

Perrotin

*Reunion: A Conversation with Chen Fei Prior To His First Exhibition in
North America @ Perrotin NYC*

November 2019

Reunion: A Conversation with Chen Fei Prior To His First Exhibition in North America @ Perrotin NYC

November 20, 2019 | in Painting



Painter and Family, 2018. Acrylic on linen. 290 x 290 cm. 114 3/16 x 114 3/16 in. Photo by Guillaume Ziccarelli. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.

As globalization encapsulates the globe and polarization intensifies our societies, it's interesting and refreshing to see art made on the "other side of the world," where different rules, values and policies are in effect. And one of those exhibitions is currently on view at **Perrotin NYC**, where Beijing-based artist **Chen Fei** is having his first-ever solo exhibition in North America.

With interest in the grotesque underbelly of daily life and the mixture of ambition, desire, pornography, greed or incest, Fei has become a prominent figure in China's post-1980s artistic movement. In his images, he renders scenes of life that reveal touching points

between his native culture and the Western world, from everyday domestic scenes and borderline surreal portraits, all the way to a new series of contemporary still lifes and vanitas imagery. With a background in film, Fei's visuals are greatly informed by Hollywood and Japanese anime, which results in images that feel like a frozen film still. With regularly mundane scenes and a cast of recurring characters (primarily himself, his wife and his dog), the work carries a documentation-like quality, while maintaining a sense of underlined eeriness to it.

We were curious to find out more about the new series of work, the large scale portraits and the still-lives, and the way his work relates to his native tradition and/or Western culture.



***Sasha Bogojev:* Your film background is known to inform the composition of your imagery. Is there a narrative behind each work, and how much do you like to show in the image itself?**

Chen Fei: Perhaps you can understand this as an absence of formal art training's tinge in my work. I studied professional film production at university, so films related to my hobbies and interests have a stronger influence on me. That could be a way to read my work, though there isn't a direct relationship with my current creations.

I feel like these are two different modes of expression, and there is no need to articulate filmmaking techniques in paintings. But I like narratives that can be present in paintings. This may make people think of my previous studies. There was a phase when I arranged the scenes in my paintings with dramatic conflict and strong narratives, but I actually don't care to tell a specific story. After all, I'm not a writer. I only deliberately provide a narrative to underline my ideas. I do provide some details or clues to bring about resonance in people, and it's fine even if they misinterpret the paintings. My job is complete as long as people draw whatever they need from the images. Ultimately, I'm saying nothing. I'm just providing a painting that looks like it contains a narrative.



The setting of your images seem to be ambiguous, is this purposeful? Why do you arrange them this way?

For me, art's definition is uncertain. Art has value but is not responsible for solving problems, just like how art and science run in parallel—with the latter being the representation of human rationality and objectivity, forbidding even the most minute deviation. And art is the more emotional part of humanity; sometimes it can be capricious, with your mind running wild and behavior becoming unhinged. My paintings may be rooted in my expression of representation and my obsession with it. This is the limitation of my work as a painter—all messages in my images will be clear and functional, and the artwork will seem specific, with no space for extrapolation. This is something I don't want

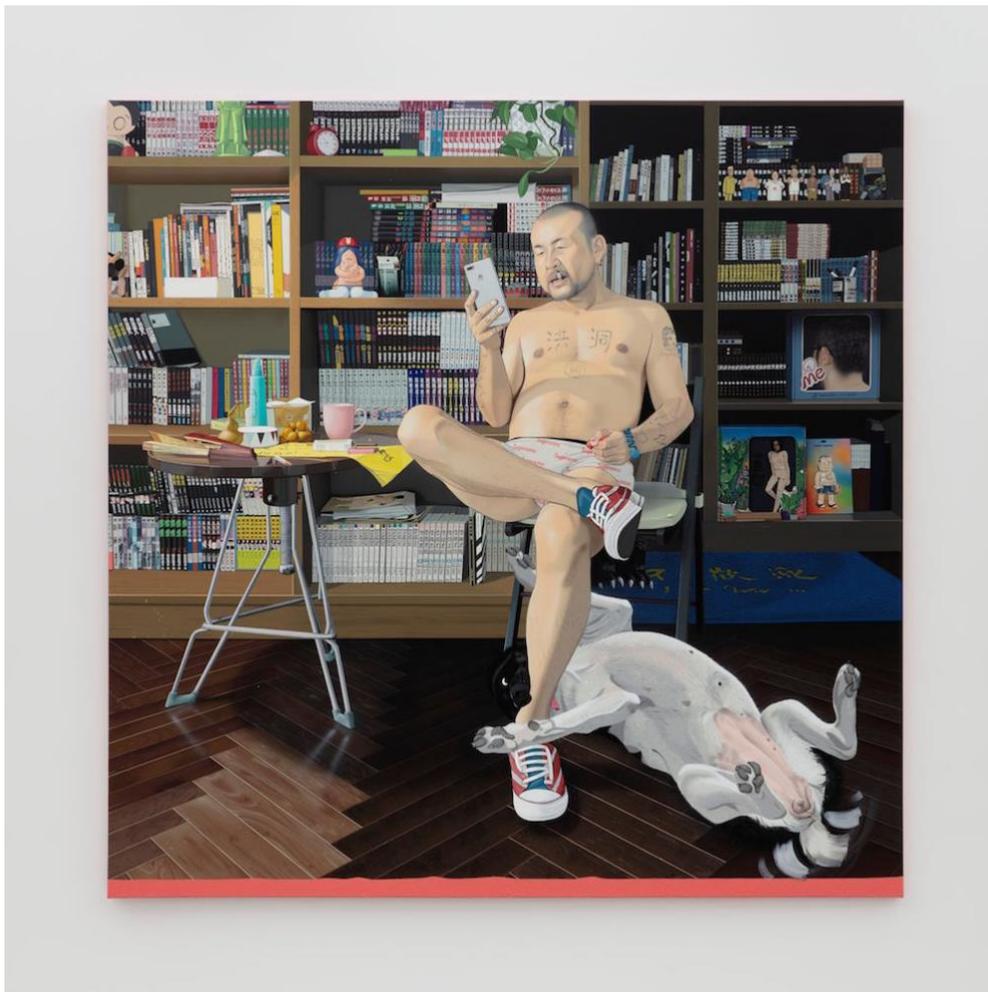
to pursue, so I use various techniques in my creative process to compose my images and dilute my emotions or noxiousness, so the work has more latitude.

Do your individual pieces continue on each other in any way?

I am sure that each stage of my artistic development is not isolated. There must be some kind of connection between artworks. Most of the time, there is natural derivation and evolution, though there are also many instances where I deliberately subvert an innate idea and force myself to construct a new format where I lack expertise. On some level, this is continuity and connection.

You're known for regularly putting an image of yourself in your work. Where does this urge come from?

Hmm, this may not be entirely deliberate. I just feel that this is the most convenient way to communicate with myself, and I don't need to hold myself accountable.



There is a lot of nudity in the new body of work. Is there a meaning or a concept behind it?

I feel that the human body is a subject that will never cease to be explored—we can find 100 million examples in art. Humans are either clothed or nude. For me, painting clothed figures carries more direction, and the meaning within the painting will become particular and narrow. I do not intend to objectify or offend anyone's body, and I am not interested in provoking anything. I think nudes are the most natural expressions. They appear in my work to fit the theme in the most appropriate manner. Every consideration is based on the work.

Are the images depicting life around you as you experience it, an alternative reality, an imaginary reality, or something else?

My creations are highly related to my era and surroundings, but regrettably, I cannot feel their entirety. The levels I can touch upon are limited, so I can't produce themes that are absolutely realistic. It's more about my feelings—the image may be a sketch, or a generalization, or an interpretation, or a fable.

I put these elements together and try to use my paintings to record and express it all, but I am not objective. I am a painter, and I am often controlled by my subjective emotions. I need to use these feelings to derive and evolve. My work is not based on seeking a realistic representation—instead, it's as you describe it, a parallel reality—but I don't know where it might head in the future. This line of work, of creating art, changes as you age and your understanding of the world shifts. I hope that I always have a critical heart.



Is there a unifying theme or element between the works for your upcoming show?

Starting with myself as the center, but taking objects and ideas as a departure point, my thoughts were at first more about modern art's evolution and growth in China. This topic has blossomed in my creative process in the past few years. I found possible points of divergence within, but at the same time am not satisfied with a specific representation. This is related to the changes in the perception of my environment in these few years.

It can be said that specific themes in these paintings helped me to develop a better understanding of the outside world, while shifts in the outside world allowed me to dig deeper into my paintings' subject matter. Together, these conditions stimulated the development of this theme, which is this; our relationships are reflected within our situation. This is certainly related to politics, but I feel that I am just a painter, and the nature of my work is limited, so I can't just use painting to criticize and find fault in things. Facing this sort of problem, every race and every person will maintain their own perspective—it's difficult to find consensus. And my only course of action is to use art to make people recognize each other's cultures a little more, eliminating a little bit of the

conflict that stems from the unknown. So the common theme in my practice during these few years has been to touch on these issues.



Does your work relate to traditional Chinese art in any way?

When I was younger, I didn't take note of traditional Chinese art that much, because it was always something within reach, and so I had the impression that it was something that exists naturally, or that there will be a better opportunity and plenty of time to learn about it. My interests tend to be what most young people are interested in—Western literature, music, paintings, pop culture, and the like. Slowly, as I headed deeper into my own work, my personal problems emerged. I discovered that differences in the core expressions of Eastern and Western cultures are not in the formation of appearance or language, but rather in their intrinsic philosophies. Their appearances may look similar, but there are different paths of entry leading to that. As my work evolves, I have come to realize that we think of time and space in different ways.

Nowadays, aside from emphasizing our own cultures' attributes, we should also attain a culture that has no locality—one that lets people feel the extraordinary qualities of your culture but also allows accessibility. In general, it is necessary to connect with modernization seamlessly. I would like to be the connection between these cultural

differences so that everyone can experience these core values. Of course, my capabilities are limited, so this may only be a beautiful vision.



How much does the sociopolitical situation of your homeland influence your work?

My hometown and where I live now certainly have a major impact on my art. These influences are like the textures that a person experiences in life. Nostalgia and the status quo both linger in my work. It is magical, yet also real. I used to think that my life would unfold in an age of slow and steady development, one that cannot inspire great thoughts, superb art, or rapid advances in technology.

In this imagined era, we would be a generation of relatively mediocre people with stable lives, but in the last few years, the world has undergone massive changes, even in central China. I suddenly realized that we have already been swept up in the changes brought about by a critical time. Old economic systems are undoing the relationships between nations. It's intensifying exchanges between cultures, and splits have materialized. I'm

actually a little fearful, but there is no other option except to calmly face it and reflect on what your work and life will look like in the future. I actually don't like to speak openly about politics, but yes, where I live and the changes it undergoes profoundly influence my work.

What's the concept behind the new still life arrangements with food items?

The still life series has been a focus of mine in the past few years. As I mentioned, as a Chinese acrylic painter, I always feel limitations around me. In an era where performance, abstraction and conceptualism are mainstream, these limitations bring about self-doubt, and I think it's difficult for me to paint something fierce under those conditions. So I might as well return to a primitive state and paint some "weaker" works. If paintings could be classified into different tiers, still lifes might be the lowest form. But at the same time, still lifes are like vessels—this tranquil format can demonstrate the undercurrents in my thoughts. I really want to paint the kind of work which seems humble but able to address pertinent issues.

**Is there any difference between the Chinese or Western/European still-life format?**

We all know that in ancient Rome or during the Renaissance of the 16th century, there were still lifes, but most of them were paintings showing the surroundings of official

figures or religious narratives. It wasn't until the 17th century that still lifes were popularized as their own genre, especially with Dutch painters. They are very different from the Chinese still lifes.

In traditional Chinese paintings, there are many paintings similar to [European] still lifes, like the Song dynasty yuanti [royally endorsed] flower and bird paintings, but they show completely different scenes from Western still life paintings. The Chinese chose to use the format as a means of observation that places an emphasis on time; the refusal to sketch exactly what they saw reflected creative and philosophical thought. It wasn't until after the Qing dynasty that there were still life paintings in China that had an affinity with art from the West, but the core content was different. Every depicted object needs to have meaning or an allusion. Of course, this also related to changes taking place in various historical periods.

So, how do those two inspire your work?

Both methods—the Chinese one as well as the Western one—have inspired me greatly. Conceptually, I am using an approach from Chinese painting to create still lifes that appear to have no locality, in order to form a confrontation with traditional Western still lifes, and more importantly to emphasize my own cultural attributes.

The China that I exist in today is undergoing many unpredictable changes, and I have the key responsibility to explore this. But the country's situation and environment have long forbidden intense expressions in art, or maybe it's outdated to use direct methods like that. As a "vessel," still lifes are the perfect vehicle for my work. I take to unoffensive formats like a duck to water. I discuss all things that I am critical or skeptical about—including geographies, class issues, public welfare, and other situations—and even if the point is missed, there's still a still life to appreciate.

Within my visual language, I won't allow myself to paint solely to depict an object. As much as I can, I'll simulate a reproduction, and make more attempts in my visual language, so it won't be a still life painted for its own sake.



The title of each work seems to be the key to those works, is that right?

Yes. I said earlier that as long as the viewer can look at the paintings, they'll be able to feel it, but it's fine to refrain from forming your own reading. Yet deep down inside, as a painter, I do hope that people will understand my work, so the title functions as a guide.

What are your hopes or expectations for this showcase, given it's your first show in North America?

I am going through an interesting phase. I feel helpless, but I have also discovered some interesting things—I feel that China and America are very similar on some levels. China is being swayed by ideology, while America is held hostage by political correctness. Strictly speaking, neither society is absolutely open. When I consider this, I'm amused. I am curious about how my work will be recognized, refuted, or completely ignored when it is shown in the United States.

Translator: Brady Ng