

ENGLISH

GALLERIA CONTINUA

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CHEN ZHEN

DOUBLE EXIL

GALLERIA CONTINUA | PARIS - Exhibition from 29 September 2023 to 6 January 2024

"Migrations will create a population of the 'culturally homeless'. Double exile will become a widespread condition: no real roots, no real belonging to the new culture. How can I reinvigorate my original culture and develop my sense of belonging to a new culture in the context of globalisation? I live in a constant state of recontextualisation".

Chen Zhen

GALLERIA CONTINUA is pleased to present for the first time in its Parisian space, *Double Exil*, the solo exhibition by Franco-Chinese artist Chen Zhen (Shanghai, 1955 - Paris, 2000).

Since first encountering his art at the Venice Biennale in 1999, followed by a first exhibition at the gallery in San Gimignano in 2000, GALLERIA CONTINUA has presented and supported the artist's work in various locations around the world, in museums and major institutions, as well as at numerous art fairs and events.

A major exhibition in terms of its scale and the breadth of time covered in Chen Zhen's career, *Double Exil* has a particular resonance in Paris, the artist's adopted home.

The exhibition invites visitors to take an intimate look at Chen Zhen's work, and to discover the major themes that preoccupied the artist throughout his life, and which anticipated today's socio-political complexities.

Born in Shanghai in 1955, Chen Zhen grew up in a family of French-speaking doctors in the former French Concession during the Cultural Revolution. At the age of twenty-five, he was

struck down by an incurable disease, haemolytic anaemia, and this transformed his view of the experience of the value of time and space, and had a lasting impact on his artistic work. Aware that he didn't have much time left, he decided to emigrate to France, to open himself up to other cultures and other worlds. When Chen Zhen arrived in Paris in 1986, he experienced culture shock. He gave up painting and developed his artistic language in the form of installations.

He developed a concept he called "transexperience": for him, this neologism expresses the experience of dialogue between cultures and the creative process engendered by the blending of identities.

In his work, Chen Zhen examines two contrasting situations: that of the immigrant and his integration into a new environment, and that of the nomad and his relentless uprooting. In other words, it refers to an experience - a double exile - increasingly widespread in the twentieth century with the acceleration of human migration.

The exhibition opens with the universal theme of peace and fraternity between different peoples and cultures, and presents an evocation of the monumental installation *Jue Chang, Fifty Strokes*

to *Each* (1998) through preparatory drawings, photos and a video of the performance presented at the Venice Biennale in 1999. Originating in the geopolitical context of the Middle East at the time, the work questions conflicts around the world more generally, and becomes an instrument for the artist and the public to express energies and tensions in a choral way.

The hope that lies in the next generation is conveyed by the pieces in the series *Un village sans frontières (A Village without Borders)* (2000). Chen Zhen created this universal village using ninety-nine children's chairs from different countries around the world, transformed into little houses made of candles of different colours, celebrating both diversity and spirituality - the candle also symbolising, in China, the life of an individual.

Around two years before his death, Chen Zhen decided to study traditional Chinese medicine, which he saw as a way of thinking and acting very close to his own vision of art. He transposed this knowledge into his final works, which question the curative and purifying action of art on the metaphorical processes of illness and healing.

This is the case in *Zen Garden (2)* (2000), which explores the encounter between two visions of medicine - Chinese and Western - in relation to the human body, the dimension of care and the contrast between the physical and meditative states, and *Crystal Landscape of Inner Body* (2000), which presents human organs in crystal forming an "inner landscape" of the body, in order to transcribe the human anatomical geography in all its fragility and complexity.

Pursuing a reflection on the relationship between the natural and the artificial, a central theme in the artist's research, the installation *Le Produit naturel/Le Produit artificiel (Natural Product/Artificial Product)* visible from the window in rue Michel-le-Comte, consists of artificial red roses planted in cow dung. Chen Zhen anticipates an increasingly posthuman future, where man's mind and will struggle against nature and seek to dominate it. In it, he questions the foundations of the human being in the face of the rapid development of the technical-scientific and economic-commercial fields.

A residency in the Shaker community in Sabbathday Lake, Maine in 1996 gave Chen Zhen the opportunity to experience a world where

every gesture of daily life suspended time and working with your hands became a meditation. During this time there, Zhen took portraits of each of the Shakers, creating an intimate space for posing during which individual exchanges took place with the members of the community.

In the room opening onto rue Michel-le-Comte - *Mummification/Testament* (1991), *Lands-Objectscape* (1995) - and in the basement - *La Légèreté/Le Poids (Lightness/Weightedness)*(1991), *Le Dernier Portrait/L'Hibernation (The Last Portrait/Hibernation)* (1991), *Les Textes de la lumière/La Lumière des textes (The Texts of Light/The Light of Texts)* (1992) - are wall installations that explore the theme of consumer society and the cyclicity of the life of objects.

For these modern altars, created in the early 1990s, Chen Zhen adopted Lamartine's question: "Objets inanimés, avez-vous donc une âme?": "Inanimate objects, do you have a soul?", and uses objects he found at flea markets or picked up in the street. The transition of the object, with its cultural, social, economic and political connotations, to different states is achieved through the use of natural elements such as fire, water and earth - elements that perform a veritable rite of purification and sublimation of consumable products.

The basement space also features the enriching video of the entire conversation between Chen Zhen and Hans Ulrich Obrist, which took place at Osaka airport in the late 1990s.

On the first floor is a selection of abstract paintings in oil on canvas, executed by the artist following a trip to Tibet, where he had gone in 1983, despite being ill, to "cleanse" and "purify" himself. *Qi Flottant - La porte féminine (Floating Qi - The Female Door)* (1985), *Qi Flottant - Instant (Floating Qi - Instant)* (1985) and the triptych *La Transmigration (The Transmigration)* (1985) were inspired by the "Great Void", which, according to Taoism, encompasses all kinds of creative factors, and symbolises both time and space, essence and power, movement and harmony. In these paintings, Chen Zhen expresses his vision of "Qi", the vital energy, as a vertical line.

Continuing the tour, globalisation and consumer society and their relationship to tradition, are the central themes of *Untitled*, produced posthumously in 2015 on the basis of projects by the artist and consisting of two twin boats, whose bows interlock. Each boat carries its own

cargo: Chinese-made objects for one, Western products for the second. Their two propellers rotate continuously, creating a paradoxically two-way dynamic. In this way, the artist offers a metaphor for the contradictory and evolving relationship between China and the West.

In Chen Zhen's own words, *Social Investigation - Shanghai N.1* (1997) *"focuses on the great and violent transformation of a city like Shanghai as a typical example of neo-auto-colonisation in terms of urban planning. The project thus combines historical traces of colonisation, photos of recent changes, imaginary drawings of urban interventions and critical texts on reflection"*.

The exhibition culminates on the theme of meditation, with the major installation *Purification Room* (2000). The installation, which occupies the last room, presents a monochromatic domestic environment in which the walls, floor, furniture and objects are covered in a thick layer of clay. This natural element can be used to perform a rite of transition and purification, in order to enter into a new existence at the end of the cycle of life. Visitors are invited to meditate and become aware of their own spirituality and bodies, in order to rediscover their balance with nature and contemporary society.

Twenty-three years after his death, the issues Chen Zhen addressed are still fundamental to understanding and questioning the complexities of the contemporary era, while the richness of his work has earned the artist widespread international recognition.

His work has been shown throughout the world, notably in retrospective solo exhibitions at several major museums and institutions: the Serpentine Gallery, London (2001); the National Museum of Contemporary Art, Athens, and the ICA, Boston (2002); the P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, New York, and the Palais de Tokyo, Paris (2003); the Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna (2007); MART, Rovereto (2008); the Rockbund Art Museum, Shanghai (2015), and the Pirelli HangarBicocca, Milan (2020).

Chen Zhen's work has also been the subject of a catalogue raisonné produced by ADAC (Association of the Friends of Chen Zhen), in collaboration with GALLERIA CONTINUA and published by Skira, the first volume of which was published in 2014 and the second in 2018.