

## BURN FOR THE DAY - CHEN ZUO SOLO EXHIBITION by Chen Junyao

Chen Zuo's second solo exhibition at Galerie Urs Meile commences with a compelling statement, "Burn for the Day". Inspired by the opening line of the poem "*Ta Suo Xing · Yuan Xi*" (踏莎行·元夕)<sup>1</sup> by the Chinese poet Mao Pang (毛滂) from the Northern Song dynasty (960 - 1127), "Seeking spring through the snow, lighting lamps to keep the day going." Chen Zuo's rewriting "Burning the lamps and waiting for the day" distinguishes itself from a helpless compromise with the night and obedience to reality. It diverges from a more Apollonian approach characterized by rigor, order, and control. Instead, he acknowledges and embraces the unknowable future symbolized by the night and seeks the birth of a new order through a forceful intervention into the chaos. A violence that can be seen as a reaction against social conditioning and the structural oppression faced by the global South in the process of universal urbanization.

The exhibition begins with a portrait of a huddled drunkard, alternating between drunkenness and sobriety in urban life, a half-asleep, half-awake cycle that echoes his embodied environment and his witness to the progress of urbanization. At the same time, contrary to the specific, materialized scenarios constructed by the modern city, most of the figures in Chen Zuo's paintings are outside of those concrete scenes. For example, the works *Naughty Dog 2023* (2019 - 2023) and *Octopus Guajia* (2023 - 2024) are set in a suspended context, and the environments depicted in these two works range from the countryside with its gardening setting, to a part of the town illuminated by the cold light of the city sky in the snowy winter night. The specific scenarios Chen Zuo omits from his paintings can be regarded as a kind of bridging of the urban-rural dichotomy, with the village in the city as the result of the convergence of the two, which is also representative of the suburban areas of Beijing where he has lived for a long time.

In his works, even in bright daylight scenes, there are still a lot of dark tones, and through layers of brushstrokes and color blocks, he builds up a depressing but full of vitality atmosphere. In contrast to the brightness, there are those lonely backs outlined in the afterglow of neon lights. The movements of the characters and animals in the paintings are stiff and their eyes are confused, whether they are ordinary people busily shuttling through the urban villages or vagabonds on the edge of the city, they all present a kind of wavering situation with no one to rely on amidst the ever-changing social process, creating an abrupt tension with the hustle and bustle of the city. As Liu Yichang<sup>2</sup> depicts in *The Drunkard*, "Time never tires, and the long needle pursues the short needle in the midst of hopelessness. Happiness is like a wanderer, wandering behind the 'equal sign' of an equation ..... Inner melancholy is equal to the joy on the face, and joy and melancholy are not two different things ..... "

In Chen Zuo's paintings, bright, emotionally charged scenes are often in dark tones, while on the contrary, they present more out-of-the-box colors, which contribute to the dramatic tension in his works far more than the contrast between light and shadow. Color becomes an extension of emotion, and the metaphors brought about by the bold and rhythmic use of color, along with the outlining of the artist community around him in his works, are in fact the result of an internal view of a larger social and structural situation. Just like the violent pursuit of self-awakening represented by "Burning", the colors of brown-red, ultramarine-violet, nickel-yellow, and chrome-green are full of conflicts and oppositions, and they also build up the constancy of viewing. Through the brushstrokes and texture, as well as the hidden structure of the composition, he reveals his understanding of the individual in the modern society - a world full of opportunities and contradictions at the same time. In Chen Zuo's own understanding and description of painting, he builds up a complete, calm, constant and stable image with a classical-like painting expression, and underneath this gaze-able surface, there is an undercurrent of repeated tugging and pulling, just like the animal figure in the work *Naughty Dog 2023* (2019 - 2023), which is tentatively progressed by the unexplained, indistinct leash held by the man's hand. Under the stable structure of his works, one can feel a kind of anxiety and impulse of being pushed forward. The colors that have been repeatedly overlapped, intermingled and have even decayed on the canvas are reminiscent of painful sun spots under the scorching sun. It is as if they've been roughly peeled off from the overburdened facades of the urban villages.

The metaphor and revelation of the violent and competitive relationship brought about by urbanization is also embodied in a more specific context. In *Untitled (Tangyuan Pingpang)* (2024) Chen Zuo

uses table tennis, a sport that carries a distinctive national symbolism, to depict two different preoccupations in the same competition. The confrontation between the player who serves and the receiver is not only a competition on the playing field, but also a continuous tug-of-war between individuals participating in the operation of society. They seem to be focused, but their eyes do not meet each other, they are present at the same time, but they never really understand each other, and this deviation of the center of gravity stems from their own sense of defense and preservation of self-power. As the perspective moves further from the periphery to the center, Chen Zuo transforms himself into a player at the poker table in the work *Intermission* (2024), observing everyone involved in the game from a more subjective perspective, as well as the passivity and exhaustion written all over their faces throughout the game, and a kind of apathetic, individualized calculation.

These two works are situated in more concrete situations, further illustrating that the confrontation between individuals is not due to free competition, but rather to the imposed social structure, making them appear indifferent and detached in the images, as if they are placed in an endless game in which they are forced to participate. As viewers, we can see in the images the gathering of individuals in the disciplined society described by Foucault<sup>3</sup>, a social group portrait shaped by the “social machine” and the power of rules, manipulated by the invisible force of discipline. The invisible traces of oppression and violence in these images also echo the words of German philosopher Hannah Arendt<sup>4</sup>: the “institutionalized violence” of modern society does not appear in the form of revolution or drastic change, but rather penetrates into daily life, disintegrating the independence and power of action of individuals. In Chen Zuo’s works, the city becomes a figurative expression of this institutionalized violence, and the figures in the paintings are individuals caught in the network of this violence, struggling, confused, but never able to get out of this predicament.

Returning to the theme of the exhibition, “Burn for the Day” evokes a state of restlessness, which is not only an expression of the individual’s unwillingness to be drowned in the social vortex, but also the artist’s courage to try to continuously play with the encounters around him through his creations. Whether it is the opponents at the card table or the athletes at the ping-pong table, each individual is in an indifferent stalemate while trying to hold on to their own territories, just as Chen Zuo experienced from his daily observation: “It seems that they are all present, but they are all withdrawn.” This is reminiscent once again of Liu Yichang’s *The Drunkard*, in which the novel’s characters teeter on the edge of losing their sanity and control, engulfed by desire and powerlessness, yet in the twinkling of an eye attempting to grasp some kind of illusory hope. Chen Zuo’s images are also full of such ambiguities, as the fissures of reality are infinitely enlarged in his works, and the sense of existence of countless individuals in the city is washed away to become more and more fragile. As Chen Zuo says, “Painting is a tug-of-war with one encounter after another.” His creations are not meant to express the isolation of mankind, but to expose the dilemma of modernity, that is, how the value of the individual is being eroded by the expectations of the collective. -The commoditized and efficiency-driven life has made people lose the ability to stop, thus indulging and getting lost in the frenetic reality.

The violence hidden in the process of urbanization has become a grand narrative implicit in Chen Zuo’s creations, which runs throughout his works and further connects him to the geo-culture of the broader global South. After his travels in Southeast Asia, Chen Zuo’s creations further reflect his individual-level observation of the urbanization process in the context of the Global South, using his travels and personal perceptions of Phnom Penh, Siem Reap, Saigon, and Menai as a blueprint for his works, in which rapid urbanization has led to the breakup of the traditional community structure and the forced relocation of impoverished populations. All these phenomena are condensed in his works, reflecting the disintegration of individual identities and the erosion of living space in tandem with social progress, as well as the mandatory changes in local patterns brought about by globalized economic flows and the spread of cultural ideologies.

The gradual expansion of this discourse is reminiscent of anthropologist James Scott’s *Weapons of the Weak*<sup>5</sup>, in which he explores the everyday forms of resistance among the displaced people of Malaysia - laziness, desertion, feigned obedience, and inefficiency - to reveal the relationship between this discrete but large group and those who exploit their labor, food, taxes, and income, and the roots of the ongoing struggle. Using unspoken understandings and informal networks, Stecco argues for a self-defensive war of attrition with low-profile techniques of resistance, and a determined and tough effort to confront irresistible inequalities in order to avoid the collective risks of open revolt. Is this idea echoed in the series of works previously created by Chen Zuo? In relation to his solo exhibition *The Unbeatable Winter* held at Galerie Urs Meile Beijing in April 2023, works such as *Naughty Dog* (2020 - 2022) and *March at Night (Apricot Flower)* (2022 - 2023) depict the artist’s ghetto of Beijing’s Roman Lake, an area where artists have been passively relocated due to the expansion of the city and where Chen Zuo has experienced three moves of

his studio as a result of urbanization. All these experiences were transformed into silver-white light reflecting on the surface of the lake under the illumination of the moonlight on a snowy night, the silence of heaven and earth, and the grains of ice on the roaming wet beach at the edge of the lake. It connects the pedestrians holding their dogs at the highway linking to the edge of the lake, as well as Chen Zuo's observations of rootless, floating, and unattached groups with a narrative tone of magical realism. This observation is rooted in his long-term local experience, and presents a savagery and vigor in the midst of decay, as well as a kind of empathy with the faraway places - those marginalized individuals who don't belong to a clear space and time and have become the displaced people in the process of modern urbanization. His concern for the mobility of identity and discourse is thus further expanded.

The fact that Chen Zuo's paintings often take several years to complete has appropriately established a coordinate system that shuttles him between history and geography, and has helped him to find his own specific position in the continuous movement and accumulation of individual experiences. Through the calm action of painting, Chen Zuo continues to respond to many problems in modern society, and at the same time presents his unique personal experience witnessing the process of urbanization in China. As a sample of non-linear development, Chen Zuo extends and responds to how individuals seek a balance between control and anti-control within the systemic pressures of social structures. In this process, the highlighting and concealing of violence and contradictions, the reflection and adaptation of geo-culture and Chen Zuo's critique of modern society allow us to glimpse the reality of the Global South from a geo-cultural perspective. Just as "painting is a tug-of-war with one encounter after another", Burn for the Day has become a weapon for the weak.

<sup>1</sup> Ta Suo Xing · Yuan Xi is a poem written by the Chinese poet Mao Pang (毛滂) from the Northern Song dynasty (960 - 1127). "Seeking spring through the snow, lighting lamps to keep the day going." ("拨雪寻春, 烧灯续昼。") is the first line of the poem.

<sup>2</sup> Liu Yichang (Chinese: 劉以鬯; 7 December 1918 – 8 June 2018), was a Shanghai-born and Hong Kong-based writer, editor and publisher. He is considered the founder of Hong Kong's modern literature. His best-known works are *The Drunkard* (1963), considered China's first stream of consciousness novel which inspires Wong Kar-wai's award-winning film *2046*.

<sup>3</sup> *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (French: *Surveiller et punir : Naissance de la prison*) is a 1975 book by French philosopher Michel Foucault. It is an analysis of the social and theoretical mechanisms behind the changes that occurred in Western penal systems during the modern age based on historical documents from France.

<sup>4</sup> Ashcroft, Caroline. *Violence and power in the thought of Hannah Arendt*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Scott, James C. *Weapons of the weak: Everyday forms of peasant resistance*. Yale University P, 1985.