

XIAO GUO HUI

Le Théâtre du Paradis

23 November 2023 – 20 January 2024

Paradise is locked and bolted.... We must make a journey around the world to see if a back door has perhaps been left open – Kleist

Galerie Fabian Lang is immensely proud to present *Le Théâtre du Paradis*, an exhibition of Xiao Guo Hui's latest body of work. Over two years in the making, this is Xiao's largest single solo show to date and the first one in Switzerland.

Xiao Guo Hui grew up in a sort of utopia. An old house with the rural atmosphere of a village, at the heart of an ancient city – thirty families living side by side. The door was never locked; birdsong and the hum of cicadas filled the air, along with the scent of flowers. Rice, vegetables and fish were ever present. In our childhood, we apprehend the world as a work of art, whose contours surround us and which we take for granted. Expulsion from paradise is the signal experience of moderns; the cheerful Guangzhou of Xiao's memory has been completely replaced with a monolithic, monstrous carapace, the largest urban zone that the world has ever seen. In alienation, he found himself on the royal road to the experiences that have been the heritage of the West for several centuries; after an initial stay in Canada, eight years in Paris has given him an index of vivid images which populate his imagination. Paris with all of its heritage, not only the experiences of today but the entire heritage of modernity, is visible in the paintings in this show, notably the title work.

From 2010, at which time they lived in Toronto, Xiao Guo Hui has worked together with his wife Chen Wenqing in a collaborative process. With a background in fashion, Chen helps to design the costumes and outfits worn by the human figures in the large, fresco-style paintings, which are realised in grand tableaux using egg tempera painting, a traditional and time-consuming process. Inspired by admiration of Piero Della Francesca's *Legend of the True Cross*, Xiao experimented with different techniques, seeking the timeless sense created by these classic painting techniques. Rather than photo-realism, Xiao's painting gives the sense of a biblical parable, or some divine lesson; the rough shades of fresco painting, which mixes pigments with water, and the oily, living quality of egg tempera, gives this quality, one which Xiao originally found in renaissance painters such as Francesca and Giotto. In the time used to carefully prepare the materials and grind the pigments, the image that at first comes as a passing thought solidifies, assumes its full outline; it is born only after the lengthy gestation that egg tempera demands. Only indirectly do these paintings recall Chinese life; more often, they seem to be memories from years walking in European cities. The paintings shown in *Théâtre du Paradis* adopt the visual language of the European Renaissance, at the moment that paintings of religious scenes gave way to paintings of everyday life, as in Brueghel, or of the absurd fantasies of Bosch or Goya.

It's not hard to see in the title painting of the show submerged recollections of the pandemic years. In the sort of public square that any French or Belgian village has at its center, figures stagger around; some repairing a building, others apparently dancing, laying out food, wheeling themselves about in wheelchairs, doing handstands, walking hand in hand with their children. Towards the right of the painting, a column of people in brown clothing queue in a line entering a tunnel. Here we see the almost-eternal scene of human life, with its struggles and needs and absurdities and routines; the European setting conveys both particularity and a sort of universal experience. The individual reigns supreme here; she is free to wander in whatever direction she wishes. Xiao wrote, 'standing on a depressed street, I saw these scenes: deranged people panic – buying in supermarkets, anxious crowds waiting in long queues, people who wore masks turned into an intolerable threat that provoked beatings. The church saw only coffins and the priest, alone, without his congregation. Ambulances shuttled on the street, and medical staff busy carrying patients while a pair of running couples who were exercising ran by without even noticing. After a slight relief in the middle of the pandemic, another new atmosphere emerged. People lost their patience and couldn't wait to return to their normal and good life. At this time, the hustle and bustle of unscrupulous crowds spread all over the parks, restaurants, and streets. Lovers kiss in the street without scruples. Young people would rather be fined

than miss a crazy party; cafés and bars are full of people like the good old days. It is hard to imagine that these scenes are happening during a pandemic. That kind of demonic egoism, anarchist fanaticism, and the weird spectacles produced while the invisible virus is rampant, reminds me of Antonin Artaud's description of the plague in his great Theater of cruelty: 'We can do whatever we want, now. What is it that we want? We fumble, drunkenly or afraid, towards the life that we want- or think that we want.'

Elsewhere, we see grotesqueries of pigs ready for slaughter, in *Ethical Butcher, 2022* and *Still Life, 2023*.

The pig being butchered is a recurrent motif in Xiao's work; pigs so easily stand in for our own condition, fattened and pampered and yet ultimately with little control of the circumstances of our lives.

Consumption of pork seems to stand in for man's brutality to man in Western and also Chinese literature, perhaps because pigs seem so intelligent and close to us - Houellebecq writes a lot about that, for example. Paintings like *Le Vent, 2022-2023* or *The Dream, 2023* appear as parables about the huge and complex forces that pull us and push us; the sense that our self-directed individuality is an illusion, and that human life coils about in recurrent patterns, underlies much of Xiao's work. The sheer randomness of human experience - where a war, or a pandemic, or a revolution, could break out and interrupt the pattern of daily life - is unforgettable for those who have lived through such events. And yet the bourgeoisie, whose native environment Xiao has made his own, and which is in the background of the works of this show, is a group devoted to ordering and tidying existence, seeking to make it manageable and controllable; ultimately, perhaps, a futile task. Towards the tail end of the pandemic, Xiao watched as people around him drank the cup of life to the last drop, socialising and drinking as if at the last supper (a psychological experience which is reflected in *Happy Hours, 2022-2023*). When the illusion that we control our circumstances drops away, and we find ourselves wandering alone through grey cities, it's not out of the question that we lose our self-control as well. Either fastidiously ordered, or anarchic egoism; for the bourgeois, among whom we count ourselves, there seems to be no middle ground.

Everyday life and the process of painting merge in Xiao and Chen's partnership; certain motifs appear and reappear, in the works as in our lives. In the *Théâtre du Paradis*, we see extraordinary things, archetypes coming to life; as we put back on our jackets and walk back onto the street, the world itself has reframed itself in a more fantastic light.

Text by: Jacob Dreyer