

# Kunstmuseum Bern

Window on China

**Ji Dachun, Liu Ye**

February 7 to April 1, 2007

## Ji Dachun

The exhibition of the Chinese painter Ji Dachun in Bern is his first solo exhibition outside Asia. Following on the success of the exhibition *Mahjong. Contemporary Chinese Art from the Sigg Collection* (2005), this is one of a series of regular "Window on China" exhibitions in the Museum of Fine Arts Bern, which has been made possible by the collaboration of the collectors Ueli and Rita Sigg.

Ji Dachun was born in 1968 in Nantong (Jiangsu Province) and lives and works in Peking. In his paintings and drawings he combines Chinese tradition and Western modernism in an ironic and sometimes humorous cocktail. He centres objects or figures carefully on a white background, sometimes two objects, figures in a dialogue or a closed group of figures. The broad empty space is always an important element of the composition. Ji Dachun has two distinct "styles": a graphic one, taken from the traditional scholarly painting of the "literati", which is reminiscent of the "scribble technique" of Cy Twombly; and a pictorial one that owes something to Picasso and American painting (Philip Guston, for example). However, surrealistic moments always play a part: whimsical images, singular combinations of figures and objects or body fragments and unusual perspectives. Sometimes, what appears naïve is transformed into irony, the apparent woodenness of the figures conceals a bewildering mental mobility. Ji Dachun will paint, for instance, a male nude with the head of Adolf Hitler; a flayed Mickey Mouse; a teddy bear copulating with a pig; a traditional Chinese landscape convulsed with flashes of lightning; a dried indigo root or a scholar's rock thrusting like a phallus sideways into the picture. The bizarre can occasionally turn into the scatological; the artistically piled-up heaps of dung that fill the picture are meant to be pictorially provocative. In the case of Ji Dachun, there is nothing that cannot be depicted, nothing that cannot be combined with something else. The painter shows no respect for his subjects, but does unequivocally for painting, which is always exemplary, either extremely precise or apparently cleverly "dashed off".

Traps are concealed behind Ji Dachun's fine painting, one must step warily. Ji indulges in the principle of "perversion" – of traditional Chinese landscape painting, of the western discourse on painting, of "good taste", of the beauty of the human form (of which he occasionally shows inner parts), and of the "politically correct." Here, perversion is to be understood as the inversion of socially accepted aesthetics. This inversion allows the painter to create a free space for himself, one that is his alone. There is a risk that he will enclose himself in a hermetically sealed world and remain misunderstood. However, this is not true for Ji Dachun. The sensual appeal of his painting seduces us to "interactivity". The paintings function as rebuses that demand deciphering by the viewer. The "perversion" stimulates us to re-establish the "correct" order of things. Ji's art takes a very individual stance within a Chinese context. Disregarded for many years, it is now finding increasing acceptance and appreciation. The staged absurdities and transpositions are proof of a (desperate?) search for meaning in a society torn between tradition and modernity, East and West, between a spiritual vacuum and a consumer's cornucopia. Ji Dachun makes sense out of nonsense and attempts to establish another form of identity by means of inversion: fruitful perversions indeed!

This exhibition was made possible thanks to loans from the following collections: Ueli and Rita Sigg, Switzerland; Yang Bin, Liu Haifeng, Li Liang, Xiao Yuyuan, Lin Song, Xu Lei, Wang Bing and Liu Shan, all from Peking.

## Liu Ye

Liu Ye is one of the few artists who travel regularly between Europe (Germany, Holland and England) and China. This has allowed him, as he expresses it, “to concentrate on myself”. Liu’s childhood, socially influenced by the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) and visually by kitsch propaganda art, has brought forth an artistic world that at first appears childlike, but then proves to be anything but naïve. It is marked by early memories, fairytales and childlike concepts of happiness. He juxtaposes the disasters of world history with the figures of winged boys and girls - a ship going down in a hail of bombs being saluted by a toy sailor.

In recent years, Liu Ye has turned his attention repeatedly to Mondrian. In 2005 and 2006, many paraphrases were created with reference to late works from Mondrian’s American period. *Once Upon a Time in Broadway* is an allusion to *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* (1942/43, Museum of Modern Art, New York). The blue and red squares and rectangles echo the colours in the dress of a little girl and a stuffed rabbit positioned in the front of the picture. Or rather: both figures seem to dissolve into pixels within the picture, to multiply and follow each other along pre-laid tracks as in a computer game. The war pictures *Gun* and *Sword* possess downright epic magnitude. Two girls confront each other with drawn swords against an orange-red sky, or a girl with a rifle in her lap stares forlornly into a bright red emptiness. In spite of the weapons, the scenes are not really dangerous. The trees and mountains look like scenery backdrops. The main theme is the colour. The duel takes place between the painter and the canvas. The self-assigned task is: How do blue, yellow and green behave towards a dominant, dictatorial red?

Sometimes Liu Ye drifts back to adolescence when dredging up repressed images: His lady teacher (*My Teacher II*) appears as a sexy, scantily clad, enigmatically smiling pin-up in yellow, equipped with a whip. The mysterious “L” or “Madame L”, with oval face, widely spaced eyes and an extremely high forehead – which gives her a markedly childlike appearance – appears in other paintings, either smiling innocently from beneath peach blossoms or, equally innocently, gentle and at the same time demanding with a whip waiting for a “Client” (the viewer?). That this innocence is deceptive is proven also by the girl in a little pink skirt in *Banned Book*. For once, she can be seen in profile. The locks of hair falling over her face and the almost Vermeer-like serenity of the scene would never lead one to speculate on the nature of the book referred to in the title.

In the portrait *Ruan Ling Yu* (2002), a “harmony in blue”, the round face of a young woman with a melancholy gaze appears like a moon in the night sky. Here we are not far removed from sentimental Montmartre kitsch – if the masterly technique and sophisticated composition did not prove that here a conscious artist is at work. Continuing the allegory of the night, in the composition *Night* the pale apparition develops into a female figure, naked but for underclothes, who seems to be sitting weightlessly in the starry night-blue sky, dangling a red shoe from her foot. With *Schneewittchen* (Snow-White) and *Mädchen mit den Schwefelhölzchen* (The Little Match Girl) we have effectually arrived in the realms of the (northern European) fairytale. In one picture, Liu honours the creator of these figures by setting Hans Christian Andersen in the same element: quietly falling snow. However, Andersen is muffled-up while the skimpily dressed girls have to battle against the relentless cold. This composition, as so often in Liu’s work, is based on a square. The rigorous paradigm contrasts with the lightness of the content and the painting style. In his works, Liu attempts to combine the imaginative power and sensitivity of fairytales with the strict and rational way of philosophical thought – a synthesis of Eastern art (one can read Chinese as well as Japanese influences into his work) and Western ideals (Mondrian, Barnett Newmann etc.) creating at one and the same time severe as well as playful images.

The exhibition is comprised of loans from Ueli and Rita Sigg, as well as from Dutch, American and Japanese private collections. It is being supported by the galleries Tomio Koyama, Tokyo and Sperone Westwater, New York.