

你好，黄昏！
HELLO, DUSK!

段正渠
Duan Zhengqu

策展人：刘鼎
Curator: Liu Ding

2018.09.15 - 10.20



Duan Zhenqqu: Hello, Dusk!

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“I always think dusk causes a sadness in people and that the night is deeply mysterious. Looking back to my childhood, it had a special significance to me and it seemed to imply an overpowering yet indefinable melancholy. What’s more is the immense sense of things ‘unknown’ – where everything is seemingly hidden along with their unrevealed possibilities. Dusk turns into something that captivates us because of this unknowable feeling. This is precisely the reason why issues relating to expressions of this ‘mystery’ continues to captivate me.”

——Duan Zhengqu

Magician Space is very pleased to present its inaugural solo exhibition with artist Duan Zhengqu.

This exhibition is curated by Liu Ding, who brings together three different perspectives to outline the remarkable humanism characterising Duan Zhengqu's system of artmaking. The main part of the exhibition is formed by new works from 2015 onwards. As an introduction to the entire exhibition, it begins with three watercolour works on paper between 2012 to 2015. Beginning in the 1980s, this first chapter describes the early stages of Duan's career and focuses on a collection of sketches and oil painting – this body of work spans an extensive period to present exploratory forms of liberation for the artist. The second chapter will display a series of 15 works comprising watercolour and pastel on paper, each with an enigmatic aura to them. The third chapter will take two different styles to highlight the major significance landscapes have had throughout the artist's life. Rather than presenting a 'retrospective' per se, this small-scale exhibition looks to offer reflection into the artist's comprehensive body of work – what is noticeable are the recurring threads as they persist within his practice, while also overlapping with one another. With up to 40 years of work, there is seemingly an uninterrupted flow and indefatigable energy to his continued observation into reality since the beginning of his career.

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Duan Zhengqu has emerged as an important artist within the historical context of China's progression since the 1980s. He first began his studies at the oil painting department in Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts in 1979. As early as before his graduation, Duan had never become fully satisfied with merely reproducing styles related to Western modernism. On one hand, he attempted to explore the formal capacities of expressionism, surrealism, and ancient Chinese mural painting. Whilst another side of his work comes from the portrayal of familiar objects unearthed from the local milieu of his surroundings. Elaborating on this further, he has sought to establish a congruent methodology to join these two facets in order to discover ways to perceive and mark new cultural subjects within his work. The Shanbei region of northern Shaanxi province has become a stimulus for the artist to absorb the outside world. Around the formidable Loess Plateau, the deep river valley with its steep precipice, or the low-lying mountains around this terrain, the people persevere with a simple life, unfettered, as well as warm – a state that is internalized through the constitution of more new worlds created by the artist. In these worlds, they are constituted not only by the colors, forms, and sounds of the external world, but also through pleasurable pursuits and the joys of the artist – these are worlds that are equally constituted by the expression of many things.

Through this overview of Duan Zhengqu's work since the 90s, we predominantly look to use three themes in order to outline a rudimentary trajectory of his work. The first theme includes the beginning of his panoramic landscapes, which approximately begin in the mid 90s. These paintings have a subdued palette, filled with grandeur and a visual tension to them. The second theme foregrounds the relationship between man and nature, which is used as narrative content for imagery within his work. He employs tropes characteristic of magic realism to portray exaggerated figures shaped by thick colors that fill the composition with contradictions, the implausible, and a theatricality–this sets the entire tone for the work, which is filled with agitation. He also employs geometric compositional forms to lend a sense of stability to the image. In respect to how figures are shaped within his paintings, he borrows methods taken from Balthus' depiction of characters, which draw on the symbolic as well as awkward features. For example with the depiction of movement, ways of using exaggerated expressions or with the theatricality of these people – in this way, he is able to form his own unique qualities within the work. The construction of the entire image is set by either the dark night or a backdrop of dark colors. This enhances the staged or ritualistic quality to the work, which in turn foregrounds the dissonance between different distances in relation to reality.

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From 2010 onwards, Duan Zhengqu begins to again display an inclination towards presenting more landscapes within his work. This is especially apparent in the recent works where he still builds up a dusky atmosphere within the work. However, he now uses tempera to create his paintings. Having been influenced by this new material, fine strokes are fine strokes are used to create the image and to soothe out the ambience of the work. In this way, tempera retains certain characteristics that give the work a unique luster and causes the dark colors to appear more transparent. Naturally, this transformed technique is also applied to his works by oil painting or watercolour. The landscapes in the new work together form a distinct contrast between splendour and the sublime, which presents a comprehensive yet effortless visual impression to the viewers.



Exhibition View

Hello, Dusk! -- Duan Zhengqu Solo Exhibition, 2018



Exhibition View

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Exhibition View

Hello, Dusk! -- Duan Zhengqu Solo Exhibition, 2018



Exhibition View

Hello, Dusk! -- Duan Zhengqu Solo Exhibition, 2018



View Northwards to the Great Wall
 2017
 Oil on canvas
 160 x 230 cm



A View of the Great Wall
 2017
 Tempera on paper
 32 x 41 cm



Linzhou
2010
Watercolor and pastel on paper
22 x 42



Kuyucheng City
2013
Pastel on paper
24 x 33



Exhibition View

Hello, Dusk! -- Duan Zhengqu Solo Exhibition, 2018



Exhibition View

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Exhibition View

Hello, Dusk! -- Duan Zhengqu Solo Exhibition, 2018



Exhibition View

Hello, Dusk! -- Duan Zhengqu Solo Exhibition, 2018



The Billowy Yellow River, 2014, oil on canvas, 160 x 230 cm



Forest, 2018, oil on canvas, 160 x 230 cm



First Frost, 2016, watercolor on paper, 48 x 37 cm



Exhibition View

Hello, Dusk! -- Duan Zhengqu Solo Exhibition, 2018



Exhibition View

Hello, Dusk! -- Duan Zhengqu Solo Exhibition, 2018



Exhibition View
Hello, Dusk! -- Duan Zhengqu Solo Exhibition, 2018



Exhibition View

Hello, Dusk! -- Duan Zhengqu Solo Exhibition, 2018



Hengshan

2015

Watercolor on paper

32.5 x 20 cm



White Dews

2016

Watercolor on paper

37 x 48 cm



Exhibition View

Hello, Dusk! -- Duan Zhengqu Solo Exhibition, 2018



Exhibition View

Hello, Dusk! -- Duan Zhengqu Solo Exhibition, 2018

About the Artist

Duan Zhengqu (b.1958, Yanshi, Henan Province) graduated in the oil department of Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts in 1983. He is currently a professor and PhD supervisor at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Capital Normal University; researcher of the Oil Painting Institute of China National Painting Academy; a member of the Oil Painting Art Committee of China Artists Association; and director of China Oil Painting Society.

Duan Zhengqu has participated in many large-scale exhibitions organised at the National Art Museum of China. He has also exhibited previously at the Central Academy of Fine Arts Museum; Hong Kong University Museum; Art Museum of Nanjing University of the Arts; The National Museum of Art, Osaka; Beijing International Art Gallery; National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Seoul; Seoul City of Museum of Art; Vasa Art Museum of Finland; National Museum of Lima; Museum of Modern Art of Chile; Art Museum of Hubei Academy of Fine Arts; Art Museum of Xinjiang Urumqi; Taipei Fine Arts Museum; Russian National Museum; Peking University Exhibition Hall; Zhejiang Art Museum; Shanghai Art Museum; Guangdong Art Museum; Fujian Art Museum, Shenzhen OCT Art Center; and He Xiangning Art Museum, etc. He has also held solo exhibitions at the Beijing Art Academy and the China Oil Painting Institute Art Museum. Other notable exhibitions include the Shanghai Biennale in 2000; Beijing International Art Biennale (2003, 2005, and 2015); as well as the second edition of Yinchuan Biennale in 2018.

He has been invited to give academic lectures at academies and galleries and has served on the selection committee for national oil painting exhibitions. Many of his works have also been selected for publications, including Selected Works of Duan Zhengqu; Selected Works of Contemporary Oil Painters and Works of Duan Zhengqu, Tianjin People's Fine Arts Publishing House, 1996; China Modern Art Review Series: Duan Zhengqu, Guangxi Fine Arts Publishing House, 1998; Shaanbei Listening Song, Liaoning Fine Arts Publishing House, 1999; Duan Zhengqu, Shanghai Literary and Art Publishing House, 2005; On Paper – Duan Zhengqu Paper Works, Henan Fine Arts Publishing House, 2007; Second Section: Duan Zhengqu, Jilin Fine Arts Publishing House, 2007; Duan Zhengqu: Village Landscape, Jilin Fine Arts Publishing House, 2009; Academy Art 30 Years: Duan Zhengqu, Shandong Fine Arts Publishing House, 2010; Stories and Legends: Duan Zhengqu, Art After 30 Years, Hunan Fine Arts Publishing House, 2012; Modern Painting and the Painting Department of Capital Normal University, Duan Zhengqu, 2013; 1981-2015 Anthology of Works, Hebei Art Press, 2015; and Garden Village Art: Duan Zhengqu, Sichuan Fine Arts Publishing House, 2016.



Selected article

Hello, Dusk!

Text by Carol Yinghua Lu

*"I always think dusk causes a sadness in people and that the night is deeply mysterious. Looking back to my childhood, it had a special significance to me and it seemed to imply an overpowering yet indefinable melancholic feeling. Furthermore, there is an immense sense of the 'unknown' – with everything seemingly hidden along with their unrevealed possibilities. Dusk turns into something that captivates us because of this unknowable feeling. This is precisely the reason why issues relating to expressions of this 'mystery' continue to captivate me."*¹

Duan Zhengqu

In order to understand Duan Zhengqu and the path taken in his work, we must first return to the mid-1980s, a formative period where the outlines of Chinese contemporary art, its discourse and value judgements intersect together. At the same time, it is this very historical context that also provided a vital backdrop for the artist as he formulated a unique way of making work. Duan Zhengqu had recently graduated from the Oil Painting Department at the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts, and voluntarily decided against the opportunity to stay there in favor of returning home to work at the Zhengzhou Painting Academy. Reflecting on his creative state during this time, Duan Zhengqu wrote:

*The New Wave spreads wave-by-wave to even the local cities such as Zhengzhou. It is not a hard wave as such, but a soft wave that drops and seeps into the easy life here. Perhaps due to my own sense of self-importance, my fantasies never seem to match up with my life. It is hard staying with something mediocre and far more difficult sticking with this new wave, even if we are at the tail-end of its lively stage. But there are actions of mine that resonate to this New Wave and other actions that have no relevance at all. Like when I use a big bucket to splash paint into so-called "abstract" work; or fiddle with some materials to create so-called "installation" work; or apply some concepts to my drawings to create "avant-garde" work, etc.. Out of this placid state that surrounds me, there is something hard to put your finger on in regards to these so-called works made today – they also work as a cathartic release to me. Amongst the sounding of people's reactions to these works and of my own minor acts of resistance to this – and due to this poor life where these issues have been going on now for years and accumulated to a point I can no longer counteract nor make them go away entirely with – it is this situation that gives rise to another helplessness and form of release to me."*²

^[1] Duan Zhengqu, "Living Colors: Conversation Between Yin Shuangxi and Duan Zhengqu", Huayuan Village Art Talk: Duan Zhengqu [M]. (Chengdu: Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts Publication, 2016), p.291.

^[2] Duan Zhengqu, Huayuan Village Art Talk: Duan Zhengqu (Chengdu: Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts Publication, 2016), p.86–87.

The 6th National Fine Art Exhibition, which opened in October 1984, and the *Chinese Youth Art in Progress Exhibition*, which was held in 1985, were two large-scale high profile exhibitions that emerged after the "Eliminate Spiritual Pollution" ended in 1984, which itself was the culmination of an "ideological liberation" first put forward in 1978. A series of discussions were centered not only on these two national exhibitions, but also on many of the related events from the same period, which tore open the once invisible cracks that lay between middle-age to more senior artists, younger artists, as well as the different models they used to work under. Essentially with all of these artists, they in fact shared the same ideological origins and developed out of the same form that offered their emancipation. Taking the Cultural Revolution as a reference, the senior artists tended towards affirming and opening up the myriad possibilities of individuality heralded by a new era of free and autonomous formal exploration. They tended to be more inclined towards throwing themselves into a search within the underlying elements of China's own cultural context in order to "activate" them once again. With the young artists who entered into education after the Cultural Revolution, the more adept members who gradually emerged out of this group were enthusiastically more receptive to the large influx of publications, opinions and wave of artistic and philosophical thought, which entered into China from the West after the Reform and Opening period. They simply chose to favor the "idea" as the sole indicator in discerning contemporary art as a formal exploration: using this to separate themselves from the constraints of realist formalism; circumnavigating the old-fashioned calls from conservative factions to return art back to their Chinese cultural roots; and also the one-size-fits-all formal experiments and artistic language officially "chosen" by the conservative academy.

Although there was a group of senior and middle-age artists who were subversive to these rules through a discreet artistic language internalized within the works on display at the *6th National Fine Art Exhibition*, overall the official ideology still remained as the dominant criteria for the participating artists due to the residing influence of the "Eliminate Spiritual Pollution" political campaign. This led to a situation where a convergence of various themes and styles occurred within many of the works that entered into the exhibition.³ Many of the works persisted to follow the principles and techniques of realism, or they derived themselves from or reflected upon the substance of life itself. In the eyes of the young students who were either graduated or only recently enrolled into the school, the *6th National Fine Art Exhibition* was a dominant example of a sustained intervention and interference by the official ideology into the field of art. Less than a year later, the *Chinese Youth Art in Progress* exhibition also opened. At the same time, graduate works emerged from various major art academies and groups of young artists from across the country who would go on to establish their own art collectives one after another, bringing to the forefront a new era underlined by a youthful new generation of trailblazers. During this period, the magazine "Art" changed its editor-in-chief and the critic Shao Dazhen arrived at its helm to actively steer it towards the promotion of modern art. "Art News of China" and "The Trend of Art Thoughts" were newly established, while the "Jiangsu Pictorial" revised the direction of its magazine structure – each of these publications worked to successively promote the New Wave as its main goal in art. Meanwhile, the proponents and participants of the New Wave also began to encounter political challenges from the art system, which was perceived as being possessed by a conservative force that lay internally within the system itself. Due to this dynamic, a tension began to develop between the New Wave and the official art system, which happened despite the fact that the New Wave movement itself had from the beginning, emerged out of this very system. This tension between the conservative forces within the official art system gradually led to a blurred boundary between the

^[3] Chen Zui, "From a Perspective of Form, How I See Oil Painting in China After the Sixth National Fine Art Exhibition", A Discussion on Oil Painting, Liu Yushan, Chen Lvsheng, ed [M]. (Beijing: People's Fine Arts Publishing House, 1993), p.279.

New Wave art, and in this way, the arguments and frictions resulted in a greater polarization, coming to the point of eventually turning into a rigid divide between the two sides.

In April 1984, Duan Zhengqu was selected by the provincial art association to complete within three months the oil paintings *Noon Break* and *New Horizon* in order to inaugurate the opening of the *6th National Fine Art Exhibition*. The former work was selected for the *National Fine Art Exhibition*, however, it was unsuccessful in entering the exhibition. After this work, *New Horizon* was selected by the art association for the *Chinese Youth Art in Progress* exhibition and was also not selected in the final list of works. From his time at school to the years after graduation, Duan Zhengqu had been in continual pursuit of a work that he calls “belonging to himself”. After entering school, he focused on improving the fundamentals of his sketching ability, which he considered as his weakness. At the same time, he also turned towards assiduously studying all the books he could borrow from the school library in order to imitate and learn from these drawings. For example, Chagall, Rouault and Rousseau were some of the artists Duan Zhengqu studied using the books he found in the school library. “At certain moments I would study expressionism, then to the style of Wyeth, or I might paint the surrealism of Dali and Magritte, every day I would switch between different painting styles. Whenever I couldn’t think of anything to paint, I would either look at the mirror to paint a self-portrait or follow what was happening on the television to paint either from memory or something imaginary.”⁴ In terms of reading and in comparison to the books on philosophy or aesthetics, Duan Zhengqu had a penchant for modernist literature found in the West. “I would buy absurdist plays, stream of consciousness novels, black comedies... and also read books by William Faulkner, Saul Bellow, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Margaret Duras, D.H. Lawrence, Franz Kafka, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and others.”⁵

In 1982, Duan Zhengqu visited Beijing a year before his graduation to see the exhibition *Expressionist Oil Paintings from East Germany* held at the National Art Museum of China. While preparing for his graduation, Duan Zhengqu returned to his hometown in Yanshi County and everyday would wander around the villages surrounding the county. He would look at the temple fairs, animal markets and put himself among the people, language, and ways of living he was most familiar with. He became aware of the gap between the Magritte-style things he painted at school in relation to the reality that he trusted the most, which compelled him to think for the first time in his life the relationship between life and art. He had therefore decided upon what should be the subject of his work, which was that his paintings should come from his experience of this land – to “paint towards the land”⁶. He was eager to paint the things familiar to him by using a traditional language. This eagerness also prompted him to return and borrow a number of books from his school related to ancient Chinese murals, including those at Dunhuang, and the Eastern Han Mural Tombs

^[4]Duan Zhengqu, Huayuan Village Art Talk: Duan Zhengqu, p.52.

^[5]Duan Zhengqu, Huayuan Village Art Talk: Duan Zhengqu, p.53.

^[6]Duan Zhengqu, Huayuan Village Art Talk: Duan Zhengqu, p.56.

in Horinger. The thoughts he developed during these studies were then incorporated into his graduation work. He created two paintings, one of which was a vegetable market, which adopted the “flash technique” often employed by Soviet painting; the other painting depicted a market of horses and mules, which incorporated the flatness of Horinger murals, where a background is painted using flat earth colors and the composition is created by using a scattered perspective. A free-hand form evokes the figure of a farmer, which dispersed itself across the scene. These figures come from quick sketches made during his frequent trips to the countryside and between them there is no overall narrative that connects them together. However, the gaze of these different figures appears to correlate to one another in order to lend an overall sense of completeness to the entire picture.

Duan Zhengqu’s artistic explorations were driven by his dissatisfaction of never truly being fully satisfied with merely reproducing styles related to Western modernism. On the one hand, he had attempted to explore the formal capacities of expressionism, surrealism, and ancient Chinese mural painting. Whilst another side of his work came from unearthing the portrayal of familiar objects from the local milieu of his surroundings. Elaborating on this further, he also sought to establish a method of closely joining these two facets together within his work. Whether it was with the works included for his graduation exhibition or with the works selected for the submissions to both the *6th National Fine Art Exhibition* and the *Chinese Youth Art in Progress* exhibition – his achievements were not immediately recognized. His work lacked the realism tendency that was widespread and prevalent throughout the *6th National Fine Art Exhibition*, and it also lacked the overt conceptual consciousness or the penchant for social issues that was predominant with the majority of works included in *Chinese Youth Art in Progress*.

Since the beginning of his life, Duan Zhengqu was raised in the countryside and his trajectory never left its confines until he entered college in 1979. He was naturally at ease with the friendly disposition of the Central Plains way of life in the countryside. In his view, this way of life is the embodiment of truth itself. For Duan Zhengqu, this sense of authenticity is the premise that gives him the steady ground to create. It is a kind of foothold and it is what he cares for and concerns himself with in the majority of his work. The truth he looks for is not purely factual nor is it the kind of faithfulness to reality as espoused by the genre of realism. Rather, it is related to how aspects of the outside world can be incorporated within his heart in order to become part of his own internal world: rural farmhouses, households, markets, trails, barns, mountain ranges, fields, games, festivals, ceremonies, and the entire life journey of a peasant. These are the scenes he grew up with, which have always fascinated him, shaking him through to his soul, and it has been the enduring object of his indefatigable will to paint.

In criticizing the *6th National Fine Art Exhibition*, while at the same time praising *Chinese Youth Art in Progress*, the young artists had also delineated a guideline to focus on concepts and criticality. It was during this time that Duan Zhengqu also embarked on a search of his own to pursue the idea of truth based on his own internal world. “Henan is a place that I was too familiar with... so I went to school far away in Guangzhou, but I was averse to the over-the-top lushness and bright colors in the South. I’m not sure who brought it up to me about the North during this time... but the topic soon stuck to Shaanbei for a while.”⁷ For Duan Zhengqu at the time, “Shaanbei” was like any other

strange name of a place that could have been anywhere.⁸

Since the Reform and Opening-up policies, there has been an influx of western modern art and waves of thought that have introduced new artistic styles, models of working and resources for new ways of thinking. This situation prompted some practitioners with a strong desire to look inward once again for answers and also to rethink issues more broadly in relation to Chinese culture as a whole. Similarly to traditional culture, Shaanbei has become a fertile place for many artists, writers and filmmakers to base their work on as well as being the ground to distinguish themselves from others. It is a place rich in cultural symbolism and meaning. Shaanbei stands for the northwestern part of Shaanxi, which includes the old revolutionary domains such as Yulin City and Yan'an City. The area is situated at the center of the Loess Plateau and has many unique geological characteristics. It has layers of red soil with thick yellow ground soil from the Cenozoic period that covers an ancient terrain of Mesozoic bedrock. Caused by the flow of water, cuts into the surface and the erosion of soil together give form to topographical features such as the plateaus, ridges, mounds and ravines.

By the mid-1980s, Duan Zhengqu had already discovered through publications the paintings of Shaanxi based artists such as Cai Liang and Zhang Ziwei who have been using Shaanbei as a subject for their work since the 50s. This also includes the oil paintings on Shaanbei by Shang Yang, which were featured in the Art magazine. He then traveled to Wuhan, visiting Shang Yang's house in order to borrow and study a large oil painting by the artist on a scroll of Korean paper. At the time, the common characteristic often described in texts about Shaanbei would be filled with imagery of the desert, frontier villages, "winds blowing on a long ancient path", or "shining spears and armored horses". Often films of this time also used the desolate landscapes of Shaanbei as a backdrop. For example, with the masterpiece by Chen Kaige's *Yellow Land* (1984) which tells a story based on the rural ramparts in this region. This was in fact another reason that drove Duan Zhengqu to this area, which was to reflect on the prevailing tendencies of the time. During the 6th and 7th edition of the Fine Art Exhibition shows, he observed how the majority of works seemed only to pay attention towards technique or were crowded with ornamental flourishes and kitsch imagery. Duan Zhengqu had conflicted views towards the works on view lavished with a plastic-like highly technical style - for he also had turned to Shaanbei for imagery and a bold feeling for his work too.

In March 1987, Duan Zhengqu with his friends Duan Jianwei and Liu Dahong together undertook a trip to Shaanbei to make sketches, and from there they wandered to Yan'an and Suide County. They spent two days in Suide County to create sketches and oil paintings, and finally settled in the Yuanze valleys in Mizhi County, Yulin. In one week,

he painted in excess of more than forty oil landscapes; during the day, he painted and in the evening he spent with locals drinking and singing love songs. In 1988, Duan Zhengqu went on his second trip that lasted for half a month to Shaanbei as he returned to Yulin prefecture to visit places such as Mizhi County, Jia County, Shenmu County and Fugu County. While there, for more than one week, he resided in a cave dwelling typical of the Loess Plateau, listened to the folk songs of villagers and drank with them again. In February, the following year, he painted this vivid scene from memory into the work *Folk Songs from Red Rock*. It is a painting that has a subtle influence taken from Rouault, which Duan Zhengqu executed without reference to any photographs or live sketches. Instead, he relied on the canvas itself to continually work out the composition. Guided by his imagination, the canvas arranged together with the resemblance of different groups of figures, demonstrating an extraordinary ability to evoke complexity in relation to his mastery of capturing likeliness of a group of people within a composition. This time things went smoothly as he was selected into the 7th National Fine Art Exhibition and received the bronze medal for his work, which offered plenty of encouragement to the artist. Since the time when he had first heard the songs while in Shaanbei, he had already made a conscious decision to evoke the methodology of Rouault to capture the essence of this region. "Rouault is a great spokesperson for the hardships and suffering of people. There are hardships that exist for sure in Shaanbei, but for these resilient people, they seemingly have another attitude towards their suffering."⁹ Duan Zhengqu particularly admired the calm strength of the people in Shaanbei in the face of this suffering, and this resonated with his own character and aesthetic tastes. Inspired by how religious figures were depicted during the early Renaissance period, Duan Zhengqu used a technique inspired by romanticism to express groups of figures featured within the scenes of his work. By using similar methods to create the composition, he was able to foreground the sense of tension between the different figures. At times, there are a considerable number of figures featured within his canvases. In other moments, perhaps due to fatigue, an interchange might occur, between painting only one or two figures. What he cares about is not the plot, but the ability to perfectly capture an emotional state in just the right way.

In October 1990, Duan Zhengqu accompanied Duan Jianwei as they traveled to the gallery of the Central Academy of Fine Arts to sign an exhibition agreement. On September 15, the following year, the exhibition *Art by Duan Zhengqu & Duan Jianwei* opened at the museum with the artists exhibiting twenty works each. All of the works by Duan Zhengqu were from sketches largely made during the trips to Shaanbei or observations he made afterwards. The acclaim gathered from this exhibition was significantly important to the artist. When the Huangshan Conference was held in 1988, many of his friends offered to travel to Huangshan with him, yet the artist was not entirely or actively inclined to pursue the topical issues shared by his contemporaries. The meeting was based on events or activities that had happened from 1985 onwards and persisted in promoting the concept of what people recognized as "modern and contemporary art" of the time, and the intention was to disseminate these concepts to become more widespread. Moreover, these events would contribute as an important prelude to the 1989 *China/Avant-Garde Exhibition*. In other words, it was a dominant new force, with both a vast sense of cohesion as well as exclusivity to this time. Guided by his heart, Duan Zhengqu was not satisfied with drawing only on inspiration derived from Western modern art alone, instead, he was more preoccupied with the search for his own ways of feeling. Shaanbei became for the artist a stimulus to absorb the outside world. Around the breathtaking terrain of the Loess Plateau, there are deep river valleys

^[7] Duan Zhengqu, Huayuan Village Art Talk: Duan Zhengqu, p.81.

^[8] Duan Zhengqu, Huayuan Village Art Talk: Duan Zhengqu, p.83.

^[9] Duan Zhengqu, Huayuan Village Art Talk: Duan Zhengqu, p.110.

with steep edges, low-lying mountains, and the people persevere there through a simple, unfettered and warm life – a state that is internalized through the construction of other worlds created by the artist. In these worlds, they are not only constituted by the colors, forms, and sounds of the external world, but also through its pleasurable pursuits – something equally appreciated by the artist.

Art by Duan Zhengqu & Duan Jianwei was held at Central Academy of Fine Arts and it was an important position since the context of the “new generation art” appeared in 1990. Between the beginning of 1990 to September 1991, a series of exhibitions were organized by Central Academy of Fine Arts, while during the same period the *New Generation Art Exhibition* was also held at the Beijing Museum of History, and the exhibition of *New Figurative Painting* at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Beijing. This was followed by the publication of observations and critical reviews by critics, which enabled this phenomenon to become more established. Many of the Central Academy of Fine Arts graduates particularly gravitated towards the ordinary people, as well as the scenes and things surrounding them, often using them as subjects in their work – their techniques often placing particular emphasis in the exploration of expression. With the *New Generation* artists, they used their techniques to focus on portraying ordinary people from the city in order to integrate everyday life into their work. However, with Duan Zhengqu, he turned his focus towards the rural areas of Shaanbei, whilst combining this with Rembrandt influenced studies of lightness and darkness, especially his use of dark tones, eventually transforming these elements into his own language through a search for a new method of expressionism. There was a profound mystery he could feel through immersing into the natural environment and cultural history of Shaanbei. Across the region with the ramparts, ancient castles, temples, light festivals and the indigenous folk music, all of these things bore the heavy weight of hardship and bleakness of history. This profoundly stirred within the artist the need to paint with a dark black and heavy palette to capture the mystery, the immense vitality and unpredictability of the Loess Plateau.

The exhibition held at the Central Academy of Fine Arts Museum in September 1991 provided for Duan Zhengqu enough conviction to move forward and follow his own direction. From this period onwards, Duan Zhengqu traveled each year during the Chinese New Year to Shaanbei, where he would collect materials, make sketches, drink, converse, and join the festivities with the locals. Upon returning from these trips, he would then paint the people and scenes he encountered there without any interruption. In the 1980s, Duan Zhengqu began to use the theme of peasants within his work. Many of his contemporaries had made similar attempts, but by the 1990s, the majority eventually switch to the appearance of looking more contemporary by focusing on themes related to the urban city. Just as in the past, Duan Zhengqu persevered with his fixation on the subject matter of peasants and the Shaanbei region, and together formulated his own conscious model of working. He shared a firm belief in the ability of this theme, which allowed him an ample degree of freedom to fully observe the relationships between man and nature, and most importantly, it also afforded him a medium to focusfully on the fundamental issues related to his artistic language. The artist regards technique to be the most complex issue related to painting. For him, it is an issue of finding just the right way to express the feeling of an object and looking how this correlates to the constitution of a captivating aesthetic language. Whether painting either a figure or an animal, Duan Zhengqu has demonstrated

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