

YUE MINJUN

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Yue Minjun gets to laugh again, this time in Paris

PARIS

Beijing painter is known for using smiling face as veiled political criticism

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 institu-

"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 Chandès, director of the Fondation Cartier, 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 or is often paired 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. Chandès said.

It took Mr. Chandès 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, 50, 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 Zhong, 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 stayed experimented with a new iconography lush with signs of a disenchantment in confronting their society and assessing their own status," said Grazia Quaroni, a curator at the Fondation Cartier. But, she added, "30 years later, Yue Minjun's work exudes 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 Paris show, adhering to traditional no-



tional consecration in Europe, something he has now attained with the retrospective "L'Ombre du fou rire" at the Fondation Cartier in Paris.

"I am happy about this show, especially since I have never had a retro-

1/3

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THE WORLD'S DAILY NEWSPAPER



2/3

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INTERNATIONAL Herald Tribune THE WORLD'S DAILY NEWSPAPER

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

Through next March, the Fondation Cartier is presenting a collection of nearly 40 paintings, plus drawings and photographs, 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 works, making versions of his aesthetic widely available.

With time, individualized portraits gave way to self-caricature, and Mr. Yue began limiting his subjects to his smiling self, alone or multiplied to infinity, as he retreated into a creative solitude.

"During this initial process, I decided to create an icon, something that had not 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 disguised political criticism — reflecting the obligatory mask of general contentment demanded in a society in which the appearance of the masses had become a state priority.

"The work of Yue Minjun speaks of lockups, of being fenced in," Mr.

Works by Yue Minjun, right, featuring in the Fondation Cartier show include "The Death of Marat," above, a 2002 riff on the painting by Jacques-Louis David with a political slant, and his 2000 painting "The Sun," left.



Chandès said.

The ambiguity of his iconic character has enabled Mr. Yue to conceal his political message, albeit thinly. It has, nevertheless, allowed Mr. Yue to largely skirt trouble in China and reach a wider global audience.

In 2008, as the Chinese art market boomed, the Pace Gallery in New York set up a major outpost in the 798 Art District, also known as Dashanzi, one of Beijing's thriving art communities, and added Mr. Yue to its roster of artists.

The gallery is currently showing at Art Basel Miami Beach, which runs through Sunday.

Last year, Pace Beijing presented a solo exhibition of Mr. Yue's works, titled "The Road" and featuring a series of recent paintings inspired by Christian iconography. They included reinterpretations of the Annunciation and the Resurrection as biblical scenes either devoid of their characters or populated with repetitive images of the artist's signature grinning man.

And Mr. Yue's popularity has held. "The market has cooled down in the last few years and we see fewer speculators," Leng Lin, the president of Pace Beijing, said in an e-mail.

Even so, prices continue to climb. "Today, we see a shift in the art market with a significant increase in buyers from mainland China," Isaura de Viel Castel, Chinese art specialist at Sotheby's in Paris, said in a telephone interview. "There is a trend in China for re-

appropriation of their own patrimony."

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

In his series "Landscapes with No One," Mr. Yue reproduces both well-known Chinese socialist paintings and classics of Western art with the protagonists conspicuously absent.

His version of "Mort de Marat," by Jacques-Louis David, depicts the homicide scene with Marat absent from the bathtub. In his version of "Execution" inspired by "The Execution of Emperor Maximilian" by Manet, or possibly Goya's "Tres de Mayo," Mr. Yue paints underwear-clad, laughing men facing a firing squad.

As Ouyang Jianghe, a Chinese poet, wrote in a poem for Mr. Yue, reproduced in the Fondation Cartier's exhibition catalog, "All immemorial sadness is in this laughter."