fragmented culture.

In 1974, Nam June Paik created his most famous work, *TV Buddha*. There is an 18th-century statue of Buddha meditating before a real-time image of itself on television. Their gazes on each other form a closed loop and "an eternal moment." This work revealed the confrontation and dialogue between two different cultures in the 1970s when new technology and Eastern Buddhism were popular in the West. Nam June Paik conducted an incredible combination of the forms of Eastern philosophy and image technology. The copper Buddha facing its own mirror image became a classic case of an individual thinking about self and a crucial example of an artist's reflection on the developments of oneself and modernity.

During seven years of artistic creation, Zhao Zhao also keeps communicating to and transcending himself in the long trip of self-discovery. Pirsig found it challenging to pursue truth, and science cannot provide the ideal answer. He even thought, "science cannot teach me how to understand the girls in my classroom." Gradually, he lost faith in science and studied Eastern philosophy and culture, expecting to solve his confusion in Buddhism and Zen. The more he pondered, the more he realized his ignorance.

### The Answer is in the Wind

The exhibition presents Zhao Zhao's artistic clues from 2016 to date. It is not easy to define his style in these seven years. Especially when they depend on mediums, such as painting, installation, video, performance, archives and ready-made objects. Obviously, this multi-thread method prevents Zhao Zhao from being restricted by any single stereotype. Style depends on the form's components, such as aesthetics, structure, order, organization, and combination. Zhao Zhao also uses compound grammar, containing conceptual art's puns, intertextuality, relationships between inspiration and concept, realism's moral and value positions, modernism's forms, emotions, and abstract meanings.

These art styles come from a long history, like the bronze vessels with hundreds of years of history in Zhao Zhao's new work, *Chinese cultural heritage - Shang*. Other works in the "Chinese cultural heritage" series lead the historical span to space-time tens of thousands of years ago: the Yadan landform formed through hundreds of thousands of years, the ancient city of Jiaohe from the 2nd to 5th century B.C. E., the jade cong tube in Liangzhu period dating over 5,000 years ago, the 1970s modern motorcycle, and the 1990s Toyota off-road vehicle. These objects belonging to different ages form a relationship through double meaning and mutual observation under Zhao Zhao's craftsmanship. There seems to have a sense of destiny that ties them together incredibly.

The key to understanding and interpreting long-winding history is how to perceive the relationship between different art genres and objects within. If we think of history as a continuation, the vitality of a civilization can be activated beyond time and space. People keep passing down the traditions in both material and spiritual worlds. These ancient cultural heritages still have an impact on the here and now. Not far away, alongside the East Third Ring Road rises the towering Taikang Building, which is modeled after the ancient jade cong, a ritual object. Its monumental form and mysterious image make it a unique landscape in the modern city. It possesses a permanent quality beyond the present, reality, and zeitgeist, just like Futurism architecture. The bronze vessel, a ritual object in Shang and Zhou dynasties, also becomes a still life in Zhao Zhao's big-scaled painting. It travels through time, telling unknown stories that lack textual recordings. Because we cannot understand their functions and uses, these objects from different dynasties can become mysterious and exquisite artworks that transcend practical meaning.

If we take history as a revolution, civilization is born from the binary opposition between disavowal and creation. With the changes in production tools, productivity and production relations, no matter technology or style, the advanced will always replace the obsolete. Artistic creations occur in the reflections, doubts, critiques, and imaginations of existing art. The morality of art history is to form new artistic genres, improve discipline development, and tell a new story in the debate about the essence of art, the disagreements, and the struggles. Herein lies a perspective to appraise Zhao Zhao's works, including both the new "Chinese cultural heritage" series with its Liangzhu - Shang - Zhou dynasty progression, and the literally showcased dramatic tension within the artworks of different eras and regions.

With this perspective, we can realize the conflicts between these works and objects, values and positions, industries and paintings, concepts and dramas, ancient civilizations and modern emotions, individual aesthetics and time appeals, as well as Eastern and Western world views. Such conflicts exist everywhere in modern life. People walk around between the Forbidden City and the 798 Art Zone and move within a city full of buildings with various styles. Messy information interrupts an individual's thoughts. We share experiences from everywhere and different histories. We need to deal with the shocks from complicated and diverse modern life and rejections from civilizations to reach inner peace and determination. The videos in Zhao Zhao's works, for instance, are impacted deeply by the modern technological revolution, while the brushwork in his paintings shows auras in classicism souls. Zhao Zhao, who lives in the contemporary, cannot settle himself in any single orientation. He needs to find a unique perspective in various styles in order to take modern society as fission in the form of complexity and diversity, enabling him to conduct cultural considerations, thus explaining the truth of our lives in the present and the cultural conditions unique to our age: we do not trust a single genre with exclusive avant-garde and critical quality, but we are living in the hopes and disadvantages they have constructed.

Zhao Zhao is a rare post-modernist among Chinese artists. Unlike the majority, he never gets obsessed with the revolution of new art or the renaissance of some form of classic art. In those dazzling works, we cannot see any artistic evolution or obsolescence. All we can see is the single principle of some outdated art form. Unlike what Nam June Paik did in 1970, it is difficult for us to declare that video is the only avant-garde art form with legitimacy. Traditional painting skills still have their charms at present. Medium-determinism and -priority have collapsed in the art world. It is not obvious anymore to select the superior between an average video work and an excellent sculpture work.

Compared with time trends, an artist's existence relies on an individual's freedom. Long ago, art history developed in a way that new technology doubted traditional existences. Modern sculpture and installation keep throwing past artworks into the categories of history and antique, and this trend has influenced Chinese contemporary art for several dozens of years. Zhao Zhao has a unique understanding of this past and current life. He does not try to use present images to follow the steps of development closely or make a grafting of the traditional forms and objects in a contemporary manner. Instead, with an artist's sovereign freedom, Zhao Zhao finds a method to suspend the inner conflicts of the art system, regard the complex structure in contemporary society as a proposition, integrate the existing art forms and languages, and reconstruct the meanings of time and space.

Obviously, it is an uncommon field. In Zhao Zhao's recent creations, there have been lots of museum-style showcases, antiques from ancient periods, and various styles and mediums. Their purpose is to seek an answer: if we can still recognize the present world as intact, division and ambiguity must be its spiritual characteristics. Different systems, multiple standards, and diverse values have shaken the traditions and arts we are accustomed to. The singular answer to art is entirely eclipsed by the absurd and yet certain working process.

In search of truth and answers, Zhao Zhao has created artworks that not only belong solely to this age, but also possess the power to recreate said age. He reflects chaos with chaos and represents complexity with complexity. The present can be traditional, contemporary, ordinary, literal, academic, commercial, consumptive, eternal, territorial, and worldwide. His works are sometimes evident with YES or NO, and sometimes empty with Neither and Nor. The ambiguous conclusions confuse the true answer. They are closer to authenticity than abstraction and summarization. Consequently, looking through Zhao Zhao's works, it is difficult to describe the emptiness under the rigid shell and the profound insights behind exterior delicacy.

## Western Trilogy

In the autumn of 2015, after being away for so long, Zhao Zhao decided to come back to his hometown to accomplish one of his most important works, *Project Taklamakan*, with ten years of experience in Beijing. Before the snow fell that year, Zhao Zhao returned to the Taklamakan Desert, 3,000 kilometers away, where his older generation had worked hard all their lives and where his memories started since childhood.

Thereafter, 100 kilometers of cables, dozens of transformers, a double-door refrigerator, and a work team of a few dozen people were divided into four trucks. After five days, the team arrived at Lunnan, a town at the northern end of the desert, from Beijing. Zhao Zhao followed the edge of the desert highway through a poplar forest, laying 100 kilometers of cable to the heart of the Taklamakan Desert. Eventually, he linked the cable to an electric refrigerator full of beer, powered it on, and ran it for 24 hours.

The concept, seemingly effortless and meaningless in Beijing, accidentally opened Zhao Zhao's journey to the West for the following years and inspired him to create the "Western Trilogy". An experience would inspire another experience, and history would relive vividly due to the occurrence of yet another totally different reality. Two years later, Zhao Zhao restarted *Project Taklamakan* in another form. He transported a Bactrian camel from the Taklamakan desert to an exhibition hall, an urban space, for ten days. However, the camel and the natural civilization it represents have lost their practical functions in trading and cultural communications over several centuries. They both turned into a moving landscape in the exhibition hall, a tourism feature, a living fossil in historical evolution, a western memory that has long since disappeared.

The remote and long history and the vast and boundless world of the west provided Zhao Zhao with a bigger space-time perspective and another historical dimension. Nature here is much more ancient than human beings. Whether day or night, sunny or rainy, the desert only follows its rules and settles down on this land. Zhao Zhao also started his discussion on industry rising and nature civilization, long history and temporary reality, as well as modern principles and ancient beliefs.

In 2018, at Tang Contemporary Art, Zhao Zhao laid out a massive piece of asphalt floor, the middle of which was inlaid with animal figures made of brass, stainless steel, black iron, and vivianite. It is the third chapter of the "Western Trilogy." At that time, silent lights sparked from the asphalt floor, and the reflective fragments were pure, illusive, and solemn. The furs used to be soft, and the images and stories of cats turned into the rigid metal on the black ground, making them seem immortal. Life's data, growth, and meaning are placed in a much more extensive history and reality.

"Western Trilogy" is about Zhao Zhao's time in the West and returning to a period of history. The western regions of China happened to experience numerous civilizations and dynasties, becoming a corridor of humans' footsteps, blood ties, cultures, and histories since ancient times. For thousands of years, people in the area accepted the gods' decrees, lived and multiplied alongside the rivers and oases on the edges of the desert, and cultivated with kantuman (a distinct farming tool used by cultural minorities in Xinjiang). Deserts, rivers, wind, and humans live a safe and sound life. People poetically imagined the wisdom of the Creator with songs, dances, and sayings.

They have a logic to life: poems here are distanced with joy and sorrow, and philosophy here is about love to the soil and praise to the immortal deities. "Western Trilogy" has a different meaning for Zhao Zhao. Since then, traces of the West can be seen everywhere in his works. For instance, the white cotton, weathered ruins, lost ancient scripts, thousand-year-old grotto statues and Western fruits and foods for daily consumption, or on the other hand, his memories growing up, conflicts with the older generations and with his hometown, as well as dialogue with his own past.

Just like the past in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, where Pirsig started his trip to the western USA with confusion about modern society to seek truth in nature and Zen. Finally, he found the truth of life while seeing the sea and reconciled with modern society. Many years later, the "Western Trilogy" became Zhao Zhao's spiritual trip. In the center of the Taklamakan desert, at the moment of opening the refrigerator, the aerial camera fly higher and higher to record every fantastic moment of light. It witnessed prominence and decline, life and death within the shifts of history and the desires behind it, then disappeared in the endless night.

After several months, when memorizing that moment, Zhao Zhao said that it was all gone. It feels unreal, like a blockbuster, yet it is also countrified and tiny in the gloom.

## A Long Day

How long is one day? Even though science can give us a clear answer, the length of time does not rely on science.

As for the whole universe, human history is nothing more than a long day; As for human beings, an era is nothing more than a long day. However, a long day can change everything in life for an individual.

The length of life depends on our perspectives and horizons; it differs due to the distance in time and space. If space-time is short enough, we can restore its origin for the largest. If the space-time is long enough, tragedy and joy decline with the changes in form and become an abstract, aesthetic elegy beyond our clear imagination.

For instance, "A Long Day" has diverse forms in Zhao Zhao's seven-year-long artistic clues. It can be transverse in time: from a fossil more than 100 million years ago, a stone plow tens of thousands of years after that, the oracle bones of the Shang Dynasty, the statues of the Tang Dynasty, the porcelain of the Song Dynasty, the peach-shaped pastry of the late Qing Dynasty, the modern screw, to a headset popped a few years ago. It also has longitudinal sections, such as 24 hours in the heart of the Taklamakan desert, the daytime sky of New York, and the starry sky of Beijing. "A Long Day" can also be the graving of time, for example, 12 hours in a day, a line painted in a second, oil paints that took a year to enlarge, and a dozen memorializing pieces of metal from a wreckage.

"A lifelong day" indicates a historical meaning. In thousands of years, those cherished treasures and advanced histories are not merely the carriers of romantic stories or the praises of craftsmen and artists. They contain complicated historical changes, like the decay of civilization, the vanishing of many crafts, and the interruption of artistic morals and spirits. Those ups and downs in history propel us to lament the changes of time as well as the permanence and impermanence of everything. Sometimes, a day can be felt much longer than a year and a century.

Therefore, "a long day" for Zhao Zhao is a perspective rather than an art style. Compared with the existing answers in the art world, it differs in length, thickness, and weight due to the creator's life, their eyes, heart, personality, and complex brain. It is much richer than art and creates a diverse flow rate and density in artworks. "A long day" is the profound mystery of art, rather than an objective description of Zhao Zhao's creative clues for seven years of history and sociology or a study on craft, material, and style with histories of science and technology. How does "the hands of God" create these objects? What kind of idea, thought, emotion, and soul create them? In this lifelong day, what gives him the passion for art? What makes him draw with such kindness that blossom into an aura in the night, brewed with abundant emotions from long and hard labor?

The answer is obvious yet hanging. Different from other artists, Zhao Zhao never gets obsessed with the revolution of new art or the renaissance of certain forms of classical art. In those dazzling works, we cannot see any sign of artistic evolution or obsolescence. Zhao Zhao finds a unique method to suspend the inner conflicts of the art system, to regard the complex structure in contemporary society as a proposition, to integrate the existing art forms and languages, and to reconstruct the meanings of time and space.

Born in 1982 in Shihezi, Xinjiang, a city built on a dried-out riverbed, Zhao Zhao had experiences of both corp life and the deserted Gobi. They shaped his dual understanding of modern life and natural civilization. His Father's strict and cruel education made him revolt against orthodoxy at a young age. He detested any discipline and mansplaining: the slanted golden figurine in *Slanting* best explains this experience. As a teenager, he honed his will and courage through his expertise in the sparing team to realize his crazy imagination in difficulties and fights. His rebellious and grotesque youth life enabled him to finish his first performance work. This prompted him to quit school early, come to Beijing, tear a piece of Kiefer's work in Berlin, pretend to be blind one day in Shanghai... He used to make a sculpture for a deceased friend, then hiked for four days and three nights to the top of a 4200-meter mountain. He also drew moving portraits of father and son in his thirties and forties for his coming daughter.

Over the years, Zhao Zhao's one day has been filled with a variety of life forms, which is a world that people are familiar with yet strange. He has worked hard and well in preparing for exhibitions, compiling monographs and making spaces, yet living the life of a recluse who cultivates pleasure in boredom and solitude by raising carrier pigeons, doing cricket fights, and systematically studying tea and artifacts collection.

Life has never been a scientific experiment. One day can be both long and brief.

## About Artist

Zhao Zhao was born in 1982 in Xinjiang, China, and he currently lives and works in Beijing and Los Angeles. In his art, he engages with real subjects in multiple mediums and plays with art forms, emphasizing an exploration of the relationship between the individual and the rest of society. His work is developed around the subtle emotional changes that take place as we are confronted with diverse cultural influences. He brings together the expressive methods of contemporary art and traditional culture to create metaphors for people's living circumstances and modern society's real conditions in a globalized world. His work also reflects his attitudes toward the coexistence of collective and individual ideals.

In recent years, Zhao Zhao's bold, radical artistic practice has attracted international attention. He has presented solo exhibitions and personal projects at the Long Museum (Shanghai), Macao Museum of Art (Macao), Alexander Ochs Gallery (Berlin), Carl Kostyál (Stockholm), Roberts & Tilton (Los Angeles), Chambers Gallery (New York), Mizuma and One Gallery (Beijing), Lin & Lin Gallery (Taipei), Tang Contemporary Art (Hong Kong), Tang Contemporary Art (Beijing), China Art Archives and Warehouse (Beijing), Song Art Museum (Beijing), and Fusion Art Center (Beijing). His work has been shown in group exhibitions and collected by many institutions, including MoMA PS1 (New York), the Tampa Museum of Art (Tampa), Pinchuk Art Center (Kiev), Groninger Museum (Groningen), the Museum of Asian Art (Berlin), Hamburger Bahnhof Museum for Contemporary Art (Berlin), Padiglione d'Arte Contemporanea (Milan), MAXXI National Museum of 21st Century Art (Rome), the DSL Collection (Paris), Castellón Contemporary Art Space (Castellón), the White Rabbit Gallery (Sydney), M+ (Hong Kong), the Minsheng Art Museum (Beijing), the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art (Beijing), the New Century Art Foundation (Beijing), Taikang Space (Beijing), Luxelakes - A4 Art Museum (Chengdu), Minsheng Art Museum (Shanghai), the Museum of Contemporary Art (Shanghai), Start Museum (Shanghai), Ming Contemporary Art Museum (Shanghai), Tianjin Art Museum (Tianjin), the Hubei Museum of Art (Wuhan), the He Xiangning Art Museum (Shenzhen), Wanlin Art Museum at Wuhan University (Wuhan), the Wuzhen Contemporary Art Exhibition 2019 (Wuzhen), and the Yokohama Triennale (Yokohama).

He has developed artistic collaborations with Louis Vuitton, Land Rover, Nike, Vans, Vennet, and other brands.

In 2019, Zhao Zhao won the Artist of the Year Award at the Thirteenth Award of Art China (AAC). In 2017, his piece *Project Taklamakan* was selected as the poster and catalog cover image for the Yokohama Triennale. That same year, Zhao Zhao was named one of China's top 10 artists by CoBo and he won the Young Artist of the Year Nomination Award at the Eleventh Award of Art China (AAC). In 2014, Modern Painters named Zhao Zhao one of the world's top 25 artists to watch.

## About Curator

Cui Cancan is an active Chinese independent curator and critic.