

Zhao Gang: Comfortably Dumb – Works from the KWM Collection

2017.12.15 – 2018.3.2

KWM artcenter will present 35 paintings from the KWM collection by the Chinese American artist Zhao Gang, the first in a series of the KWM collection exhibitions. The exhibition comprises 10 paintings on canvas and 25 paintings on photographs, 8 never exhibited before.

Zhao Gang is considered an 'old generation' artist who participated in the beginning of Chinese Contemporary Art history. He is often connected to the "Wuming (No Name) group" and "the Stars group", two of Beijing's premiere artist groups in the 1980s. Inspiration from the artists and poets of these movements, who stood outside the dominant system, stimulated his commitment to philosophy and initiated a life long interest in theory critiquing painting methodologies, the origins of the avant-garde, Conceptual Art and what can be defined as Contemporary Art. Zhao Gang studied Philosophy in United States and Fine Arts in the Netherlands, after which he settled into a job in banking on Wall Street giving up painting all together. Throughout all his various careers, he has maintained a non-stop dialogue with socratic questions, doubts and struggles particularly applied to the existential meaning of what it is to be a painter today.

Zhao Gang is competent in using irony and a sense of humour to de-construct and transform the subject matter in his paintings. Although an obvious meaning of his works is hard to come by, there is a clear strategy and methodology at play. The works in the KWM collection are inspired by Chinese iconographic images, for example portraits of Ancient emperors, Tulufan frescos of courtesans from the five dynasties period (907-960), ancient lotus paintings from the Song dynasty, old photographs from the Republic of China (1912-1949), Mao's revolutionary poems and black and white photographs of the Suzhou landscape gardens. Though the content maybe be more traditionally related to China, he has translated the subject matter using his unique visual language which is more associated to western painting techniques. Sometimes there is a subtle change in angle and composition, for example, when he positions a Tai lake piece of rockery horizontal or demonises a kings face with a Francis Bacon style face. He usually utilises the title to emphasis the concept within the painting. These works cleverly highlight, simultaneously, the two-way cultural alienation often experienced between the East and the West, while at the same time reconcile any conflict the 'bourgeois' might have with the avant-garde arts.

A particular highlight of the collection is the 25 paintings on photographs based on photographs of Suzhou landscape gardens and the Duan Qirui Mansion in Beijing. The photographs are all shot by the artist, and printed on watercolour paper. Zhao Gang then paints watercolour on the surfaces. Every painting on photograph is as unique as his painting on canvas. The painting additions are based on the architecture in the image itself, quite different from artists, for example, Arnulf Rainer and Gerhard Richter who have drawn or painted on the photograph to confront the original image often aggressively. Zhao Gang's works, however, are full of strange and naïve qualities and historically distant from our times. They evoke a similar sentimentality one might have for old colour hand painted black and white photographs and Bai Hua writing.

About the Artist

Zhao Gang (b. 1961, Beijing) currently lives and works in New York and Beijing. He made his artistic debut as a member of the Stars Group, one of the first avant-garde artist groups to open the era of contemporary art in China, when he was just 18 years old. Shortly thereafter he pursued formal art education in Europe then New York, graduated from State Academy of Fine Art, Maastricht, Holland; Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, USA; MFA, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, USA. Later after that, Zhao Gang lived for over two decades beyond seas, developing a diverse body of work as his perspective became distinctively international. Over the course of his wanderings, Zhao Gang has been featured alongside prominent Chinese painters Liu Wei and David Diao; since returning to Beijing in 2004, Zhao Gang has turned his ever-expanding focus toward the entanglement of his personal past with Chinese history and his unique position, at once a native and a newcomer, in China today. His selected museum solo exhibitions include: The Road to Serfdom II, Museo de Arte Contemporáneo, Santiago, Chile; Paramour's Garden, Suzhou Museum, Suzhou, China, 2015; The Road to Serfdom, Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing, China, 2015; Sick Man: Zhao Gang, Today Art Museum, Beijing, China, 2011. His selected group exhibitions include: The Door, P.S.1 Institute of the Arts/Blum Helman Gallery, New York, USA, 1990. He participated in important biennial/triennial exhibitions as PERFORMA 07, the Guangzhou Triennial, and the Yokohama Triennial.

金杜艺术中心 (KWM artcenter)

The KWM artcenter opened on 20th October 2016. It is located on the second floor of the WFC centre CBD in Beijing. The new art center is supported by the law firm King & Wood Mallesons and an KWM artcenter affiliated private art fund. The KWM artcenter has over 700 sqm of exhibition space, including an exhibition space, a VIP room and an educational space. It will be used to present and promote artists both domestically and overseas. In particular, it will act as a rare art institution at the heart of the economic central area in Beijing. It will provide high-quality art educational activities and courses aimed to cultivate art lovers and collectors. It serves to improve the international influence of Chinese Art and become a powerful communicator of Chinese Contemporary Art.