

THE ENDURING PRACTICES OF LACQUER 髹 行

WENG JIJUN
WENSEN QI

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01/09 > 10/10/2018

GALERIE DUMONTEIL (SHANGHAI)
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The Enduring Practices of Lacquer

Weng Jijun & Wensen Qi

Dates: 1 September to 10 October 2018

Venue: Galerie Dumonteil Shanghai

Address: Building 105, 199 Hengshan Road, 200031 Shanghai

Opening Hours: 11:00 a.m.-7:00 p.m., Closed on Mondays

Galerie Dumonteil is very pleased to present *The Enduring Practices of Lacquer*, a dual solo exhibition of Chinese artist Weng Jijun and French artist Wensen Qi, featuring two artists' most recent practice in lacquer painting as well as their thoughts and contemplations on this traditional art form during the contemporary era.

The practice of lacquer is not only a craft that has been passed down from ancient China but also a physical and spiritual journey to all the lacquer art learners. Lacquer painting has its roots in China dating back over 2000 years while archaeological findings indicate the use of lacquerware in the Neolithic Age 7,000 years ago. Painting with lacquer has always been a meticulous, long and complex process. It requires great skills and even greater attention; fortunately the hard work is rewarded by its durability, allowing the artwork to remain bright and resplendent for centuries. It is not exaggerated to say that lacquer art only opens its door to the most determined and devoted, and both artists here belong to this category.

Through the enduring practices of Weng Jijun and Wensen Qi, the exhibition engages us in discussions over the new directions of this genre as well as lacquer, the material itself, and further calls for refreshed perspectives on the aesthetics and values attached to this enduring art. As the Asian branch of a French gallery, Galerie Dumonteil (Shanghai) regularly hosts exhibitions dedicated to dialogues and academic exchanges between Chinese and French artists in diverse fields of art.

Weng Jijun: the Philosophical Quest between Lacquer and Painting

Weng Jijun (b.1955, Shanghai) is considered as one of the pioneers in China who promotes lacquer painting as an independent art genre equal to other genres in the visual art category. To Weng, the oxidation process reveals the very essence of lacquer and enriches its language of expression. Mastering various sophisticated lacquer-making techniques such as bodiless lacquer and panel mounting, Weng pays more attention to the spiritual pursuit of the work, and constantly searches the path between "the general theory or method and the particular application" under the guidance of Chinese philosophy. Now a professor of lacquer painting at Shanghai Art & Design Academy, Weng not only focuses on his own creation, but also pays attention to the development of lacquer painting in China while seeking new approaches to its inheritance.

Actively involved in pushing the boundaries of the critic aspect of lacquer painting, Weng evaluates its past and current situation in China, *"Although it was not until the last 1980s that lacquer painting has gain its real independence in China, but because it is originated from the art of lacquerware, the crafts and techniques are very mature. To some extents, this rich history hinders the spiritual pursuit of the painting aspect as well as the spontaneity and flexibility that should be present on the panels. At present, there is still too much emphasis on the standard derived from the experience and aesthetics of lacquerware. For instance, most works are still categorized by specific themes and contents, over-emphasizing craftsmanship and decorativeness."*

These leads to Weng's recent interest — expressing his work in a simpler, more direct way, paying more attention to the meaning of the lacquer material itself, and transforming some of the lacquer techniques into abstract expressions. In the Memory series, Weng strips all the imagery and symbols to explore the painterly expressions composed by the marriage of lacquer and its creation process. In the *Cluster* series, Weng drew inspirations from the intangible culture heritage Xipi Qi (or Rhino Skin Lacquer, if translated directly), and forms his unique language. Unlike the abstract brushwork on canvas and paper, the labyrinth of colors and patterns are created by accumulated layers of lacquer and repeated polishing effects, and its penetration between colors makes it also differ from the

traditional Xipi (or Rhino Skin) effect. All the complex languages — the energy and traces of overlapping, the intentional and the accidental — are barely visible under the surface, waiting for its viewers' scrutiny before guiding them into the mysterious realm of lacquer.

Wensen Qi: From Lacquer Apprentice to Material Master

Lacquer painting has always acted like a strong magnet to Wensen Qi (formerly known as Vincent Cazeneuve, b. 1977, Toulouse region, France). After studied at École des Métiers d'Art in Revel, the city renowned for the art of furniture, he opened his first studio specialized in the restoration of Western and Asian lacquer wares. In order to attain the full knowledge of lacquer, Wensen moved to China in 2009, and settled in Chongqing where the mountains provide *ch'i shu* (lacquer trees), the source for producing raw lacquer. Following the steps of the masters, he gradually learned the secret of lacquer, as well as the traditional Chinese culture revolved around this particular form of art. He began to construct pieces with his own simple yet complex narratives derived from both oriental and occidental philosophies and heritages.

Wensen is keen on experimenting with various materials driven by his fascination with human's ability to transform natural materials throughout history and how various materials react to the magic touch of time. *"I paint with materials. There are all kinds of materials in my studio — gold, rusted iron, dust, clay and so on. They are all the same to me. What happens in my studio is just like in the natural environment — each material has its own place."* In order to allow these materials to fully integrate with each other, the artist patiently waits, reflects, and again sets off for the unknown. Thus, the variety of materials endows Wensen's work with both structural and temporal dimensions, in which the original property of the materials are often neglected or half-lost. This shift between the familiar and the unfamiliar shapes Wensen's artistic language, like a modest thinker reveals the beauty conceived in a silent contemplation.

And yet the complete work is still not the end of the journey, all the special marks and abstract shapes continue to invite responses from the viewers. Wensen's two-sided lacquer screen is probably one of the most eye-catching works of the exhibition. On the lighter side, symbols similar to the ancient Chinese counting system take the place of wood carving patterns, while an abstract shape unifies all the panels on the darker side. Deeply immersed in the Chinese culture, the artist successfully transformed the four-panel lacquer screen — one of the most iconic pieces of furniture in ancient Chinese design — into his own abstract expression orchestrated by western elements. Consistent with Wensen's other works, the uneven undulating texture are united with smoothness and brilliance, as if the surface was covered by a poetic mist, quietly speaking his wishes. All the integration and efforts are so seamless that it is impossible to define Wensen's work with the usual categories. He encourages the viewers to embrace art and aesthetics with more openness and less terms in mind.

The Practice of Lacquer Today

For centuries, lacquer painting was limited by its own glossy decorative quality and its dependence on foundations. It was not until the 1930s that this practice had been revived and developed as a distinct genre of fine art in Southeast Asia. More openness in the 21st century allows the methods of the practices, the use of material and the temporal aspect of the medium all became part of the conversation. The dependence of lacquer actually creates more interactions with other materials and more possibilities for experimentation. For instance, Weng Jijun prioritizes the essence of lacquer and painting as his main concerns, whereas Wensen Qi concentrates on exploring the approaches for combining lacquer with unusual materials.

Through the works and the spirits of the two genius successors, Galerie Dumonteil celebrates the new life of lacquer painting, and invites everyone to take a second look at the roots and diversified paths of Chinese contemporary art. Unlike some contemporary artists who merely use lacquer as a medium, both Weng Jijun and Wensen Qi insist on continuing the tradition of lacquer art, and they have committed themselves to bringing new possibilities to lacquer painting through their years of insightful researches and persistent practices. Like the art they deeply love and respect, they are tenacious enough and patient enough to create works that can stand the test of time and the remarks of the history of art.

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ABOUT GALERIE DUMONTEIL

Since 1982, Galerie Dumonteil has assumed a major role in the market of the figurative sculpture. Focusing on modern and contemporary art, Galerie Dumonteil has three gallery spaces in Paris, New York and Shanghai respectively. While the headquarters in Paris focuses on gathering a permanent collection of artifacts, the branches in New York and in Shanghai serve to preserve the zeitgeist of the Interwar Period and promote European artists from this epoch to both Chinese and American audiences through focused, themed exhibitions.

Established in 2008, Galerie Dumonteil's Shanghai branch, committed to strengthen the collaboration and professional ties within the art scene in Asia, is one of the first Western art galleries that has involved in the early stage of the burgeoning Chinese contemporary art.

Galerie Dumonteil is renowned for its group and solo exhibitions featuring artists who were active between the 1930s and 1970s such as François Pompon, Georges-Lucien Guyot, Rembrandt Bugatti, Diego Giacometti, Charles Artus, Marcel Dery, Pablo Picasso, Armand Petersen and Joseph Czaky. Through its extensive networking with artists and collectors, Galerie Dumonteil has become the leading gallery in terms of animal figures and objects depicting nature around the world. For more than 20 years, the gallery has devoted itself to the discovery of and promotion of talented contemporary artists. Today, artists such as Daniel Daviau, Jean-Marie Fiori, Helmut Koller, Eric Pillot, Jean-Claude Meynard, Rubén Fuentes, Hubert le Gall and Wang Keping, with their predecessors, share the walls of the gallery's three spaces in Paris, Shanghai and New York, creating a truly diverse group of objects for the appreciation of collectors.

Through a thoughtful selection of artists and objects which reflects the ideologies and aesthetics of the founders, Pierre and Dothi Dumonteil, the gallery builds up an unparalleled taste for its clients by showing selected French art from the 1930s as well as works by contemporary artists. Following the traditional model of marchand d'art, the gallery maintains a long term relationship with artists as their exclusive agent. The gallery's financial support for sculptors whom it has promoted has been exceptional. Putting much care into the management and distribution of the artist's works, Galerie Dumonteil out-stands from other art galleries due to its collaboration with artists' families, various foundations, and artists' estates. Furthermore, much more than a commercial gallery, Galerie Dumonteil, expanding its influence and involvement to other sectors of the art industry, not only offers bespoke art consultancy which aims to help clients form important and valuable collections but also leases objects to museums for special exhibitions.

Regularly collaborating with museums and numerous influential publications, Galerie Dumonteil has participated in multiple international fairs, including the Biennale des Antiquaires since 1990 and the PAD Paris/London since 1998. A member of the Comité professionnel des Galeries d'Art, Carré Rive Gauche, Compagnie Nationale des Experts, Syndicat National des Antiquaires, Galerie Dumonteil is a truly versatile and influential establishment.

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