

Exhibition May 12 – July 14, 2007, Lucerne
Opening Saturday, May 12, 2007, 15.00-17.00

Wang Xingwei - "Large Rowboat" is not a Group Show

In Chinese traditional literature, quite often poems were simply named after the first of a stream of emotional images evoked by the first line of the text. Similarly, a specific work by Shanghai-based painter Wang Xingwei lends the title to the show *Wang Xingwei - Large Rowboat* at Galerie Urs Meile (Beijing, February 3 – March 31, 2007; Lucerne, May 12 – July 14, 2007). Although not the earliest of the exhibited paintings, *Large Rowboat* (2006) is the first of Wang's most recent works that marks a further technical and conceptual turning point in the artist's chameleonic production.

At a first sight Wang Xingwei could be taken for anyone: he could be Ingres, Kandinsky, Duchamp, de Lempicka, just to quote some names; he could as well be a surrealist, a photorealist, an illustrator, or even an art forger. Wang Xingwei exploits different cultural references and incisively combines them with an outstanding ability to exploit diverse pictorial techniques to which he resorts ad hoc when shrewdly sifting through the history of art. As painter Xie Nanxing says of him:

Wang Xingwei reminds me of those master workers in the old factories from times gone by, who were able to create something new by assembling pieces coming from different old machines, just depending on the function they wanted the newly made tool to have.¹

Wang Xingwei plays hide-and-seek with the viewer, concealing himself behind a large company of characters that he revives from various historical and cultural references: art history, classical novels, placards, or from his own mind, as in the case of the weird gang of penguins and pandas reappearing from time to time in the artist's paintings (see, for instance, *Death of Panda*, 2004, a work inspired to Giotto's fresco painting *The Lamentation*, 1305-06 A.D.). Wang provokes, flabbergasts and intrigues viewers with his irresistible and colourful symbolic gimmicks, with the uniforms and other paraphernalia through which the same man and woman suddenly change their identities, becoming surreal golfers, sailors, hostesses, disquieting nurses and who knows what else in the future.

Other times, as in a number of Wang's latest works, starting with *Large Rowboat* (200 x 260 cm, 2006), the two represented subjects are not only stripped of any professional attire, but also deprived of detailed facial features. Quickly sketched, cartoon-like geometric silhouettes outline the unsophisticated figures of a man and a woman, seemingly a couple. "I want to slowly depart from art history," Wang Xingwei explains. "In the past the observer needed to have a [certain] cultural background [to understand my works], while what I am dealing with now has a more direct connection with anyone's personal experience. [In my latest paintings] I built formal models to create shapes. I want to simplify the form, and I find sketching a very comfortable way of expression."²

When first seeing a monographic catalogue or a one-man show by Wang Xingwei, one could mistake the paintings for a collection of works by diverse artists. This is because, besides shifting from one style to the other, Wang keeps simultaneously developing different trends and variations around independent scenes which are disjointed from any time and cause/effect, a priori rational and narrative succession. Even if Wang's paintings could be grouped in generic series following certain styles or topics, whether belonging to the same period or dating back to dissimilar creative moments, the artist leaves the task of ordering and connecting the works to the viewer's own discretion. Under Wang Xingwei's direction, the subjects are caught in ridiculous and/or helpless circumstances, purposely staged in order to break the acknowledged rules of logical thinking. Beyond the initial laugh or astonishment, the viewer starts creating new associations through which the real nature of Wang Xingwei's works reveals itself. Like burlesque snapshots, Wang's paintings show and question conflicting aspects peculiar to the tragicomic experience of life, an unfathomable condition that has repeated itself from time immemorial.

by Nataline Colonnello

Beijing, January 13, 2007

On the occasion of this show a catalogue was published.

¹ Colonnello, N., Xie Nanxing, Wang Xingwei (2005). *A Criss-Crossed Interview with Xie Nanxing and Wang Xingwei*. In: *Catalogue Show Me... Catch Me... Sight Unseen: Xie Nanxing and Wang Xingwei*. Beijing: China Art Archives & Warehouse (CAAW), Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing-Lucerne. p. 28.

² Wang Xingwei in an interview with the author held in his studio in Shanghai on January 8, 2006.