

Wang Xingwei

The Code of Physiognomy

Exhibition in 798 Gallery, Beijing

21.3.–12.5.2019

Opening: Thursday, March 21, 4-6.30pm

Galerie Urs Meile is honored to announce the opening of *The Code of Physiognomy*, the solo exhibition by Wang Xingwei (*1969, Shenyang, China) at our gallery space in 798. The exhibition will present the main body of works Wang has painted since his last solo exhibition in 2016. Since 2008, the principle of plastic art has always been underlined, as the inherent structure of the pictorial language and its form has always been the artist's emphasis. In his recent practices, however, this principle seems to have given way to the characteristic and detailed shaping of images and figures. The body of works turns its focus to various forms of portraiture loaded with referential symbols and playful metaphors, which allude to the title of the exhibition—are we able to decipher the code? Do we accept the challenge to unlock the myth hidden behind each physiognomy?

In the gallery's main space, the audience is first confronted with *Noon Break* (2017 - 2019, oil on canvas, 4x 200 x 240 cm), a significant work consisting of four single panels, each of which is an essential part of the integrated narrative and composition. The work is considered an outgrowth of Wang Xingwei's *Japanese Soldiers* series themed on the often over-the-top television dramas set in World War II, which feature vivid descriptions and pictures of negative images like "Japanese Devils" and Chinese traitors. That painting series culminated in *Honor and Disgrace*, his previous solo show. Here again the artist shows his extraordinary plot-weaving abilities and the habitual nature of role-playing. What distinguishes *Noon Break* from the previous series is his more realistic approach. Japanese Soldiers applied reduced shapes and perspective to create a comic-like style. In this way the artist's focus was shifted to grammatical, structural, and organizational aspects of the language of painting. The composition, use of color, nature of space and physical objects was brought from the background of the painting's realization to center stage. Yet simplified motifs are often more indicative and straightforward in illustration, which can often lead them to be more subjective, even judgmental in a sense. *Noon Break* brings in enough details and visual components to block the bridge connecting words and their semantic meaning, considering art is also a language. The repetitive imagery of Japanese soldiers being arranged in a peaceful summer noon, together with the inopportune title of "Noon Break," keep pushing the boundary for the audience to break any association an image could bring.

There is no difficulty catching the strong desire for expression and storytelling in Wang Xingwei's painting. Toying with disconnected elements, dismantling the acknowledged logic of thinking, and fabricating domestic incidents into his personal fantasies have always been winning strategies for Wang Xingwei since the beginning of his artistic journey. In *Four Seasons* (2016/2017, oil on canvas, 4x 240 x 200 cm), four portraits feature four disgraced top government officials of the Chinese Communist Party, whose names are so notoriously well known by Chinese households that they are recognized almost immediately. Metaphorically introduced, each portrait was given an emotional state and a specific season. The four portraits correspond with and supplement each other in multiple ways, such as the figures' identities, composition, and the motif of seasonal progression from spring to summer, fall and winter. The viewer can enjoy figuring out all the layers of intellectual complexity and obscure quotations, or feel content with an uncommon or audaciously visual feel. Surely if we examine the imagery of *Four Seasons* closely, we will find certain figurative elements that have repeatedly appeared in his previous works, such as the yellow-colored short bush framing a rectangular pit around the protagonist of the spring portrait, and a forest of white birch trees in the winter portrait. Here, however, they have been transformed in different colors or techniques. This reveals another topic of Wang Xingwei's approach—squeezing out value from form, and conducting research on shape, volume, and painting technique until certain forms are incorporated into his pictorial meta-language, which he then continuously perfects over the years and develops into a highly sophisticated and personal "visual dictionary."

This applies also to the other works shown in this exhibition, such as *The Encounter of Life* (2018,

oil on canvas, 240 x 200 cm), *Unfaithful Lover* (2017, oil on canvas, 150 x 200 cm) and *Autumn* (2018, oil on canvas, 160 x 240 cm), which, together with many others, create an ever-increasing and self-referencing system where the figurative elements in Wang Xingwei's paintings could be released from their original context, becoming a sort of "aesthetic subject." The artist thus gains ultimate freedom in choosing what goes into his paintings as long as he sees how to fit them into his narratives and fabrications. At the same time, we cannot ignore the fact that it is a delight to look at Wang Xingwei's paintings. The chromatic juxtapositions are often daring, almost like visual gymnastics for audience. His construction is always perfect, both balanced and harmonious. He employs meticulous efforts and precision to visualize the settings in each of his paintings, a strategy that enriches their pictorial content and heightens the overall visual appeal. The artist is forever driven subconsciously by a longing for a kind of classic and timeless quality in his work

A catalogue published by the gallery will accompany the exhibition. Parallel to *The Code of Physiognomy*, *Shenyang Night*, a special solo exhibition by Wang Xingwei, will open on the same day in Galerie Urs Meile's former exhibition space in Caochangdi, which accommodates the artist-in-residence program of the gallery.