

ZHOU SONG'S WORLD VIEW

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Zhou Song is an internationally acclaimed and innovative artist. In his work, the artist pictures varied pictorial worlds, which on the one hand appear realistic but gradually reveal themselves as hyper-realistic reshapings of completely new realities.

What does our reality comprise? How is our current existence defined? Are we inclined to see the future positively or do we side with those who believe that the apocalypse coming? These questions cannot be answered with a simple yes or no since they concern complex developments that concern both the individual human individual and relate to surrounding social contexts, the country, the state, and humankind in general. Art does not provide an answer to these questions any more than politics do, nor do wise thinkers who grapple with traditional philosophical queries. But art has the possibility, through content and techniques, to show people things that they have not perceived before—and this also impacts the works of Zhou Song.

I was initially fascinated by the pictures in Zhou Song's „Inflating“ series, which are precise in terms of painterly technique and breathtaking in their treatment of the subject. It is useful that an artist like Zhou Song develops theses in his paintings in a direct, and sometimes less direct way, using them to make strong arguments. The strength of his theses is achieved not through blurred imagery or abstraction, but through the mastery of a refined painterly technique. Zhou Song's paintings provoke challenges in the viewer. He challenges our sensibilities when he represents people in the shape of giraffes, depicts them as feet in pointed shoes with high heels, or wraps the body with thorns so that a triangular head peeks out at the end, similar to the above-mentioned animal. What an intelligent depiction of a human caught in a high-speed world! Zhou Song calls the painting *Heaven* (2022), which means sky as well as height, evoked by a slender body moving upward. Is this body a giraffe in a zoo captured by people and marked with the number 1? Is it a person who feels like a giraffe, someone who is trapped in the career that they have pursued? Or is the depiction a joke, a cynical view of the world, or an image for reflection?

When such paintings—which are 2.45 m high or taller—are displayed in a museum, they are forceful. Zhou Song infuses many of his works with inimitable humor, which is, following his work, seemingly necessary to survive in a society that has made great advances yet still sometimes lacks development in interpersonal relations. Wherever people live, certain communal traditions persist, while other social forms of relations emerge.

Us (2021) is one such painting, depicting two people pressed to each other. In the upper section, we see a dark blue suit wearing a white shirt, tie, and sunglasses, seemingly lying on top of a man with a lighter suit stretching diagonally from the upper right to the lower left of the painting. Both are not by any means lightweights. Where did they meet? Perhaps in the metro, which at times does not permit an inch of individual autonomy, as everyone—intentionally or otherwise—touches each other closely due to the lack of space? Wherever—the specific location does not really matter. Us is a symbolic image. It shows us our life in highly civilized societies. The perfectly cut-out fruit of the painting A New World also fits this aim: the melon is sharply painted as a pointed triangle, the cherries as small irregular squares, as well as the apples and other fruit as other geometric shapes. The theme is masterfully varied in Zhou Song's work.

Zhou Song sees an artificiality in everyday life that defines our civilization. Ancient philosophers from ancient China and Greece likely would have been horrified had they encountered fruit wrapped in plastic. They definitely could not have imagined fruit that grows in nature presented in such an artificial way. However, our current existence in nature is very distanced. We have been „making“ nature work for us for a long time, to the extent that it provides us with vitamin-rich products. Step by step, our culture has brought artificiality into our living rooms, into our supermarkets, and thus into our everyday lives. Artificiality takes hold daily—there is no escape from it.

To this end, Zhou Song, who always meticulously follows developments in the natural sciences, has further addressed the issue of how artificial intelligence is helping to shape our everyday lives in his large-format paintings (series: Entropy). We are in the middle of its reach: human robots, automated driving, smart homes, facial recognition, music streaming, medical diagnosis, navigation, digital voice assistants and more—humans are more frequently and urgently transferring their intelligence to computers. Again, progress is radically transforming due to artificiality.

In the large-scale painting New Genesis (2017), robots acting anthropomorphically conquer the world through wars. Ruins and remnants of human existence linger in the leftmost part of the frame: a lying pregnant woman, an antique nude sculpture, a broken car, remnants of cities and industrial buildings. In the left corner, a dropped atomic bomb releases its mushroom cloud. On the right, a group of robots march with mechanical steps toward an unidentified target. They communicate with each other as they move forward.

This is an outstandingly well-executed horror scene, with our future depicted in greyscale. The robots have taken over our world, which the famous computer HAL in Stanley Kubrick's film 2001: A Space Odyssey ultimately failed to do after fighting with a human crew. The neuroses that HAL progressively developed during the journey to the planet Jupiter demonstrate the vulnerability of all intelligent systems.

It is only logical that Zhou Song also deals with the topic of human intelligence in his work. His paintings such as *Field of Consciousness* (2016) or *Stream of Consciousness* (2015) concern the brain's operations. In *Matrix*, we then see a fetus that has begun its growth, while in *Zero-Gravity* (2017) an already-delivered human lies in a crouching position on hard ground.

Of course, a large part of painting or sculpting deals with aesthetics. This can refer to concepts of beauty, which is the focus of numerous works from the history of art, beginning with technically brilliant works of the Renaissance until the end of the nineteenth century. Modern art began to change the concept of aesthetics as grounded in notions of beauty, sometimes even reducing it to absurdity. As great as the achievement of the ready-made was to modern art theory, their intellectual impact was actually minimal. Buying a bottle dryer in an iron store in Paris (1914), signing it, and then selling it is a bold act. To align one's entire artistic output with ready-mades is an even bolder one. The above-mentioned practices championed by Marcel Duchamp found many professional imitators who took up his avant-garde ideas, right up to Piero Manzoni, who exhibited a work made of 90 tin cans, each reportedly filled with 30 grams (1.1 ounces) of feces. The label featured the following description in Italian, English, French and German: Artist's shit, Contents 30 gr. net, Freshly preserved, Manufactured and canned in May 1961.

Part of Zhou Song's artistic strategy is to sometimes exaggerate aesthetics, especially in his *Red Field* series. One painting, titled *Soldiers Weeping V*, shows a rifle cut in half, which reveals the inside of human muscles in various shades of red. For me, no depiction of a rifle has ever advanced such a menacing presence. One stands before this painting and many associations suddenly come up: war, devastation, injury, death. This picture touches the viewer! Therefore, this kind of representation is exactly the appropriate aesthetic, because it concerns the depth of human coexistence. This theme also touches on animals such as fish, which Zhou Song sometimes treats with a harsh red color. In one such painting, fish innards are also depicted—an unpleasant sight.

However, the exhibition ends with an oversized strawberry sculpture, reconnecting viewers with more conventional aesthetic concepts. The strawberry is both painted precisely and hyper-realistically or presented as a small metal sculpture.

Zhou Song's spectrum of artistic work is extraordinary. As a painter and sculptor, he can approach the objects in this world in a seemingly pleasant aesthetic and translate them impactfully into an artistic medium. But this seemingly pleasant aesthetic can be deceptive. The realistic touch of his paintings can end up translating as an uncanny hyperrealism. This is why exhibitions of Zhou Song's works always provide adventures in viewing.