

Thomas Erben Gallery

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Fang Lijun
Woodcuts
Thomas Erben Gallery

Considered one of the leading figures in China's contemporary art scene, Beijing based Fang Lijun returns to New York with a vigorous group of large-scale woodcut prints. Since the early 1990s, Lijun has been associated with Cynical Realism, an art movement that developed in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square massacre in June 1989 when thousands of pro-democracy demonstrators—most of them students—were brutally killed by the government's military. While the 1980s had been characterized by the avant-garde community's enthusiastic belief that the artists would be able to contribute to the regeneration of Chinese culture, the events of 1989 immediately destroyed these hopes. With the Cynical Realists a whole generation of Chinese artists, who had grown up during the Cultural Revolution and witnessed its subsequent downfall, began to express their disillusionment. Losing faith in communal progress, Lijun and his peers turned towards a more personal and emotionally detached viewpoint that allowed for an ironic examination of China's quickly changing society.

In a rigorous statement that was published in a 1992 article by the Chinese art critic Li Xianting, Lijun brought the Cynical Realists' emotional stance to the fore: "A fool is someone still trusting after being taken in a hundred times. We'd rather be lost, bored, crisis-ridden misguided punks than be cheated. Don't even consider try-

ing the old methods on us, we'll riddle your dogma with holes, then discard it in a rubbish heap." Almost a decade later, Lijun's compositions continue to show traces of the former anguish, but increasingly utilize an imagery that is as symbolic as it is universally applicable. Considering China's consistently developing adaptation of Western capitalism and its values, it is not surprising that nowadays, Lijun creates metaphors for society in general rather than pointing at his country alone.

In "2001.11.22" (2001) three bald headed figures are set against a plain background. With their faces transformed into anger-ridden masks, two men are shouting at the audience, while the third one, standing in the background, looks away with aloof indifference. Depicted from below, they become a threatening, oversized front that forces the viewer into the role of the out-cast. In this atmosphere tinged with unease and suspense, any sudden outburst of aggression seems possible. Generating a sense of timelessness, the monochromatic palette of grays enhances the overall graphic clarity in which every contour, edge, and shadow is chiseled out dramatically.

The idea of opposition is portrayed more picturesquely in "2001.13.24" (2001). With a few energetic lines that bring the emotional vigor of German Expressionist woodcuts to mind, Lijun succeeds in capturing the characteristic motions of water. Out of the fluid masses, two arms are raised towards the sky, belonging to an almost entirely drowned individual, who is fighting for his life. Searching for something to cling to, the hands are transformed into claws that engage in a gesture of panic as well as hatred. As a mocking contrast to the emotional horror experienced by the victim, large flowers are falling from the sky and color the scene with superficial beauty. Underneath this ornamental cover, the determined struggle of a lonely figure against an overpowering medium is as obviously doomed to fail as an individual's attempt to go against the rest of society. For Lijun the metaphorical dilemma is that there is no natural resolution; neither floating with nor swimming against the stream is a satisfactory option. The reason is revealed in "Untitled" (2002/2003), in which Lijun's portrays society as a homogeneous group of men in which individuality is superceded by a boring blend of mediocrity.

Suspended from seven gigantic Chinese silk scrolls, the multi-paneled work shows an infinite mass of heads. Lacking any distinguishable characteristics, the figures transform into clones whose physical presence would evaporate if they were singled out of the group. In opposition to the energetic palette, ranging from oranges and reds to bright yellow, the vibrant human cluster has been rigidly frozen. Gazing into the sky, they remain silent, passively waiting in unison—but for what? Instructions? Changes? Orders?

—Stephanie Bubmann



Fang Lijun, "2001.11.22" Woodcut, Edition of 15. Courtesy Thomas Erben Gallery, New York.

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516 West 20th Street New York NY 10011-2820
phone 212-645.8701 fax 212-645.9630
email info@thomaserben.com