

## CAO Zaifei's Solo Exhibition The Room of Sisyphus

Don Gallery is pleased to announce the opening of *The Room of Sisyphus*, the artist CAO Zaifei's second solo exhibition at the gallery space, on 7th February 2023 and running until 5th March. The recent oil on canvas paintings, ready-made paintings, and several of CAO's illustrative performance pieces are all included in this solo exhibition, which offers a more thorough overview of the artist's output.

The works of CAO Zaifei have a consistent and comprehensive theme that alludes to the absurdity and absurd character in Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*. The story of Sisyphus is a metaphor and allusion to a myth of eternal return in CAO's painting *The Room of Sisyphus*, which also symbolically depicts a scene of the lockdown in Shanghai in 2022. The mountain and the road beneath it are replaced with living space and community, and just as Sisyphus pushed the boulder day and night to the top of the mountain that he could never reach, so too do people struggle endlessly with the cycle of viruses.

Due to the lack of materials for painting during the lockdown, CAO Zaifei turned to painting directly on kitchen utensils - pots, pans, ladles, spoons, knives and chopping boards - which symbolise the restricted and confined utensils but carry the landscape outside the window. In *Floating*, a man stands on top of a black swimming ring holding a round stone, the relative tensions between buoyancy and gravity, instability and equilibrium, are indicative of an impending capsizing. In *Still Life*, a watermelon resting next to a support shaft that may be about to burst from its own overripeness before losing weight and falling off the shaft replaces the plastic sphere typically used to depict the world.

CAO conceals and diffuses philosophical ideas with classical sensitivity and modern sensitivity, considering the metaphysics of the ancient Greek period and the contemporary human life dilemma, beneath his subversion of utilitarian rationality and the dramatic absurdity of objects and people. It involves a reevaluation of ancient Greek metaphysics and the existential conundrum facing modern people.

Camus once described that "The work of art is itself an absurdity, involving only its description". But CAO Zaifei does not see his works as a refuge from the absurd, his works on canvas are given a path to the absurd, and he then injects actions that are close to the naked reality into his performance works, thus confronting and fighting the absurd. In Shanghai's famous People's Square Matchmaking Corner, personal details of eligible men and women are listed on sheets of A4 paper, and the absent protagonists are replaced by data and words. It is here that CAO conducted a three-year performance called "*Reading Love Poems in the Matchmaking Corner*," in which he stands on a small stool, while dressed as a reader and recites poems while holding them in his hands.

Aside from ironically pointing out how material and environmental conditions have become a race to the bottom in modern society and how real love has come to be associated with idealism, CAO restores love and romance to their rightful place. Through his performance pieces, CAO seeks to break down barriers between people and expose the absurdity of the dating underworld to the general public. The romance

of CAO Zaifei is not simply about putting love in its proper place; it is also about the freedom that comes from thought, freedom that satisfies life's passion, and freedom that ultimately inspires creation.

Is he a victim? Or a resister? Sisyphus is the embodiment of tragic fate in ancient mythology, the figure of the sufferer, but in Camus' writing he becomes a symbol of the human spirit struggling against fate and awakening; CAO Zaifei looks directly at the absurdity lurking in the undercurrents of modernity. He acknowledges the absurdity, confronts it, explores its origin, and then engraves himself deeply into the back of Sisyphus.