Yue Minjun gets to laugh again, this time in Paris

BY NAZANIN LANKARANI

Five years after his rise to the top of the Chinese contemporary art market, Yue Minjun has something new to smile about.

Best known for his large-scale paintings depicting his own smiling face, Mr. Yue, who is based in Beijing, has long been a star of the Chinese contemporary art scene, having achieved commercial success through a highly singular aesthetic.

He has had solo shows in the United States and Europe, as well as in Asia and, in 2007, set a record for Chinese contemporary art when his painting “Execution” sold for about $5.3 million at Sotheby’s in London, a record that has since been broken.

But what was missing from Mr. Yue’s roster of accomplishments was institution

"What you see on the streets is a second incarnation of my work," he said. "To copy in China is a normal practice, so I have no objection."

For Hervé Chandes, director of the Fondation Carriére, the exhibition is an opportunity to show the range of an artist who, despite being a fixture in art fairs, is not as well known by the wider public in Europe as in group shows with artists of "unequal quality."

"We wanted to explore the density of Yue Minjun’s repetitive painting and show that which makes the strength of his images," Mr. Chandes said.

It took Mr. Chandes several trips to Beijing to assemble the works shown here. "Many collectors who loaned their pieces did not wish their identity to be known and acted through agents," he said.

A prolific painter since the early 1990s, Mr. Yue, 56, belongs to the generation of artists marked by what he calls a "profound sense of loss and disillusionment" after the crackdown at Tiananmen Square in 1989, in which popular demonstrations culminated in the massacre of protesters.

"I feel that those years enabled us to find a new energy," Mr. Yue said in a conversation in July with a friend, Shen Zhou, included in the catalog of the Paris show. "We discovered that the ideas and assumptions we had about a lot of things were no longer credible." For the artists who chose to stay in China after 1989, the Cynical Realism movement, which Mr. Yue joined, was a possible path to express their experience in post-Tiananmen Chinese society.

"Those who played experiemented with a new iconography laced with signs of a disenchantment in confronting their society and assessing their own status," said Grazia Quaroni, a curator at the Fondation Carriére. But she added, "30 years later, Yue Minjun’s work evokes a sense of melancholy rather than cynicism."

In the early 1990s, Mr. Yue, in search of a stylistic identity, painted, "The Artist and his Friends," a work in the
YUE MINJUN

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speaking through a Chinese interpreter for an interview in Paris at the preview of the Fondation Cartier exhibition.

Throughout March, the Fondation Cartier is presenting a collection of nearly 40 paintings, plus drawings and photography, from the artist’s studio, museums and a number of major art collections around the world, some never before seen by the public.

"To organize a show of this scope in China would be impossible because we would need the collaboration of a major institution," Mr. Yue said.

Mr. Yue is a local celebrity in China, as well as an international star. Street markets in Beijing, for example, contain numerous copies and imitations of his work, making versions of his aesthetic widely available.

With his individualized portraits gaining worldwide attention, and Mr. Yue's subjects' subjects to his sending, a new, more multi-cultural identity is being revealed into a creative outcome.

"During this initial period, I decided to create an icon, something that had never been done before," Mr. Yue said. "It was not meant as a self-portrait in its traditional sense, but something more like a movie star acting in different roles.

His laughing face became the means for a singular political criticism, reflecting the obligatory mask of general commitment demanded as a society in which the appearance of the masses had become a stale point.

"The work of Yue Minjun speaks of lookouts, of being honest in," Mr. Chandes said. The ambiguity of his iconic character has enabled Mr. Yue to conceal his political message, albeit subtly.

The art market in China has been crucial in promoting his work. The opening of the Pace Gallery in New York and its major outpost in the 798 Art District, also known as Dashan, one of Beijing's biggest art communities, and added Mr. Yue to its roster of artists.

The gallery is currently showing an exhibit of Mr. Yue's works called "The Road" featuring a series of recent paintings inspired by Christian iconography. They include reinterpretations of the Annunciation and the Resurrection, as well as scenes of the city's signature buildings.

And Mr. Yue's popularity has held up. "The market has cooled down in the last few years," Long Lu, the president of Pace Beijing, said in an interview. "Korean, Chinese and Western cultures," Mr. Lu explained, "are not seen as a stand-alone.

"Today, we are a part of the art market with a significant increase in buyers from mainland China," "Maurice de Vlaminck, Chinese art specialist at Sotheby's in Paris, said on a telephone interview. "There is a trend in China for re-appropriation of their own patrimony."

For his part, Mr. Yue has been appropriating classes of Western art for years, establishing a parallel between the experience of repression in China and Western cultures.

In his series "Landscape with No One," Mr. Yue reprints both well-known Chinese socialist paintings and classes of Western art with the protagonist conspicuously absent.

His version of "Musee de Louvre" by Jacques-Louis David depicts the homestead scene with Marx absent from the background. In his version of "Execution," inspired by "The Execution of Emperor Maximinian" by Manet, or possibly Goya's "Tres de Mayo," Mr. Yue paints a wall under water, a laughing man facing a firing squad.

An Owang Jangke, a Chinese poet, wrote a poem for Mr. Yue, reprinted in the Fondation Cartier's exhibition catalog, "All immemorial, address is in this laughter."