

[中文](#)[Home](#) | [Exhibitions](#) | [Artists](#) | [Research](#) | [Shop](#) | [Space](#)

Zhao Yang, Painter of the “Uncanny”

Author: Loïc LE GALL 2016

In 1919 Sigmund Freud described the concept of the “Uncanny” (Das Unheimliche) as something which is the result of a departure from ordinary rationality. This psychoanalytical term, associated with anxiety and horror, is what best portrays Zhao Yang’s painting.

The real and the imagined become indistinguishable, blurring boundaries, and instilling confusion in the eyes of the beholder. Familiar objects and events become troubling and, depending on the context and situation, upset unshakeable truths such as life and death, in the onlooker’s mind. This distinctive mode has pervaded paintings for centuries, going back a long way in the history of art from Jheronimys Bosch, to Füssli’s Nightmare (1781) – and includes well-known iconography such as the incubus and the horse’s head – which also appear in works by Zhao Yang.

It is a current which found its way into the works of many painters throughout the 20th Century, such as Giorgio De Chirico and Rene Magritte, and even spread into David Lynch’s world of imagery and film.

As such, Zhao Yang’s pieces, inspired by traditional Chinese painting techniques, form part of a vast heritage, embodying high quality and originality stemming from a blend of genres, periods and traditions.

"Profoundly bonded to the world of legends – recurring reference found in Zhao Yang’s paintings – ruin appears to be a marker of the era in timeless setting, caught between the resurgence of bygones and the possibility of an apocalyptic future. Architectural debris serve as a frame to construct space on the canvas and add circumstantial matter to the unfolding scenes. The landscapes born under the artist’s brush are testimony to outstanding technique and refreshing skill in the field of composition. The works display an influence from modern Chinese painting, including of course Liu Haisu (劉海粟), who at the dawn of the 20th Century was already uniting oriental and western stylistic traditions.

Zhao Yang’s landscapes also appear to form a bridge between cultures, referring to both his forest-covered birthplace Jilin (吉林), and to folk tales and modern sagas from the field of science fiction, comics and fantasy.”

The bizarre undercurrent and worlds of fantasy built on Zhao Yang’s fairy tales are a reminder of Bruno Bettelheim’s

analyses. Bettelheim was a Viennese student of Freud's. In his acclaimed work, "The Uses of Enchantment", he explains that "those who delve into the meaning of fairy tales, initially see a tranquil lake which at first simply appears to reflect their own image. And yet before long they discover beneath this image the chaos of their inner soul..."

In Zhao Yang's paintings monsters and creatures which should remain hidden, secret and in the dark burst out into timeless reality disrupting lives. Here the painter is playing the role of a magician or a hypnotiser –definitely not that of a guide. Reading the painting is not straight forward, as the painter deliberately misleads the viewer, much like in the mayhem of "Nobody Can Be Themselves", from 2009.

Zhao Yang gives life to a centaur cast in an undefinable, yet resolutely modern landscape, where factory buildings fill the background. He has also drawn liberally on mythical fauna from various cultures, such as the centaur, the Kirin (麒麟), and the mermaid, for example in "The Home of the Mermaid", from 2011.

The concept of the hybrid is also a common concept, though here appears to be more of a reference to literary sources. Zhao Yang also gains significant inspiration from legendary and classic writings as diverse as Shan Hai Jing (山海經), The Classic of Mountains and Seas, dating back to the warring states era, and the Odyssey, attributed to Homer towards the 8th Century BC.

There is an important marker in Zhao Yang's career which explains the extent to which he has been influenced by poetry and classic epics. For many years he worked as a book publisher. It was during this period that he developed a penchant for quotations from an eclectic range of authors, ranging from Socrates to Victor Hugo and Martin Heidegger. The very concept of the hybrid is therefore deeply engrained in this mixture of literary genres, and surfaces via his canvases as well through his abundant use of iconography.

Zhao Yang's past has not been worn away, remaining palpable in the form of his many references and other activities intrinsically linked to his painting, namely writing. In the piece entitled "Yes, It Could Only Be A Ball", he employs a phrase which serves as a kind of motto encapsulating the vision of his world: Real death is rebirth.

The play on references is particularly visible in one of Zhao Yang's early works, Common fate (2008) in which he depicts the white serpent (白蛇傳) the main character in a very well-known folk tale. The legend is set against a nameless landscape, staging only the iconic white snake and a flooded scene as clues. Zhao Yang explains that tradition is a necessary foundation upon which we can build ourselves and move forward, while at the same time it is a wake-up call, a way of perceiving the world.

This work in particular sets out to forge a fresh kind of magic, introducing a more modern approach. The painter rapidly includes more items taken from contemporary culture, bringing the motif into the present.

It is for this reason that cars, planes, diving equipment and other items are juxtaposed with timeless landscapes and representations, such as hunters. Hunting has a place of its own in Zhao Yang's paintings, in particular since 2014, year which saw an affirmation of his technique. Staging wilderness is unusual in contemporary art. The inner feelings of the hunter are reminiscent of primitive instincts – hunting scenes are still the most ancient reference in the history of art harking back to the prehistoric era – instincts that modern impersonal life has gradually sought to erase.

As a counterpoint to this trend, Zhao Yang portrays the battles that are waged in everyday life, violent encounters between animals and humans, which still bear some note of empathy. The canvas hanging in the Centre Pompidou, *The Spring*, is as such the epitome of this ambivalence. The shades applied to the bear, the vegetation and hunters merge into chromatic union, operating as an ensemble. The very existence of the beast (and its death) appears to be a function of inexorable chase serving as a sharp reminder of our own fate.

Landscapes and nature form a composition redolent of a laboratory exploring our own condition, a cross between the hybrid and the bizarre.

The more recent canvas entitled *The Blue*, from 2015, set in a time of legends can be seen as a fusion of the many facets constituting Zhao Yang's art: an unrelenting quest to position the viewer on the uncomfortable cusp between the familiar and the uncanny.

Related Artists:

ZHAO YANG 赵洋

[Works](#) | [Press Room](#) | [Links](#) | [Jobs](#)

[ShanghART Singapore](#)

✉ [Register ShanghART Mail-List](#)

[f Facebook](#)

[Instagram](#)

[WeChat 微信](#)

上海香格纳文化艺术品有限公司
办公地址：上海市徐汇区西岸龙腾大道2555号10号楼

© Copyright ShanghART Gallery 1996-2019
备案：沪ICP备09094545号

 沪公网安备 31010402001234号