

How the Curatorial Stereotyping of Chinese Art Essentializes the Work of Zheng Guogu

The juxtaposition of Guogu's concurrent solo shows is a call to substitute a more rigorous and nuanced critical focus for ready-made stereotypical tropes in understanding contemporary Chinese art.



Zheng Guogu, "Visionary Transformation of the Tranquility of Heart" (2016), oil on canvas, 82 7/8 × 58 11/16 inches (image courtesy the artist)

Buddhism has become not only a religion, but neoliberalism's spiritual panacea. Its currency has risen across the globe. Its practice has become regionless, as hard to define as it is easy to subscribe to. And its contemplative teaching is not only perfectly compatible with capitalist pursuits but indeed acts as mental opium for the mad dance of late capitalism: for the neoliberal individuals unable to actually distance themselves from rapid technological accelerations and capitalistic endeavors, its tenet of impermanence offers moral comfort while its slogan of

renunciation provides psychological distance. Eastern spirituality has quickly become a favorite institutional rhetoric because it has the innocence of the other, the authority of the transcendental, and the flexibility of moonshine. And that is why when an esteemed art institution like MoMA PS1 invokes vapid Buddhist tropes to unify the career of a Chinese artist whose trajectory is inseparable from the politics and economics of contemporary Chinese society, it's a sign that something has gone very predictably wrong. Zheng Guogu's two current solo shows in New York: [*Visionary Transformation*](#) at MoMA PS1 and [*Photoworks 1993–2016 "Even a click of the shutter is unnecessary"*](#) at Eli Klein Gallery, offer a chance to compare different curatorial treatments of his work.



Zheng Guogu, "Honeymoon No. 7" (1996), C-print, 23 5/8 x 39 3/8 inches (courtesy of the artist, Vitamin Creative Space, and Eli Klein Gallery © Zheng Guogu)

At the age of 49, Zheng Guogu has achieved a wide-ranging and diverse body of work. Emerging out of the coastal city of Yangjiang in the early moments of Deng's economic reform, he was an enthralled observer of the blooming consumerism and influx of global culture. The current show at Eli Klein Gallery presents the first overview of his photography work from the 1990s. "My Teacher" (1993), a photo in which Zheng is shown laughing with a homeless man whom he observed for six months, can be deemed the young artist's manifesto. In an interview, Zheng explained that he was attracted to his teacher's heedless joy and "special immune system." Referring here to the man's vagrant diet, "immune" can also describe his exemption from societal rules. Zheng is interested in exemption: escaping a system (legal, economic, or cultural) through operating within it. This subtle, strategic form of dissent was to become an underlying thread throughout his career. In "Honeymoon" (1995), Zheng borrowed a friend's wedding certificate to spend a "honeymoon trip" at a hotel in Guangzhou with a girl named Luo La. The resulting snapshots of the trip emanate a genuine sense of romance and intimacy. "Computer Controlled by Pig's Brain" (2007) targets the overheated art market, proving that

being open and deliberate about making “bad” paintings from randomly generated phrases is not enough to deter the usual process of aesthetic and speculative commodification.



Zheng Guogu, “Visionary Transformation of the Purification” (2011–2013), oil on canvas, 79 15/16 × 54 5/16 inches (image courtesy the artist)

Inspired by the video game *Age of Empires*, in 2005 Zheng set out to build a colossal private garden in his native city Yangjiang. The construction process depends equally on architectural ingenuity and schmoozing local legislators to bend planning regulations. According to the wall text of his painting show *Visionary Transformation* at PS1, Zheng’s elaborate real estate

undertakings “evoke the Buddhist belief in the impermanence of the physical realm.” Moreover, his “pursuit of such transcendence” is crystallized in 12 paintings that “heighten” the “enlightenment” of Buddhist *thangkas* through the “transformative power of digitization.” *Thangkas* are traditional Tibetan Buddhist Scroll paintings used to focus meditation.

We learn that for each piece, Zheng digitally overlaid multiple *thangkas* and then painted them in oil with various application techniques. In most of them, such as “Visionary Transformation of the Purification” (2011–13), a concentric configuration of deities disintegrates into an all-over marbling of discordant colors. Despite the holographic effects of overlaying, the paintings are overwhelmingly flat. The marks range from damp and wobbly (resembling inkjet image transfer) to brittle and abrupt. In “Ultra Violet Visionary Transformation No.2” (2014–15), the mannered curvatures of the syringe-applied paint strands sit awkwardly with the slapdash texture of their enclosed surfaces. Religious contemplation is at least plausibly derided in these paintings, although overly quoted as a nominal theme and source of imageries.



Zheng Guogu, “The Vagarious Life of Yangjiang Youth No. 16” (1996), C-print, 24 x 39 3/8 inches (courtesy of the artist, Vitamin Creative Space, and Eli Klein Gallery © Zheng Guogu)

The problem is not that this is a weaker body of work by an otherwise significant and inventive artist. It lies in MoMA’s wholesale acceptance of these paintings as fitting seamlessly into Zheng’s artistic oeuvre, neatly folded into the shorthand of spirituality — which, thus, becomes a trope that bypasses critical evaluation — the need to consider how these paintings function as art, as if visual strength is not historically a primary site for spiritual or political message. Such mindless mythologizing of Chinese artists is in no way rare. In fact, artists like [Xu Zhen](#) have made works that deliberately satirize the awkward essentializing of Chinese art into stereotypical Eastern cultural values.

Therefore, if we are to critically assess Zheng's heterogeneous oeuvre, it is necessary to secularize, so to speak, his conceptual focus to specific ends. The show at Eli Klein offers the potential for one such reading. A consistent thread that runs through the works on view is a kind of qualified, amorphous, negotiable freedom enjoyed by the individual in post-Cultural Revolution China, a period marked by the constant rise of new infrastructure, systems, and orders. Thus, this freedom is in constant haggles with an essentially authoritarian power structure whose actual rules in practice are often in flux and sometimes indeterminable. From the vagabond living outside of societal norms in "My Teacher" (1993), to the imposter couple realizing their romantic dreams in "Honeymoon" (1995), to the artist navigating local regulations to build Liao Garden (originally named Age of Empires), the freedom is mapped out by systems and rules that the individual bypasses to romance some deeper value.



Zheng Guogu, "The Vagarious Life of Yangjiang Youth No. 15" (1996), C-print, 24 x 39 3/8 inches (courtesy of the artist, Vitamin Creative Space, and Eli Klein Gallery © Zheng Guogu)

Zheng measures society's power topology through its negative spaces: where the rules are not; where games can become reality, even just for the sake of the game itself. Consumerism is both the condition and confine of his work. The boisterous gang in "The Vagarious Life of Yangjiang Youth" (1996) strike poses of violence and rebellion, but their individuality likens that of '90s youths everywhere because of the leveling influence of global mass media; Zheng's "bad" paintings can only mock the commerce of art by being implicated in it. The "precise, fairytale-like existence" of the dolls floating in the urban skyscape in "Tokyo Sky Story" (1998) is symbolic of a sense of suspension between an all-determining economic infrastructure and the ethereal realm of personal imagination. In this light, the paintings at MoMA are logical

extensions of his older works, as they evince the desire to push the limits and manipulate the principles of a framework, to see how far one can go.



Zheng Guogu, "Planting Geese No. 3" (1994), C-print, 23 5/8 x 39 3/8 inches (courtesy of the artist, Vitamin Creative Space, and Eli Klein Gallery © Zheng Guogu)

This is just one possible reading of Zheng's work which, stitched to the artist's complex and variant life, often takes unpredictable turns depending on the immediate circumstances and the set of possibilities on hand. His mode of operation is instinctual and pragmatist, opposite to the mythical, inward-turning beam of spirituality in MoMA's narrative. One thing *Visionary Transformation* tells us is that the currency of incomprehensibility is still robust. The juxtaposition of the two concurrent shows, therefore, is a call to substitute a more rigorous and nuanced critical focus for ready-made stereotypical tropes in understanding contemporary Chinese art.

[Zheng Guogu: Visionary Transformation](#) continues at MoMA PS1 (22-25 Jackson Ave, Long Island City, Queens) through June 23. The exhibition was organized by Peter Eleey, Chief Curator, with Josephine Graf, Curatorial Assistant, MoMA PS1.

[Photoworks 1993–2016 "Even a click of the shutter is unnecessary"](#) continues at Eli Klein Gallery through May 18. The exhibition was curated by Christopher Phillips.