

Yang Jiechang - 3 Souls 7 Spirits

Shanghai Minsheng Art Museum

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curated by Martina Köppel-Yang and Johnson Chang Tsong-zung

with the kind support of:

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The exhibition is accompanied by a comprehensive catalogue.

3 Souls 7 Spirits is the title of Yang Jiechang's large-scale solo exhibition at Shanghai Minsheng Art Museum, and it is the name of one of his masterful calligraphies present in the exhibition, too. The motto originally describes the taoist concept of the essence of the human soul. As title of Yang's solo exhibition and as calligraphy, it hints to two fundamental elements in his oeuvre: the use of the calligraphic brush and the emphasis on spiritual values, which he appreciates for their universality. It is a kind of pragmatic spirituality, anchored in the here and now, similar to the one evident in Chinese literati culture, where contemplation and self-cultivation are as much an act of participation in worldly affairs as governing.

Yang Jiechang's main tool to actively take part in our contemporary world is the Chinese brush. He has been using a variety of artistic media throughout his career, yet painting and calligraphy are at the centre of his creation. He however does not consider himself an ink painter or calligrapher but rather a contemporary literati and painting for him is an act of participation. After his emigration to Europe in 1988, Yang was quasi naturally attracted by romanticism, in particular German romanticism with its subjective quest for spirituality, its love for nature and the search for the obscure and unfinished. Both, Eastern spirituality and romanticism are present in his oeuvre on a conceptual and on an aesthetic level from very early on, for example in his "Hundred Layers of Ink" series (1989 - 1999). Shown for the first time in the seminal exhibition "Les magiciens de la terre" in the Centre Pompidou in Paris in 1989, this series of monochrome black and mostly large ink paintings established his international reputation.

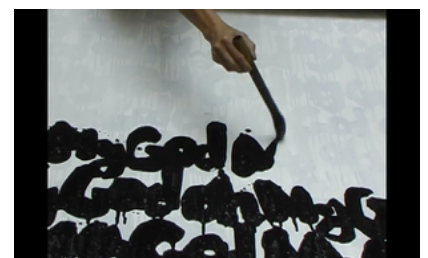
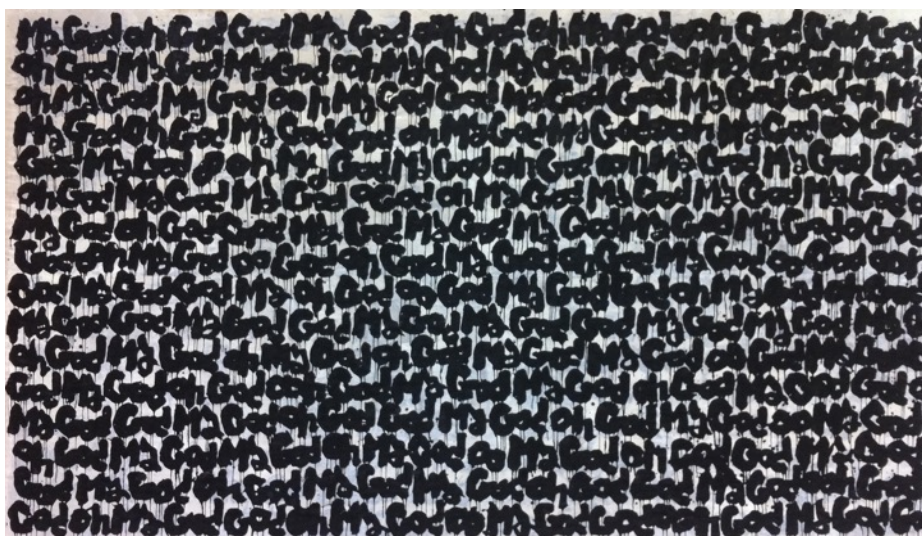
The present exhibition at Shanghai Minsheng Art Museum shows 18 works, including two objects, three videos and 13 paintings and calligraphies belonging to different creative periods.

3000 Needles (1992), one of the earliest works present in the exhibition, was created shortly after Yang's emigration to Europe for the Artists' Museum in the Polish city of Łódź. The site specific work consists of six sheets of canvas completely covered with needles, on which the artist glued his hair with a drop of his own blood. Yang here reacts to the fact that the city had one of the biggest Jewish Ghettos during World War II and the time of Nazi regime. The minimalistic work is neither an aesthetic nor a conceptual statement but the expression of the artist's compassion and revolt against injustice and cruelty.



This is also true for many of the other works present in the exhibition: under the often aesthetically raw and sober surface we discover a complex narrative or fervent statement.

Oh My God/ Oh Diu is a set of two large calligraphies with two videos (2002-2005) showing the artist writing and pronouncing these two expressions in reaction to the events of 9/11. Among the images broadcast by the mass media over and over again, only one appeared authentic to him: A young man running from the collapsing twin towers and shouting "oh, my god". Yang qualifies the other images as propaganda, as false evidence of a big lie. *Double View Crosss* (2014), *Lifelines 1 and Lifelines 2* (1999), and *Children Running* (2014) belonging to the same creative period, use vigorous calligraphic lines and a reduced formal language, as well as layering and the overlapping of images, too. Similarly these apparently abstract works are a comment on our contemporary reality.

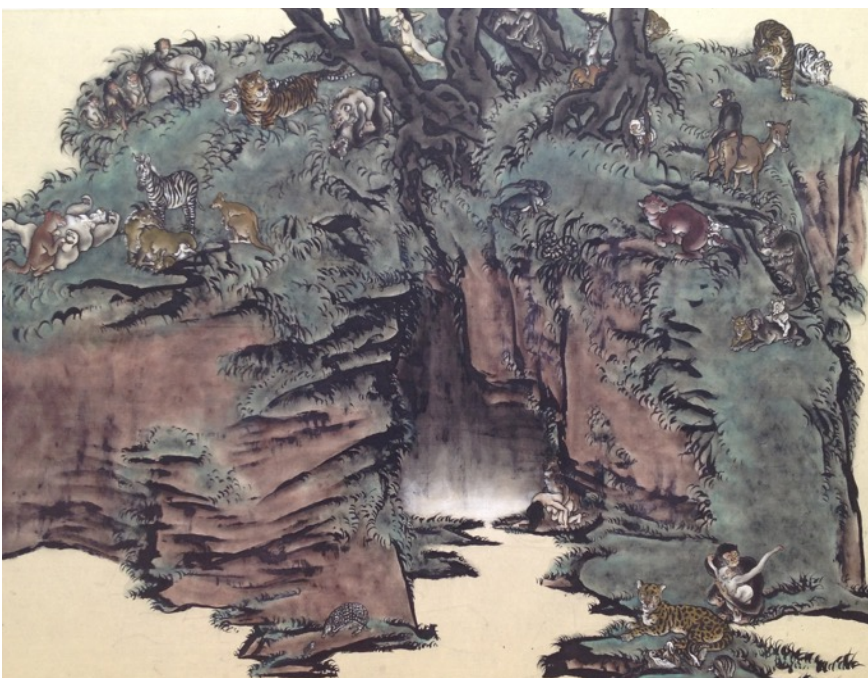


Yang Jiechang, *Oh My God*, 2002, ink and acrylic on canvas, 226 x 398 cm. With video.



Yang Jiechang, *Double View - Crosss (Wie im Himmel so auf Erden)*, 2014, ink and acrylic on Xuan -paper, mounted on canvas, 227 x 488 cm

The *Tale of the Eleventh Day* (2011 - 2018) and *Stranger than Paradise* (2009) Series use a completely different technique, the so-called *Gongbi* or meticulous color painting technique. For this realist technique washes of ink and color are applied layer by layer on Xuan-paper or silk. Both series are depicting a kind of universal landscapes, in which the artist stages the interaction of animals of different species, as well as that of human beings with animals. The dissimilar communication of the depicted couples ranges from curious discovery to playful contact and joyful mating. All seems equal interplay, compassion and love. Yet Yang's sensual paradise and utopia of impartial communication and action was imagined before the backdrop of enhanced globalization with its increasing conflicts and crises.



Yang Jiechang, *Stranger than Paradise - Red Grotto*, 2009, ink and mineral colors on silk, mounted on canvas, Set of 4, 2/4, each 95,5 x 121,5 cm

I still Remember (1997 - 2019) is the most recent work in the exhibition. This large calligraphy consisting of 18 rolls is a list of names of people Yang met in his life and whom he still remembers. The calligraphy is accompanied by a soundtrack with the artist's voice reading these names out aloud. The piece is written in a calligraphic style developed by Yang, which he calls "dark calligraphy". Here, similar to all his calligraphies, he purposely uses *baibi*, mistakes and failures, to create the work. Yang, who is writing up-side down, as visible in the videos accompanying the calligraphies *Oh My God* and *Oh Diu*, makes the ink disperse, or drip, and chooses an extremely coarse writing style.



Yang Jiechang, *I Still Remember*, 1997- 2019,
calligraphy, ink on Xuan paper, 18 rolls, each roll 320 x 145 cm
photo: Marc Damage

Everyone is a Qi Baishi (2017) is an educational project developed by Yang Jiechang over the last years. In the exhibition this project takes the form of an actual class room. Children are invited to learn the basic modules and techniques of Chinese painting, as proposed in the *Painting Manual of the Mustard Seed Garden (Jieziyuan Huapu)*, a printed manual of Chinese painting compiled during the early-Qing Dynasty.

Many renowned Chinese painters, for example Qi Baishi, began their drawing lessons with the manual. The drawings realized by the children are exhibited in the exhibition together with templates realized by Yang Jiechang.



Yang Jiechang, *Everybody is a Qi Baishi*, 2017, installation, drawings, 25 tables, stools, 400 frames

The video works present in the exhibition include *Lohkchat* (2003), *Landscape da Vinci* (2009) and *Six Two Zen* (2018). For Yang video is an extension of his painting, a way to write down an idea in a concise and pointed manner. *Lohkchat* was created in relation to 9/11. It shows the artist holding a toy-plane and mimicking its sound, taking off and flying until it finally crashes with the exclamation "Lohkchat", a Cantonese swearword meaning something like "Fuck". The video goes together with a tapestry - originally the tapestry of a German art centre - , on which the artist incised the plan of an airport. *Landscape da Vinci* is a site specific work realized in Toscana, Italy. It shows the artist shooting arrows onto the camera with the village Vinci as backdrop. The composition of the video image resembles that of the Mona Lisa. With each hit the camera moves and the video image shivers only to stand still until the next hit. The beauty of the image lies in the instability of the balance that has to be redefined through every individual act of the artist. *Six Two Zen* finally shows Yang pulling faces. The title indicates the artist's age as well as a mindset that he hopes to have attained.



Yang Jiechang, *Landscape da Vinci*, 2009, video projection on screen, 2' 10" loop

Yang Jiechang was born in Foshan (Canton, China) in 1956. He grew up during the Cultural Revolution and the beginning of his artistic career coincided with China's political opening in the late 1970s and 1980s. His first appearance in Europe and trigger for his emigration was his participation in the exhibition "Les magiciens de la terre" in the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris in 1989. Yang was trained in the techniques of paper mounting, calligraphy and traditional Chinese painting at the Fine Arts Academy Guangzhou (1978 -1982), where he taught until 1988. Living in Paris and Heidelberg (Germany) since 1989 he participated in numerous exhibitions around the globe: *Les Magiciens de la terre* (Centre Pompidou, Paris, 1989), *Chine demain pour hier* (France 1990), *Silent Energy* (MoMA Oxford, 1993), *Shenzhen International Ink Biennial* (1998, 2000, 2002), *Pause - Gwanju Biennial* (Korea, 2002), *Zone of Urgency - 50th Venice Biennial* (2003), the *Guangzhou Triennial* (Canton, China, 2003/2005), *La Force de l'Art - 1st Paris Triennial* (Paris, 2006), the *Liverpool Biennial* (Liverpool, 2007), the *Istanbul Biennial* (Istanbul, 2007), the *Moscow Biennial* (Moscow, 2009), the *French May* (Hong Kong 2001/2015) and *Carambolages* (Grand Palais, Paris 2016), *The Street*, (MAXXI, Rome, 2018), *Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World* (Guggenheim Museum, New York/Bilbao/Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, 2017-2018).