

traps, and a small 18-carat-gold hook that shines from the belly of a fiberglass snake that dangles from the ceiling at the far wall of the second room—a small, sparkling lure that captures the dark magic of exploitative desire that is explored in this exhibition.

Tessa Moldan

• • •

The Avant-Garde is Not Afraid of a Long March at ShanghART Gallery

A pistol-shot rang out in 1989 at the *China/Avant Garde* show. Li Shan (b.1942) was a participant in this group exhibition. Belonging to the New Art Movement (as the avant-garde

was known in China), the artists refused to placate public taste, putting their careers and lives on the line in order to find new ways of making art.

At the opening of *The Avant-Garde is Not Afraid of a Long March*, Li Shan's immersive floor-to-ceiling oil *Rouge Series* (1995) occupies a full wall in the central space of Gallery. Comprising a range of sexual iconography and realist allegories, it depicts Chairman Mao in several black-and-white male silhouettes embracing, performing fellatio or touching casually against a bright blue background, and with him holding a large pink lotus flower. Adopting a generalized figuration, the detailed brushwork and rhythmic arrangement of limbs make it more elegant and distinctive along with the

delicately outlined lips of Mao, which are richly sensuous.

Fellow artist Zhou Tiehai produced *The Avant-Garde is Not Afraid of a Long March* (1998), which could be both visually experienced and “read” as a text. Located at the entrance of the gallery, it reads like a long dissertation, albeit in French; a man riding a motorcycle in a mountainous landscape creates the background setting. Using the analogy of Mao's Long March of 1934–1935, the artist reiterates the title in disturbingly bold Chinese characters, as if to put stress on the avant-garde's journey through the difficult and restrictive 1990s in China.

What does an avant-garde artist want from art, from people, from society? ShanghART Gallery's latest presentation revolves around

these questions, but, at the same time, it considers the gestures with which avant-garde artists stage themselves and the revolutionary act of founding a new art.

The exhibition takes the form of a speculative collection that addresses the perceived needs of its audiences—whether in Western or Eastern eyes. Works have been selected to show their responses to modernity and the modern experience, along with the emergence of new sensibilities. The latter is most interestingly brought to bear in Chen Xiaoyun's *Lightning on the Hillside* (2016), a poetic encounter of the dress zipper and the natural phenomenon of lightning.

Featuring works by 12 Chinese artists, the exhibition draws on the vitality of a local



Yng Fudong, *The Coloured Sky: New Women II, 6*, 2014, color inkjet print, Hahnemuhle ultra smooth paper 305g, 180 x 120 cm. Edition of 10.



Birdhead, *Passions Bloom Ambitions – The Waking of Insects No.3*, 2018, gelatin silver print, calligraphy and stamp on photo wet mounted on basswood, teakwood frame, 36.7 x 30.5 x 2.3 cm.



Sun Xun, *Nocturnal Glume*, 2018, light box, luminous agent, watercolor on luminous paper, 31 x 23 x 7 cm; image size 29 x 21 cm.



Li Shan, *Rouge Series*, 1995, oil on canvas, 220 x 168 cm (x 5 pieces). All images: Courtesy of the Artists and ShanghART.

scene that has been shaped by politics, globalization, migration, and contemporary life. One of the show's strongest works, by Birdhead, presents the duo's iconic series of black-and-white photographs, whose heavily worked surfaces, sometimes incorporating collage or abstract painting, bear traces of their interest in Chinese literature, and in expressing the big human emotions. There is a provocation in their gestures that brings viewers to encounter them with an attitude other than contemplation. "How dare you!" A young man sticks out his middle finger. There's also the quiet one; the tortured one; the funny one. The ideas of 'freedom' and 'inventiveness'—that anybody has the right to be anywhere and do anything, no matter who they are, and how they are dressed—is apparent in their art, all expressed through their own view of people and things in Shanghai.

Yang Fudong uses photographic images to express his skepticism about modernity and life in China. At first glance, his *The Colored Sky: New Women II, 6* (2014) mimics the mass-media stereotypes of the female body in filmmaking and advertising, as it shows two young women posing seductively

for the camera. Whether disguised as haughty housewives, pretty doctors, or hard-working socialites—women in China could be all or none of

them. The artist beckons us to explore the numerous possibilities of the modern world with him; and to see and think of things differently.



Chen Xiaoyun, *Lightning on the Hillside*, 2016, clothes, leather, polyester, zips. 320 x 290 cm.

The exhibition demonstrates an art with many different ideas and themes in response to the modern times and experience. Sun Xun's *Nocturnal* series (2018) combines light-box, luminous agent, and watercolor on luminous paper to create a floral still life. Others such as Zeng Fanzhi, Ouyang Chun, Zhang Enli, and Yang Zhenzhong dabble in abstract and figurative paintings of interiors, landscapes, and of everyday experience in China—revealing, in the process, their own 'reflexive' selves and their becoming more deeply aware of the self and surrounding world.

Given the myth of the avant-garde, revolutionary politics, and contemporary life, the title *The Avant-Garde is Not Afraid of a Long March* suggests the surreal. Absent are works that overtly engage with landscape. Yet, the show is outstanding in its coverage of some of China's contemporary art such as performance, installation art, and conceptual art and its support of these artists of independent spirit. The March continues with lively art, vision, imagination, and a generous dose of optimism.

Christine Han

• • •



Zhou Tiehai, *The Avant-Garde is not afraid of a long March*, 1998, mixed media, gouache, oil stick, and charcoal on paper, 200 x 400 cm.