

ZAN JBAI
NOTHING HAPPENED
NOTHING TO TELL YOU

21 June - 28 July 2007

Kamel Mennour is pleased to present « nothing happened / nothing to tell you » a Zan Jbai's solo exhibition at the Gallery.

**David Rosenberg's interview of Zan Jbai
On the occasion of his exhibition**

David Rosenberg: You define yourself as « an idiot who paints by following the rarely-frequented path of the ancient Chinese masters; that of the elite painters »...

Zan Jbai: Yes, I am an idiot, someone who doesn't move with the times. But that doesn't mean I live in the past. In saying that, I'm alluding above all to an idea, an axiom, which remains, in my opinion, a relevant definition of art: to not be direct, to conjure up « much » by means of « little ». The old masters - Mi Youren, Chu-Ta and a few others - do exactly that: they show very little, almost nothing: a branch is used to show the tree, or they paint a mountain obscured by clouds. Today, to work according to this principle of the « little » is precisely the opposite of imitation or plagiarism, it consists of following a solitary path within an open field of research.

DR: What are your views about contemporary Chinese art?

ZJ: I was asleep for two hundred years... I've moved directly from the distant past to today! As a result, I feel as if I have very little in common with my contemporaries. In fact, I'm more interested in the «contemporary gaze» than in contemporary art itself. For example, I don't understand the passion that artists have for painting or sculpting effigies of Mao! In China, the situation seems ridiculous to me: art is either influenced by the communist period or by popular culture and mangas. What are even more regrettable are the pastiches of traditional art that consist of a doubtful mix of adulterated Taoism and pseudo-calligraphy. I think it's healthy and right to want to keep one's distance from all that.

DR: But nevertheless, you consider yourself to be an oriental painter...

ZJ: Yes, I am an « oriental » painter, but one who refuses to use Asian or oriental signs. No cultural stigmata! Those are the undoubted signs of provincial art. In Asia, we mostly follow Western fashions. While the signs or subjects may be « Chinese », the work remains Western in spirit. These are some of the problems an artist has to struggle with. My decision to come and work in Paris and present my art abroad is a direct result of this reflection. I want to exhibit in another context, set apart by a different regard. From a pragmatic point of view, but one that is also aesthetic and philosophical, I think my paintings are well situated within the globalized networks of contemporary art.

DR: When did you start to formulate these decisive thoughts?

ZJ: It was during my studies. I started to paint at the age of fifteen. I entered the Chinese School of Fine Art at Hangzhou, where, for four years, I trained to paint in the Western academic style. After that, I worked alone for three years. It was during my studies at Hangzhou, after two or three years, that I realised it was useless to listen to others. I also understood what I wanted to do.

DR: On the same subject, you talk about "apparent insipidness" as a desired effect...

ZJ: The apparent insipidness of the grey and white monochrome tones is the ingredient that allows the real essence of the painting to be masked, in order for it to be better revealed. I chose white because of its resemblance to a transparent veil, a screen, a liquid, or even a mist where the faces appear, or seem to fade.

DR: And where do these faces come from?

ZJ: Before painting, I take photographs. I never show these images. Most of the time, they're of women. It's perhaps because I put myself in the position of the spectator far in the future that I choose subjects that seem to me to be both sober and timeless. During the painting process, I erase any details, any clues. I remove anything that isn't essential, until all that's left is a body or a face, a sketch of a garment, or even just a sheet. When one tries to get closer in order to better make out the contours of the body or face, they grow fainter. The subject always keeps its distance.

DR: Your work is characterised by excellent anatomical rendering and the skill with which you capture a pose. However, I know that to your eyes, these do not constitute a justification for it. What is it, then, that motivates your work?

ZJ: My soul is solitary one. And solitude is linked to the notion and the experience of distance. Perhaps that's my subject: the separation and the insurmountable distance that renders our gaze possible...

Zan Jbai « nothing happened / nothing to tell you » is on show at galerie kamel mennour Tuesdays to Saturdays, 11am to 7pm.

For further information, please contact Marie-Sophie Eiché, Jessy Mansuy-Leydier et Emma-Charlotte Gobry-Laurencin.