

## Zhang Kai -Solo Exhibition-

27<sup>th</sup> August 2007

The oil paintings of Zhang Kai denote the artists sensitivity to spatial environments, a peripheral vision which reflects upon the dichotomy of alienation, existence and urban solitude. A native of Hohhot, Inner Mongolia, the artist has written, "...inconspicuous and unobserved...they (telephone poles) are sculptures of the city, whose silhouettes may be found all over China". His words echo the signals of life, interwoven in "...the form of the wire: simple or intricate, random or precise...", a metaphor of alienation and the transformation which embraces all aspects of existence in contemporary China.

The earlier of the series reveals a prominent saturation of colour, monochromatic fields which yield a stark juxtaposition of the figures which are suspended in the immediate visual fore of the canvas. This acts as a subtle mechanism of detachment, and an acute extenuation of the themes underscoring the composition. Softened tones later surface, to achieve a diminished yet coherent exploration of the theme, and the chosen figures of dogs appear at random, encaged, floating, hidden or partly obscured. The weary guardians of aspiration, destruction and renewal, of hope and despair, seem to be mirror a voyeurism of the actual experience, while remaining subject to both the artist and experience of the city.

Zhang Kai does not further explain nor justify his work: juxtaposition, self-elect iconography and colours are left to the subjective appraisal of the individual within the audience. His intentions remains somewhat obscure, an expressionistic and poetic orientation displays the perpetual evolution of a simple thematic series. To cite the artist, "...the dogs...are also a language of their own...both the main characters and the opponents in the game...". This play, in contrast with the "...the most desolate and uninhabited areas...icy and full of violence...lonely and helpless" articulates a certain despair and raises the question of the human condition, the profound sense of futility and nihilistic undertones which predominate consumerist culture and the abandon of self with the demise of the past, a past whether fictional or real.

The emotive force and the subtlety and nuance by which it has been achieve define Zhang Kai as an exceptional artist who possesses a lucid sensitivity to the small, and whose attention to the former in his work allows for a re-examination of the greater.

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The machinations of industry, urban renewal and catchwords of the vanguard of alienation echo throughout his work, yet, what is appreciated is a personal vision imbued within what otherwise might fail as a cliché repetition of the predominant themes & discourse of his generation.

Whether photographic or painterly, the process of creation behind this exhibition serves as an emotive vehicle rather than indictment, what is manifest in the artworks refracts daily experience, and is suggestive of an arrival, discovery ...work which emanates the mundane and avoids the pitfall of allegorical observation. Subtle, unique, the work is an understatement of the reality of one alone with a world in rupture, of a creative impulse in catharsis.

R.A. Suri  
August 2007

Graduated in 1994 from the Central Academy of Drama in Beijing, Zhang Kai prefers to see himself as an artistic worker rather than an artist. Worker or artist, these two words do not oppose each other, but are rather complementary: it is probably this rigorous work and the repetition of two themes, telegraph poles and dogs, which give Zhang Kai's paintings and photographs their strength and originality.

Arriving in Beijing in the 1990s he noticed all these poles rhythming the city, and started painting them on end. He found that these entangled, complex and imposing shapes were mirroring Beijing and a part of China. One of the real meanings of the poles is to symbolise the Chinese society: a disorder where everything is possible. These shapes fascinate him and almost obsess him. This leads Zhang Kai to a great concentration on his technique, so as to unravel as precisely as possible these objects and the meaning he gives them.

The dogs appear in his work for a very simple reason, his affection and his complicity with that animal.

Therefore quite naturally these two subjects merge into each other, sometimes comparable to scenes from a comic strip, with a very graphic edge, where there transpires a certain humour.

Since the very beginning of his work one of the most important evolutions is that of the colours he uses. During all his youth, the artist searched for recognition, the need to be seen, this can be achieved through vivid, sometimes loud colours. He was also under the influence of the 1990s pop art and cynical realism art movement in China. Slowly the young artist matured and did not feel the need to sparkle any longer. His colours became softer and melted, leading to the greys of 2005 which make the work more delicate, almost a little melancholic.

For Zhang Kai, modest and discreet artist, painting is a necessity, and of course also a search for the inner self. At the margin of so many currents in Chinese art today, the artist follows his own path, never as strict as those poles he loves so dearly, but with a real energy and a strong wish to progress and communicate.

Marie Terrieux | Curator  
August 2007

Translated by Patrizia Van Daalen

Why telegraph poles?

Because they are inconspicuous and unobserved.

Summer 1996, I was walking during the sunset when, by chance, I came across the most spectacular sight: a telegraph pole that was lit by the last rays of sun and contained indescribably unique energy.

Since then, I have been photographing different shapes and moods around telegraph poles.

What makes it special?

The most fascinating aspect is the form of a wire: simple or intricate, random or precise.

When I began using oil to paint telegraph poles, I couldn't help but analyze them and use them to form a language with which to express my emotions.

For me, they are sculptures of a city, their silhouettes can be found all over China, in small lanes and on wide avenues, in the most desolate and uninhabited areas.

In downtown, they are cold and full of violence.

In quiet streets, they are lonely and helpless.

I want to show various emotions in these telegraph poles, emotions that constantly change.

Whilst painting this form, I have gone through numerous phases: exaggeration, realism, and exaggeration again.

Why dogs?

*Dogs* in my paintings is also a language of its own. I think I chose to paint them in order to express how special is the relationship between dogs and humans.

The dogs are - the main characters and the opponents - in the game that is my painting. Continuous changes between their roles are resulting in my paintings.

This is a simple explanation of my work. I think that everybody who sees my paintings will realize that there is boundless space for their own interpretation.

I am very interested in human imagination because it is not controllable and adds an element of mystery.

Zhang Kai

October 2006

Translated by Lauren Gollasch