

TANG SHUO

by Olivia Sand

As a young artist, finding a medium not only technically suitable, but also allowing for a broad narrative is a challenging undertaking. A graduate in two disciplines, mural art and experimental art, Tang Shuo (b 1987, China) has over the past years taken a step back before relying on oil painting to tell personal stories. Through his dense paintings that present larger than life figures, Tang Shuo draws the viewer into the canvas as a silent observer of the scene. Highlighting moments of daily life in the country side, the subject matter is bold and unexpected, conjuring a certain feeling of nostalgia. In his practice, he has developed a unique and personal language to capture the every day, with himself as the leading character. In 2020, he moved to London, eager to further develop his work, with countless stories and anecdotes awaiting to unfold on canvas.



Tang Shuo

Asian Art Newspaper: So there is actually a real person behind the main figure depicted in your paintings!
Tang Shuo: Yes, it is a self-portrait in all the works. Perhaps it is not me from the inside, but visually it is.

AAN: You use paint, the most traditional and ancient medium when it comes to art. It is challenging to come up with a new language since so much has already been done. However, you have managed to create a very personal language. How have you done this?
TS: Right now, I feel I am in a good place in regard to my practice. I am very curious to see how my work is going to evolve, and what will happen next. My paintings are generally based on stories that took place in my hometown, Dashishan, a mountainous area characterised by large stones, located around 120 kilometres from Guilin. As a small and remote village, and especially compared to the country's largest cities, the way of life is basic and traditional, with no signs of the latest fashions or technologies of our modern world. The present generation might think this village and its people are just a fading memory, but I do not share that view: I feel there are still many stories to be discovered – this is even more so the case today. I just returned from Dashishan after

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CONTACT US
 Asian Art Newspaper
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EDITOR/PUBLISHER
 Sarah Callaghan
 Asian Art Newspaper
 PO Box 22521,
 London W8 4GT,
 United Kingdom
 sarah.callaghan@
 asianartnewspaper.com
 tel +44 (0)20 7229 6040

ADVERTISING
 Kelvin McManus
 Commercial Manager
 tel +44 (0)7877 866692
 kelvin.mcmanus@cksmmedia.co.uk

SEND ADVERTISING TO
 Asian Art Newspaper
 PO Box 22521
 London W8 4GT
 info.asianart@btinternet.com
 tel +44 (0)20 7229 6040

ART DIRECTION
 Gary Ottewill, Editorial Design
 garyottewill.com

SUBSCRIPTIONS MANAGER
 Toby Moray
 info.asianart@btinternet.com
 tel +44 (0)20 7229 6040

SUBSCRIPTIONS AND ADMINISTRATION
 Asian Art Newspaper
 PO Box 22521
 London W8 4GT
 United Kingdom
 info.asianart@btinternet.com
 tel +44 (0)20 7229 6040

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NEWS IN BRIEF

All That Remains had its world premiere at the 2022 Venice Film Festival. It received the Best Immersive Experience award at the Luxembourg City Film Festival and the VR360 Award at the Kaoshiung Film Festival. For more detailed information on events, visit thecoronetheatre.com

ARCHAEOLOGICAL DISCOVERIES, SRI LANKA

A new archaeological project has started in the medieval city of Polonnaruwa, Central Province. The project aims to unveil the city's development, urban form, and the factors contributing to its rise and ultimate fall. A team led by Dr Keir Strickland of La Trobe University, Australia, is using cutting-edge ground-penetrating radar (GPR) technology to remap the ancient city. Dr Strickland commented, 'This technology has allowed us to detect buried remains of ancient structures without disturbing the site. We are seeing signals from buildings, tanks, ponds, and even furnaces, offering a crucial glimpse into the city's layout without excavation'. While previously known structures such as the Parakramabahu Palace and meeting halls are visible, GPR has revealed intriguing possibilities of an even older layer of the city.

CAMBODIA CONSERVATION PROJECT

Conservators from the National

Authority for Preah Vihear (NAPV) and the French School of Asian Studies (EFEO) are currently piecing together a cultural puzzle that has waited centuries to be solved. The Dancing Shiva excavated from Prasat Krahorm (Red Temple), at the Koh Ker archaeological site in Preah Vihear province in 2012. Eventually, over 10,000 pieces were recovered in varying sizes. The statue is a remarkable artefact of Khmer heritage, significant not only for its size, but also for its exceptional iconography, which reflects the religious symbolism of the Khmer Empire during its zenith. Koh Ker was constructed in the 10th century under the rule of Jayavarman IV, while Rajendravarmā II reigned in the 940s, during the same century. Chhan Chamroen, Deputy Director at the Department of Conservation of Monuments, explained: 'The process of assembling the sculpture is being carried out by a joint Cambodian and French team, and is approximately 65 per cent complete'.

AICHI TRIENNALE, JAPAN

The sixth edition of the triennale, *A Time Between Ashes and Roses*, is scheduled to open in September 2025. The festival is organised by Artistic Director Hoor Al Qasimi and reflects upon fluctuating states and connections that exist between ecological environments, human activity, and the narratives and theories that unite them. In addition

to Aichi Arts Centre in Nagoya, the 2025 iteration includes special collaborations with Seto City and Aichi Prefectural Ceramic Museum, which will highlight the continued presence of Japanese craft alongside international and modern-day ceramic projects.

GREY ART GALLERY

After nearly half a century on Washington Square, the Grey Art Gallery, New York University's fine arts museum, reopened in a purpose-designed, larger, and more visible space at 18 Cooper Square in lower Manhattan on 2 March. With this transformational move, the Grey was renamed the Grey Art Museum.

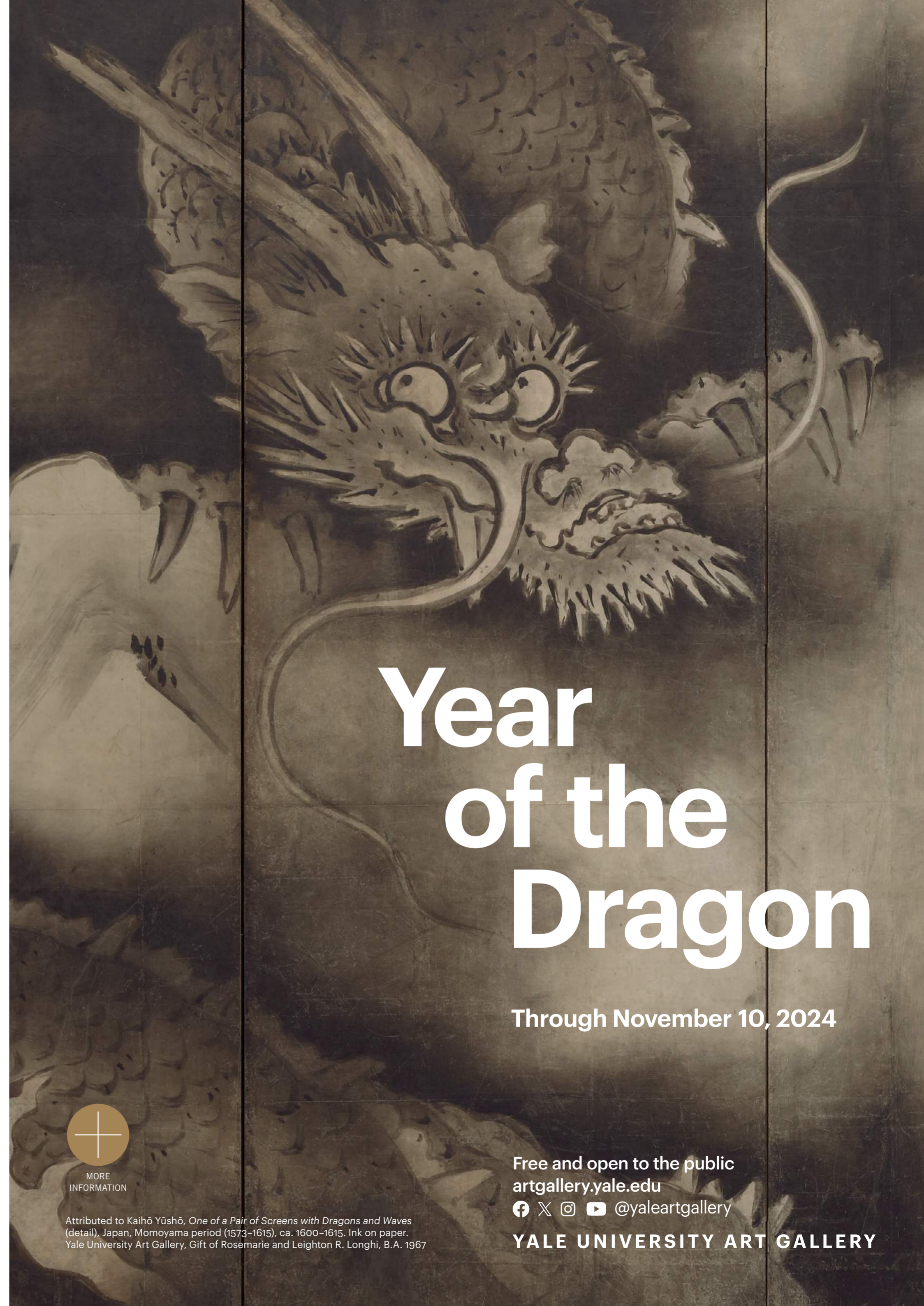
THE MET RECEIVES CHINESE PRINTS

The Metropolitan Museum of Art has received a gift from the Pinkowitz Collection of more than 300 prints by artists from or working in Mexico. Alongside this larger donation, The Pinkowitzes had previously gifted 31 woodcut prints by major Chinese printmakers active in the 1930s and 1940s in December 2023. Artists represented in the collection include Gu Yuan, Wo Zha, Yan Han, and Chen Yanqiao. The Modern Woodcut Movement in China was initiated by Lu Xun (1881-1936), the father of modern Chinese literature. Woodcuts were easily produced from inexpensive materials with relatively little training, and the technique, which was seen as a counterpoint to literati painting, was used extensively

during the 1930s and 1940s by both Communist and Nationalist leaders to disseminate political messages in a graphically impactful, legible form. Some of the most iconic vignettes from the mid-century decades of war and revolution were produced in this medium.

GUGGENHEIM LG AWARD, NEW YORK

Shu Lea Cheang (b 1954, Taiwan) has won the 2024 LG Guggenheim Award. The Net art pioneer, whose interdisciplinary practice spans over 30 years, is the second award recipient to be recognised as part of the LG Guggenheim Art and Technology Initiative, a five-year, multifaceted collaboration designed to research, honour, and promote artists working at the intersection of art and technology. Cheang was selected by an international jury of experts in art and technology, and will receive an unrestricted honorarium of \$100,000 in celebration of her groundbreaking achievements in this field. Cheang has carved her own path as a visionary. She has engaged emerging technologies (often since their inception) in innumerable forms – including as a theme, tool, and medium – since the 1990s, and developed a remarkable understanding of their complexities, as well as insight into their role in shaping society. Her use of code, gaming engines, software design, hacking strategies, and traditional mediums like installations, film, and performance in her multifaceted projects reflect her unique approach to art-making and reject neat categorisation.



Year of the Dragon

Through November 10, 2024



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YALE UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY

Attributed to Kaihō Yūshō, *One of a Pair of Screens with Dragons and Waves* (detail), Japan, Momoyama period (1573–1615), ca. 1600–1615. Ink on paper. Yale University Art Gallery, Gift of Rosemarie and Leighton R. Longhi, B.A. 1967



Tang Shuo at his exhibition in Lausanne, Switzerland

celebrating the Chinese New Year, which gave me the opportunity to find out more and research what is happening in my hometown. I also asked family members about stories from the past, taking us back to the life of the older generations and, in my opinion, there is still a lot to be said and documented. My objective is to paint these stories, depicting these places and the people.

AAN: What makes that village so special and be such a rich source of inspiration for your practice?

TS: Over the years, like many rural parts of China, the village has been changing in such a way that not many people live there anymore. When I was a child, however, the village was considered to be almost untouched by the modern world, there were about 100 people living there with most of them involved in agriculture. Now, I want to understand more about the history of my village, as I now discovered that people in the village actually moved from the next village – located just five kilometres away. So over time, this other village migrated to my home village. As a result, all the people in the village have the same ancestors, making it impossible for young people to fall in love or marry, because they all share the same surname. On another note, there is a temple in the village that is approximately 400 years old. It is no longer in operation, so I asked everyone in the village why that was, but they could not come up with an answer, it seems no one really knows. Currently, only a few objects remain there, but during my last visit, I took a close look at the poems inscribed on the stone tablets. This is a good example of something relating to the village that I want to investigate further.

AAN: Are you basically painting your own childhood, or are you depicting an anonymous figure that represents the average youngster in Dashishan?

TS: Some paintings are about my own childhood, but some go beyond this and involve other people. The works about me are based on real events even though in my creative process, I may also add some elements emanating from my imagination. As for the broader stories, I primarily rely on accounts of the ancestors and the older generation. Presently, I am eager to

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I am eager to find out more about the history of the village
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find out more about the people, the stories, and the history of the village, and it is precisely through these stories that I want to explore more possibilities for my painting.

AAN: The elements emanating from your imagination seem to carry a surreal feature. Do you agree?

TS: You are not the first person to say that the works have a surreal element! My stories are based on real accounts, however, as some of them took place a long time ago and are quite vague, passed on from one generation to the next, I fill these gaps using my imagination, especially in relation to the background or the natural elements, for example, the weather, or the vegetation.

AAN: Is the village now similar to the way you experienced it growing up?

TS: It is actually quite different today, especially as many have moved away and houses have been abandoned. In addition, some of the people I used to know when I was a child have passed away. We have this tradition in my village of putting up in our home pictures of deceased family members, in order to preserve their memory. When I look at such photographs, I am reminded of some of the stories, or the things I used to do with that person, from when I was a child. Such events also feed my practice.

AAN: Interestingly, you completed two very different degrees at art school: one traditional in mural painting and later, a very avant-garde course in experimental art. It seems neither of them led you to what you actually wanted to do – painting.

TS: For my bachelor's degree,

murals. However, once I graduated, I could not put my skills into real practice. Instead of working in this traditional manner on site, I was mainly part of public projects or joining architects to finalise their vision by painting murals on a wall. Later, I studied at the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA), in Beijing, for my master's in experimental art. Experimental art is the equivalent of what is called 'liberal arts' in the West, which allows and encourages you to experiment with a freer hand. It is more about using different materials for installation than it is about painting. It was a terrible time for me, because I constantly suffered from self-doubt regarding the works I created. In addition, my personality – not being that much of a social person – did not help, as in China, as is the case elsewhere, if you want to promote your art, you have to socialise with galleries, collectors, and curators. Therefore, it was quite difficult for me. Ultimately, it was not until 2020 that I started painting. Now that I focus exclusively on this medium, I realise what a wonderful and suitable practice painting is for me. Looking back at my time at CAFA, I have a very negative outlook on installation, mainly because its practice evolves solely around having an idea, and the piece being based on that idea. I remember one of the professors, who would teach a specific set of formula, and the students were supposed to create a work of art based on that formula. In my opinion, this was absolutely not what art should be, and as a result, I kept questioning my work for a very long time.

AAN: You emphasised what a wonderful medium painting is. What aspects did you find in painting that you did not find in any other medium?

TS: To me, painting has a very calming effect, and I find it to be very straightforward, whereas installation has a tendency to trigger uneven reactions: one moment you think your piece is all right then the next moment you completely disagree with it before agreeing with it again. It is a spiral and an endless circle. In addition, as opposed to painting, for installations you have to give the audience your description and your conceptual thinking behind the work. It requires a very extensive use of language. My language is painting and I am relying on it to simply tell my own story.



Shepherd's Sorrow (2023), oil on linen, 200 x 150 x 3 cm, Lausanne exhibition @substancemat, Mathilde Lesueur

I studied mural painting based on Chinese traditional techniques (similar to the religious murals in the Dunhuang grottoes or at Fahai Temple), as well as meticulous *gongbi* painting. Beyond a rational approach, it requires patience to intricately follow this traditional painting style. I worked on smaller-sized boards, usually not creating original works, but imitating existing



The Child Catching Butterflies (2024), oil on linen, 120 x 110 cm, courtesy of the artist



Co-conspirators (2023), oil on linen, 192 x 200 x 4 cm, Lausanne exhibition @substancemat, Mathilde Lesueur

AAN: Did the first generation of Chinese artists that were internationally successful like Zhang Xiaogang, Yan Pei Ming, Fang Lijun and Yue Minjun have an impact on your trajectory?

TS: When I was still living in China, I was mainly focusing on installations, which explains why this generation of painters did not have much impact on my practice. Once I moved abroad and began focusing on painting, I feel that the way I painted and created was mainly echoing my own world, since I used my own language to express my ideas. In a way, I was probably more influenced and impacted by Western painters and old masters like Caravaggio (1571-1610), the post-impressionist Rousseau (1844-1910), and the modern artist Balthus (1908-2001).

AAN: In what sense?

TS: In the case of Balthus, I am fond of his attitude as an artist. He stayed away from art circles, leaving the big city behind for a quiet environment in order to focus on creation. In that sense, he was not really influenced or impacted by the other artists or trends. In addition, I admire the way he painted figures, also with the ability to focus on and depict one specific moment in his work. As to my own work, I am trying to echo just that by capturing a frozen moment in time within the story, almost like a clip from a film.

When it comes to Caravaggio, I greatly respect the fact that he lived in the streets, depicting violent elements in his paintings, but in a very realistic way, I grew up in an environment with a father who had a very bad temper and was verbally violent. Therefore my thoughts resonate all the more with Caravaggio.

AAN: Since moving to the Europe, did you have a chance to travel and see the original works by your favourite artists, or did you mainly get to know them through reproductions?

TS: For most of the old masters that I like, I actually had the opportunity to see their work in person, either in

Europe, and for Caravaggio, for example, I would go to the National Gallery in London from time to time just to revisit and ponder his work.

AAN: Beyond painting a moment, your practice is also about capturing an atmosphere without the audience knowing what happened before or after. The painting therefore remains open-ended. Do you agree?

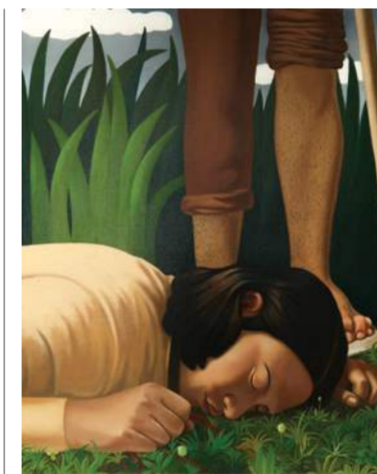
TS: Even though my art is about a story, I always try to select and paint what I consider to be the pivotal moment of the story. As a viewer, you clearly cannot understand the full story just by looking at the painting, which leaves ample space for them to imagine what is actually happening – before and after. In addition, the title of the work provides the audience with an entry point. Overall, I prefer to leave the painting open-ended, with the audience relying on their imagination to fill in the gaps themselves.

AAN: Some of your titles *Shepherd's Sorrow, Murder, Decision to Flee, Sorrowful Fugitive* seem to point to rather tragic circumstances.

TS: Yes, indeed. My paintings are based on very tragic and sad stories, and I myself am quite affected by them. I look at these stories in a dual way: firstly, I look at these events from a distance without feeling that strong sense of belonging to the place to which I am referring. This is probably due to the fact that during junior and high school, I did not live at home. Secondly, I realise that my behaviour and my personality were all formed during my childhood, so in some ways I am also part of these people, I am one of them.

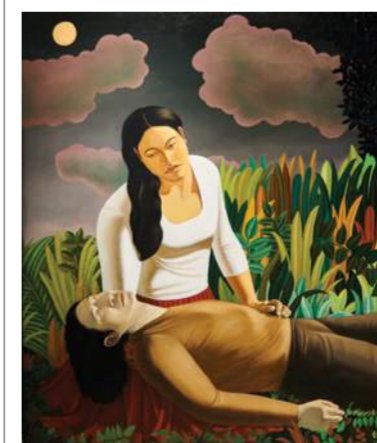
AAN: Going back a few years, what prompted you to move to the UK?

TS: Back in 2020, I went to the UK, and more specifically to Liverpool, to be reunited with my now ex-wife, who had gone there to study. When she returned to China, I was unable to join her right away, as at the time, I had barely started working with galleries, and I was collaborating



Murderer (2023), oil on linen, 90 x 70 cm, Lausanne exhibition @substancemat, Mathilde Lesueur

with institutions in London and in Europe. I found myself at a turning point of my career, as I was about to have a solo show in London. Had I gone back at that time, my trajectory may have been completely different. In addition, she travelled back to China in January 2022, when the country was still subjected to strict lockdowns, due to Covid. This was especially true in big cities like Shanghai, where I was supposed to go and live. Overall, it was a terrible time, on a global scale as well as on a personal level.



Mother Who Lost Her Last Son (2023), oil on linen, 180 x 150 x 3 cm, Lausanne exhibition @substancemat, Mathilde Lesueur



Magician (2023), oil on linen, 150 x 150 x 3 cm, Lausanne exhibition @substancemat, Mathilde Lesueur

AAN: How did your family react to your desire to become an artist?

TS: Back then, when I told my family I wanted to study art in high school, my father was completely against it. He is a farmer, and no one in my family has studied to degree level. My father expected me to go to university, learn some technical skills, get a job, get married and have children, perhaps even become a government official and join the Communist Party. A standard life in rural China. My father thought that studying art was something unworthy. It is only recently, once I started having exhibitions and earning some money, that he has shown a more positive attitude towards my life and work.

AAN: With your bad experience of experimental art, has everything you have done since moving to the UK been based on the training you received in mural painting?

TS: Actually the basis of my oil painting came from my high-school training rather than from the mural art training. When I first arrived in the UK, I started painting, but it was all very unfamiliar to me. I had brought some watercolours with me from China, so I started painting things like still lifes and flowers that were not related to me or any particular story. However, I am someone who is never satisfied and always wants to try something new, so I began to teach myself how to paint figures. Initially, I just used to search online for figurative characters and their poses, but they were never the ones I was actually looking for. Ultimately, I decided to take pictures of myself and use these as a starting point for my painting.

AAN: So your practice is somehow the result of circumstances. The fact that you appear in each painting is originally based on your inability to find the proper pose online matching the one you had in mind?

TS: Yes, absolutely. I could simply not find the right pose for the character that I wanted to paint.

AAN: Lately, some pieces also feature a female figure. Do you rely on sitters in the painting process?

TS: At the initial stage, the female figure depicted in my paintings is actually based on myself too. However, in order to better paint female figures, I seek help from my female friends. For example, if a painting features both male and female figures, I first pose as the character, and then have a female friend replicate the pose. This allows me to combine my facial features with the female body.

AAN: How do you proceed when starting a painting. Do you make sketches before starting out on the canvas?

TS: If I am not certain about what I am going to paint, I make a sketch in my notebook first, but when I am completely sure of what I am going to do, I just draw it on the canvas straight away. Usually, the process starts with me having an idea, imagining the figures, the poses, and the setting, as well as the background. I would then take a picture of myself as the main figure and, if the painting involves two or three figures, I would take pictures of myself in different poses and use them as the basis of my painting. In my opinion, over the past four years, my paintings have gradually changed in the way I depict figures and faces. In the beginning, my work was based on a simple occupation or pose, let us say a farmer with a snake, or a shepherd, but now I am trying to capture more detail about their story, the personality behind the figures, even bringing out the conflicts between the different figures.

In addition, the scale of my pieces is increasing, allowing me to paint the figures full scale, which I think allows a better understanding of the whole story by the audience. I feel the works I am painting now are beginning to be much more complete than the ones I used to create. I am starting to paint full body figures, trying to express their soul in order to depict a well-rounded story.

Previously, the story was more of an outline, but now, it bears more details, delicate nuances, as well as very subtle emotions.

AAN: You have several exhibition projects scheduled for 2024. Will the new pieces subject-matter remain anchored in your village?

TS: Absolutely. That is also one of the reasons I recently travelled back home in order to take additional pictures and collect stories from my father and grandfather. Let me relate one story in particular: by the time I was born, the one-child policy was still in place. My parents were hoping for a girl as they already had two boys. While my mother was pregnant, she had to hide and moved in with my grandmother to an even more remote part of the village. After I was born, I stayed hidden with my grandmother for two to three years, because of this one-child policy. Desperate for a girl, my parents were even willing to exchange me with a girl from another family that had three daughters. When I was born, my family was actually fined 1,200 RMB, which back then, was a lot of money. It is almost a coincidence that I am still here today! Had anything unexpected happened during that time, I would not be here. Also, had I been exchanged, my life would have been a completely different one. This story, as well as all the other ones I have collected, is an example of those I want to include in my paintings. They are all true and are often extraordinary stories.

AAN: With many stories yet to be painted, what would your dream painting look like?

TS: I would love to work on a very large painting involving many characters. Ideally, I would like to spend half a year, or even a full year, focusing on this one painting. Allowing me to depict the story with all its characters in such a complete, detailed, and meticulous way. Now that would be a fabulous experience. ● Tang Shuo's work will be on view with a solo exhibition at Beers, London, from 7 June to 13 July