

# Chen Sixin

## *Pale World*

Galerie Urs Meile, Zurich Rämistrasse

September 6 – October 25, 2025

Opening: Saturday, September 6, 2025, 6 - 9 pm

The artist will be present

Galerie Urs Meile is pleased to present *Pale World*, the first solo exhibition in Europe by Chinese artist Chen Sixin (\*1995). The exhibition brings together a series of new works in which the artist examines the figure of the ghost as a symbol shaped by globalization and filtered through personal memory, internet culture, and popular imagery.

Excerpt from the essay “Chen Sixin: The Tail of the Story” by Ren Yue.

### Soft Steps of the Ghost

In a series of new works from 2025, Chen Sixin has continued to use the slow, intricate medium of colored pencil drawings, but has shifted to a “ghost” motif. Unlike the richly textured, muscular and sinewy animal images of his earlier works, the ghosts in his new series seem to float in the air with blurred edges, lightly sweeping across the picture. This lightness has softened the sense of direct, overbearing force in much of Chen Sixin’s earlier imagery, leaving more room for the imagination, for breathing, and for fluidity. Furthermore, if the animal images in Chen Sixin’s works have a clear ecological thread, the ghost works have shifted more into the realm of memory and imagination.

In the cultural context, ghosts approximate that “liminal state” that so frequently appears in our lived experience. They are both alive and dead, at once frightening and captivating. There are many sources for the ghost in Western culture. In Gothic literature, ghosts were the manifestations of unsettle grievances. With the rapid development of photography and the popularity of “parapsychology” in the Victorian era, ghosts were assigned a role that was part scientific, part mystical. In contemporary popular culture, from the cute, friendly ghosts of cartoons, to the fearsome ghouls of horror movies, ghosts are undergoing a process of simultaneous disenchantment and reinforcement of its role a tool for cheap thrills. This ability to repeatedly switch between affability and intimidation has turned ghosts into a favorite object of expression in visual art. The image of ghosts in the Chinese context is equally complex, marked by native religious notions of dead spirits, and deeply rooted in folk traditions revolving around the Ghost Festival (Zhongyuan Festival), the Tomb-Sweeping Festival, and other holidays. In these settings, ghosts are often incarnated in the form of paper puppets, lanterns, and masks, and are often connected to collective patterns, kinship, and spatial order.

The ghosts in Chen Sixin’s works do not have any so-called cultural properties, nor do they serve to admonish or intimidate - though the artist admits that the ghost in his mind has always been “a white sheet with two holes in it,” a symbol that is “very Western in the eyes of people from the East.” The tide of globalization that pushed the classic image of the ghost into the artist’s subconscious has already begun to ebb, while in a continuation of the intuitive and satirical elements of the artist’s creative thread, these ghosts linger on the margins of the picture and in the interstices of the plot, maintaining an ample sense of sentimentality and play.

This time, Chen Sixin has been constructing the existence of his ghosts through the three spatial dimensions of the sky, the land, and the sea. Perhaps reading these artworks in groups will yield a more interesting narrative. The three new works *Ghost Dog*, *Bullet Holes*, and *Ghostly Machismo* (all 2025) all employ gray tones with touches of light yellow, and seemingly unconsciously place the faceless ghosts into one of Tadao Ando’s signature concrete

buildings, with a bit of divinity hiding within. The ghost who floats over a pale cyan ground in *Longing* (2025) is made from a dense accumulation of wavy white lines, with a thin scarlet thread denoting that it is a kite, though we cannot know whose hand is holding the thread. The blue-green of the sea in *Shipwreck* (2025) is thicker, while the kite, also made of wavy white lines, appears to lie broken on the ground, its thread vanished. Which artwork is closer to “freedom” is perhaps not what Chen Sixin is asking, but the viewer whose gaze flits back and forth between the two paintings may feel that freedom is nothing more than having the face of a ghost.

In correspondence with two works that depict wide views of landscapes in the distance (*Rot* and *Search Search Cold Cold Sad Sad*, both 2025), Chen Sixin brings the camera in close for *No Way* (2025), to focus on a little ghost in a corner formed by crumbling walls. This is perhaps the moment with the strongest sense of a story in these new works, coalescing sentiments of helplessness, social awkwardness and cuteness on this not entirely complete body and bearing of a ghost in a particularly captivating form.

In his 2014 book *Ghosts of My Life*, British cultural theorist Mark Fisher proposes that unlike the phantoms of the past, ghosts today haunt us with the “futures that failed to happen.” They are always reminding us of certain historic possibilities that were suspended or vanished, leaving constant echoes of their “absence.” The “ghost sense” is particularly powerful in a postwar era marked by constant technological process, and a culture enveloped in nostalgia. In this light, when compared to his earlier works centered on animals, this “spectral turn” is not just on a graphic level; it is also a veiled reflection of a certain zeitgeist. Chen Sixin has noted that his interest in drawing ghosts is rooted in a plethora of internet videos. “Internet grazing” is perhaps the greatest shared trait of today’s youth. As liberalism wanes and the post-pandemic status quo is normalized, our screens are filled with videos of war, disaster, pet videos, and comedy shorts. The mixture of distant scenes of death with everyday entertainment has brought the floating, translucent, fleeting ghost closer to our perception of the world, that of sustained uncertainty and suspense. This creative turn could also be an echo of the artist’s own identity shift in a period of recession and low social morale. Art may no longer be the clear carrier for market fervor and aesthetic progress it once was. Now it must face the reality (at least for now) of its “demotion of mission,” and provide a kind of container for fluid sentiments.

Ren Yue is an art writer and editor based in Beijing. She has written for *LEAP* and *ArtReview*. Alongside her academic and editorial work, she runs the poetry project *Ghost Cascade*.

Chen Sixin (\*1995, Guangzhou, China) lives and works in Chongqing, China. He graduated from Guangdong University of Technology in 2017 and received his master’s degree from Maryland Institute College of Art in 2021. His work draws on posthumanist thought and visual culture, blending surrealist elements from old comics and cult films. Rejecting linear narratives, his practice embraces fragmented ideas and subconscious responses, creating poetic, ambiguous worlds between reality and fantasy.