

Wu Chen

Bad Man Can Also End Up in Heaven

2017.3.17 - 4.23

MAGICIAN SPACE
魔金石空间

Magician Space is pleased to present its second solo exhibition with artist Wu Chen.

To better understand this artist, I would refer the audience back to his debut exhibition “Matisse’s Skirt”. The relationship between each work was more of an echo than defined by repetition. For example, the lustful swan featured in the 2013 work *Leda Leda* and the Swan makes another appearance in the painting *Bad Man Can Also End Up in Heaven*, but this time as a swan that makes it to heaven after death.

The titles of the paintings within the exhibition go beyond simply being just mere names. They also function to sublimate and extend the work’s meaning, becoming as important as the lines or color on the canvas itself. A 2016 work, *Figurative Portrait of Abstract Artist* depicts Sean Scully in a dressing gown while working - he looks both like a king or prisoner. The painting is both satirical and ironic, from its title down to the painting of the scene. Faced with a composition produced using a mixture of different methods of appropriation, it is perhaps best to view these paintings similarly to how one enjoys a ‘Mo Lei Tau’ style comedy from a Stephen Chow film. A nude Santa Claus in a brothel, Bin Laden holding a swan in his arms, and a baby-face Mondrian...

If you are familiar with either art history or the art world, looking at Wu Chen’s paintings can be absorbing as they are interesting. He tampers, appropriates and mixes together work and artists found deep within the annals of art history. As the art world becomes more like an underworld of gangsters, the words of an artist are increasingly like coded messages comprehensible only to an inner circle. If you do not happen to be as conversant with art history, this shouldn’t put you off either nor should you turn away. A misreading always has been one other way of reading and often leads to the creation of something unexpected.

The skill found within a painting ought to be matched with expressions of ‘good painting’ and ‘bad painting’ that are relative to the content. It is precisely here, where one can regard this point as the pinnacle where form and content unify together well. Wu Chen has a habit of using acrylic to control the coarseness of his brush stroke. He does this to alter, but also embellish as he paints - you cannot simply wait on the joke as you might end up offending it.

"*Bad Man Can Also End Up in Heaven*" is also the title of this exhibition. This does not necessarily draw the conclusion that good people therefore must go to hell. The font used for the exhibition title derives from a calligraphy style used by Mao Zedong – the first character for ‘bad’ and the last character of the Chinese word for ‘heaven’ have been rendered illegible. But there is no real need to worry regardless - you can simply look at the sentence and read that ‘man reaches the sky’.

Liu Ye
2017.2.9

About the artist

Wu Chen (b.1983, Henan) currently lives and works in Beijing and Chengdu. His paintings evoke a miscellaneous array of ‘artist portraits’ and layered references culled from sources as varied as picture handbooks to exquisite illustrations from art history. Layer by layer they undergo a child-like process of distortion and reassembly, causing one to wonder at the morbidity of such a whimsical sense of imagination.

Major solo exhibition include: *Bad Man Can Also End Up in Heaven*, Magician Space, Beijing (2017) ; *Matisse’s Skirt*, Magician Space, Beijing (2014). Important group exhibitions include: *TRAVERSE · COURSE – 2016 HUAYU YOUTH AWARD*, Art Sanya, Sanya (2016); *The First Dao Jiao New Art Festival*, XI Contemporary Art Center, Guang Dong (2016); *The 6th Chengdu Biennale*, Chengdu International Conference and Exhibition Centre, Chengdu (2013); *The 3rd Terna Contemporary Art Award*, Rome (2010); *“Youth China” Contemporary Art Exhibition*, Art Museum of University Heidelberg, Heidelberg (2008).

Museum and Public Collections: White Rabbit Contemporary Chinese Art Collection, AUS ; Museum of Contemporary Art Chengdu, CN.

壞人也耐上天去
Bad man can also end up in heaven

MAGICIAN SPACE
魔金石空间

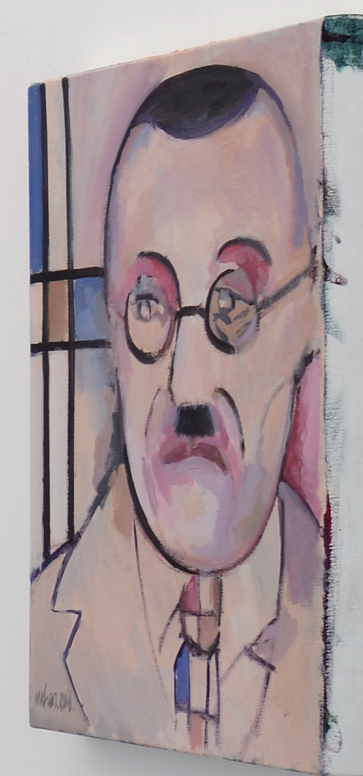


Untitled (Bad Man Can Also End Up in Heaven No.2)

2016

Acrylic on canvas

250 x 180 cm

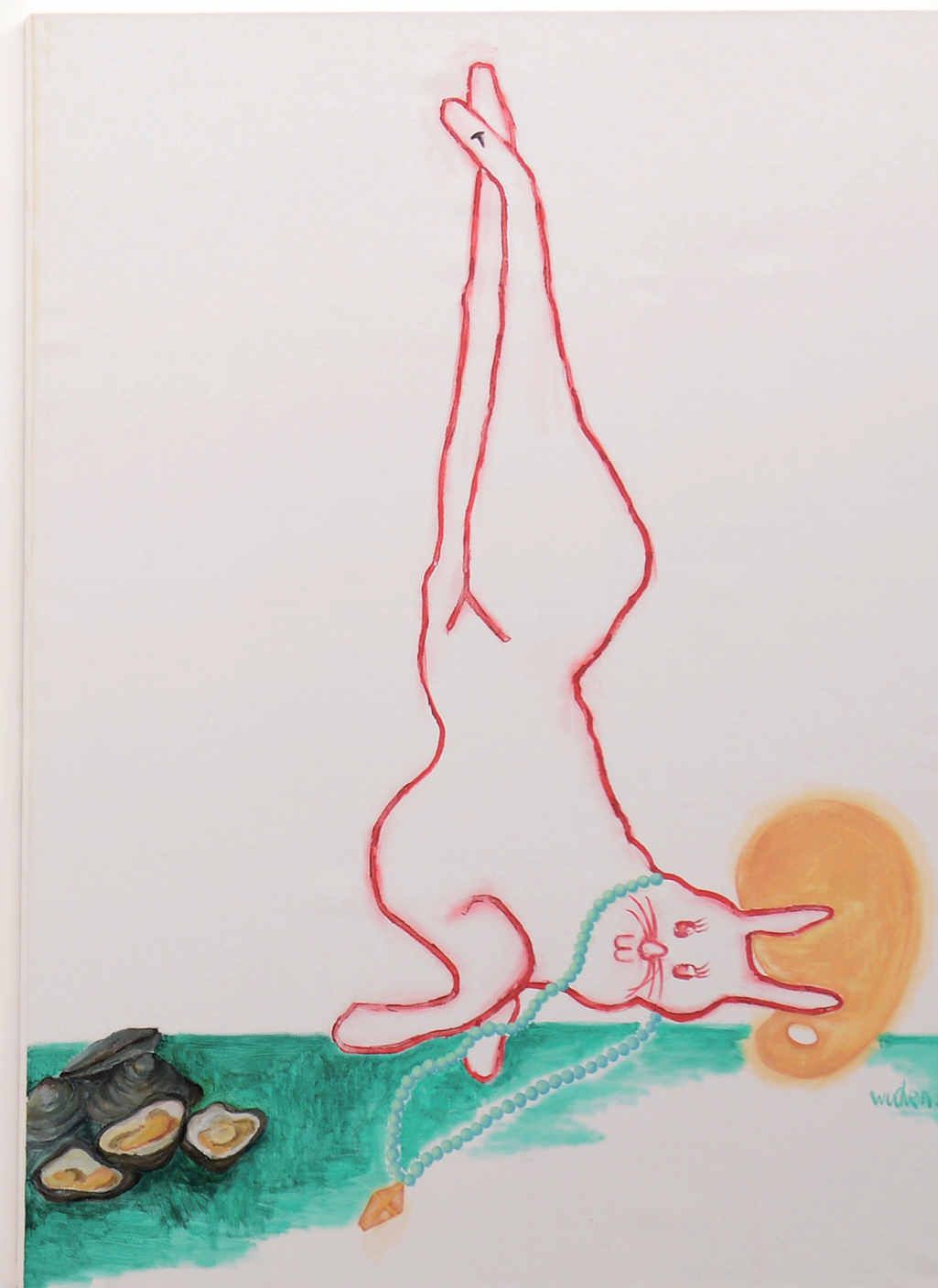


Wu Chen: *Bad Man Can Also End Up in Heaven*, 2017
Exhibition view

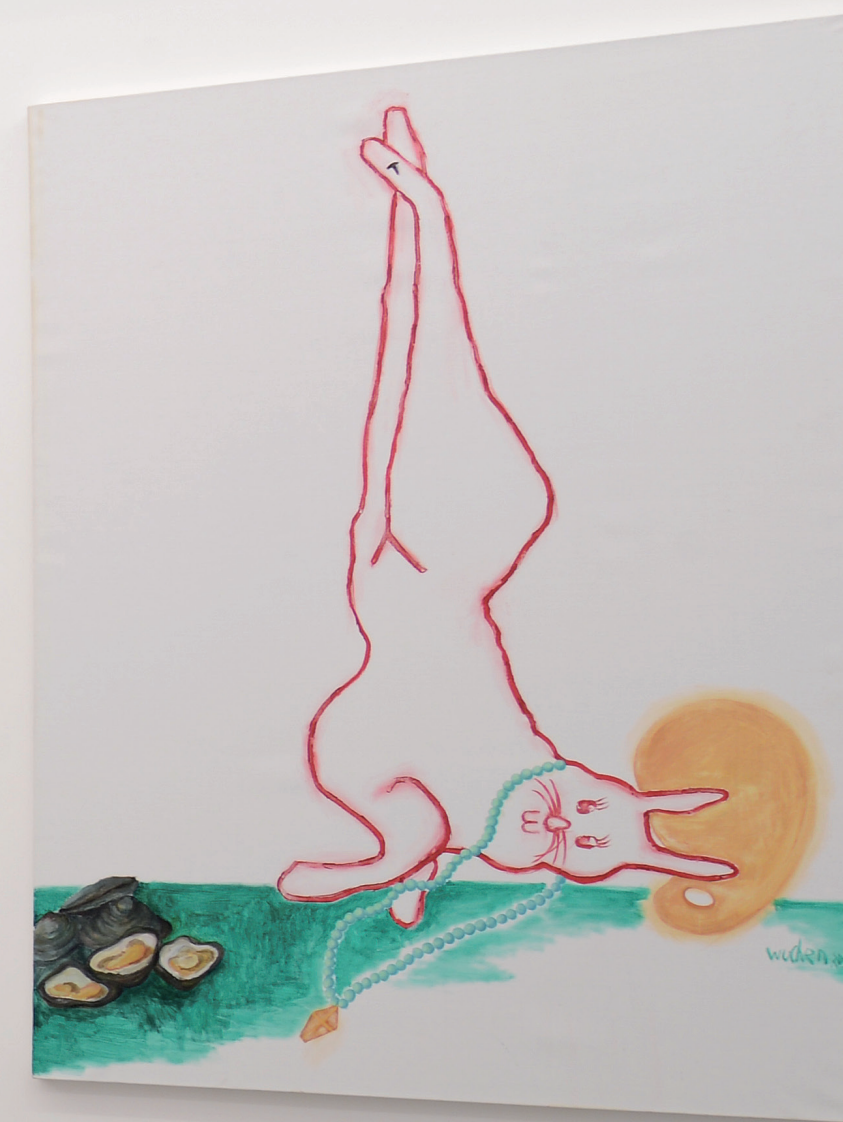
MAGICIAN SPACE
魔金石空间

Bad Man Can Also End Up in Heaven
2015
Acrylic on canvas
300 x 200 cm





Wu Chen: *Bad Man Can Also End Up in Heaven*, 2017
Exhibition view



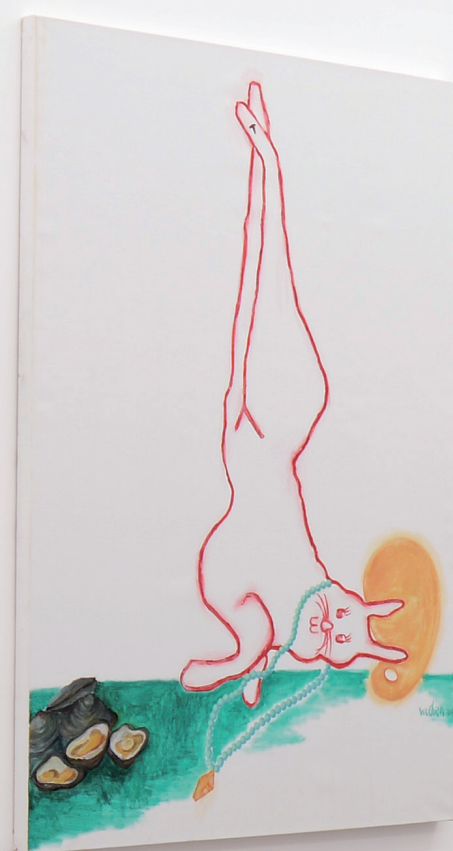
Wu Chen: *Bad Man Can Also End Up in Heaven*, 2017
Exhibition view



Wu Chen: *Bad Man Can Also End Up in Heaven*, 2017
Exhibition view



Portrait About the Male Female Male Figure
2016
Acrylic on canvas
200 x 300 cm



Wu Chen: *Bad Man Can Also End Up in Heaven*, 2017
Exhibition view



Wu Chen: *Bad Man Can Also End Up in Heaven*, 2017
Exhibition view



Chronicle of a Married Young Girl's Escapades

2015

Acrylic on canvas

180 x 250 cm



Interview | Wu Chen & Liu Ye

Liu Ye: I discovered we have something in common. We both like using acrylic. You practically only use acrylic right?

Wu Chen: Yes, I use only acrylic.

Liu Ye: So why not oil painting then? Or maybe explain a little of how you arrived at this method of using acrylic?

Wu Chen: Oil painting takes a while to dry. When I'm painting, my mood often changes during the moment. I need the quickest method to record an initial mood down first and then I slowly adjust things from there. If with every step, there was a long moment in-between, then the strength of that mood diminishes.

Liu Ye: Yes. Compared with oils, acrylic has the added convenience of not needing to wait long to dry.

Wu Chen: Besides that, there is a richness to working with acrylic - you can also let it dry slowly too if you wanted. For your own painting, does it normally need a while to dry?

Liu Ye: Not really, actually I like that acrylic dries quickly and that I can see the results. The only downside to acrylic is maybe its lack of body - you have to paint over a few times before you get an effect.

Wu Chen: For me, there is a technique to using acrylic, which makes things easier to control. My paintings normally begin by first arranging images onto the computer and then I continually make adjustments while painting. The ease that acrylic allows me enables me to work with a lot more gusto.

Liu Ye: You gain a certain kind of freedom. It means that your work is already situated within a particular process of painting - it's both the sketch as well as the finished article. Looking at your painting as a whole, you regularly return to the same subject in a number of your works. Moreover, the duration between the works can be comparatively long too. For example, there is the 2014 painting, *Weird Rabbit After Understanding Painting*, which you paint again in 2015, *Untitled (Still - Life with a Rabbit)* - the subject is pretty much the same. What were you thinking about in regards to these works?

Wu Chen: The time between the two paintings is very special to me. The painting in 2014 was made while in Chengdu and I hadn't yet left for Beijing. The work in 2015 was after I moved my studio to Beijing. On top of that, it was the end of 2015 when I had just completed a solo show too.

Liu Ye: Before 2014, were you always in Chengdu painting? Why did you move back to Beijing then?

Wu Chen: Since graduating in 2007, I stayed in Chengdu to paint. Actually, just after graduating, I wasn't feeling particularly confident and had the feeling I needed a few years to build something up. In Chengdu, I practically had no connection to the art scene and was just painting by myself. Slowly, I realized I was beginning to sink too much into my own world and lacked a dialogue with an audience - the more I painted in this situation the more it made me feel powerless. In 2012, there was little work of note that came by. By 2013, I gradually began to find a new feeling. Meanwhile, I had this idea to change scene and move to Beijing. It was during that moment, I had a fantasy that my own solo exhibition would happen in the next three years. I put myself in a mindset where everything I was working on, was in preparation for this exhibition that had not yet existed. *Weird Rabbit After Understanding Painting* was essentially the last painting completed in Chengdu before my move to Beijing. I imagined myself as Beuys holding a dead rabbit - the pearls and gold cross necklace were added as elements of my imagination. To be quite frank, I was hoping this rabbit could find its own opportunity and place in Beijing. Then with *Untitled (Still-life with a Rabbit)* this was after my solo exhibition opened. Although the first show happened quickly, I think this debut public appearance was very important to me.

Liu Ye: Yes, the artist still needs a dialogue - otherwise it becomes mere self-amusement. Your first show was interesting and it was through this that I got a better sense of you too. If you look at it, even though in some ways you were lucky, this was something you had been building up towards for quite a while now.

Wu Chen: After that first show, things happened quickly with works in Art Basel Hong Kong and then a solo presentation at Art021 in Shanghai. All these things were hard to imagine when I was in Chengdu. The rabbit in *Untitled (Still-life with a Rabbit)* is noticeably more relaxed in that work.

Liu Ye: Although the first rabbit looks rather more lively, in the second work, he looks significantly more brazen in demeanor. The rabbit with a red outline feels more anthropomorphic - from the hindquarters to the waist - it is similar to a sexy woman's figure.

Wu Chen: These two paintings also connect together: wealth, painting, and the artist. The good thing about being involved with a gallery and the market is that it allows you to promote yourself with confidence. I see money as something like opium or medication; there are benefits, but also inevitably side effects too. From a wider perspective, a region of economic prosperity can also bring about good art.

Liu Ye: The majority of great art has been produced in regions with a relatively good economy. For example, if you were in North Korea, it would be hard to have good contemporary art there. For sure, the power of capital is also a big issue today too. But the buck still stops with the artists themselves. Take Rembrandt as an example, you cannot say that he is a bad artist because he sold well early on. Normally, people say because he suffered a difficult time afterwards – that's what makes him a good artist. Whether an artist is good or bad, money certainly plays a role in the distinction. But I would refrain from defining it as the single important factor behind that. For example, the main source of income for an artist in the past was through commissions, patronage from the wealthy elite - the path was even more fixed then. So for people in the current era like us making art, it is freer much more now.

Wu Chen: Yes, the relationship between money and art is complicated. The fact that in a short time there were so many great masters in Holland, this has something to do with its era as an important naval power. I'm thinking a lot about my own perspective in relation to these questions, often through a hypothetical situation or my imagination. I hope I can convey these things in a sincere way. Even if at first my method sometimes might appear naive, I work my hardest to depict this naivety as accurate as possible. Take again the work Untitled (Still-life with a Rabbit) - from the oysters, pearls, to the gold cross - these elements not only produce a mismatch - from the view of a painter, they emerge out of the palette. Maybe this was what Beuys, covered in gold, was speaking of in his conversation with the dead rabbit. Isn't there this philosophical nonsense that says the moment right now is the best era, but also the worst era. Elaborating on that, I can probably say money is art's best friend, but also forever its enemy.

Liu Ye: That's interesting, I think there's a certain 'serious but irreverent' manner to how you play with the world. But I think this play with the world is very different from my generation. For example, my generation mostly faced the social environment, but for you it's more about deciphering yourself using this dark humor. At a glance, your work appears very casual, but in fact there is a lot of reflection and observation going on before a decision is made. The figure in the painting Untitled (Still-life with a Rabbit) is hung upside down. For the work Bad Man Can Also End Up in Heaven, the swan is also upside down - is there a connection between these works?

Wu Chen: Although formally wise, they have things in common; I still see them as independent from one another. With Bad Man Can Also End Up In Heaven and a painting from Leda Leda and the Swan (2013), then there is a recent work Untitled (Bad Man Can End Up in Heaven No.2) – there is more of a connection behind these three works.

Liu Ye: I feel the painting from 2013 portrays more a physical desire. How did you go from there to the 2015 Bad Man Can Also End Up In Heaven?

Wu Chen: 'Leda and the Swan' is a subject beginning with Da Vinci and subsequently developed by countless artists ever since. On the whole, these works have focused on the eroticism and emotions between Leda and the Swan - my painting Leda Leda and the Swan is a continuation of this expression of lust. During the time of Bad Man Can Also End Up in Heaven I was thinking about using painting as a kind of 'full stop' to this motif - basically a way to bring a certain closure to this subject matter. On canvas, you see Zeus facing trial – there's a congregation of different swans positioned like angels from a classical painting. They are all around Zeus, who is the biggest swan being punished. After the painting, I wasn't completely satisfied. So I began Untitled (Bad Man Can Also End UP in Heaven No.2), which shows Bin Laden holding a swan. It was a hypothesis that Bin Laden might not be as 'bad' in comparison to Zeus or at least that Zeus might not be much better. Humanity can be as simple as much as it can be complicated.

Liu Ye: 'Good person' or 'bad person', depending on the situation, they can become interchangeable. I think an important issue is an ability to recognize or be conscious of one's evil side. For an artist, we benefit from being able to take something 'bad' and allowing that to manifest on the canvas in how ever way we like.

Wu Chen: I once painted a portrait of Hitler (Portrait of Anonymous Painter, 2014), where I painted him as an ordinary painter. If Hitler were able to utilize his wild ambition and dark side into art form, perhaps we would have gained an extra average artist rather than war fanatic. This is just my imagination of course.

Liu Ye: There was also another early painting similar to the large painting with three figures on a blue background. Were these three figures inspired by the painting The Luncheon on the Grass?

Wu Chen: Yes, this work was completed in 2016 and titled Untitled (The Relationship between Male Nude with Male Nude, Male Nude with Female Nude, and Female Nude with Male Nude), and then there was another work in 2014 where the title was missing the untitled part. Actually, even earlier was How to Look at an Abstract Painting, which also uses the figures from The Luncheon on the Grass. The work imagines Manet who is standing from the point of modernism and reacting to a post-modernist abstract painting. The work depicts the two gentlemen and a nude Victorine Meurent, and of their surprise at the subversion of being in a painting composition consisting of geometric lines. For the two works between 2014 and 2016, I tried more to describe a mental interaction between the three models. I was hoping to position myself behind the models to observe the backs of these figures. Maybe the lead male protagonist liked the lead female protagonist, but the lead female protagonist was in love with the second male, and then maybe the second male was in love more with the lead male protagonist. If you describe the work in 2013 as dressed up like time travel, then the two works in 2016 are closer to a drawn-out melodrama. The 2016 work also inserts a coconut tree into the background, which adds a feeling of incredibility.

Liu Ye: This suddenly brings to mind a word that best encapsulates the relationship between your art and you as a person, ‘Mo Lei Tau’. It’s a kind of irreverent play with the world and describes accurately your type of humor too.

Wu Chen: Why did you think of this particular word?

Liu Ye: This description, the paintings themselves, and also the titles given each work: this is very much like the films of Stephen Chow. You first might think everything is all over the place and illogical, but you never feel there is a lack of reason either. The deeper you enter and the more you begin to understand, and also the more this happens as you play around more. This satire and sense of irony helps you to broach objects and also convey ideas through them. There is a decision behind certain imagery such as the rabbit or swan, which may seem at first to be without any rationale - but they actually suit your paintings very well. There’s also the imagery of coconut trees – it’s the kind of image you would normally have a hard time to fit within a painting. If you do it wrong, everything will easily look especially tacky. But through your ‘Mo Lei Tau’ way with things – these elements seem appropriate with plenty of meaning behind them.

Wu Chen: That was pretty amazing what you just said, especially up to the coconut tree. I had a conversation once with artist Xie Nanxing and I don’t quite remember how we eventually ended up talking about Cézanne’s The Bathers. It made me think about that tree in the canvas and how it was used to divide up the composition – and I wonder to myself what kind of tree it was?

My first reaction was a coconut tree and unconsciously maybe this is what a land-locked person imagines yearning for the beauty of the ocean.

Liu Ye: Oh, it is a gift to select in a precise way all the objects and subjects for your paintings. It is also where a good artist needs to practice a certain skill of self-cultivation. On the surface, the objects you choose seem to lack logic, but at the same time they make people feel their placement within the composition is also very specific too. This is a particular gift you have in your paintings. The large red painting over there, is that a new work?

Wu Chen: That's right, this is a self-portrait of me (Portrait About The Male Female Male Figure, 2016). There is a little connection with a work last year called The Fountain of Bernini. This work was about wanting to go through the mirror positioned above and use that to create a mental space.

Liu Ye: For this painting, it makes me think of Velazquez's 'Venus at Her Mirror (1644–1648). I've discovered what appears to be a common thread in your paintings – all the works have a dialogue with art history. Although your thoughts might appear to jump from place to place, this doesn't mean that there isn't any trace of intention there either.

Wu Chen: Yes, for me as a painter, there is always that relationship present. For many people, the painting by Velazquez also connects with Giorgione's Sleeping Venus. Art history for a painter is a little like a dictionary. Its maybe the advantage that a painter has as otherwise, there's no foundation there for us. To make something completely from scratch would be very difficult.

Liu Ye: Do you think this issue applies only to painting? Would you say you are more connected to questions of reality or to painting itself? You could say there are two paths – one path is inspiration from reality, the other inspiration for painting might come from other people, but then on many other levels you can also say it is 'painting about painting' too.

Wu Chen: Uh, actually I always regard the nature of painting with plenty of curiosity. For example, self-portraits by painters, the painter's studio, the tools of a painter, and this also include the models they work with too. This is probably the reason why I choose to work with an easel. When I'm abroad to see museums or exhibitions, even with plenty of moving-image or installations, which of course I might be interested to see and experience – but for me, the thing that gives me the most satisfaction is still a painting. So my personal interest is situated on that level, I've chosen painting as a means to express my understanding of it.

Liu Ye: I've discovered that your curiosity is very strong. Maybe we could say curiosity and the reflection that followed by that is the driving force pushing you towards this way of approaching painting.

Wu Chen: Personally, I'm the type who likes to work alone for a long stretch of time in the studio. Working in solitude makes it easy to indulge in flights of fancy. Going back to Portrait About The Male Female Male Figure, you started to say it made you see a connection with Venus At Her Mirror, which is true. Actually the mirror has many important uses in painting. Not only is it about creating three-dimensional space within a two-dimension surface – often the mirror functions to establish a mental space. Like for example, the many mirrors that you find within the paintings of Bacon.

Liu Ye: Is that a deformed figure within the mirror of your painting?

Wu Chen: Sure, the figure in the mirror is a combination of a male and female figure. I also try to give the audience looking at the painting a small test on their sexual orientation. Liu Ye, what did you see when you first saw the work?

Liu Ye: That ' s a breast right? Then that ' s the navel?

Wu Chen: Right, so most men when they first see this will see a female form - normally this means that the person is straight. But of course this is just my hypothesis and it doesn ' t necessarily mean I ' m accurate.

Liu Ye: So for me, being a straight person, means that I like femininity?

Wu Chen: Yes.

Liu Ye: Well that ' s obvious (laughter). Actually if you look at it longer, it starts to look like the genitals of a man, right?

Wu Chen: Right, I used part of a female body and wanted it formally to look a little like a male organ. Isn 't there a saying that everyone has a gay gene within him or her? It ' s just the case that some people have more of this gene than others and I really want to test myself. When I was painting this, I also discovered something amazing too - the setting of this painting is an erotic place. While searching for images on the internet I discovered many of these places have hanging in the rooms reproductions of classical oil paintings: images of the Holy Mother, Holy Child, the bathing females of Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres - the relationship between sex and art is very intimate.

Liu Ye: This is just being human don ' t you think? Eroticism is an important part of what it means to be human and as a subject matter for art. So from the perspective of a painting, a subject matter is more narrow than wide-ranging. Different relationships can build up from this point, so what is crucial is the means used to convey things in this day and age, that ' s what is most interesting for me.

Wu Chen: Most of the time, I think painting is more about conveying things you can understand. Like a critic or scholar using text to describe things, each painting has a rationale or concept. The difference is that I ' m accountable only to myself and there ' s no boundary limit to where I can head towards or associate myself with.

Liu Ye: This is equivalent to how you might work again on something to complete a new work. There are not many themes for a painting. Take a novel for example, a novel really only talks about one subject matter - the story of love between a man and woman. An earlier term in English for the word ' novel ' was interchangeable with ' romance ' stories. Of course, there are novels afterwards that now do not speak about love. But generally speaking, the most popular classical novels have used different techniques and writers to write about love between a man and a woman. You just have to look at who writes it better or in an interesting way, Just look at Dream of the Red Chamber, Jane Eyre, Anna Karenina...

Wu Chen: It's like someone once said that art history is also a history of sex. In that case you can say the novel is a history of romance (laughter).

Liu Ye: So the theme of painting is not how we imagine it to be. It isn't something that has to be elaborated too much on. I think painting's validity is based on your ability to remember culture, that's when it becomes effective. The work The Fountain of Bernini is really filled with a lot of erotic elements within the painting.

Wu Chen: The Fountain of Bernini not only consists of erotic elements. It is also like a murder scene too. I'm hoping for the work to be a mash-up of styles, something similar to Quentin Tarantino's films. There is a Snow White princess from a fairy tale who grows up in reality to be a recently married young woman. The evil Queen bursts into the bedchamber of the married woman who is living in another reality now. A pair of legs in the foreground, allude to another space from the position of an observer looking into the painting. Maybe it's a part of the audience or myself. In short, there's always foreplay before the climax.

Liu Ye: The leg you painted into the canvas is very interesting indeed. In one moment, you take a fairy tale and bring it straight into reality. The leg is like medicine; it's used to enhance absurdity in the painting. Right now there are plenty of artists who have a lot of absurdity in their work – even an abstract painting, a good abstract painting, also can have a lot of absurdity within it. You have painted a work called Figurative Portrait of Abstract Artist, which is another work I like very much. In the beginning, I couldn't tell what you were painting. After looking at the title, and then again at the painting, you begin to see the irony and contradiction within the work. The relationship of these two things sharing the same space at the same time is very interesting.

Wu Chen: There is also a painting with Sean Scully. Personally, I'm not so interested in his painting nor do I have much feeling or understanding of abstract painting itself either. I'm more interested in him as a person; maybe because he is Irish. It brings to mind the emblematic talisman and Irish footballer Roy Keane, or the band U2, I've always liked them too. I feel this abstract way of putting colors onto the canvas is like a violent release. If he uses abstraction to convey his feelings, then what I am doing is using a figurative method to express my understanding of his abstract paintings.

Liu Ye: I saw his exhibition in Shanghai. If Mondrian is a classic intellectual abstract artist, then he is also an archetype of a working class abstract painter for me too. He was born into the working class. In his work, there are also elements there that will move people. Abstraction can very easily turn into something graceful or decorative, but his work often has a coarseness to it.

Wu Chen: I also identify with the working class. I'm also interested in the side where he seems uneducated – he's something of a scoundrel too. I remember once in high school, I bought a football magazine introducing the Irish football team, "Obstinate and Unruly, Fearless Against Pressure" – that was their assessment. In the European or World Cup they won only three matches: beating England and Italy in the process. In 2015, I also painted Self-Portrait, which was after my first solo show. I wanted to paint myself as a butcher with a black face, and where my facial features could feel like abstract male genitalia. It was my way of prompting myself to be more aware in a clear-headed way – and to maintain more courage.

Liu Ye: 'The working class must exercise leadership in everything', this was a sentence I heard all the time when I was young. You seem to always have a habit of painting self-portraits or portraits of artists.

Wu Chen: Right, I'm always interested in artist portraits. Untitled No Surname, in the beginning I had the idea of painting Wang Xingwei's portrait.

Liu Ye: How did the concept come about then?

Wu Chen: The initial idea of the work came from a photograph of Wang Xingwei. In the photograph, he was wearing some work clothes. He was holding a long brush he had made and in another hand there was a large color palette. It looked very much like a knight from a medieval era, wearing armor and ready to stand guard for painting or something like that. I then applied Wang Xingwei's way of working and produced a completed sketch in the beginning. I first used a computer mouse to sketch, but the problem with drawing on a computer is that I have never formally practiced with that before. I felt a lack of feeling with my hand, so I then painted again another line sketch. I eventually arrived at the final painting which became Untitled No Surname.

Liu Ye: Looking at first, it gives me the impression of a full stop. It is like a painting produced as a kind of punctuation mark. The bosom area resembles the EU currency symbol or maybe a 'V' is in there too. Then the mouth looks like the Chinese character ' 令 ' – was this something you intended?

Wu Chen: Haha, that's a very interesting interpretation. When you say it like that, I can see the resemblance there. But I honestly wasn't thinking in that direction. The sign looking like a 'Euro' is part of the armor, the kind from medieval times.

Liu Ye: Do you want to know why I thought of these symbols? I was small and had just started to paint, and in our housing block was an old bus driver who would tell me how painting should look like: the two characters for number 6 could be the eyes, then you would turn around the number 8 horizontally to make a hat, the number 3 was one ear, you turn over 7 and it's a nose. This painting made me think of that.

Wu Chen: My paintings begin with a conjecture, which I use to open up further associations. The departure point for this painting began with my painterly way of conveying things, which then can transform into a relationship with how I imagine connections that bridge a relationship between the idea of being a painter and being conditioned by a particular era. I think to be a painter today is like the character Don Quixote – there's no aim, but at the deepest level there is a certain gusto or a certain conviction there. But maybe this conviction is a joke too and of course this is my understanding. Actually, I think its dangerous to use text in order to try and understand a painting. But then again you mentioned this 'Euro' sign, which is interesting too.

Liu Ye: In total, how many artist portraits and 'self-portraits' have you made?

Wu Chen: From 2012, I began to paint about ten or twelve paintings here and there. I normally paint one or two self-portraits a year. Maybe because my Zodiac is Leo, so I can be quite narcissistic. I like to paint these self-portraits. There are plenty of reasons you could say

that my paintings are mostly all self-portraits. There are roughly ten portraits of other artists – they work as my understanding and perception towards a few artists from a certain period of time. It follows the changes of my perception towards them, but I might also return to a particularly portrait in order to create another one. The subject matter of an artist portrait is something I will keep persevering with as I hope that through the artists I paint, I can make up a version of art history from myself.

Liu Ye: Everyone has artists they like and don't like. It's always a question from one individual to another individual. Take Mondrian, who happens to be an artist I like particularly and who is very important to me. But for you, maybe he's not so important. The artist you might like has a lot to do with how you judge or understand their work, which is the most important factor there. Whose work do you like or are there any artists you consider to be important to you?

Wu Chen: Matisse. For me, he's in the category of an enlightened artist. He's really a painting teacher, because he can teach you so many specific things about painting. For example, how to use color in order to convey things or how he uses line to accentuate a form. I have also painted about Matisse's work If Matisse Was Born In the US and there is a ridiculous premise behind it. After Matisse and when you arrive at the things American artists have started to do, then you begin to see a part of his work in theirs too. Every time when I'm not sure what to paint or maybe before I start painting, I like to have a look around at his books.

Liu Ye: I've also discovered another issue to do with the way you paint your own name, which is also very interesting. In your paintings, it seems that the name painted has a more expanded use.

Wu Chen: Right. If the beginning of painting and its conceptualization is the stage of insemination; then the process of painting is the pregnancy; and its completion is the birth of a new life. Then giving the work a name is the same as giving a name to a newborn life. The name is also a way of giving audiences an entrance or passage to read into the work. I like to find ways that can give the name a little more meaning to it. Liu Ye, how do you normally title your work?

Lie Ye: The titles for my work are something quite serious. Each painting is different, so giving the work a title is different every time. That unique way of giving titles suits your 'Mau Lei Tau' style of painting. Some of my paintings have names only in English without a Chinese translation. For example, there is a small painting where a small girl is holding a pig. The interesting thing was when the painting was auctioned once, they created an entirely new name for it "...and The Pig Princess", which of course, was completely inappropriate.

Wu Chen: "...and The Pig Princess" (laughter). This is far more 'Mau Lei Tau' than me.

Liu Ye: So your art and personal temperament relate to things you do, it also includes your technique and way of giving titles – they all need to be matched up and there is a very skillful way in how they are conveyed together.

Wu Chen: Yes. How to paint will always be at the core of things.

Liu Ye: So you still see painting as an important skill?

Wu Chen: Skill is still important. I think it is a tool to transmit and make concrete your thoughts. However accurate you are depends on your ability to master the skill.

Liu Ye: Whether your skill is good or not, sometimes it signifies whether or not the ‘thing’ you are trying to convey is appropriate or not. So this is about using judgment as a standard to gauge what is good or bad. This crude painting technique you use is very connected with what you are trying to express. Can you say a little about how you learnt to paint?

Wu Chen: Very early on it was just before I took an exam for senior high school, but I studied only a short time. It was hopeless for me to enroll into art academy and I didn’t really want to go back to studies again either. Instead, I got into a painting course at Southwest Jiaotong University. When I was little, I always very much liked painting, and then when I got into primary school, my father found an old man to teach me painting. I remember vividly how this old man could use a pen to draw pictures of horses especially well. When he taught me to paint, I just enjoyed adding things onto these horse paintings like wings or horns. I would give names to the horses such as ‘Sea Unicorn Beast’. The old teacher came to teach me a few times, before never coming back again. After that, I simply turned to Dragon Ball Z in order to draw different kinds of manga.

Liu Ye: You still seem to have a Dragon Ball Z feel as well as ‘Mo Lei Tau’ too. (Laughter)

Wu Chen: Yes. Akira Toriyama showed me the way to enlightenment (laughter). So I never really went through any rigorous form of training to learn painting. My first lesson in university was with Xie Nanxing. In order to get into a more creative state, the important thing about him was that he would make you forget all the required things you needed to learn before enrolling in exams. From my first year, I began renting a studio with friends to paint. I’ve always been a little off the track in that way.

Liu Ye: From the time you were little, you painted Dragon Ball Z in a ‘Mo Lei Tau’ manga style. Our generation would look at children’s books too, but mainly in the realist style such as Jimao Xin (The Letter with Feathers). Perhaps the most ‘Mo Lei Tau’ of these was ‘Journey to the West’ where Monkey King is molded into a soldier fighting against oppression of the feudal system. For your generation, you see a natural progression from that culture into a ‘ Mo Lei Tau ’style influenced through your exposure to Dragon Ball Z.

Wu Chen: I used to also think that way too. But today it does seem very ‘Mo Lei Tau’ (laughter). Yes, I also think it is very important to convey things sincerely. Liu Ye, I have been thinking about a question recently. It’s basically the difficulty of painting: before art history perhaps there was a trajectory from classical to impressionism, arriving afterwards at modernism, and then you get to post-modernism. After post-modernism, you suddenly arrive at a situation where there is a feeling of no end-goal any longer. Almost as if it doesn’t matter anymore what you paint - or even if you did paint anything, it would never be good anymore.

Liu Ye: After abstraction, I think on the whole, formal exploration in painting already ended by then and it appears we are into a period of nihilism. This explains why you can paint anything now, you can still feel that whatever you eventually do paint, that it is not quite right either.

Wu Chen: That's an accurate way to put it. Whatever you paint can be ok and what ever you do paint is not quite right either. Before, at a certain time in art history, the most important aspect for an artist was formal experimentation or to contribute towards how art could be perceived. Looking at today, where do you see the possibility of painting now?

Liu Ye: This issue is too big. I've been thinking a lot about this questions too: painting is something I decided to do and whatever way you look at this, this decision to paint already implicates you into a relationship with history. That's to say, what is important is not only to work at expanding new boundaries, but also how you integrate what has happened before in the past. Painting is not as free as we imagine, it's something with its own set of rules. Moreover, it has a thousand years of history to compare with. So there is a magnitude of rules and this hasn't changed as much as we imagine either. Speaking generally, painting is just a game within a rectangle and it is a very high-level style of game at that.

Wu Chen: Hmm. The more you think you can understand art or painting, the more you feel it is a very difficult game to play with. Painting is also like Chinese chess. After countless games of Chinese chess, the variation of moves is already exhausted now. But also there are fundamental rules to adhere, you can only jump diagonally and it's not a movement you change merely for the sake of being innovative.

Liu Ye: If you change any of these crucial rules, it no longer becomes Chinese chess and transforms into another game entirely. There are certain crucial things that make up painting and these are the things you follow in order to judge what is good or bad. If you try to replace these elements from painting, you end up missing an essential part of painting. It is very difficult to break away from this – especially as what defines the parameters you work within has only four sides to it.

Wu Chen: Facing painting is like facing a mountain, I feel like I've actually just entered it. I need to find a way to convey in a genuine way all the struggles and torment I have in front of a canvas.

Liu Ye: Painting is the path you have chosen to take. It is something interesting just as much as it is difficult.

Wu Chen: Yes. Hard games are always the ones that are most interesting. The easy to play games are the ones that never last long. I've also been thinking more and more about the title of this exhibition.

Liu Ye: What are your thoughts?

Wu Chen: I want to use the title of the work Bad Man Can Also End Up In Heaven for the name of this exhibition.

Liu Ye: I hope that everyone can go to heaven, even the 'bad' people too. It complements the Mo Lei Tau style too.

Wu Chen: (Laughter) 'Bad people' also have a beauty to them too. So let's use this name as the title of the exhibition.

Liu Ye: Sure, I think it suits the exhibition very well indeed.

Wu Chen

1983 Born in Zhengzhou, Henan Province
2007 Graduated in Painting Major from Southwest Jiaotong University
Currently lives and works in Chengdu and Beijing

Solo Exhibitions

2019 Art Basel Miami, Miami, USA
2017 *Bad Man Can Also End Up in Heaven*, Magician Space, Beijing, CN
2014 *Matisse’s Skirt*, Magician Space, Beijing, CN

Group Exhibitions

2020 *2020 – SONG ART INVITATION EXHIBITION*, Song Art Museum, Beijing, CN
Art Basel Online Viewing Room, Basel, CH
2019 Beijing Contemporary Art Expo 2019, Beijing, CN
Art Basel Hong Kong, Hong Kong, CN
2018 West Bund Art & Design, Shanghai, CN
Art Basel Hong Kong, Hong Kong, CN
2017 Art Basel Hong Kong, Hong Kong, CN
2016 *TRAVERSE• COURSE - 2016 HUAYU YOUTH AWARD*, Art Sanya, Sanya, CN
The First Dao Jiao New Art Festival, XI Contemporary Art Center, Guang Dong, CN
Art Basel Hong Kong, Hong Kong, CN
2015 *Duang!* Pa Ta Gallery, Shanghai, CN
The Cabinet of Wonder, The Cabinet of Wonder, Beijing, CN
The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even, Pekin Gallery, Beijing, CN
Hong Kong Art Basel, Hong Kong, CN
Art 021, Shanghai, CN
2013 *The 6th Chengdu Biennale*, Chengdu International Conference and Exhibition Centre, Chengdu, CN
Paper Works, Hi Art Store, Beijing, CN
2012 *4 min 22 sec*, Southwest Jiaotong University Art Museum, Chengdu, CN
2011 *Amble*, Line Gallery, Beijing, CN
Carousel, Times Art Museum, Beijing, CN

2010 *First New Star Art Festival*, Chengdu International Conference and Exhibition Centre, Chengdu, CN
The 3rd Terna Contemporary Art Award, Rome, IT
Idealism in Xipu Town, Southwest Jiaotong University Art Museum, Chengdu, CN
2009 *Creative M50 Exhibition*, M50 Creative District, Shanghai, CN
The 2nd Xiaozhou Art Festival – 25°Travel Literature in Xiaozhou Village, Guangzhou Independent Film Week, Guangzhou, CN
“Youth China” Contemporary Art Exhibition, LOFT224 Gallery, FR
2008 *‘Jiong’ – Expressions and Attitudes*, the 3rd Shanghai Duolun Youth Art Exhibition, Shanghai Duolun Museum of Modern Art, Shanghai, CN
“Youth China” Contemporary Art Exhibition, Art Museum of University Heidelberg, Heidelberg, GER
2007 *The 3rd Chengdu Biennale – Emerging Artists Feature Exhibition*, Chengdu Contemporary Art Gallery, Chengdu, CN

Museum and Public Collections

White Rabbit Contemporary Chinese Art Collection, AUS
Museum of Contemporary Art Chengdu, CN

MAGICIAN SPACE
魔金石空间