

Shao Fan

Face to Face

Exhibition in Lucerne: 25.4.–5.7.2014

Opening: Friday, April 25, 2014, 6–8 pm

Galerie Urs Meile is pleased to present the first solo exhibition of Shao Fan (*1964 in Beijing, China) in Lucerne. For his last exhibition at the gallery in Beijing, it was important to the artist to discuss the different attributes of the term “old” in the East and West, and with the Eastern one also his own convictions. Whereas in our culture the word is related to terms such as worn out, faulty, outdated and ugly, the word has a much more positive meaning in China. Oldness is regarded as a quality, something approved and proven, mature, rare, and, above all, beautiful. When confronted with the antiquities Shao Fan uses, this view needs no explanation, because Eastern and Western perceptions are quite similar here. But when it comes to contemporary painting, a Western viewer needs to detach himself from the logic of the avant-garde and its pursuit of the new and unknown. Asian art does not involve the concept of genius, where greatness is measured by the artist’s ability to create original artworks that break with tradition. Here, the ideal is the master craftsman whose constant practice brings him close to perfection. Shao Fan is an incurable classicist in the Chinese sense, and it is in this context that the recurring motif of a hare can be explained (*Misty Winter*, 2013, oil on canvas, 150 x 100 cm; *Portrait*, 2013, oil on canvas, 200 x 170 cm; *Portrait*, 2013, oil on canvas, 150 x 100 cm). Shao Fan does not paint the hare because it has a special meaning to him, or because of the many myths told about it in Chinese culture. To Shao Fan it is just an animal, like all the others he paints. His animal portraits are more or less anthropomorphic and composed with reflection symmetry; they are always painted in different shades of gray and the subject depicted is contrasted with the texture, which resembles stone. The achromatic palette is chosen on purpose, to make the paintings appear old. Often his pictures are titled *Portrait* and humanized, because Shao Fan wants to depict human feelings in subjects other than humans. Even his pear (*Medicine*, 2012, oil on canvas, 170 x 210 cm) looks as it is uncomfortable, while the portrait of an apple brings body parts to mind (*Portrait – Apple No.1*, 2013, oil on canvas, 110 x 150 cm; *Portrait – Apple No. 2*, 2013, oil on canvas, 82 x 71 cm). A monkey looks at a mirror (*Monkey Looking into Mirror No.2*, 2012, oil on canvas, 66 x 49 cm), a rabbit sits at a desk, an eagle is presented head-on, as it is the custom for portraits (*Portrait – Eagle*, 2013, oil on canvas, 100 x 80 cm), and a tiger has a child’s facial features (*Baby Tiger*, 2011, oil on canvas, 200 x 160 cm). The anthropomorphic process makes Shao Fan’s subjects appear cute and comical. The animals depicted touch us. They also touch Shao Fan, yet they do not hold any special importance for him, so this effect is not intended, but is based on our Western misconception. A detour helps to understand Shao Fan’s Taoist outlook on the world. Juxtaposing a statement by film director Werner Herzog—an exemplary point of view held by someone who is convinced of the privileged position of mankind—with Shao Fan’s paintings, it becomes clear what the artist sees, or does not see: “... in all the faces ... I discover no kinship, no understanding, no mercy. I see only the overwhelming indifference of nature. ... And this blank stare speaks only of a half-bored interest in food.”¹ A person with an attitude toward animals that is similar to Herzog’s will see cynical humor in Shao Fan’s paintings. However, to the artist it is only natural to paint hares as relatives who look at us as equals and communicate with us on an emotional level. Another difference in the socialization of both our cultures contributes to the misunderstanding. While we are used to trying to understand the essence of a thing through intellectual abstraction, in China essence is grasped through the senses. Consequently, even if the animals depicted look cute to us, we have to keep in mind that the artist’s intention has nothing to do with what we associate with the term “cute.”

In Shao Fan’s art subject and form are of equal value. His paintings do not open worlds; they are first and foremost object and material. It is easier to perceive his works in this fashion when looking at his three-dimensional pieces. Shao Fan was among the first artists in China to create works that walk a fine line between art and design (*Embroidered Tea Table – 2012*, No. 3, 2013, walnut, table: 78 x 200 x 131 cm, stools: 50 x 59 x 49 cm). Shortly after graduating from Beijing Arts and Crafts College in 1984, he began working on objects, relating to this as his passion. For example, he combines a chair from the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) with acrylic glass plates in a way that makes it seem as if the chair is exploding and its individual pieces are about to fly apart. The inner structure revealed—the individual parts—is as

beautiful to Shao Fan as the assembled whole. This is a familiar principle of calligraphy. Each stroke is executed with the sense that it alone is already beautiful. Shao Fan usually works in the Western technique of oil painting, but recently has created a number of portraits in traditional Chinese ink. For example, *Portrait – Small Ink Rabbit No. 2* (2013, ink on rice paper, painting: 170 x 90 cm, scroll: 274 x 100 cm) consists of a number of individual, curved, narrowing brush strokes that together create the image. Shao Fan used a similar kind of line in a sculpture, as well. *Ming Beard – 2006, No. 5* (2006, red sandalwood, 43 x 152 x 12 cm) is part of a series of objects that he recreated in the style and simplicity of the Ming Dynasty. The curved shape does not at first make the viewer think of a hair from a beard, but Shao Fan is not interested in the reproduction of real life models or individual features in any medium he uses. The concrete would only distract him from the beauty of his inner world, he says.

1 Werner Herzog's comment in: Werner Herzog, *Grizzly Man*, 2005, documentary, 103 mins.