

Qin Qi: Figures Series

Curator: Cui Cancan

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Tang Contemporary Art, Beijing 2nd space

Tang Contemporary Art is proud to announce the opening of Qin Qi's solo exhibition "Figures Series", held in the gallery's Beijing 2nd spaces on September 10, 2022. Curated by Cui Cancan, the exhibition features more than 30 pieces of "Figures" works divided in 4 distinct units, including Qin Qi's new works in recent years.

Figures Series

Cui Cancan

Figures have been a key subject in Qin Qi's art over the last few years. Compared to his past work, these paintings are primarily comprised of figures, stories, and scenes. Stylistically, this series is even more distinct, amalgamating Qin Qi's many years of stylistic changes and drawing on various subjects and schools of art, including the landscapes of Romanticism, the perspectives of history painting, the methods of Realism, and the languages of Cubism, Symbolism, and Art Deco.

The figures reference two different sources: the long-form coverage, writing, and portraits in *People Weekly* and the figure paintings of visual art, a genre like landscape or still life.

In contrast to the famous personages in the media, Qin Qi depicts figures that we admire in our lives. They are the people around us; they are friends and acquaintances, but they are also readily identifiable personalities. Qin's standards for deciding who becomes a figure in his paintings might be connected to the force of their personality, the rarity and interest of what they do, or their strange and absurd behavior. They also encompass how heartless someone is, how much they can drink, their arrogant or unshrinking attitude, or their ability and conduct. The ordinary person might interpret these people as capable, ruthless, or eccentric.

Compared to the seriousness, objectivity, and neutrality of the news media, Qin Qi's works portray relaxed, amusing, and subjective figures with a significant amount of personal commentary. In Qin's paintings, some of the aspects of these figures' stories are realist, while other facets are expressive. The stories have origins, but they also contain information that we passively accept. Within this corresponding framework, Qin needs to actively uncover metaphors, associations, and exaggerations. He associates Ho Chi Minh with the Southeast Asian monsoon, connects the inspiring Stars artists with cultural prophets, and transforms an argument into a battle between kangaroos.

Artistically, Qin Qi's figure paintings are entirely different from the figure paintings that appear in an art history textbook. In the Middle Ages, figures were often taken from the Bible. Classical works frequently feature portraits of the nobility. Realism highlights ordinary people, and modernism focuses on the form of the figures. Qin does not care about the positions of these artistic styles, but by fusing them, he changes traditional figure painting's relationship between subject matter, theme, and expression. When the figures no longer serve subject matter and form, how can the figures become as important as themes and concepts? Qin cares more about figure paintings and about the place of figures in the medium of painting. How are figures created in paintings? How are themes constructed? And how can he create a distinct style through the depiction of a theme?

In other words, Qin Qi is not faithful to the truth of the outward appearance of the painting or the essence of the story, but he is loyal to a deeper vision. This vision is related to the essence of painting. These figures are not conceived or envisioned as a medium for communication; they are also reflections of passion, ambition, and a way of making a painting.

Therefore, this all-new figure painting series is a consideration of painting history and the generative mechanisms of figure painting, but it is also a discussion of how everyday stories, folk subjects, personal visions, and artistic styles shape the grammar of figure painting. With his casual, humorous, and caustic approach and secularized style, knowing smiles always spread across the faces of Qin Qi's viewers after a flash of realization strikes. Those smiles reflect a contemporary re-imagining of the function and value of a long-standing genre like figure painting.

1. Artist Stories

Most of the figures in Qin Qi's paintings are his friends or people he knows from the art world. These works often come from stories he has heard, and some are visions of the protagonists' personalities and experiences that result from a conversation with them. However, they are simply sources of inspiration that Qin Qi needs to rework, rearrange, and organize. He establishes his stories, which are closely integrated with a certain style or classic scene from art history. The exhibition opens with the figure of a gallery assistant. The cello that she plays lays a dramatic foundation for the narrative rhythm in the entire gallery. Like the movements of a sonata, the work overflows with the joy, humor, emotion, satire, and dreams of people and stories.

Xingjie and His Still Life Painting brings the perspective from the figures back to the studio, back to the painter, and back to the painting. How are these figure paintings created? How are figures transformed into figure paintings? What are the relationships between stories, subjects, figures, and forms in the paintings? Zhao Xiaojia suggests the self-referentiality in figure paintings; *The Old Man and His Son* offers a portrait of the personality of his old friend Zhang Li, and *Fountain* envisions a story between Jin Shangyi, an elder painter born in the 1930s, and Zhang Ji, an artist born in the 1990s. Duchamp's *Fountain* has a double meaning, which mirrors the notable differences between the artistic values and public personas of two artists born a few generations apart.

On the other side, *Zhang Yue's Story* tells a legendary tale about the artist Zhang Yue. Qin Qi depicted this experience as a story of hunters, eagles, and lions from history paintings. In another complementary story of two figures, Qin uses two dramatic methods to organize a conflict between two kangaroos, which stand in for two artists (Zhao Gang and Chen Wenbo). The paintings in this section are part of the tradition of dramatic and satirical paintings in Qin Qi's work. Drawing on the narrative structures of storybooks or comics, or employing the methods of film montage, they point to the core of figure painting: how the protagonist is portrayed and how manifesting the possibilities and imagination hiding within ordinary stories can become bewildering artistry.

2. Three Interludes

This section is comprised of three smaller stories, focusing on Qin Qi's repeated depictions of similar figures and his treatment of genre stories.

The first story is about the past. The Stars group were one of the origins of Chinese contemporary art, and Zhao Gang was an early participant. In the painting, he appears like a prophet, telling stories about the United States and the West to the poet Mang Ke. There are two people in the cave: one is the bringer of light, having mastered sorcery and knowledge, and the other is a listener from the village, waiting to be baptized into Western civilization. In another painting, several members of the Stars group act as disseminators of culture along the Silk Road, bringing the spark of Western art from distant lands.

The second story is about friendship. Brother Guang is one of Qin's good friends and soccer teammates. They always go drinking after the games, and they seldom eat snacks with their drinks. Brother Guang's straightforwardness fades into lonely drunkenness. After they finish drinking, there are always a few people who need to help him as he staggers into the night. These kinds of nights become two kinds of stories in Qin Qi's work: one is the exaggerated Mannerist depiction of a figure alone against a backdrop, and the other takes on a more Romantic tone. On the Bund

under the lanterns of Shanghai, a pedestrian wanders in the dull blue and bright yellow night, and the romantic atmosphere of the city seeps into the heart of every drinker.

The third story is about the art world. Zheng Lin is an important gallerist who plays three different characters in three paintings. These three characters come from what Qin Qi heard and felt in his interactions with Zheng. The three works depict Zheng Lin building his name in Bangkok, Zheng Lin working in the wheat fields, and Zheng Lin in a traditional Chinese scene. In one of the large works, the gallerist and his guests drink under garlands at a banquet with a Southeast Asian colonial sensibility. They enjoy the monsoon evening, the magnificent banquet, and the art. In another work, the gallerist becomes a Chinese traditional figure with a leather hat, bird and flower paintings, inkstone, and porcelain vases, as the intensely international mood of the previous painting fades into a Chinese aesthetic. These three figures may come from three of Qin Qi's assumptions. The encounters between figures are the undercurrents of the work, but he also adds dramatic, fictional exaggeration. Through suggestions, highlights, contrasts, and associations, he blends stories, scenes, figures, and languages to manifest the charms of painting as a medium.

3. Celebrity Anecdotes

In addition to friends and acquaintances, Qin Qi has incorporated many famous people into his work. He has an ongoing series on Ho Chi Minh that includes a dozen paintings. We chose the work that involves two famous people: Ho Chi Minh wears military fatigues and stands in one of Paul Gauguin's Tahitian landscapes. This kind of juxtaposition and fusion similarly appears in Qin's depictions of Jack Ma, the founder of Alibaba. Ma wears an Arab dress and leans against a camel, returning the tech founder to the era of Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves. Here, the distant Silk Road is a metaphor for the modern logistics empire.

There are light and dark sides to human life, which is obvious in Qin Qi's figure paintings. In the news, Joseeh Punmanlon sings about the latest skate shoes, and on stage, he looks like a magnificent Arab aristocrat in an Art Deco palace, as two people with staffs stand guard to his left and right. The other side to the story is that he was born in Shaanxi. He stands on heavy, rutted loess plateaus, and all that rubs off his skater shoes is dust and all that sits beneath his feet is an undertone that is difficult to change.

Jack Ma and Joseeh Punmanlon can both count as life's winners, and their dreams are always close to being realized. The image of a person sitting on the moon may be the best depiction of their life stories. On a peaceful night with no one else around, a lonely person sitting in a city skyscraper and wearing rabbit ears imagines becoming the best performer in life.

4. The Secret Key to History Painting

Figures are just props that cannot be the essence of painting. Qin Qi's historical and folklore painting series has become the primary current in his work over the last few years. In these works, "pure" oil painting has been given a local flair. Oil painting was imported, but local painters transformed the medium into a tool that could more appropriately record local life and customs. This localization eliminates the oil painting's Western sensibility and imbues it with a local rusticity. Because of this local air, it is begrudgingly accepted by orthodox Western oil painting.

Qin's India and Tibet series dominate this gallery. The ethnic dress and adornment, the bustling crowds, the complex folds and wrinkles, and a riot of color stoke his creative passion. The root of this passion is the way in which oil painting shapes a painter's aesthetic tendencies and the vitality that intense strangeness and exoticism can give to works of art. Similarly, his Exoticism series shows indifference and satire to the localization of Chinese oil painting. Qin Qi draws on these non-Chinese landscapes to rethink the process of 'nationalization' of oil painting. When painting is used as a universal tool, do the materials and objects it takes determine the quality of the painting? Can "nationalization" and "post-colonialism", as a competitive strategy, really be seen as a form of artistic progress?

In his historical and folklore painting series, Qin makes free use of various styles from art history, breaking down historical categories and the barriers between artistic schools. Through exotic scenes, he turns "local" scenes on their heads and sets aside national, ethnic, regional, and spatial restrictions. His historical and folklore painting series gives us the secret key to understanding Qin's ideas about painting. For him, figure painting is not about Realism's revelation of themes and stories, nor does it extoll inner worlds and ideas like Symbolism or remake a locality or an ethnicity in order to achieve some kind of self-confirmation. The positions of and confrontations between these different schools become ever-present resources for Qin Qi, which he uses to achieve endless openness in his figure paintings, resulting in the discovery of free vocabulary and the expansion to historical figure painting styles.

About Artist

Qin Qi graduated from the Department of Oil Painting at the Lu Xun Academy in Shenyang. Since Qin Qi emerged in the art world in 2002, he has created work that both negates and advances ideas and styles, forging a distinctive path for himself within a new generation of painting. He began with erotic images and allegorical narratives in early 2000, then in 2004, he shifted toward pictorial experiments in painting. Later, he moved away from the event-driven and unfinished qualities of these images and engaged with a consciousness of form and structure, and developed weight, brushstrokes, and vision in his images.

His works are characterized by a surreal dimension, through which he strives to depict things taken from a familiar context and represented with a reconfiguration of their concepts. His compositions are characterized by still life, real landscapes, dream-like situations and sketches from nature, all different elements that he has rationally chosen to assemble together in order to prove the coexistence of many different worlds. Qin Qi is a visual thinker and his compositions, no matter often permeated by a sense of ambiguity; appear as subtle representations of a consciousness that goes beyond forms to reach their more remote meanings.

Qin Qi has participated in exhibitions worldwide; in 2018 his work was featured in "Visible or Invisible Forms" at Kuandu Museum of Fine Arts, Taipei, Taiwan; in 2008 he was part of Guangzhou Triennale and Nanjing Triennale; in 2009 his works were presented at Prague Biennale. In 2011 Qin Qi had his first solo show at Minsheng Museum in Shanghai.

About Curator

Cui Cancan is an active Chinese independent curator and critic. He has won CCAA (Chinese Contemporary Art Award) Art Review Award for Youth, Critics' Award in Chinese contemporary art by YISHU, Annual Exhibition Award by Art Power 100, Nominee for Lincoln Curator Prize by TANC Asia Prize, The Best Artist Solo Exhibition of the Year Award by Chinese Contemporary Art News, Best Exhibition Award by Gallery Week Beijing, Annual Curator Award by Art Bank, et cetera. Since 2012, he has curated almost 100 major exhibitions, including group exhibitions like Hei Qiao Night Way (2013), Rural Wash, Cut and Blow-dry(2013), FUCKOFF II (2013), Unlived by What is Seen (2014), Between the 5th and 6th Ring Road in Beijing (2015), The Decameron (2016), Rip it Up (2017), Spring Festival Projects (2018), The Curation Workshop (2019) and Nine-Tiered(2020). He has curated artists' solo exhibitions such as Ai Weiwei, Bao Xiaowei, Chen Danqing, Chen Yufan, Chen Yujun, Feng Lin, Han Dong, He Yunchang, Huang Yishan, Jiang Bo, Li Binyuan, Liu Gangshun, Liu Jianhua, Li Qing, Li Zhanyang, Ding Muer, Ma Ke, Mao Yan, Qin Qi, Sui Jianguo, Shijiezi Art Museum, Shi Jinsong, Shen Shaomin, Tan Ping, Wang Qingsong, Xie Nanxing, Xia Xiaowan, Xia Xing, Xiao Yu, Xu Zhongmin, Xu Xiaoguo, Zong Ning, Polit-Sheer-Form, Zhang Yue and Zhao Zhao et cetera.