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Zhao Gang Captures Northeast China's Near-Extinct Culture

Informed by his Manchurian identity, the artist sets out by motorcycle for the Chinese Eastern Railway to explore the Northeast province's fading heritage

By Nooshfar Afnan, Frieze.com | December 9, 2020

A leading force of the Chinese avant-garde Stars Group, Zhao Gang has long used irony to shed light on the dark fissures of history. At Beijing's Long March Space, as part of 'Chinese Eastern Railway' – a project initiated by fellow artist Zhang Hui – Zhao unearths conflict, imperialist aggression and intrigue in a region he is no stranger to: Manchuria (now Northeast China). Having visited this part of the country for ten years, the artist here presents more than 100 paintings that, informed by his own Manchu identity, investigate the province's near-extinct culture.



Zhao Gang, Modernism Building 1, from 'The North East' series

2020, oil on canvas, 65 × 50 cm

Courtesy: the artist and Long March Space, Beijing

Manchuria's history is complicated. After centuries of turbulence between warring ethnic groups, the region became the subject of foreign influence – initially Russian, later Japanese – at the start of the 20th century. The Chinese Eastern Railway, built as part of a secret alliance with Russia in the wake of the first Sino-Japanese War (1894–95), was the focus of this overseas encroachment. In Zhao's hands, Manchuria constitutes a unique aesthetic environment in which multiple cultural forces collide.

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Zhao Gang, Macha, from 'The North East' series
2020, oil on canvas, 65 × 50 cm
Courtesy: the artist and Long March Space, Beijing

Structured in four parts, Zhao's 'The North East' series is a montage of historical subjects. While earlier chapters, completed during lockdown, are dominated by images of domestic items and consumer goods, post-lockdown, Zhao set out by motorcycle from Beijing for the Eastern Railway. There, the artist produced a series of small, plein air paintings portraying the railway and neighbouring buildings, as well as some large-scale landscapes that capture the region's crisp air, brilliant light and Russian-style architecture (Life Painting at Hengdaohezi 3, 2020). An admirer of Russian constructivism, Zhao looks to the bold geometries and colours of artists such as Alexander Rodchenko. Elsewhere, depictions of former communist leaders and revolutionaries, some of whose lives intertwined with that history, are presented alongside a self-portrait of Zhao as a young man in Paris.



Zhao Gang, Life Painting at Hengdaohezi 4, from 'The North East' series
2020, oil on canvas, 160 × 180 cm
Courtesy: the artist and Long March Space, Beijing

Zhao's use of pastiche in this vibrant body of work, at times executed in a crude style, is unmistakably of its time, yet also draws on a complex history and even adds a touch of the fictional. Through his art, Zhao makes sense of the world, the forces that have shaped history and, ultimately, his own life.

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