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CANS Interview | Zhao Gang: Without humor and elegance, there is no need for contemporary art to exist

By CANS Asia Art News, April 9, 2019

Each Modern's exhibition "Zhao Gang: Diluted Retrospective" opened on April 12th. The show plays with the definition of a "retrospective exhibition" and presents a series of new works from 2019. Zhao Gang looks back at the complex history of China through an imaginary narrative based on modern revolutionary history and his own Manchu identity. The works also explore the mixing of cultures that took place in Harbin.

The show is composed of two conceptual projects displayed on two floors. On the 1st floor, watercolor on paper, oil painting, and installation works depict Russia's October Revolution and the modern history of revolution in China from Zhao Gang's perspective. Among the 39 small-sized watercolor on paper, iconic representations, like Lucio Fontana's "Spatial Concept 'Waiting'", the candy installation by Felix Gonzalez-Torres, and last emperor Puyi can be found. Zhao Gang places seminal historical and contemporaneous images together to provide a path to his focal point. Large-scale silkscreens on canvas on the 2nd floor document the city of Harbin, which was once a shelter for Jewish refugees from Russia. Through his Manchurian identity and his experience of displacement, Zhao Gang's exhibition explore external cultures form the history of China and builds from this a new identity.

«CANS Asia Art News» interviewed Zhao Gang to talk about how he makes art to re-state the symbols of history and culture with humor. He reveals how his identity is a mixture of parts which form a new identity. The exhibition will be on view until May 18th.

«CANS Asia Art News» : *From your past exhibitions "The Khitans" and "The Road to Seldom" at UCCA, 2015, you've reviewed your own identity to quite some extent. This time, at Each Modern, you focus on Harbin, the north-east of China and made two projects that are different from your past painting style in order to talk about cultural mixture and shock. Since you have lived in many countries, would you please share how Harbin is symbolic to you, or is it a memory?*

Zhao Gang : From "The Khitans" at Platform China to "Emperor and His..." at AYE, I wanted to take the Khitans as an "excuse" to review the relationship between them and the Manchurians. They are related

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whether by their race or history. On this point, I think the history of China is ambiguous. There is nothing certain. “The Road to Serfdom” at UCCA in 2015 discussed what a “certain identity of Chinese” might be. For example, In “Cocksucker Blues” I painted a group of intellectuals who studied abroad. They tragically tried to help their country. They ended up bad, even dead. When they started to think “Is this still the motherland China?” they became “cocksuckers”. Am I a cocksucker? I guess so! I already forgot this China, this so-called country.

Back to my Manchurian identity. The Manchurians built the Qin Dynasty, which ruled the same territory of modern China. The Manchurians also built the Republic. After the Republic fell, the Manchurians lost themselves. Then the constitutional monarchy. Eventually the Manchurians built the Republic of China, and then more problems from the warlords and from betrayals occurred from within, then communists and Civil War. Everyone wanted to solve the problems with help from outside of the country, like Sun Yat-sen, who wanted only 13 provinces on the south of Yangtze River. He was willing to give the northeast part of China to Japan or Russia – just for the Republic of China’s own good.

This history incubated in a city like Harbin, which was a city built by the Jewish refugees who fled from Russia. Actually, the northeast wasn’t China in the beginning. The Manchurians counted it in. I often think about people who live in that kind of unstable situation, and I represent them through art.

«CANS Asia Art News» : In <Diluted Retrospective> , there is a chair with an empty beer bottle inserted in it in front of the wall of 39 watercolor on paper. It seems like you are providing the audience a specific point of view; and the 39 watercolors, you cite key characters from, Chinese traditions and symbolic icons of contemporary art. Why the Russian October Revolution?

Zhao Gang : The 39 watercolors were drawn casually and subconsciously. I read a book and it reminded me of the modern revolutionary history of the Chinese, the October Revolution from the West, and the how art developed after that period. Before the October Revolution, there was this formalism by Kazimir Malevich and Alexander Rodchenko. The way contemporary art exists is all about authenticating history. And China, I think it is a “total mess”. Both Russia and China want to talk about Utopia, but Chinese politics will only talk about a “Chinese Utopia”. That’s actually nothing, I think.

«CANS Asia Art News» : On the 2nd floor you document your imaginary Harbin through photography. You made the silkscreens on canvas and portrayed a nearly utopian space. Why did you choose “silkscreen” for the multicultural Harbin? Do you plan to make photography art like this for other cities?

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Zhao Gang : Only Harbin, I think. I do not plan to make art like this in any other city. For me, Harbin is enough to remind people about Utopia and possibility.

«CANS Asia Art News» : All historical, social, and political elements in this show seems quite humorous, is it mandatory to be critical to make art?

Zhao Gang : I think it must ridicule and it must have humor. Without humor and elegance, there is no need for contemporary art to exist.

«CANS Asia Art New» : You joined China's first independent art group "Stars" at 18. You studied abroad and were educated in the West; you even left the art scene and became a banker which means you have experienced both right and left wing. Your art practice is all about decomposing. How do you see your identity under the definition of nationality?

Zhao Gang : Like I said, I am a cocksucker. I have already lost a clear sense of character. I lost the knowledge and the emotion towards China as well. It is such a pity that I was even here, I'm unable to agree with how this land has "bred" me. From my experience abroad, from Europe to USA, or even Cuba, Chinatown is always the dirtiest place, why? Chinese people should think are they "really Chinese"? The concept of a Chinese is ambiguous, and that is what I am interested in.