



1 *A Wishful Day*, oil, 14 x 10"

2 *In Front of a Mirror*, oil, 24 x 24"



2

## REFLECTIONS

Jeffrey Chong Wang's debut U.S. solo exhibition is on view now at Arcadia Contemporary in Pasadena, California.

BY JOHN O'HERN

**J**effrey Chong Wang was born in China in 1979, a period known as the “Beijing Spring.” It was not long after the death of Mao Zedong, chairman of the Communist Party in China and the leader of the Cultural Revolution, a movement to purge society of its impure elements. The Beijing Spring was a brief period of artistic freedom and the Democracy Movement following Chairman Mao’s brutal regime. Ten years later students and activists rose up again seeking democracy and free speech, resulting in the government’s crack-down and the massacre at Tienamen Square. Another 10 years later, Chong Wang was living in Canada.

As part of his BFA program at Ontario College of Art & Design he studied for a year in Florence, a period he calls “a significant event in my artist career.” In 2009 he received his MFA from the New York Academy of Art. He returned to China between 2010 and 2016, working with artists there and gaining new experiences to add to his multicultural history.

He says, “My artwork is a reflection of my emotions and memories and shows my understanding and interpretation of my life experience and the world that surrounds me.”

In his novel *Speak Memory*, Vladimir Nabokov



3

wrote, "One is always at home in one's past..." Chong Wang comments, "My time spent growing up in my native China has been an important influence on my artwork. I have painted portraits of my family members at different ages as well as different locations in China that I remember from my past."

As a septuagenarian surprised by the vagaries of memory, I ask him if memory distorts the facts of history. He replies, "I don't think my personal memory distorted the facts of history, maybe the ideology or culture in society changing will distort the facts of

history." We may be experiencing that today.

Chong Wang's knowledge of Western painting and its traditions often appears in his paintings. In *Bird Man*, 2019, a reproduction of Jacques-Louis David's *The Death of Marat*, 1793, hangs on the wall. Marat was a French revolutionary leader murdered in his bathtub by his political enemy, Charlotte Corday. The composition of the main part of the painting recalls Édouard Manet's *Olympia*, 1863. In Manet's painting, a nude woman reclines on her couch with a black cat at her feet and a black servant offering



4

3 *Soft Winds*, oil, 20 x 16"

4 *Bird Man*, oil, 48 x 36"



5

5 *Deer Ghost*, oil, 30 x 24"

6 *Eat, Drink, Men and Women*, oil, 30 x 96"



6

her a bouquet of flowers.

In *Bird Man*, a maid, fully clothed in her uniform and wearing a military gas mask, reclines on her couch with a cat at her feet and a man behind her, fully exposed in his open robe, standing behind a perch for a magpie that blocks his genitals from view. Where the cat in Manet's painting is full of symbolism and French double entendres, Chong Wang leaves the interpretation up to the viewer.

"I don't think animals in my paintings are having any specific personal symbolic meanings," he says. "Maybe they carry symbolic meaning that [is] accepted by people in general. Since I won't give any new semiotic meaning to those animals, I hope viewers can see them just the way they are."

The space of his paintings is often compressed, the elements seemingly occurring in different times and places within the same space.

The drapery and distant landscape of classical portraits appear in his double portrait *A Wishful Day*, 2020. After a moment of intimacy, a nude man rests against the breasts of a woman smoking a cigarette. She appears rapturously satisfied while he has an enigmatic expression of exhaustion. His tattoo is a classic Western sailor's tattoo alluding to love for some unknown other. It makes me think of Westerners sporting Chinese calligraphic tattoos that, translated, mean something other than the wearer thought or intended.

In *Deer Ghost* the couple is wearing costumes from disparate cultures and time periods. Chong Wang explains, "I like to mix different times and historical

visual languages in [paintings], to me it became an interesting game. Coming from China and having spent the youth in the environment that was so rapidly changing, I have witnessed things that are postmodern, absurd and surreal in our lives. And I feel those experiences are reflected in my works.

"My work is a response to the imbalance between my inside feelings and the outside world," he continues. "I fuse classical concepts and traditional techniques into my work using my own exaggerated figures. These figures reflect the history of Western oil painting techniques but also show contemporary themes of Eastern culture."

As unfathomable as his paintings are, they elicit a faint familiarity, a vague recognition that in a dream or in some forgotten past, we have had the same experience.

Chong Wang is represented by Gallery House in Toronto. The U.S. debut of his new paintings will be at Arcadia Contemporary in Pasadena, California, through October 25. ●

## JEFFREY CHONG WANG: RECENT PAINTINGS

**When:** Through October 25, 2020

**Where:** Arcadia Contemporary, 39 E. Colorado Boulevard, Pasadena, CA 91105

**Information:** (626) 486-2018, [www.arcadiacontemporary.com](http://www.arcadiacontemporary.com)