

MENG HUANG "I AND WE"

As an artist, Meng Huang (* in Beijing in 1966) does not play the role of auto-fictionist, who loves to reinvent himself constantly, as Andy Warhol did. Nor is he completely able to disregard himself in everything that he undertakes. So in this respect everything that he produces as a painter as well as a photographer contains both direct and indirect references to his existence. Just take his cycle of paintings, *Paradise Lost* (1993-2002), as a starting point: we see views of streets. Industrial buildings. Vast fields and lone trees. Actually inhospitable landscapes. Nothing really cozy. Also nothing beautiful, or even sublime. Instead, pure confrontation with an exterior immersed in the darkness of night, along with a sense of alienation.

These exterior views do not refer to anything in specific, as Meng Huang once said in a conversation. At the time he was sleeping during the day, awake and working at night. Since the world was already dark when he woke up, it seemed fully unreal to him, because only the shadows of things stood out. This vision of the mysterious also reflects the ultra-subjectivity of an artist who is always trying to climb over the walls of inauthenticity. Here, there is the echo of a life and work conducted in resistance against the superpower of conformity.

Beginning with the landscapes in which no colors appear, the depiction of a crumpled pack of cigarettes (*Cigarette Box*, 2011, oil on canvas, 5x 335 x 84 cm) is a disturbance. Instead he simply presents us with the package, obviously endowed with great meaning, which is why he selected a large format, linking it with a small-format series made up of twenty pictures (*Cigarettes No. 1*, 2011 - *Cigarettes No. 20*, 2011, oil on canvas, each 80 x 80 cm). These are of crushed cigarette butts in black ashtrays. Just one in the first picture, then two, then three, and at the end of the series, twenty. The number of images of cigarette butts corresponds to the number of cigarettes in a pack. Why?

To accuse the artist of a simple descriptive approach to the reality he feels he is at the mercy of would be as wrong as assuming that his sojourn in Berlin caused a sudden break in his work. Alone the fact that he does not use packs of western cigarettes suggests that this is something completely different from the inconsequential copying of reality's beautiful façade. From out of the red of the packaging the image of Beijing's Temple of Heaven stands out. Here, everything is so precisely fixed that even individual words and symbols are legible. The pleasure in detail is remarkable, but certainly not a sign of blind appreciation for the image depicted, because the cigarette pack is so crumpled that one can hardly come away with the impression that this is simply about design. In addition, Meng Huang renders the deformed red package as if it were floating in front of a gray, foggy background that resembles clouds of smoke. He also combines the image with the pictures of cigarette butts so that we cannot help but imagine someone chain-smoking one cigarette after another, which also allows us to envision the time that passes from the point the pack is opened to when it is finally empty.

The issue of the meaning behind the cigarette brand is of considerable relevance to the interpretation. "Zhong Hua" is too expensive for the normal Chinese citizen, and is usually smoked by people who want to show that they have made something out of themselves in business, that they belong to the successful, or to those who have power in government. The brand has not only become an overpriced status symbol, but it also signifies political power, and is often given as a gift. We can get closer to what Meng Huang wants to express through these linked images if we pay more attention to the brand name. Assisted by a translation of the phrase "Zhong Hua", we arrive at a symbolic level. Suddenly it becomes clear that the brand symbolizes the greatness of China and that Meng Huang's view refers to the passage of time, eternal change, and the end that comes to everyone and everything, without exception. Crushing the cigarette package thus embodies the artist's critical attitude toward tradition, which is not eternally relevant, as far he is concerned.

From this point, one looks at a work like *Cage* (2011, steel, edition of 3, 180 x 100 x 80 cm) in a different way. What at first seems like a completely normal sculpture made of steel bars turns out to be a considerably more complex construct. In front of us is an empty cage in the basic geographical shape of China. By using the basic outline of the People's Republic, Meng Huang refers to his friend Ai Weiwei's work, *Map of China*. Yet, he also lends it another dimension. His use of steel bars instead of wood bring into play allusions to the case of Ai Weiwei, as well as to the circumstances endured by critical intellectuals. All of China is barred, and consequently, a cage that signifies bondage.

In the photo series *Go* (2009 - 2012, edition of 7, series of 16 b/w photographs, 16x 75 x 62.5 cm) the artist not only examines himself, but the question of time, as well. We see the self-portrait of a man whose hair and beard not only make him look different, but also strange. Sometimes he depicts himself with long hair. Sometimes like a punk rocker. Sometimes like a member of the Taliban. Sometimes like an intellectual. The longer the hair, the more clean-shaven he is; and the shorter the hair on his head, the wilder the beard is. Ultimately, at the end of the process, he has neither beard nor hair. Here, we see not only the passage of time, but also the alteration of man.

Meng Huang looks at the question of time in a completely different way in his 2004 Polaroid series, *I No. 2* (2004-2005, edition of 7, c-print including 52 scanned polaroid photos, 56 x 167 cm). It documents more than just his politically and personally motivated journey between Henan and Beijing. At the same time, he explores the issue of what is left of an original after time has passed. At the very start, a self-portrait taken in Henan, where he spent his childhood. For other photos portraying the course of his journey, he followed his feelings and selected places along the way, very different sites, towns, motives, and scenes. To these he added each Polaroid photo he had taken before. We see, for example, people he met: the Yong Tai Temple in Deng Feng; a girl wearing an opera costume; but also books on the revolution; then a work Ai Weiwei was working on at the time he visited him in Beijing.

All in all, signs marking a journey to his roots, which fade more and more as time goes by. The photos not only capture the motifs that jumped out at him while he was on his search for lost time—they also contain a changed Polaroid photo. It contains everything photographed before, but the more often he repeated the process of adding a Polaroid to a new picture, the smaller the things in the older picture became. The self-portrait from the beginning is still there at the end, somewhere, but because it has become smaller and smaller, it has also become increasingly difficult to recognize. In the end only a touch of a trace is left of the original. For Meng Huang this personal experience is an analogy that he uses to formulate something that is simultaneously specific and general, because the question that ultimately preoccupies him has to do with what happens to the source or the origin over time. The gradual disappearance of the self-portrait can also allude to the original idea of Marxism, because at the outside, only a vague trace of it is left, too.

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