

‘A FAIRY TALE IN RED TIMES’ WHITE RABBIT COLLECTION AT NGV

ARTWORK LABELS

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A Fairy Tale in Red Times: Works from the White Rabbit Collection

This exhibition features works by twenty-seven Chinese artists, and is a collaboration between the NGV and arts patron and philanthropist Dr Judith Neilson AM, on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the establishment of Neilson's White Rabbit Gallery in Sydney.

The White Rabbit Collection is currently the world's largest private collection of contemporary Chinese art. It contains more than 2500 works by over 700 artists, all produced since the year 2000. Not simply an art collection, the works form a social document that reveals dramatic generational change in Chinese society, culture and contemporary art in the twenty-first century.

The NGV celebrates this visionary endeavour with a selection of works from artists based in mainland China and Taiwan. *A Fairy Tale in Red Times* reveals the creative energy and technical virtuosity of artists from two generations: the first post-Mao generation, and a younger generation for whom the Cultural Revolution is ancient history.

CHENG Ran

程然

born 1981, Chifeng, Inner Mongolia, People's Republic of China

Item Idem

Born 1977, France

Joss

2013

colour video, sound

The White Rabbit Collection, Sydney

Joss paper or 'ghost money' is burned at Chinese funerals to provide the dead with their needs in the afterlife. Today, the replicas burned to venerate ancestors include cars, electronics, designer accessories – even fast food and alcohol. To the haunting strains of 'Ave Maria!', flames lick slowly towards a pack of cigarettes branded 'Hades'. Designer handbags burn and explode, showering sparks. These luxury goods are models made of paper, plastic and tin, blown up one after another like a sacrificial offering to appease angry gods. *Joss* examines the struggle between our longing for the divine and consumerist greed.

ZHU Jinshi

朱金石

Born 1954, Beijing, People's Republic of China

Spring Festival is Coming

2015

oil on canvas

The White Rabbit Collection, Sydney

Zhu Jinshi's slabs of oil paint are so thickly applied, often with shovels rather than brushes, that they form mountains on the surface of the canvas. Zhu's works are informed as much by calligraphy and expressive *xieyi* ink painting traditions as by the Western abstraction he discovered when he left China in the 1980s. Zhu began this work in November and finished it in February, just before Spring Festival, the celebration of the Lunar New Year. Vivid colours dance across the surface and communicate a sense of joy: the long winter is ending, and the earth renews itself.

ZHANG Dali

张大力

Born 1963, Harbin, Heilongjiang, People's Republic of China

Square No. 6

Square No. 8

Square No. 9

2014

resin

The White Rabbit Collection, Sydney

Zhang Dali hired rural migrant workers who were eking out a precarious living in Beijing as models for this work. Plaster moulds of their bodies were cast in resin. White as ghosts, they slump in defeated postures with pigeons alighting on their arms and shoulders. Far from the heroic figures of revolutionary sculpture or the Western Classical ideal, these melancholy figures represent suffering and endurance. The title alludes to Tiananmen Square, a potent symbol of state authority. Any migrant workers tempted to gather there would be quickly moved on or detained, and in reality no birds inhabit its vast spaces.

SU Meng-Hung

蘇孟鴻

Born 1976, Taipei, Taiwan

The Album of Immortal Blossoms in an Everlasting Spring by Giuseppe Castiglione

2012

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

The White Rabbit Collection, Sydney

Su Meng-Hung is fascinated by the journey of images, from the refined art forms of the Qing court, where Jesuit painter Giuseppe Castiglione served the Kangxi, Yongzheng and Qianlong emperors, to the mass-produced textiles and graphics that surround us today. Here he combines the floral imagery of the Italian court painter with the unmistakable vanitas object of a skull, conflating the beauty of massed flowers with the inevitability of death and, perhaps, with the fall of empires. Borrowing from a lexicon of visual imagery from the East, the West and everywhere in between, Su explores paradoxes of aesthetics in a globalised world.

ZHANG Peili

张培力

Born 1957, Hangzhou, Zhejiang, People's Republic of China

Happiness

2006

two-channel colour video, sound

The White Rabbit Collection, Sydney

When Zhang Peili was a child, movies were often shown outdoors – the community would sit on little stools to eat snacks, chat and watch the flickering screen. *Happiness* expresses Zhang's sense of both nostalgia and cynicism about the past. On one screen, characters from the 1975 film *In the Shipyard* appear to give rousing revolutionary speeches but in fact they're uttering banal phrases removed from their context. On the other, crowds greet their meaningless words with the rapturous applause that once punctuated the oratory of Mao Zedong. With these doctored remnants of cinematic memory Zhang denies the possibility of a heroic narrative.

Tianzhuo CHEN

陈天灼

Born 1985, Beijing, People's Republic of China

Marble Painting 3

2016

marble

The White Rabbit Collection, Sydney

Tianzhuo Chen's hybrid, often transgressive art practice spans performance, dance, fashion, video, installation and sculpture. His work features quasi-religious iconography, challenging artistic conventions and notions of taste. These intentionally kitsch divinities represented in marble inlay are iconoclastic mashups of street art, Japanese and American cartoons, Buddhist and Hindu iconography, carnival sideshow, and queer visual culture. They represent characters from Chen's two-hour performance work, *Ishvara*, 2016, a psychedelic opera in seven acts that was inspired by the Sanskrit scripture, the Bhagavad-gita.

YANG Jiechang

杨诩苍

Born 1956, Foshan, Guangdong, People's Republic of China

Tale of the 11th Day

2012–14

ink and coloured pigments on silk on canvas

The White Rabbit Collection, Sydney

Tale of the 11th Day reveals Yang Jiechang's deep knowledge of meticulous *gongbi* painting techniques. The title alludes to fourteenth-century Italian author Giovanni Boccaccio's collection of novellas, *The Decameron*, set in a secluded villa where ten young people hid from the plague, telling each other stories to pass the time. Yang's *Tale of the 11th Day* is an allegory of hope and harmony in which 'the lion lies down with the lamb': predators and prey live together in a vast utopian field of mutual pleasure. For Yang it reflects the Daoist belief in the complementarity of different states of being, or yin and yang.

Tianzhuo CHEN

陈天灼

Born 1985, Beijing, People's Republic of China

Marble Painting 4

2016

marble

The White Rabbit Collection, Sydney

Tianzhuo Chen's hybrid, often transgressive art practice spans performance, dance, fashion, video, installation and sculpture. His work features quasi-religious iconography, challenging artistic conventions and notions of taste. These intentionally kitsch divinities represented in marble inlay are iconoclastic mashups of street art, Japanese and American cartoons, Buddhist and Hindu iconography, carnival sideshow, and queer visual culture. They represent characters from Chen's two-hour performance work, *Ishvara*, 2016, a psychedelic opera in seven acts that was inspired by the Sanskrit scripture, the Bhagavad-gita.

JIANG Pengyi

蒋鹏奕

Born 1977, Yuanjiang, Hunan, People's Republic of China

Trace series

2015–16

Polaroid photographs and Polaroid emulsions on paper

The White Rabbit Collection, Sydney

Jiang Pengyi is fascinated by light. His photographic experiments include constructing a camera obscura to photograph fireflies and covering objects with hot wax and phosphorescent powder to photograph their unearthly luminous glow. For *Trace* he 'lifted' the light-sensitive emulsion from Polaroid prints by soaking them in water. When the wet emulsion is laid down on a sheet of paper, it can be gently pushed, pinned, creased and folded into new shapes. The dreamy, ruffled images recall the folds of drapery in Old Master paintings. A sense of absence and mystery is palpable.

ZHANG Xiaogang

张晓刚

Born 1958, Kunming, Yunnan, People's Republic of China

Bath

2018

oil on canvas

The White Rabbit Collection, Sydney

Zhang Xiaogang is a major figure from the avant-garde generation of Chinese painters of the 1990s. His canvases, which depict melancholy nuclear families, introduced his Cynical Realist style to Western audiences. Evoking bleak family photographs from the Cultural Revolution, they conveyed his satirical response to recent history. Now, Zhang breaks free of socialist imagery with mysterious allegories inspired by childhood memories and the artist's belief that society forces every individual to play preordained roles. The image of the bathtub, he says, represents a vessel that contains memories and emotions. But it is also a stage on which his strangely assorted characters must perform.

LIN Chuan-Chu

林銓居

Born 1963, Taipei, Taiwan

Lunchbox

2002

ink on rice paper

The White Rabbit Collection, Sydney

Lin Chuan-Chu thinks of himself as a modern version of the Chinese literati, learned scholars equally conversant with painting, calligraphy and poetry. Unlike traditional painters, though, Lin's loosely expressive ink and brush works often tell of personal sorrow and family trauma. He describes the rupture between his aspiration to a scholarly identity and his background in a farming family, harvesting rice. Here, the lunchbox that looms so menacingly represents a sad memory. Each year, on the anniversary of the day his older brother left home against his father's wishes, the entire family was permitted to eat only rice and salt.

WANG Ningde

王宁德

Born 1972, Kuandian, Liaoning, People's Republic of China

Some Days series

2002–09

gelatin silver photographs

The White Rabbit Collection, Sydney

Wang Ningde is interested in the shifting nature of reality and the fallibility of the photographic image. His staged gelatin silver photographs appear to be moments from a larger narrative, but their meanings are as elusive as dreams. Born during the Cultural Revolution, Wang's generation grew up in a country transformed by new ideas and greater openness, but their dark memories are hidden scars. The central characters of *Some Days*, in their shabby Mao suits, are unreliable narrators, not entirely to be trusted. With their eyes closed, or gaze averted, they are endlessly reliving the past.

GENG Xue

耿雪

Born 1983, Baishan, Jilin, People's Republic of China

The Poetry of Michelangelo

2015

black-and-white video, sound

The White Rabbit Collection, Sydney

In a gender reversal of Ovid's *Pygmalion*, Geng Xue sculpts a young man from clay, then breathes life into him. She kneads, folds and caresses the clay in a languorously sensual way, as first his facial features and then the musculature and limbs of his body emerge, recalling Michelangelo's *Slaves*. The video unfolds like an instructional sequence for sculpture students, underscored by extracts from Michelangelo's homoerotic poems. Once whole, Geng's *David*-like figure is animated by the artist's kiss; disturbingly, he continues to breathe, his ribcage rising and falling, even after he has been dismembered and sliced into sections for casting.

SUN Hongbin

孙红宾

Born 1970, Juancheng County, Shandong, People's Republic of China

Fat Lady

2012

oil on canvas

The White Rabbit Collection, Sydney

Fat Lady stares balefully out of her tiny canvas from behind dark glasses. Apart from these lilac shades and her pink lipstick she is naked; her skin is startlingly white, and her pink nipples echo the colour of her lips. She's no idealised beauty – Sun likes *mo lei tau* humour, a Cantonese term referring to slapstick comedy that relies for effect on nonsensical juxtapositions and sudden surprises. He also loves French Impressionism but unlike Renoir's voluptuous subjects, with their averted eyes or demure gazes, Sun's self-possessed *Fat Lady* is both unimpressed and unashamed.

SHAO Yinong

邵译农

Born 1961, Qinghai, People's Republic of China

Muchen

慕辰

Born 1970, Dandong, Liaoning, People's Republic of China

Fairy Tales in Red Times series

2003–07

hand-coloured photograph

The White Rabbit Collection, Sydney

Husband-and-wife duo Shao Yinong and Muchen work collaboratively on projects exploring China's twentieth-century socialist history. For *Fairy Tales in Red Times* they photographed disabled students from a special-needs school near their Beijing studio. The photographs are enlarged, hand-coloured portraits that recall the idealised, rosy-cheeked figures in propaganda paintings that the artists remember from their childhood classrooms, and suggest that the traumas of the past lie just below the surface of the present day.

SHI Yong

施勇

Born 1963, Shanghai, People's Republic of China

A Bunch of Happy Fantasies

2009

neon, transparent synthetic polymer resin

The White Rabbit Collection, Sydney

Each neon in Shi Yong's deliriously enticing installation is an upside-down Chinese character; together, they spell out the words of a poem, 'Roses made from water'. Written by Shi's friend in a drugged haze, the jumbled imagery and delusional thinking of the poem can only be deciphered with great difficulty, and the text is essentially unreadable. For Shi this represents the impossibility of separating fantasy from reality. Like reflections of the moon in water, the flickering calligraphy connects the artist with the Chinese literary traditions of the past, but also with contemporary 'happy fantasies' that turn out to be illusions.

QIU Zhijie

邱志杰

Born 1969, Zhangzhou, Fujian, People's Republic of China

The Heritage of the Third World

2013

ink on paper

The White Rabbit Collection, Sydney

In Qiu Zhijie's fantastical hand-drawn maps, geographies of religion, politics, history and mythology become a physical landscape of mountain ranges, rivers, coastlines and national borders. South of the 'Mount of Globalization' lies the 'Wetland of Political Islam', a swamp of competing histories and contemporary ideologies. There is a place called 'Coups' and another called 'Corruption'. This invented cartography suggests relationships one may never have suspected as the artist attempts to make sense of an unstable world. Qiu was immersed from boyhood in traditions of calligraphy and Chinese painting; he imbues his work today with the richness of this history.

SUN Xun

孙逊

Born 1980, Fuxin, Liaoning, People's Republic of China

Republic of Jing Bang: The Divine Landscape of Jing Bang

2013

ink, cast paper, cotton pulp

The White Rabbit Collection, Sydney

Sun Xun created a fictional, metaphysical country, the Republic of Jing Bang ('Whale Nation'), to explore his ideas about nationhood, social harmony, propaganda and utopian ideals. Sun says that his mysterious, ephemeral nation is created 'on the back of a whale', emerging from the ocean depths for just as long as a whale takes to breathe before re-submerging and disappearing beneath the waves like other former republics. Sun's technical virtuosity with ink and brush on heavy handmade paper is evident in these images of an apparent pastoral idyll.

SHANG Yang

尚扬

Born 1942, Hubei, People's Republic of China

The Dong Qichang Project 38

2011

oil, synthetic polymer paint and bitumen on canvas

The White Rabbit Collection, Sydney

Dong Qichang was a Ming dynasty painter whose images of mountain landscapes Shang Yang rediscovered one day when he turned the pages of a book in his studio. In Daoist belief mountains were the home of the Immortals, but unlike the misty peaks found in *shan shui* ('mountain and water') landscape painting Shang's mountains are scarred, mottled and fractured. Giant monolithic forms loom menacingly, juxtaposed with cuboid shapes that allude to human interventions in the natural world. Asked why he has spent decades focused on painting landscapes, Shang replied, 'Is there anything more important than this?' His landscapes are a wake-up call to humanity.

LIU Jianhua

刘建华

Born 1962, Ji'an, Jiangxi, People's Republic of China

Fallen Leaves

2012–14

porcelain

The White Rabbit Collection, Sydney

One autumn day in Jingdezhen, China's ancient porcelain capital, Liu Jianhua observed drifts of fallen leaves and began to think about the passage of time, the transmigration of souls, and mortality. Over the next three years he made more than 5000 porcelain leaves that appear to have fallen from the trees and blown in the wind. The inherent fragility of the material emphasises the fleeting nature of physical existence: the work is a memento mori. Liu interacts with Chinese tradition, and the art forms that have defined China's cultural identity, to reflect on the enduring mysteries of life.

LIN Yen-Wei

林彥璋

Born 1987, Pingtung, Taiwan

Just Like the Way You Are 5

2011

oil on canvas

The White Rabbit Collection, Sydney

Lin Yen-Wei describes the battered, weathered animal statues that he photographs in Taiwanese playgrounds, primary schools and amusement parks as his 'childhood playmates': he has fond memories of climbing on similar animals as a small boy, on outings with his grandfather. His paintings are a child's-eye view of distinctly amateur sculptures. Faithfully rendering his deliberately lo-fi digital images of these wonky, re-painted creatures in oil paint, including the very shallow depth of field and unintended highlights in his snapshots, Lin creates an affectionately nostalgic celebration of a more innocent time.

LIN Yen-Wei

林彥瑋

Born 1987, Pingtung, Taiwan

Just Like the Way You Are 28

2014

oil on canvas

The White Rabbit Collection, Sydney

LIN Yen-Wei

林彥瑋

Born 1987, Pingtung, Taiwan

Just Like the Way You Are 11

2014

oil on canvas

The White Rabbit Collection, Sydney

YANG Yongliang

杨泳梁

Born 1980, Shanghai, People's Republic of China

Infinite Landscape

2011

black-and-white video animation, sound

The White Rabbit Collection, Sydney

Yang Yongliang's landscapes at first appear to be traditional *shan shui* vistas of mountains and waterfalls. It takes a moment to realise they are in constant motion: the 'mountains' are overlapping stacks of city skyscrapers, punctuated by electricity pylons. *Infinite Landscape* is criss-crossed by freeways bearing tiny cars and trucks. Cable cars swing on lines between the cliffs, and cranes reach upwards into a grey sky. Yang feels despair and sadness about the relentless modernisation of his home city of Shanghai, but the cities in his digital versions of ink painting could be anywhere in the modern world.

LIU Wei

刘韡

Born 1972, Beijing, People's Republic of China

Density 1–6

2013

books, steel, wood

The White Rabbit Collection, Sydney

With separate pieces weighing between 400 and almost 1500 kilograms, *Density* references the geometric forms that Chinese art students were once obliged to render in pencil and charcoal at the start of their training. Each is made from books that have been glued together, compressed and then cut to the shapes of an internal armature, the edges of their pages still visible. *Density* has a strange quality of emptiness – books that once contained a wealth of knowledge have been imprisoned within these huge forms, presenting blank surfaces onto which people must inscribe their own dreams and desires.

ZHAO Zhao

赵赵

Born 1982, Shihezi, Xinjiang, People's Republic of China

Constellations

2017

silk, thread

The White Rabbit Collection, Sydney

Having seen photographs of bullet holes left behind long after the June 1989 events at Tiananmen Square in Beijing, Zhao Zhao fired a gun at sheets of glass and painted the patterns made by the bullet holes. Their starburst patterns reminded him of the pulsating energy of the universe. Later, assisted by his mother, Zhao remade these works as silk embroideries: laboriously stitched radial forms recall delicate spider webs. The contrast between a traditional Chinese craft and the image of the bullet hole, seen so often in popular culture, is jarring – although it was, after all, the Chinese who invented gunpowder.

TANG Nannan

汤南南

Born 1969, Yunxiao, Fujian, People's Republic of China

Billennium Waves

2015

colour video, sound

The White Rabbit Collection, Sydney

Tang Nannan's work emerges from childhood experiences in his father's ancestral village beside the Taiwan Strait. The sea, with its danger and its bounty, is an inescapable presence in this part of the world. Tang studied the *Water Album* of Song dynasty painter Ma Yuan, adapting his techniques to contemporary ink works. Soon, he realised he was painting waves like mountains. *Billennium Waves* conveys the power of natural forces. The 'billennium' of the title refers to the third millennium, an era starting in 2001. Tang warns of impending global calamity wrought by humanity's poor stewardship of the planet.

ZHU Jinshi

朱金石

Born 1954, Beijing, People's Republic of China

The Ship of Time

2018

xuan paper, bamboo, cotton (thread)

The White Rabbit Collection, Sydney

The Ship of Time contains a myriad of *xuan* (rice) paper sheets, pieces of fine bamboo and cotton threads. Zhu's team travelled to ancient villages in the Yellow Mountains in Anhui Province. Here they developed fireproof rice paper, before returning to the studio to construct the work. *The Ship of Time* references a spiritual journey. In Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi's parable, *The Empty Boat*, these lines are an injunction to let go of fruitless anxiety:

If you can empty your own boat
Crossing the river of the world,
No one will oppose you,
No one will seek to harm you.

MAO Tongqiang

毛同强

Born 1960, Yinchuan, Ningxia, People's Republic of China

Order

2015

polished stainless steel, bullets

The White Rabbit Collection, Sydney

Pristine stainless steel is punctured, scarred and rippled by bullets fired into it. Like a gruesome funfair mirror its distorted reflections render each viewer a victim of gun violence. Without polemic, *Order* condemns all forms of violence, whether perpetrated by the state, by terrorists, or in gun-owning cultures like the United States. The title is ambiguous: it may refer to military orders or to a social order that accepts violence as an inevitable aspect of the human condition. Mao Tongqiang says, 'In fact, we all live under a kind of order that is sustained by violence'.