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## 以畫布紀年 — 關渡美術館「趙剛 21st：色表／支架 作為歷史人類誌」

文：高博修 Sean Gaffney，2020 年 3 月

自2007年回到故鄉北京，華裔美籍藝術家趙剛參加了一系列的國際展覽，包含美國邁阿密佩雷茲美術館、智利聖地牙哥當代美術館、中國北京尤倫斯當代藝術中心、蘇州美術館，以及數個在紐約、柏林、北京、上海與台北藝廊展出的展覽。現在，趙剛也在台北的關渡美術館展出，由館長黃建宏擔任策展人。趙剛經常被視為同輩中唯一在近年來同時身處東、西兩方的藝術家。這一點能從來自世界各地的觀眾、作家、藏家、策展人都對他的作品感到興趣看出。不過，假如能超越雙重文化的表象，趙剛的重要性更關乎時間的移軸，而非橫向的拓展。

展覽「趙剛 21st：色表／支架 作為歷史人類誌」中，趙剛將近期將繪畫作為探究歷史的稜鏡，以假設、原理、與實踐來訴說歷史。這其中所關乎的是我們如何回溯與我們為何回溯歷史，或是藝術家如何回看。對於藝術家而言，如此精明的展名非常切當，他有自我意識地透過藝術實踐建構了荒謬的歷史命運。透過這些畫作，藝術家邀請我們參與一種新的回顧模式，引起了人們對於回顧的好奇心，而這也是趙剛多年來所達成的方式。

假如有人去觀看這一個保留恰當諷刺距離與懷疑態度的創作總體，「趙剛 21st：色表／支架 作為歷史人類誌」提供了一個觀看藝術家與其作品的廣泛視角，挑戰了我們對歷史的假設與立足點。這樣的挑戰不僅只是揭穿了中國歷史文化中的荒謬，也包括了繪畫本體。我們能從過去得到什麼？有什麼是值得被留下的？這些繪畫又剩下些什麼？趙剛的作品也許能解答。答案也許是懷疑的、粗糙的、笨拙的，但這就是答案。

出生在1961年的滿族家庭，趙剛的家族在「文化大革命」期間經歷了嚴重批鬥。然而，作為當時星星畫會最年輕的成員，趙剛透過展覽，對於70至80年代的中國早期現代藝術做出了極大的貢獻。他將非屬藝術機構的藝術家群聚，以自行車代步，在夜晚的北京公寓中舉辦了多次前衛展覽。之後，就在「反精神污染」運動開始之前，趙剛離開了中國。1983年，他先是在荷蘭學習藝術，後來到了美國瓦薩學院繼續研讀。在紐約，他的角色不僅是聚集中國前衛藝術家的呼喚者，趙剛也為非裔美國藝術家們創造了對話的空間，甚至買下並經營藝術媒體〈Art Asia Pacific〉。他在紐約生活與工作超過了20年，並在2007年回到北京，尋找所謂的新中國與中國當代藝術。

隨著趙剛的歸國，他發現他與當時的北京格格不入。為了適應，趙剛繼續了他在紐約所發展出來的個人化創作方法。這種方法圍繞著他獨特的身份，也把視角帶回了歷史、情色、革命、詩意、傳統水墨、與中國過去的文化。如此一來，趙剛從私人的角度描畫了對於新中國的想像，以繪畫探討繪畫本身與自己。

趙剛所著墨的話題，是中國人與在中國的非華裔人士經常不認知的異質性。展覽中，2019年的巨幅作品《China Party 2020》描繪了一大群的人，綠袍姑娘、蓄鬚道士、中國將領與清朝皇帝都圍繞了一張圓桌，就像反映中國多元文化性的一道彩虹。當我們看得更仔細時，會發現這些人物其實都穿著非漢族或非華人的服裝。在這樣的架構下，趙剛重組內容，再透過粗糙直接的筆觸描繪，剝奪了他們的固有歷史並呈現了內在的形象與色彩。趙剛從當代主觀地看待這些非中國與中國的人物，同時也成為了從內部與外部觀看中國的人。

曾在2018年個展「趙剛回顧展」（亞紀畫廊）中展出的39件水彩作品，也能看出趙剛的主觀性。這個系列取材俄國十月革命，再融合了中國歷史及趙剛和中國、共產運動、當代藝術的連結。對趙剛而言，中國長期沒有個人的當代藝術史，藝術家的作品通常關於革命軍閥、知識份子以及中華帝國的遺跡。再次，趙剛透過繪畫與回顧性的觀點照亮了他自己的世界。

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2015至2017年作品《知識份子》描繪了中國知識份子在五四運動後，紛紛前往歐洲、美國、日本尋求更高等的教育。當他們回到中國時，也對於家鄉中滿著夢想與憧憬，希望能帶來更好的影響。但是，有很多人在最後落得了悲慘的下場。趙剛和這些知識份子一樣，同時作為局外人與局內人，而他也是一個當代樣板。

展覽中很重要的一點是更深層的時間位移，從歷史到社會人類學，再到生物人類學。2016年作品《猿王》探討了人類的史前源起。這隻猿猴背叛了牠應有的慣性，成為了一位具有潛能與智慧的生物。牠將放棄他在動物世界的王位，開始進入人類文明的演化。牠的明亮的眼神在畫布上遠望，也許正是望著人類歷史的演進。假如中國的傳統哲學家要從古代尋找指引，那麼趙剛所見的則更久遠。

我們已經不用去分辨這些肖像是趙剛看待自己身份的角度，或是他的敘事方式。近乎所有的作品都被填塞了他的個人歷史與命運。2015年至2017年《知識份子》與2016年《猿王》便提供了我們如此的觀看稜鏡。前者是文化的混合體，後者則是立足在文化出現之前。前者的人物受到了他人給予的殘酷命運，後者則因不屬於人類而倖免於難。無論是身為滿族、藝術家、移民、返鄉者、局內人或局外人，趙剛表現了明確的立場。歷史為證，良善的初衷與知識也不能保證能人類的野蠻中脫身。

另一種主題是趙剛對於庭院文化與花園景色的描繪。在2020年作品《冠狀病毒三》與《冠狀病毒四》中，物件被畫在了畫布的邊緣，傳統景物的價值被裁切、去語意化。佛的形象成為了中國文化的空殼，已然不是當初創造牠的原意，而人們卻也妥協。趙剛選出了這些面向，不拋棄卻也不接受這樣的表象價值。這樣的技法與趙剛在2015年在蘇州美術館的展覽「偶園」與水彩作品中的人物與建築不謀而合，儘管他的油畫展示於室內空間的地面上，卻也還是表現著一種不合時宜的感覺。

與趙剛無異，外人也能看到中國的風景與遠景。2015年作品「中國地圖」就是啟發自德國探險家與科學家費迪南·馮·李希霍芬的1885年著作。一塊石碑屹立在起伏的山丘與長城之前，引用了外國人對中國的想像，西方式的物質描繪被趙剛所挪用，結合了他的西方主觀意識再次產出，如同一面鏡子對照著另一面。

當代所發生的事離我們不遠，但也終將成為改變歷史的歷史。事實上，《冠狀病毒》系列是趙剛在北京疫情肆虐時在北京所創作的四件作品。在這樣的環境下，趙剛仍堅持他的手法。在第一個系列《冠狀病毒一》中，描繪了一株窗前的暗色植物，窗戶也將景色分割成了兩半。看向窗外幾乎沒有景色的窗外，一片空白凝結了世界。積雪的屋頂對應著遠方的死灰樹木，卻存留下了一片黑葉。這幅靜物畫提供了色彩及溫暖的對比，也令人沈思。趙剛將當代災難所帶來的分離、孤立、忍難、堅韌精神性透過歷史媒材納入了畫作之中。

趙剛是我們所謂中國統一文化的局外人，他在文化中看到了內在圖像，並延續創作至今。透過藝術家，或者說是透過一位畫家與畫家的職責，這些事物都能有新的意義、新的神話、與新的歷史。無論是中國、美國、或其他國家的藝術家，也許沒有人能有相同的認知思想了。

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## Canvas Annals – Zhao Gang 21st : Supports / ColorLumps as Anthropography of History at Kuandu Museum of Fine Arts

By Sean Gaffney, March 2020

Since returning to his hometown of Beijing in 2007, Chinese American artist Zhao Gang has been featured in numerous international solo exhibitions, including, Perez Art Museum Miami, Museo de Arte Contemporáneo in Santiago, Chile, Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing, The Suzhou Museum in Suzhou, China, with recent gallery solo shows in New York, Berlin, Beijing, Shanghai and Taipei, and now, Taipei's Kuandu Museum of Fine Arts. Often described as the only figure of his cohort who understands both specificities of the East and West, Zhao has had a visible footprint in both sides of this spectrum in recent years. The interest in his multivalent paintings from audiences, writers, collectors, and curators across multiple continents might attest to this. However, moving beyond this oversimplified bi-cultural conceit, Zhao's importance perhaps has more to do with a temporal shift than lateral.

“Zhao Gang 21st: Supports/ColorLumps as Anthropography of History” proposes Zhao Gang's recent painting practice as a prism of inquiry with which to examine the very idea of History (with a capital H), and the assumptions, principles, and practices that inform history. In so many words, it's something concerned with how we look back, and why we look back, or rather, how the artist does so. A more than apt title for an artist whose self-awareness about his absurd historical fate has formed no small amount of his practice. Through this collection of paintings, we are invited to a new mode of retrospection, one that elicits a curiosity about the premises of looking back, a feat Zhao has accomplished across his many years.

If one approaches the totality of this project, reserving the appropriate ironic distance and skepticism, “Supports/ColorLumps as Anthropography of History” proposes viewing the artist and his work in a broad view which challenges our assumptions of history and the shaky ground which it undoubtedly has always stood on. This challenge extends beyond merely serving a missive debunking the fallacies wrought throughout Chinese cultural history, but also encompasses the ontology of painting itself. What is worth gleaning from this past? What is worth saving? And What does painting have left to offer? Zhao Gang's paintings offer some sort of answer. Skeptical, coarse, and bawdy answers, though answers nonetheless.

Born 1961, his family's Manchu pedigree attracted considerable castigation during the Cultural Revolution. As the youngest member of the Stars Group, Zhao Gang contributed to China's earliest modern art exhibitions from the late seventies to the mid-eighties. His activity with a cohort of non-institutionalized artists formed a community of the avant-garde, traveling on bicycles between apartment exhibitions across night-time Beijing. He left China, just before the Anti-Spiritual Pollution crackdowns to study in the Netherlands in 1983 and later attended Vassar College in the United States. In New York he played a role in pulling not only a community of Chinese avant-garde artists together, but also created spaces for dialogues with African American artists, and even purchased and ran the art magazine *Art Asia Pacific* for a spell. He lived and worked in New York for over twenty years before returning to Beijing in 2007 to find a new China, and a new topography of Chinese Contemporary Art.

Zhao Gang the returnee found a Beijing he did not fully recognize. To engage with this new landscape, the artist continued what began in New York in the 90s, a practice towards the more personal, one that revolved around his specific identity, but stretched back towards history to question the present, drawing from erotica, revolution, poetry, traditional ink painting, Chinese culture's past. In this way, through the personal, Zhao depicts a new Chinese imaginary and by default a universal, explored through painting, about painting, and about himself.

One such recurring topic is the often-unrecognized heterogeneity of China, or the non-Chinese within China. In the exhibition's largest work *China Party 2020*, 2020, a panoply of figures makes up this party. A “verdant-robed girl,” a bearded Taoist, and generals and a Qin emperor gathered around a table project a colorful rainbow of a multifaceted Chinese culture. Upon more rigorous inspection, the figures are in fact all wearing the attire of non-Han Chinese, or non-Chinese altogether. Reframed in this context, and rendered with harsh and direct brush strokes, stripping the forms of their historical context and revealing an interior identity of shape and color, Zhao

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gives these non-Chinese Chinese, a contemporary subjectivity through the inherited and the traditional; one that regards China from within and without.

Comprising another facet of this subjectivity is a body of work from 2018 titled *Diluted Retrospective* (Each Modern, Taipei), featuring 39 watercolors. The series frames Russia's October Revolution in a context that includes Chinese history and Zhao himself while addressing identity through links between China, communist revolutions, and also Contemporary Art history. For Zhao, coming of age in China meant there was never one's own Contemporary Art history. Instead what the artist offers is a mix of revolutionary warlords, intellectuals, and the legacy of imperial China. Once again, through the medium of painting, Zhao Gang is able to shine a light on a precarious aspect of his world, through a retrospective turn.

*Intellectual*, 2015 - 2017 is a work which is tied to one a body of work fixated on a certain group of Chinese intellectuals who took off to Europe, the US, and Japan, post May Fourth Movement to receive higher education. Returning to China, with hopes and dreams of building a better homeland, many of these would-be statesmen meet unenviable fates. The theme of the simultaneous outsider and insider is no doubt ever present in Zhao's works as he's framed it. He is the contemporary analog of these men though in spite of this, has a different destiny.

Importantly this exhibition also draws our attention to deeper displacement with time, shifting from history and sociocultural anthropology, to biological anthropology. *Monkey King*, 2016 touches upon the very origin of homo sapiens, that is mankind's prehistoric antecedents. Betraying his tendency towards parody, Zhao shows us a sincere creature with potential and intelligence. A figure about to relinquish its throne in the kingdom of animals, and begin the heavy lifting of human civilization. Bright eyes looking out from the canvas, perhaps forward towards the march of human history to come, suggest a range of concern that goes even deeper for Zhao. If traditional Chinese philosophers looked towards the ancients for guidance, Zhao's aim may be even further back.

Whether these portraits represent aspects of the Zhao's identity or narrative are no longer in question. Almost all of the works are imbued with some piece of his own historical fate. What *Intellectual*, 2015 - 2017 and *Monkey King*, 2016 offer us is representation of this spectrum. The former is the amalgam of cultures, the latter predates culture. One figure suffers a cruel fate at the hands of his own people, despite his learning, the other is removed from this strife because it sits outside the troubles of mankind. Zhao makes clear his position on his circumstance, as Manchu, artist, emigrant, returnee, insider and outsider. History has shown, good intentions and intellect do not exclude you from man's barbarism.

Other bodies of work repositions Zhao through court culture and the landscapes from literati gardens. In *Coronavirus 3*, 2020 and *Coronavirus 4*, 2020, objects appear from edges of the canvas, cutting off, and de-contextualizing these traditional objects of value. A statue of a buddha becomes an emptied vessel of Chinese culture, both removed from the world that created it, and the people that comprise this culture. Zhao picks and chooses these aspects, not discarding, though not accepting at face value either. This technique draws parallels with his Suzhou Museum solo exhibition "Paramour's Garden" from 2015 and its watercolors of floating figures and architecture, though these oil on canvas works are grounded, and enclosed in interiors, there still a sense of the unhinged.

Landscapes and vistas of China can also be seen through eyes of outsiders, not unlike Zhao. *Map of China*, 2015 takes its inspiration from the cover of German traveler and scientist Ferdinand von Richthofen's 1885 book. A stone stele stands before rolling hills and the Great Wall. Here the foreigner's imaginary is invoked; a western depiction of an essentialist view of China is re-appropriated by Zhao, and reworked, but with his assimilated western subjectivity. A mirror is held up to a mirror.

The contemporary is never too far away, and as such neither is history or the historical events that will dot future annals. In fact, the *Coronavirus* series is comprised of 4 works done in Beijing during the height of the COVID-19 viral epidemic across China. In this context, Zhao's practice persisted. In the first of the series, *Coronavirus 1*, 2020, a small dark plant in front of a sill, with a window pane divided into sections, reframes the scene into two pieces. Looking out through these panes, a near-void of white freezes the world in place. Cascading sheets of snow blanket roof tops towards a horizon of grey and dead trees. The red flowers of the houseplant pull us back indoors and out of the cold, where, in contrast to the stark world outside, a black leaf gives a feeling a persistence. Formally, this

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still-life painting might offer contemplation on color, warmth, or a meditative state born from these contrasting features. Taken with its historical context, Zhao puts the very real aspect of separation, isolation, endurance and tenacity of the spirit born in the face of a contemporary crisis into this historical medium and subject.

He is an outsider of the fiction that we call a unified Chinese culture. Zhao sees this within these inherited images, trickling down to our present. Filtered through the artist, and through the baggage of painting and painter, these things can take on new meanings, enforce new myths, and posit new histories. No other artist, Chinese, American, or otherwise, has had the singular frame of mind to share such a vision.

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