

CAO Zaifei Solo Exhibition “Everyday Jest”

A pictographic discourse of ridicule and satire in everyday life

Don Gallery is honored to announce that it will be hosting CAO Zaifei’s “Everyday Jest” from July 24 to August 29. The exhibition, CAO’s first solo show at our gallery, will showcase 42 of the artist’s recent canvases.

Overall, CAO Zaifei’s work seeks out patterns of meaning between “words and things.” The distinct iconographic features of his work can be tied to his formal education. The artist successively matriculated from the Oil Painting Department of Nanjing University of the Arts and the Department of Philosophy and Religion at Nanjing University, and has since focused on exploring the corresponding words and meanings behind objects presented in his images. Mainly, he focuses on everyday objects, but renowned sculptures and paintings from art history also abound. Since the purpose and use of everyday things is so familiar to audiences, the symbolic language associated with these objects is therefore relatively fixed. It is here, where the commonplace meets the cliché, that CAO has chosen to throw down the gauntlet and attempt to break through such clichés associations. In other words, he has anchored his work in constructing images that activate new meanings in everyday objects.

In his work, a globe no longer symbolizes the age of globalization, sickles are no mere agricultural tool, nor are they a symbol of revolution, plastic buckets and containers are not used for storage, instead, they are used as platforms. By depicting unfamiliar amalgamations of objects in his paintings, the artist brings about a semantic shift to the symbolism of ordinary things. As a departure from the norm, CAO’s still life paintings do not focus on objects, so much as how the objects are used. The artist emphasizes hands and feet, and how they relate to the object -- or rather, he focuses on unusual relationships between hands, feet, and everyday things. A pair of shoe-clad feet stand atop plastic buckets and storage containers. A foot steps upon the blade of a sickle. An egg is tossed into the air with the back of a hand. A sickle is held in a backwards grip. Disembodied hands wipe away large

sections of a globe with the aid of a rag. Such reconstructed relationships between people and things are how the artist weaves new narrative meaning into his work.

Certainly, surrealism permeates CAO Zaifei's iconology. A number of his works allude to René Magritte in composition and form, and from this basis, CAO's own artistic characteristics are revealed. On another level, this mode of expression can also be tied to current cultural contexts. As a relatively safe zone of speech, daily life has become a resource for metaphorical expression, which artists draw upon to express what may not be said, and speak about subjects which are usually avoided in speech. This is particularly evident in CAO Zaifei's work. One finds ridicule and satire in his work, so much so that they seem to form pictographic jests -- paintings that possess a certain surface-level folksiness, which obscure depths of labyrinthine implication.

At the same time, when contrasted with an increasingly political contemporary artistic discourse, CAO's paintings present a different aspect -- one of ridicule, rather than critique. The artist does not strike out directly, instead he approaches his subject through humor. As many postmodernists believe -- irony may be the only avenue towards the serious in contemporary society. So we are left with irony, which we use to rethink past clichés in order to discuss the significance of the now. The same is true of CAO Zaifei's artistic stance. The everyday objects he depicts are often plain and simple, even intentionally rustic in appearance. Then, just after the viewer smiles a knowing smile, the painting's significance rises beyond the everyday, into that domain of the specific.

Biography:

CAO Zaifei (also known as CAO Yuanming) was born in Suzhou, Anhui. Graduated from the Oil Painting Department of Nanjing University of the Arts and the Department of Philosophy and Religion of Nanjing University. Also a visiting scholar at Purdue University in the United States. Now teaches at the Shanghai Academy of Fine Arts Shanghai University. His works involve painting, sculpture, installation, video, performance, etc.