CHEN Fei

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Artists

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In his work, Chinese artist Chen Fei asks: who gets to define taste?

Artist portrait. Photo: Ling Bojun

Cathy Fan • June 25, 2025 • **Share This Article**

Before meeting Chen Fei, I'll admit I felt a flicker of anxiety—something writers may experience before an interview. His paintings are filled with provocative details that challenge aesthetic norms. They possess a strange allure: unsettling, yet hard to look away from. Judging by the work alone, one might expect an artist known for irreverence, satire, and a deliberate embrace of "bad taste."

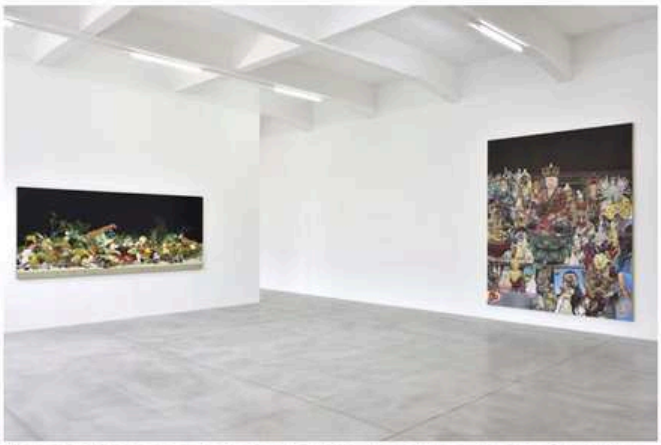
But all preconceptions quickly dissolved upon meeting him. Chen's home and studio are located in a residential compound more than an hour's drive from downtown Beijing. Like many artists in the city, he has traded convenience for spacious, tranquil working conditions. Chen was relaxed, open, and talkative, and to the delight of any interviewer, remarkably candid and unguarded. His studio occupies a large, skylit basement, which he shares with a parrot.

Chen Fei is standing at his exhibition "Grand Lobby" at the Consortium Museum. Photo: Vanessa Guo

When we met, Chen had just returned from France. His first institutional solo exhibition in Europe, "Grand Lobby," had opened at the Consortium Museum in Dijon. In a departure from many people's expectations, the show featured many still-life paintings. Massive canvases filled with overwhelming compositions of poultry, or piles of Buddha statues, glow with backgrounds of gold leaf or red lacquer, which Chen repositions as symbols of class aspiration and the transactional logic of visual culture in contemporary China. When viewing these works on a screen, much is lost—their absurdist narratives and visual punchlines only fully reveal themselves up close. Viewed on a screen, these paintings lose much of their impact—many of their narrative absurdist details only emerge when seen up close.

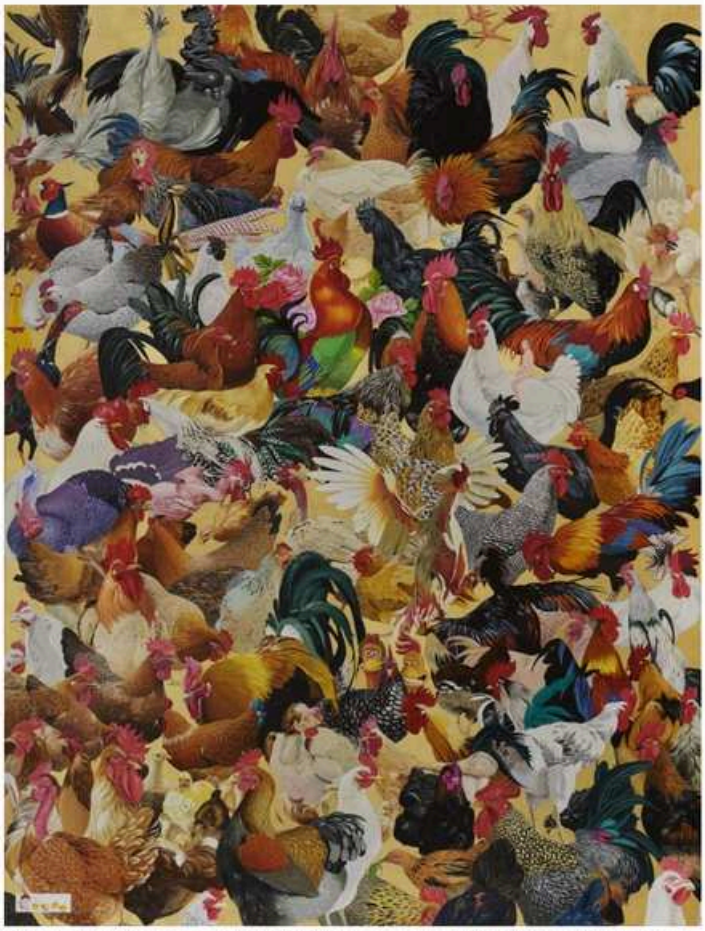
The show's title, "Grand Lobby," is ironic, evoking the gaudy, ostentatious decor found commonly in the lobbies of hotels or many public spaces across China. "You walk into these hotel lobbies and you're immediately greeted by a painting that's meant to convey auspiciousness or so-called 'positive energy'—it's always functional," Chen said. That was the starting point for the series.

Photos: Rebecca Fanuele. © Chen Fei. Courtesy of the artist and Consortium Museum.



Photos: Rebecca Fanuele. © Chen Fei. Courtesy of the artist and Consortium Museum.

At first glance, some of these paintings resemble the floral still-life traditions codified by 17th-century Flemish painters. In one, *Friendship*, lilies are arranged in a sleek VOSS water bottle, still bearing IKEA price tags. Other floral baskets are uniquely Chinese: wrapped in plastic, adorned with cheap ribbons, fruits printed with lucky terms. These are standard gifts in Chinese social customs. "Of course I'm interested in issues like geopolitics, class, history, or contemporary reality," Chen explained, "but depicting them directly risks turning the work into a caricature." So he turned to the seemingly traditional format of still life to carry these themes.



Chen Fei, *Modern times*, 2021-2022, Oil on Canvas, 290 × 220 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin

Back in his studio, Chen was at work on newer paintings—mostly large-scale, detail-rich canvases. In some, the narrative unfolds against "wallpaper" backdrops; others return to the human figure subjects. Many seemingly mundane scenes are filled with curious details. "I'm thinking more spatially now. I want my paintings to be readable from any section, like framing different shots in a film, including the background," he said. "Painting is like literature or comics—it's a way of reading." This thinking stems from his early work experience drawing film storyboards, where sequencing, spatial tension, and mise-en-scène are essential tools. Today, his paintings echo that logic, layered with narrative, built like scenes spliced from different visual registers, they invite a kind of slow, cinematic reading.

"I used to think wallpaper was tacky because it's purely decorative," he said. "But try designing floral motifs from scratch, then you'll find it's extremely difficult." He half-joked that Cubist Picasso and Peppa Pig have a historical visual connection. He then showed me books by William Morris and said he's long been drawn to applied arts. For Chen, embracing so-called "tacky" motifs isn't just irony, it's quiet but a pointed challenge to entrenched hierarchies of taste. Ornament, in his hands, becomes a site of cultural labor, visual complexity, and reclaimed memory.

Chen Fei, *Friendship*, 2022, Acrylic on linen surface on board, 78.2 × 58.2 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin

Chen grew up in rural Shanxi province in northern China. His earliest encounters with visual culture were narrative murals related to traditional opera, painted on the walls of home yards. These murals served both as decoration and as a way to cover dirt—a very functional form of art. This was his first introduction to the idea of applied aesthetics. He is seen as a "typical" post-1980s Chinese artist, having grown up during the rapid transformation of the 1990s and graduating from the Beijing Film Academy in 2005.

He described his art school education in China as a hybrid—European oil painting training mixed with Soviet-style collectivist aesthetics, later overlaid with the influences of China's Reform and Opening Up. In such a system, forms of art were merely a tool for expression. "What matters more is the context. You can't judge the sophistication of an artwork just by its medium or form."

"Pop culture was my 'first frame,' or my first sip of milk," Chen said, referring to his formative influences outside of formal training. He's a fan of Japanese animation and was also influenced by American comics through his storyboard work. "When you adopt a popular aesthetic, things tend to get flattened," he said. "But art shouldn't have a hierarchy. It should be infinite, extremely rich. Applied art shouldn't be seen as lowbrow either." The artist, long associated with "bad taste," believes taste is a "reflection of personality and capacity for tolerance."

Chen began working with galleries in 2005. In 2009, he held a solo exhibition at Star Gallery in Beijing, which he considers the real start of his professional career. In 2014, Perrotin threw a solo show for him in Hong Kong—a moment that marked his growing recognition in the art market. His secondary market began to take off soon after. In November 2023, his diptych *Stars Pile Up All Over The Sky* sold for RMB 8.74 million (about $1.214 million) at China Guardian Auctions, setting a personal record.

"The secondary market is a double-edged sword for artists. It's best (for me) to keep some distance," Chen said. He accepts the results calmly but added, "An artist just needs to know what they're doing and do it well."

Chen Fei painting with his daughter in his studio

There's a Chinese saying: "At forty, one is no longer confused." Chen is now 42. He said his life before 40 followed a relatively predictable path. "Now, I've moved beyond the phase of struggle or deliberate emphasis. My past experience doesn't apply anymore. I need to find a new direction, which is to learn how to live with myself in the present moment, while looking both far ahead and right in front of me."

As our interview came to a close, his four-year-old daughter joyfully returned home from school. Chen instantly became a doting father. "Now," he smiled, "nearly all my paintings are about her. And I don't need a reason to paint my daughter."

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