

Poetry and the Villain

By Cui CanCan

Zhao Zhao can tell stories, cleverly dropping hints while drawing you under his spell, then suddenly laying out his conclusion. Some stories are related to the artist's personal experiences, while others have been gathered from far and wide—but all are full of mystery. If he were living in ancient times, he would be the tribal sorcerer, if not the sage.

Stories lead us to realizations and shifts in understanding that are conveyed through different connections. By layering different stories, we continually produce new experiences. If we remember the story, then we will remember the person, such that stories become another means of portraying a person. A story's continuous variations as a person grows old render an endlessly dynamic image. Zhao Zhao's self-portrait series also has this quality.

With abundant knowledge and experience, a good storyteller develops a single voice that carries different accents, suggesting he has been to many places. Luckily, we always meet these people over the course of our lives—when we are children, Grandpa is like a treasure chest of tales, always telling stories, and accompanying us at bedtime. And after we grow up, various books and experiences seem like countless frames for bedtime stories that are sometimes happy and motivating, but also full of failure and pain that cultivate individual philosophies. Stories allow us to glimpse at an entire room of different worlds through a tiny keyhole.

Bamboo shoots wait through dark and cold winter nights to break through the soil. They struggle with nature to see the sun and drink the spring rain, and after emerging, their black bodies covered with mud grow short and stout. Before they start growing, they are replete with potential, unknown power, and pregnant with everything they will be. This tension within bamboo shoots—between their stifled growth and potential—has analogical meaning in Zhao Zhao's paintings.

Peaches carry a different implication in his work. In Chinese mythology, the Queen Mother of the West serves peaches of immortality at her banquet for deities. In traditional culture, the peach is a sacred tribute because it is depicted in the hand of the God of Immortality and therefore represents the extension of life. Furthermore, because they are plump and juicy, peaches allude to erotic desire. Their pink color generates fantasies, and their soft fuzz begs the hand's caress. They are like the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden because they signal the start of desire, as well as the ever-present need for redemption and promise of new life. This is the desire associated with peaches and also the lust writhing beneath the surface of objects in Zhao Zhao's paintings.

Subject matter in Zhao Zhao's paintings occupies a unique category. He has never painted directly from nature, adhered to tradition, or pursued still life. Neither form nor color nor composition is his primary concern. Nor do painting standards encumber Zhao Zhao. In fact, it would be too formal to call what we experience in his paintings “subject matter,” as his portrayals are focused more on abstractions such as freedom, personal perceptions, and delusions. Even if other mature artists choose to paint the same things that Zhao Zhao does, they could never replicate the unique perceptions that belong solely to Zhao Zhao. Subject matter is unique in his domain.

I prefer to call the things in his paintings “allusive objects” because each has its own spirit and serves as a symbol of desire. They are used poetically to represent ideals or express feelings, such as in the case of the spirit suggested by bamboo shoots, or the desire suggested by peaches. But when these “allusive objects” are in paintings, they become laden with life's pulsations and the grief of modern poetry, much like the savage desires and twisted bodies in the work of British figurative painter Francis Bacon.

Our perceptions are manifested in images, such as bamboo shoots, peaches, the God of Immortality, or villains—there are a thousand different faces in Zhao Zhao's paintings. Constantly repeating images in his self-portraits suggest complex and splintered worlds. We might say that the more situations the painter's life has, the more times the image is manifested. Sometimes it is a bamboo shoot that grows like a flame in the long night; sometimes it is the desire of a peach growing with animal-like ferocity; sometimes he is a

storytelling God of Immortality conveying the many implications of an experience; or sometimes he plays the villain, such as Vajradhara, Dharmapāla, or Chaturmahārāja to intimidate us all. In other words, in Zhao Zhao's paintings, perception and delusion combine to form a living cell that constantly grows and mutates. Meanwhile, his compositions are simple, everything is exquisite and fastidiously painted, and each metaphor, or symbol, is like painstakingly recited poetry. Using his painting skills, he clones a multi-dimensional virtual world that is disfigured and shadow-like.

Based on perception and delusion, Zhao Zhao's painting is more rigorous than poetry yet freer than most painting, and in the gap between, another allegory forms.

Allusive objects and poetry in Zhao Zhao's paintings become cautionary tales. Before bamboo shoots become bamboo, their thick and powerful stalks are withdrawn, silent, and waiting, suggesting boundless potential. But after becoming bamboo, they can only continue to grow languidly in one direction. Peaches suggest joyous yearning for extended life, yet also the bitterness of lust and temptation. The bulging head of the God of Immortality can symbolize his years of accumulated experience but may also suggest a tumor within. A practiced and wise way of life can turn from a source of inspiration to a rigid and old-fashioned rule at any time. Therefore, Zhao Zhao's allusive objects develop in different directions. The crime and punishment, or right and wrong, in his stories are more like allegorical poetry about life's changes and mixtures of symbolism and realism.

The exhibition is like a Zhao Zhao painting journal, and his self-portraits serve as an introduction to an amusing story with many twists and turns. The story takes our perspectives on a journey of personal perception and reflection. All his self-portraits depict the artist resting his head on his chin but present different expressions to indicate the individual experiences in our lives.

His early series *Self-Portrait* is romantic and pure, but later, in *Villain*, we see that the evil man has come out of his shell. Since the artist matured, good and evil, and right and wrong, have come together, and his physical body has been restructured.

Later still, a new life emerged and Zhao Zhao became a father, making him anxious about growing old. He became more deeply aware of life's path, as well as its trials and tribulations, such that he could only continue to fight for redemption. Growth eventually turns into aging, and the accumulation of experience is the result of a life. Therefore, a father becomes a grandfather in his paintings, and experiences are both true and false, and righteous and evil. The bulge on the forehead of the old man in the painting is both a symbol of wisdom and a flower-like tumor harboring evil.

Zhao Zhao can tell stories, and has no intention of passing judgment on good and evil. His self-portraits, and paintings of fathers and sons, peaches, bamboo shoots, and the God of Immortality have related motives. They are entangled with each other and yearn for each other, but right and wrong, and good and evil are no longer distinct. This is the secret of maturity, human nature, and emotion. Every wise man knows the cost of every beginning, that death is the result of life, and the peach always grows from a festering wound. Furthermore, every villain has pinched a plump peach or a naive face, just because the peach is a myth and a temptation.

Finally, the villain is sometimes gentle and sometimes vile when on a stairway searching for poetry.