

Chen Zuo

Curated by Chen Junyao

Burn for the Day

Galerie Urs Meile Zurich

November 7, 2024 - January 18, 2025

Opening: Thursday, November 7, 2024; 11 am - 8 pm

Reception: Thursday, August 30, 2024; 6 pm - 8 pm

The artist will be present

Galerie Urs Meile is pleased to announce *Burn for the Day*, the first solo exhibition by emerging Chinese artist Chen Zuo (b. 1990, Hunan Province, China) in Europe at its Zurich gallery. The show commences with a compelling statement, “Burn for the Day”. Inspired by the opening line of the poem *Ta sha Xing · Yuan Xi* (踏莎行·元夕)¹ by the Chinese poet Mao Pang (毛滂), “Seeking spring through the snow, lighting lamps to keep the day going.” Chen Zuo’s rewriting distinguishes itself from a helpless compromise with the night and obedience to reality. It diverges from a more Apollonian approach characterized by rigor, order, and control. Instead, he acknowledges and embraces the unknowable future symbolized by the night and seeks the birth of a new order through a forceful intervention into the chaos. A violence that can be seen as a reaction against social conditioning and the structural oppression faced by the global South in the process of universal urbanization.

Contrary to the specific, material scenarios constructed by the modern city, most of the figures in Chen Zuo’s paintings are outside of the concrete scenarios. For example, the works *Naughty Dog 2023*, 2019 - 2023 (oil on canvas, 118 x 75 cm (painting), 121 x 78 cm (framed)) and *Octopus GuaJia*, 2023 - 2024 (oil on canvas, 135 x 100 cm (painting), 138 x 103 cm (framed)) are set in a suspended context, and the environments depicted in these two works range from the countryside with its gardening setting, to a part of the town illuminated by the cold light of the sky in the snowy winter night. The specific scenes Chen Zuo omits from his paintings can be regarded as a kind of bridging of the urban-rural dichotomy, with the village in the city as the result of the convergence of the two, which is also representative of the suburban areas of Beijing where he has lived for a long time.

In his works, even in bright daylight scenes, there are still a lot of dark tones, and through layers of brushstrokes and color blocks, he builds up a depressing but full of vitality atmosphere. In contrast to the brightness, there are those lonely backs outlined in the afterglow of neon lights. The movements of the characters and animals in the paintings are stiff and their eyes are confused, whether they are ordinary people busily shuttling through the urban villages or vagabonds on the edge of the city, they all present a kind of wavering situation with no one to rely on amidst the ever-changing social process, creating an abrupt tension with the hustle and bustle of the city.

In Chen Zuo’s paintings, bright, emotionally charged scenes are often in dark tones, while on the contrary, they present more out-of-the-box colors, which contribute to the dramatic tension in his works far more than the contrast between light and shadow. Color becomes an extension of emotion, and the metaphors brought about by the bold and rhythmic use of color, along with the outlining of the artist community around him in his works, are in fact the result of an internal view of a larger social and structural situation. Just like the violent pursuit of self-awakening represented by “Burning”, the colors of brown-red, ultramarine-violet, nickel-yellow, and chrome-green are full of conflicts and oppositions, and they also build up the constancy of viewing. Through the brushstrokes and texture, as well as the hidden structure of the composition, he reveals his understanding of the individual in the modern society - a world full of opportunities and contradictions at the same time.

¹ *Ta sha Xing · Yuan Xi* (踏莎行·元夕) is a poem by the Chinese poet Mao Pang (毛滂) from the time of the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127). The first line of the poem reads, “Seeking spring through the snow, lighting lamps to keep the day going” (“拨雪寻春, 烧灯续昼”).

Underneath Chen Zuo's gaze-able surface, there is an undercurrent of repeated tugging and pulling, just like the animal figure in the work *Naughty Dog 2023, 2019 - 2023* (oil on canvas, 118 x 75 cm (painting), 121 x 78 cm (framed)) which is tentatively progressed by the unexplained, indistinct leash held by the man's hand. Under the stable structure of his works, one can feel a kind of anxiety and impulse of being pushed forward. Those colors that have been repeatedly overlapped, intermingled and even decayed on the canvas are like painful sun spots under the scorching sun, which are roughly peeled off from the overburdened facades of the urban villages.

The metaphor and revelation of the violent and competitive relationship brought about by urbanization is also embodied in a more specific context. In *Untitled (Tangyuan Pingpang)*, 2024, (oil on canvas, 70 x 50.5 cm (painting), 73 x 53.5 cm (framed)) Chen Zuo uses table tennis, a sport that carries a distinctive national symbolism, to depict two different preoccupations in the same competition. The confrontation between the player who serves and the receiver is not only a competition on the playing field, but also a continuous tug-of-war between individuals participating in the operation of society. They seem to be focused, but their eyes do not meet each other, they are present at the same time, but they never really understand each other, and this deviation of the center of gravity stems from their own sense of defense and preservation of self-power. As the perspective moves further from the periphery to the center, Chen Zuo transforms himself into a player at the poker table in the work *Intermission*, 2024 (oil on canvas, 115 x 150 cm (painting), 119 x 154 cm (framed)) observing everyone involved in the game from a more subjective perspective, as well as the passivity and exhaustion written all over their faces throughout the game, and a kind of apathetic, individualized calculation.

Returning to the theme of the exhibition, "Burn for the Day" evokes a state of restlessness, which is not only an expression of the individual's unwillingness to be drowned in the social vortex, but also the artist's courage to try to continuously play with the encounters around him through his creations. Whether it is the opponents at the card table or the athletes at the ping-pong table, each individual is in an indifferent stalemate while trying to hold on to their own territories, just as Chen Zuo experienced from his daily observation: "It seems that they are all present, but they are all withdrawn." Through the calm action of painting, Chen Zuo continues to respond to the many problems in the society of modernity while presenting a unique personal experience of witnessing China's urbanization, extending and responding to how the individual seeks to balance control and counter-control amidst the systematic structures and pressures in a jumpy, fluid slice of experience. In this process, the highlighting and concealing of violence and contradictions, the reflection and adaptation of geo-culture and Chen Zuo's critique of modern society allow us to glimpse the reality of the Global South from a geo-cultural perspective. Just as "painting is a tug-of-war with one encounter after another", "Burn for the Day" has become a weapon for the weak.

(The above text includes excerpts from Chen Junyao's essay *Burn for the Day* written for this exhibition.)

Chen Zuo was born in 1990 in Hunan Province, and currently lives and works in Beijing. He attended the Central Academy of Fine Arts Attached Middle School in 2011. Later on he studied at the Oil Painting Department of the Central Academy of Fine Arts and graduated in 2015 and 2021, respectively with a bachelor's degree and a master's degree. Chen Zuo attended Tama Art University in Japan in 2014 as an exchange student. He held his solo exhibition *The Unbeatable Winter* at Galerie Urs Meile Beijing in April 2023.

Chen Junyao (b.1995) is an independent curator and part-time research fellow at the Institute of Cultural and Creative Industry (ICCI), Shanghai Jiao Tong University. He currently lives and works in Shanghai and Beijing. He received a master's degree in Curating Contemporary Art from the Royal College of Art in 2020. His curatorial practice and research focus on spatial politics in the context of urbanization, the publicity of digital media, and the digital human landscape in the public environment.