

Cao
Yu

I Was Born To Do This

Exhibition in Lucerne: 11.5. – 21.7.2023

Opening: Thursday, May 11, 2023; 5:30 – 7:30 pm

“Art is a weapon to me. I use art to ‘overcome’ this vulgar age - to overcome the inferior values, the inferior aesthetics and the inferior culture of the time. Even if the word ‘artist’ didn’t exist in the world, nor in the industry, nor in the scene, I’d still do it. Because it’s a survival instinct to me - I was born to do this.”

- Cao Yu

Born in China in 1988, Cao Yu’s work spans video, installation, performance, photography, sculpture and painting. Her incisive and bold artistic language, distinctive cross-disciplinary practice, witty and ironic expression have made her a leading figure of China’s new generation female artists. She has also been recognized as one of the most influential emerging artists in the Chinese contemporary art scene. Galerie Urs Meile, together with Cao Yu, are delighted to announce the opening of the artist’s long overdue exhibition, *I Was Born To Do This*, at our Lucerne gallery. The show will feature a series of the artist’s most recent and significant works, including paintings and installations, which evoke a conscious association with the socio-political status quo in China and the momentous events in the country’s history. With her coherent approach of being challenging, courageous, analytical and performative, Cao Yu keeps addressing issues such as the value of the Chinese society and the identity-seeking in the midst of the social upheaval.

To understand Cao Yu’s painting, one must understand first that painting is one of the media that the artist consciously chooses to realize her ideas. Although she does not consider herself a painter, she uses painting to convey her message. These paintings do not have a unified style, tone and technique. Some are vibrantly colored, while others seem worn out. Some have delicate brushwork, others are reduced and brushed over. Cao Yu does not pay attention to the language of painting, does not study the gradient and harmony of colors, nor is she obsessed with composition. These paintings are more of a way of presenting a message, and the key is the message itself. One example would be *The Last Sparrow, 2022* (oil on canvas, 210 x 290 cm, 2 panels (each panel 210 x 145 cm)). The artist deliberately uses tones and brushstrokes that are consistent with the historical period in which the event depicted in the painting took place. The scene of catching sparrows in full swing is based on the Great Chinese Famine¹ that occurred between 1958-1961 in China, when the government decreed the Four Pests campaign - the eradication of the “four pests” (flies, mosquitoes, rats and sparrows). In the picture everyone is frantically trying to catch sparrows. It shows 26 people, from near to far, holding different tools and working feverishly on the same task. The whole scene has a happy, festive and cheerful atmosphere, while danger (pest infestation) has crept onto the trunk of the tree in the lower left corner. In the upper branch of the picture, there is one “last sparrow”, looking down coldly, as if laughing at the stupidity of human beings. The sparrow is a metaphor. Morbid enthusiasm and irrational destruction were not exclusive to that era. Frenzy can hold thoughts hostage and make people lose their free judgment. Here stands Cao Yu, holding art as her weapon. It fights a way out for her, and gives hope to redeem herself and the viewers of her art.

A beautiful, magnificent, glorious, and yet tragic scenery shows up in the work *The Red Sun, 2022* (oil on canvas, 200 x 320 cm, 2 panels (each panel 200 x 160 cm)). The whole piece is divided into two, one half absolute light and one half absolute darkness and death. The red color is the color of power and hope. A magnificent scene on a field of red light, with not a single human being in the whole picture, only dead, dense sparrows. The horizon, stretched out by dead bodies of sparrows, meets with light, which indicates a new beginning, a new cycle of hope.

Boss, 2022 (oil on canvas, 195 x 150 cm) depicts a pig wearing a “tiger skin”, sitting on a chair in a superior gesture with a green plant beside it, “wearing” the same “tiger skin” pattern - the tiger

orchid. The tiger skin on the pig is fake, while the one on the plant is real. The pig is clearly no longer the right size for the red “emperor chair”, yet he still forces himself into the seat, with his feet trampling the struggling fellow.

In China there is a saying - Hua Bing (画饼) which could be literally translated as “drawing a pancake”, meaning that someone describes a wonderful prospect to you but never does anything to make it come true. In *Drawing a Pancake*, 2022 (oil on canvas, 160 x 160 cm), Cao Yu confronts us with such a “realistic” pancake that seems to be just out of the pan, still hot and bubbling with oil. If you say it is fake, it is a real painted cake; if you say it is real, it is indeed just a fake cake. Cao Yu “draws a pancake” for you, if someone buys it with real money, will the fake one become real?

The classical Chinese-style neon sign is written in traditional Chinese characters and English letters, flashing out a secular but profound sentence *I Just Don't Want You to Live Better Than I Do*, which also gives the title to the work (2021, 2/3, variable channel neon sign, 290 x 106 x 14 cm, edition of 3 + 2 AP). With such a huge fanfare it “shouts out” the deepest shame hidden in the depths of everyone’s humanity. The neon sign was once the soul of China’s “Night Hong Kong” in the 1980s and 1990s. When the night fell, it illuminated a flourish of prosperity under the dark night. Those neon signs represent an ambitious commercial world, where people are competitive, driven by envy and self-fulfillment. These “inappropriate” words, appearing in such a clamorous way, “inappropriately” sting your heart and let you see yourself and others.

The title of Cao Yu’s 2020 photograph - *Dragon Head* - comes from the Chinese word for faucet, 水龙头 shui long tou, which could be literally translated as “water dragon head”. It depicts Cao Yu, clothed in black suit, seated on the faucet of an old concrete sink. Water sprays from between her spread legs directly towards the viewer. Presenting herself as an ambiguous figure, Cao Yu urinates a human “fountain”, satirizing masculine claims to superior power. If *Dragon Head* is the artist’s subversion of gendered expectations, *Dragon Head - Shanhe Declaration* (2023, ancient Chinese-style military flag, embroidery, trident, dimensions variable) is a more majestic stroke on top of it. It is a fearless declaration, a courageous statement from Cao Yu to the world as a person and an artist. The “disobedient” faucet in *Dragon Head* could be the “source” of future waves and torrents. When the ancient Chinese emperors conquered the land, they would designate a new “Shanhe” (the Chinese word for Mountain and River, refers generally to the World) as their own sphere of rule, and then set up a flag to demonstrate the alternation of dynasties. In this installation work, Cao Yu chooses “Dragon Head” as the image on the ancient Chinese military flag and erects the flag in a new territory. It is a way for the artist to gain power and pursue freedom in the crevices of politics. Cao Yu encourages herself with this declaration - Creativity is everywhere, and I was born to do this.

Cao Yu (b. 1988, Liaoning, China. BFA & MA, Sculpture Department, Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing, China) currently lives and works in Beijing, China. Cao Yu has been shortlisted for *The Sovereign Asia Art Prize*, and has been selected as the candidate of *Forbes China Most Influential Young Artist* in 2023. In 2022, Cao Yu has ranked No.1 by *Hi Art - The Most Influential Female Artist in China*. Her works have been exhibited worldwide, including Museum der Moderne Salzburg, Salzburg, Austria (2023); Kunstuseum Wolfsburg, Wolfsburg, Germany (2022); Lilehammer Art Museum, Lillehammer, Norway (2022); Kunstforeningen GL STRAND, Copenhagen, Denmark (2022); Ulsan Art museum, Ulsan, South Korea (2022); MAK Museum für Angewandte Kunst, Vienna, Austria (2019); Misheng Art Museum, Beijing, China (2018); Artspace, Sydney, Australia (2017); Today Art Museum, Beijing, China (2016). Her works have also been collected by M+ Museum, Hong Kong; Erlenmeyer Stiftung, Basel, Switzerland; Sishang Art Museum, Beijing; CAFA Art Museum, Beijing, etc.

¹ The Great Chinese Famine is widely regarded as the deadliest famine and one of the greatest man-made disasters in human history, with an estimated death toll due to starvation that ranges in the tens of millions. The major contributing factors in the famine were the policies of the Great Leap Forward (1958 to 1962) and people’s communes, launched by Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party Mao Zedong, such as inefficient distribution of food within the nation’s planned economy; requiring the use of poor agricultural techniques; the Four Pests campaign that reduced sparrow populations (which disrupted the ecosystem); over-reporting of grain production; and ordering millions of farmers to switch to iron and steel production.