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Zhang Xiaogang & Wang Guangyi
The Reunion of Poetry and Philosophy
7 February – 13 May 2018
Prague City Gallery
The Stone Bell House
Staroměstské Square 13, Prague 1
Open daily except for Monday from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m.
Exhibition Curator: Lü Peng

The meaning of “reunion” is not simple. The ancient philosopher Zhuangzi described how fish, once familiar in their viscid confinement, grow oblivious to each other when placed in mighty lakes and rivers. The encounters and separations of poetry and philosophy become repeated cycles of the human spirit, and this can be traced back to Plato’s Republic. In *The Quarrel between Philosophy and Poetry*, Stanley Rosen described the two as the spiritual world in eternal conflict. Since the advent of Plato, we necessarily see the two placed in a time of immanent, yet not realized, separation. The Republic expels poets because of their radically dissenting temperament. Poetry imitates the shadow of the shadow, freeing people from rational control and invariably enabling evasion from the rules. The Republic is a utopian order, demanding that the Way be made flesh to implement philosophy’s governance. The two are different, existing in tension and fundamental conflict. This principle is echoed in an uncanny way in the history of Chinese contemporary art through the art of two of its most important masters, Zhang Xiaogang and Wang Guangyi.

Zhang Xiaogang, whose early obsessions were El Greco and Kokoschka, was long immersed in the narrative of poetry; the intertwinement of the expressionist impulse and hallucinatory poetry recall Hermann Hesse’s Goldmund setting out on his journey. His later *Big Family* series, that has become a classic of art history, expresses separation and alienation throughout, with the simplicity and paradox of Magritte and the utterly unforced calm of his poetic language. Through these techniques, the artist succeeds in providing comfort for his ever-present sorrow and confusion. In Zhang’s life, the grasslands, the Guishan region, and his red lines are blended through an intense poetic will to reveal the psychological symptoms of a particular time.

Wang Guangyi, since the inception of his *Frozen North Pole* series, has worked to establish a paradigm based on political theology. He once eulogized the importance of rationality and serenity, as exemplified by his *Post Classical* series, the *Great Criticism* series, and most recently in the *Cold War Aesthetics* series. He insists that reality is not emotion and that only rationality can attain the other shore. Wang Guangyi’s perspective on art and history is that of the philosopher-king and, despite the irony of his political theology, his thinking has remained macroscopic and abstract. His irony is not that of Epicurus, but inclines instead towards asceticism, confrontation, and construction.

We can even clearly distinguish the individual characteristics of these two artists: In Chinese society in upheaval, both the poet and the philosopher-king confronted the dilemma of being thrown into the wilderness. For Zhang Xiaogang, 1982 was destined to be a time of isolation: after he added expressionist elements to his post-graduation works, he found himself shunned by the school authorities who determined the future employment of graduates. In the social environment of that time, unfavorable assessments by examiners condemned graduates to long-term unemployment. Condemned to rely on his inner resources in the wilderness, Zhang Xiaogang’s painting further entered an interior poetic narrative, painting providing



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him with solace and salvation. At the same time, Wang Guangyi was, broadly speaking, also struggling beyond the barriers. He felt that his own compulsory job allocation placed him far from the center of the art world; he hoped that through social action he could find a path to the art on the other shore. This stoic tendency has maintained its intensity through his later work. These two artists were traveling different artistic paths.

The 1992 Guangzhou Biennale warmly accepted these two different artists from a free market perspective, which was a complete novelty at that time. From this point on, poetry and philosophy were in constant collision. At the 1992 Guangzhou Biennale, Zhang Xiaogang exhibited his two works entitled *Genesis*, dignified works imbued with meaning that can be viewed as the artist's meditation on history. His images of political activists, warlords, conservatives, Communist fighters, and soldiers span almost the entire 20th century in Chinese history. In the work, a new-born infant placed on the black box of history perhaps suggests the spirit of the post-1980 generation: isolated, helpless, and confused, yet precipitately flung into the world. The shadowy wings of the work conceal books opening onto the revelation of a pre-baptismal biblical scene: the baby and his family will later become a basic poetic metaphor. At the same time, Wang Guangyi's *Great Criticism* series was being proclaimed. *Great Criticism – Marlboro* won the highest award, the jury prize, at the First Guangzhou Biennale in 1992. *Marlboro* became one of the most important works in the *Great Criticism* series, creating the genre of Political Pop that would make such an impact in China. The dramatic paradox created by the juxtaposition of Marlboro advertising and the Chinese triad of workers, peasants and soldiers forced people to reflect on the new ideological war, political theology, and the underlying nihilism. Wang always cut to the most anxious moments of conflict and struggle, in a way that was utterly different from the poetic Zhang Xiaogang. Yet at the same time, together the two men created the classic images and metaphors of 20th century Chinese contemporary art.

Lü Peng
Exhibition Curator

The exhibition is accompanied by a catalogue entitled *The Reunion of Poetry and Philosophy* with texts by the art historian and exhibition curator Lü Peng

Exhibition Curator: Lü Peng
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We are most grateful to both exhibiting artists Zhang Xiaogang and Wang Guangyi for their extraordinary helpfulness and support of this project.

Media Partners: A2, Art+Antiques, Art for Good, ArtMap, Český rozhlas, Prague Events Calendar, protisedi.cz, Radio 1

Venue: House of Photography, Revoluční 5, 1 Prague 1

Term: 7 February – 13 May 2018

Opening Hours: Tuesday – Sunday: 10 a.m. – 8 p.m.

Entrance Fee: CZK 120 full (adults) / CZK 60 reduced (students) / CZK 30 (senior citizens)

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Accompanying Program

Documentary film *Zhang Xiaogang*

7 February 2018, 5:00 p.m., concert hall of the Stone Bell House

Premiere of a documentary film by the director Jana Chytilová

The film documents the life and work of one of the most important contemporary Chinese painters, Zhang Xiaogang.

Lecture by the exhibition curator Lü Peng

7 February 2018, 6:30 p.m., concert hall of the Stone Bell House

Chinese Contemporary Art and Its Historical Context.

Reservation: pr@ghmp.cz

Guided tour within the context of Chinese art of the 1990s

25 February 2018, 4:00 p.m. with the painter and sinologist Jiří Straka

Guided tour

7 March 2018, 6:00 p.m. with Magdalena Juříková, Prague City Gallery Director

Guided tour within the context of Chinese art of the 1990s

22 March 2018, 6:00 p.m. with the painter and sinologist Jiří Straka

Lecture with guided tour

2 May 2018, 6:00 p.m. with Emma Hanzlíková, sinologist and art theorist

A Friendship between the Red Dragon and the Two-tailed Lion. The Role of Fine Arts in the Relations between Czechoslovakia and the People's Republic of China in 1949–1959



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Saturday art workshops

10 March 2018, 1:00 p.m. – 6:00 p.m. Story and Symbol in a Painting, The Stone Bell House

14 April 2018, 1:00 p.m. – 6:00 p.m. Painting as a Poem, The Stone Bell House

5 May 2018, 1:00 p.m. – 6:00 p.m. Playing with Scale in a Painting, Education Center, Colloredo-Mansfeld Palace

In our artistic responses we will reflect the work of both exhibiting artists. Employing the form of figurative collages using richly colored papers and drawing symbols, logos and texts, we will create our own version of large-scale Political Pop paintings by Wang Guangyi. We will also combine thoughtful painting with the principle of limited control over the dripping paint, the contrast of which will lead to an expressive artistic result. We will also focus on the art of Zhang Xiaogang, based on lyricism. Texts of his poems will provide the source of inspiration for our lyrical paintings, in which the dominant means of expression will be the blurring of the boundaries of objects as a parallel of the intangibility and transience of reality. In this respect, we will also use the use of super-real / surreal elements and shifts of real scale.

Art workshops for adults and senior citizens

Friday, 9 March 2018, 3:00 p.m. – 6:00 p.m. The Relationship between Painting and Poetry I

Sunday, 11 March 2018, 3:00 p.m. – 6:00 p.m. The Relationship between Painting and Poetry II

Friday, 23 March 2018, 3:00 p.m. – 6:00 p.m. Expression, Symbols and Ideas in Painting I

Sunday, 25 March 2018, 3:00 p.m. – 6:00 p.m. Expression, Symbols and Ideas in Painting II

In the first series of art workshops, we will focus on Zhang Xiaogang's works, his artistic expression and his role of the artist-poet. From this perspective, we will address emotional aspects and aspects of imaginary lyric of art. In the second series of art workshops, we will become acquainted with the role of the artist-philosopher as embodied by Wang Guangyi. The impulse for our paintings will be the artist's relationship to the concept based on rational and philosophical foundations. The construction of the image will be built on selected motifs and symbols that we will transfer into other contexts employing our own ideas.

Interactive tours of the exhibition for all types of schools and other age and interest groups with the possibility of subsequent creative response in the form of their own work. We adapt the events in terms of time, theme and performance levels according to the specific requirements of each school.

In addition to the above-mentioned events, there will be other educational activities for other groups of visitors, such as the disadvantaged and parents on maternity and/or parental leave and their children.

Price: Children under 10, students of art schools, teachers – CZK 5;

children over 10 years – CZK 20

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