

Perrotin

Chen Fei Steals the Spotlight in New York City

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For his first show in New York City, young Beijing artist Chen Fei merges Eastern and Western art history to make satirical works that tells us a lot about both cultures.

TEXT: Barbara Pollack

IMAGES: Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin

Born in 1983 in Hongtong, Shanxi Province, Chen Fei is something of a gangster, stealing from art history, both Chinese and Western. In his latest show at Perrotin, his first in New York City, the young artist presents one floor of portraits and another of still lifes, with paintings that evoke a Louvre on steroids. With bold colors and figures outlined in black lines, his work was at first mistaken for "cartoon art" of the 1980s generation. Though he himself acknowledges that he is part of that generation, he distinguishes his work with complex compositions and strong narratives, telling stories that shed light on a lot about the new China.



Chen Fei, *Painter and Family*, 2018, acrylic on linen, 290 x 290 cm.

Photo by Guillaume Ziccarelli. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.

For example, in *Painter and Family* (2018), Chen mirrors his life in his studio, working at an easel on an unseen picture while surrounded by intrusive family members. The artist

is naked and covered in tattoos, his genitalia blocked from view by a table holding dozens of tubs of Liquitex acrylic paint, his favoured medium. Meanwhile, he keeps a watchful eye on the scene unfolding behind him: a grandmother with a baby on her knee, a teenager staring at his cell phone, an auntie staring at the floor, a toddler playing with trucks while sitting on a finished canvas and a man on the couch reading the newspaper. According to the artist, this composition is related to Velasquez's 1656 masterpiece, *Las Meninas*, in which the Spanish artist captures himself painting a portrait of the King's children. In case the reference to Western art history is lost on the viewer, there is a stack of books on a table in Chen's painting, catalogues of the work of Leonardo da Vinci, Willem de Kooning and Tom of Finland next to a pile of Chinese art history tomes.



Chen Fei, *Scenery*, 2019, acrylic on linen, 260 x 200 cm. Photo by Guillaume Ziccarelli.

Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.

Another equally intriguing work is *Scenery* (2019), in which Chen depicts a naked female model performing a handstand on the cement floor of his studio in front of a landscape painting leaning against the wall. The juxtaposition of the startling human figure and the bucolic scene behind her is surrealistic, as if the woman is leaping out of the painted

blue sky behind her. But then when we look closely at the painting-within-a painting, we find that the grass is expertly rendered, as are the trees and the clouds. The only indication that this is a picture, not a window, is the fact that Chen also captures the folds in the material as the canvas sags on its stretchers.



Chen Fei, *My Morandi 2*, 2019, acrylic on linen, 30 x 40 cm. Photo by Guillaume Ziccarelli. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.

The portraits throughout the exhibition are all equally stunning, functioning very much like film stills. This reflects Chen's background as a student at the Beijing Film Academy, rather than one of China's more traditional art academies. The artist wanted to avoid the stultifying training in art school, but once attending the film school, he found that he disliked the collaborative nature of filmmaking, preferring to work alone in his studio. Still, the influence of movies is strongly felt in his work, inviting viewers to make up their own stories to interpret the works.



Chen Fei, *For Breadth and Immensity*, 2019, acrylic on linen mounted on gold gilded carved boxwood frame, unframed: 140 x 320 cm; framed: 171 x 352 x 14 cm. Photo by Guillaume Ziccarelli. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.

Unfortunately, the still lives often devolved into simplistic allegories. In *My Morandi* (2019), Chen presents a collection of bottles, much like the compositions of the late Italian modernist. But here the bottles are filled with Chinese products—fermented black beans, chili oil and soy sauce—an easy allusion to a kind of East-meets-West mash-up. This simplicity is also found in Chen's masterwork, *For Breadth and Immensity* (2019), a mammoth take-off on Dutch Old Master still lives that takes its title from the Confucian text, *The Doctrine of the Mean*. Here, instead of depicting restraint and modest consumption, the artist presents an overwhelming feast replacing food stuffs found in Western art paintings with chayote and tofu, as opposed to lemons and cheese. In the far right corner is a trompe l'oeil, a tiny self-portrait reflected in the curve of a golden cup. It is a truly complex composition, but its meaning can be too easily described as a collision of art history influences. Perhaps, it is also a depiction of present-day China, where gluttony and overconsumption is common place. Chen Fei is at his best when he is commenting on life in contemporary China. His painting style is strikingly of-the-moment and his narratives are packed with information



about China’s younger generation. For that he should be recognized as a rising star, pushing forward the near-journalistic portraits of Liu Xiaodong and the romantic filmmaking of Yang Fudong. Young as he is, he is overdue for a museum retrospective that can thoroughly cover his development. Hopefully, that will happen soon, before his work becomes merely a market phenomenon.

About the artist:

Born in 1983 in Hongtong, Shanxi, China, currently lives and works in Beijing, China. Chen Fei’s narrative paintings are fantasized, often perverted constructs, in which elements from his personal life are transposed into surrealistic or hyperrealistic pastiches. While he belongs to the post-1980 generation of Chinese artists raised under the one-child policy, whose overall aesthetics were influenced by mainstream culture (notably manga and anime), Chen Fei is typically concerned with the self rather than with grand history. A remarkably sharp sense of black humor informs his vibrant, ego-centered visions. Almost systematically exhibiting his own figure in his work, he satirically diverts the age-old tradition of self-portraiture to revisit Eastern and Western art-historical canons. The highly graphic quality of his lively compositions, which he envisions as film stills, playfully contrasts with the refinement of his meticulous and detail-oriented style. Further interested in how China’s rapid economic growth has impacted its now globalized culture, Chen Fei also questions his nation’s collective taste and societal evolution through his work.