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Arts preview: Cui Xinming's Journey to the East investigates the modern era

Text: Vanessa Yung



Many of CuiXinming's paintings, especially those created before 2012, depict a single room. It is not just any rented room, but the place the mainland artist called home for three years when he was studying for his master's degree.

While the inspiration and objects in his paintings are taken from his daily life — he photographs them, gives them his own twist, and then infuses them into his paintings — his works are not shallow or narcissistic documentations of his existence.

"Since 2010, I've been revisiting past experiences and memories to make sense of the society we live in. This is a process of self-discovery, as well as an investigation of the era I'm living in," says the Chongqing-based artist.

"I'm not interested in painting from a political or social perspective; I want to explore the empty, soulless mental state our people share as a result of the damage our society and system have inflicted."

Don't Hurt Me, one of the new works featured in his show "Journey to the East", is a prime example. Instead of running away, or calling an emergency number for help as a big fire approaches, the figure in the painting prays for god's help.

"The fire symbolises anything absurd, as well as events that may induce anxiety in us. I want to show how the past experiences of this guy have led to this subconscious behaviour," Cui says.



Sleepwalker

"Our people feel helpless all the time, even when they are at home, a place which is supposed to be safe. They don't know who to seek help from when there's trouble. They are scared and paranoid, and all they can do is to seek blessings from demigods."

Cui notes that vivid colours are often used to depict god and worshipping, so he uses these in his work. Meanwhile, the faceless humans he depicts suggests they are submissive.

The exhibition's title, inspired by the classic Chinese novel *Journey to the West*, about a monk and his three disciples' dangerous quest for peace, echoes China's position. It is also an allusion to the reliance people place on demigods in China.

"When there is no righteousness, people tend to dream up heroic figures, often with supernatural powers. They hope that they will set things right. Although they don't exist, people still seem to trust them to intervene when they have unsolvable or unexplainable problems," says Cui.

"I like the title because the novel and my works share the form of a travelogue, as my paintings have very strong narrative qualities. They are like films; through each frame you can understand my journey and therefore the era that I'm living in."

Edouard Malingue Gallery, 1/F, 8 Queen's Road Central, Monday-Saturday, 10am-7pm. Ends November 15. Inquiries: 2810 0317