

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2019  
VOLUME 18, NUMBER 6

# Yishu

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Journal of  
Contemporary  
Chinese Art

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US\$12.00 NT\$350.00  
PRINTED IN TAIWAN





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Cover: Feng Boyi, Chief Curator, 2019 Wuzhen Contemporary Art Exhibition. Photo: Shirley Yeung. Courtesy of the photographer.

We thank Bing Yang, Junjun Liu, Chris Mao, Runan Tongyan, Dazong Pan, Janey Song, Vivian Jianhui Zhang, Lin Li, David Chau, Kevin Daniels, Qiqi Hong, Sabrina Xu, David Yue, Andy Sylvester, Farid Rohani, Ernest Lang, Yin Qing, Chen Ping, and Stephanie Holmquist and Mark Allison for their generous contribution to the publication and distribution of Yishu.

## Siyuan Tan at Fou Gallery



Siyuan Tan's exhibition at Fou Gallery, Brooklyn (May 25 to June 23, 2019), does not follow the legacy of Chinese art in any discernible way. Although born and raised in mainland China, the artist makes use of Western imagery and of Western art materials; for example, the paintings were accomplished with spray paint. This studied repudiation of the visuals and means established by his own country's traditional arts indicates a certain resolve on Siyuan Tan's part, determined as he is to be both a participant in and a commentator on American culture. The result is decidedly mixed—not on an artistic level, which Siyuan Tan raised to a considerable height in this show, but in the sense that he appears to have conflicted feelings about a culture that gives him the freedom to do what he wants, but, at the same time, is so driven by the acquisition of money and things that its assumed liberties appear to be on the decline. His sculptures, along with the spray paintings, which illustrate at times vapid textual generalizations emblazoned on the centre of each of them, give his audience pause for thought. What are we to make of an art that conveys, without evident dismay or judgment, the deathly orientation of a culture bent on materialism? While Siyuan Tan never makes his critique entirely clear, it seems as though he might be issuing a warning to his viewers, namely, that

Siyuan Tan, *These Violent Delights Have Violent Ends*, 2019, spray paint on canvas, 101.6 x 139.7 cm, installation view at Fou Gallery. Photo: Nadia Peichao Lin. © Siyuan Tan. Courtesy of Fou Gallery, Brooklyn.

we are living in a culture made superficial and pat by our long descent into the objectification of experience, one based on money and the objects it allows us to purchase.



Siyuan Tan, *Face Off*, installation view. Photo: Nadia Peichao Lin. © Siyuan Tan. Courtesy of Fou Gallery, Brooklyn.

While the problem of materialism has been thought of as particularly American, it is now occurring all over the world, and especially in China, where the affluence of recent decades has blinded many to the country's extraordinary legacy of literature and art. Siyuan Tan left this culture of his youth for the United States in 2015 to get his master's degree from the Savannah College of Art and Design, and he must have been surprised by the ubiquity of American material interests, even though they have been mirrored in China for some time. There doesn't seem to be much of a cure for this the worship of affluence and traditional spiritual searching seems to have fallen off, leaving many artists with little or no wherewithal to fight against such a collective obsession with acquisitions. In this context, Siyuan Tan's outlook has the poignancy of a point of view promulgated by someone coming from a culture so completely different from that of the United States. Even so, his underlying arguments against consumerism, evident in his work, which explores iconic Western art and its mythologies with a skeptical eye are welcome in a time of profound conservatism. As I noted at the beginning of this text, Siyuan Tan does not involve the artistic past of China in his art, but, instead, looks to the past of Western culture. He appropriates that past most clearly in sculptures that reference the *Venus of Willendorf* and Michelangelo's *David*.

So, what is one to make of a Chinese artist working within a Western tradition? In the 1990s, when I first started writing about contemporary

Chinese art, it was fair to ask the question: “How Chinese is it?” This question is no longer valid, given the internationalism that characterizes most contemporary art. The modernist idiom, around for a full century now in the West, has become inherently eclectic, borrowing from any and all cultural backgrounds in the service of innovation in art. Moreover, because artists are settling in places distant from their origins, or sourcing an easy internationalism passed along by media such as the Internet, their experience counters any geographic purity. Therefore, someone like Siyuan Tan, now based in America, is as justified working with Western influences as he is incorporating references from the China he lived in for the greater part of his life. This is fine, even exciting, but it also means that the apparent authenticity of art arising from its indigenous origins can get lost. It can be argued that eclecticism, so central to the way artists think today, is a problematic modification of the kinds of art that historically might be formally, thematically, and geographically alien to the artist making use of them. There is nothing wrong in employing this eclecticism, but the difficulty is that all these cross-references often muddy the waters of intention and the subsequent forms of expression.

Siyuan Tan, *The Venus of Willendorf Was Destroyed in the Museum*, 2018. Plaster on plastic, wood, 22.8 x 10.1 x 5 cm (Base: 134.6 x 17.7 x 17.7 cm). Photo: Nadia Peichao Lin. © Siyuan Tan. Courtesy of Fou Gallery, Brooklyn.

In Siyuan Tan’s case, he resorts to fragmentation in his sculptures and to visual vagueness in the paintings he creates with spray paint. If fragmentation and vagueness cannot be considered only esthetic consequences of a culture that may be slightly beyond Siyuan Tan’s easy assimilation; additionally, they can be seen as a strategy to keep Western influences in check by literally constraining the clarity and wholeness of the work he presents. In the plaster sculpture titled *The Venus of Willendorf Destroyed in the Museum* (2018), Siyuan Tan gives us a larger, somewhat mutilated version of the famous paleolithic sculpture found in 1908 in Austria; the artist’s skill in reproducing the artifact is exquisite, but of equal or even greater importance is the motivation and cultural consequence of his decision to reproduce this particular work of art. Why would he do this? Over thirty thousand years old, the *Venus* is one of the earliest examples we have of art coming from the Western hemisphere. It is a key to the way we see archaic sculpture—and is a profound contrast to the mockups of new cars Siyuan Tan has been making in his occupation as a modeler for the Ford Motor Company in Detroit. His version of the *Venus* is chipped and has pieces broken off of it, making it clear that we understand his copy as one that is damaged—a harsh, but perhaps truthful, vision of how he sees the origins of Western sculpture. However, we don’t completely know Siyuan Tan’s intentions, which may, or may not, be understood as a critique—or, at the very least an indication of skepticism—toward a Western tradition that, at this point in time, in his mind, may have lost its dominance.

In his fragmented version of *David* by Michelangelo, titled *The Sculpture of David Was Destroyed in the Square* (2019), Siyuan Tan copies exactly, with epoxy, the foot and lower leg of David’s right limb, with the left foot placed separately, on its own, but both still in the position of the original sculpture. The feet are set on a small plinth, which is also created with epoxy and is an integrated part of the sculpture. This sculpture is then positioned on







a wooden pedestal with the lower section covered in graffiti. Clearly, this iconic statue is here in a state of decline; we are given only a fragment of its entirety, and the rough, undistinguished wooden base serves as a front for petty vandalism. Perhaps Siyuan Tan is commenting on how this great work is now considered, but, perhaps, too, he is conveying a certain disregard for what is deemed one of the highest achievements in Western sculpture. Or he may even be looking askance at our

Siyuan Tan, *The Sculpture of David Was Destroyed in The Square*, 2019, epoxy, wood, spray paint, 58.4 x 55.8 x 43.1 cm (base: 71.1 x 63.5 x 38.1 cm). Photo: Nadia Peichao Lin. © Siyuan Tan. Courtesy of Fou Gallery, Brooklyn.

romantic inclinations toward the historical fragment. My own sense is that he is not dismissing a tradition he likely deeply respects—why else would he have made his life in the West?—but, rather, asserting dismay about the considerable decline of high culture that now marks American life. A preference for the democratization of culture in America eventually may do away with class distinctions in art, but it also can be critiqued for erasing any impulse to encourage high art; instead, it is often the political that is embraced, as today's ongoing involvement with identity art demonstrates. Siyuan Tan's technical skill cannot assuage the feeling that it is impossible to understand Michelangelo's work on the same terms that created it half a millennium ago, and more than a few people in the art world find this situation sad; thus, it could be said that Siyuan Tan's exhibition carries with it a sense of melancholy that arises from this gap between art then and art now.

A similar effect of distancing from the tenets of high art occurs in the spray paintings, whose medium is emphasized by Siyuan Tan's experience as a car modeler in Detroit, which may have predisposed him toward a language of commercial debasement. Making a model of a car—no matter how sophisticated the process—is not the same as engaging in the intellectual and technical process of making art. In any case, even if he did work out a style that was predisposed to Chinese art, one must acknowledge the fact that Chinese culture's high points in painting—the Tang and Song dynasties—occurred roughly one thousand years ago. In consequence, Siyuan Tan has deliberately chosen a Western methodology in his image-making, not only in its content but also in his use of spray paint, a decidedly contemporary material. In the work entitled *Today* (2019), Siyuan Tan takes the opening lines of Charles Dickens' great novel *A Tale of Two Cities*—"It was the best of times, It was the worst of times"—and emblazons them in white over a light blue sky that is above an amorphous, organic-looking horizontal strip of red colour hovering above a dark green that reads like

the foliage of trees. The text again establishes a comparison between the past and the present, between the positive and the negative, much as he was doing when he graffitied the wooden podium for the partial re-construction of the *David* statue. In these paintings, Siyuan Tan regularly includes well-known Western phrases and adages to portray an unstable present, one in which esthetic and, indeed, moral concerns are paramount, especially in the America of today.

But the point needs to be emphasized once more that Siyuan Tan is himself, now, increasingly American in his experience and artistic references. This makes his visual critique more complex than it would seem. He is now part of the structures he is exposing, and he cannot escape being part of the general critique he is engaging in. In the painting titled *Buy One, Get One Free* (2019), we are presented with a sylvan scene based on the biblical garden—but here Eve is reaching for an apple proffered by a purple snake wound around the tree above her, while, at the same time, Adam is in the act of receiving an apple from her other hand—perhaps Siyuan Tan is describing a sequence of events within the same image. A horse stands next to the tree watching this encounter, and a small patch of meadow is rendered on the other side of a narrow stream, where a tree stands supporting colourful birds and other creatures, which, given the vagueness of the spray-paint technique, are hard to identify. In the background, against a blue sky, are large trees thick with foliage; a pink mass on the far right, perhaps a rock formation, looms upward, but it is hard to tell what it actually is.

While the imagery in these paintings may appear vague, the point is clear—Western culture's means of representation, as well as its ideas, can be brought into question. And, interestingly, it makes sense that the questioning is being done by someone who comes from far away—from a culture that is as different as can be from the one Siyuan Tan is now critiquing. But perhaps the artist himself is stuck in a no man's land of his own devising, seeing as he cannot himself transcend the circumstances he finds himself a part of—an American materialism that is mediated by capitalism—and that he so artfully challenges. His insights—or rather the implications of his critique—can seem powerless in preventing the not-so-slow decline of a culture he may well have highly esteemed as a student in China or as a foreigner at the beginning of his arrival here. One can only speculate, though, as the meaning embedded in Siyuan Tan's critique is subtle and complex.

In the painting *We Will Not Break Faith Today* (2019), Siyuan Tan depicts a small blue house engulfed by flames. A sidewalk leads to an open door, which, along with the windows, reveals flames with people inside. In contrast, the scene also represents a salutary suburbanism—green grass, tall trees, and a blue sky contribute to an atmosphere of familiarity to those of us who have grown up on the outskirts of American cities. But the home is on fire, and the title of the painting is, by implication, optimistic, thereby creating an oddly apocalyptic scene. So, once again, combining ambiguous imagery with



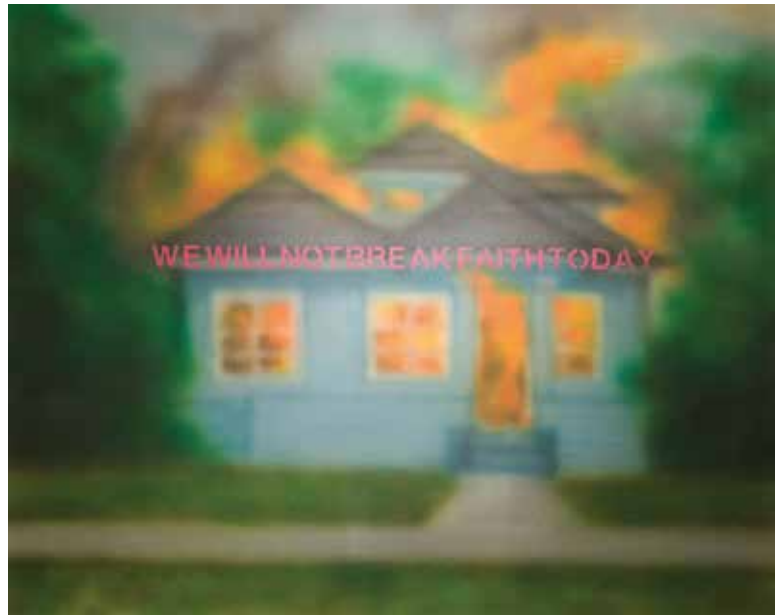


Siyuan Tan, *Today*, 2019, spray paint and acrylic on canvas, 60.9 x 43.1 cm.  
Photo: Nadia Peichao Lin. © Siyuan Tan. Courtesy of Fou Gallery, Brooklyn.



Siyuan Tan, *Buy One Get One Free*, 2019, spray paint and acrylic on canvas, 127 x 177.8 cm.  
Photo: Nadia Peichao Lin. © Siyuan Tan. Courtesy of Fou Gallery, Brooklyn.

Siyuan Tan, *We Will Not Break Faith Today*, 2019, spray paint and acrylic on canvas, 71.1 x 88.9 cm. Photo: Nadia Peichao Lin. © Siyuan Tan. Courtesy of Fou Gallery, Brooklyn.



a contrasting text superimposed on top of them creates the sense of a world in distress. Indeed, a sense of profound disquiet enters one's experience of Siyuan Tan's imagination, whose technical achievement, even with such a difficult medium as spray paint, serves to undermine the supposed beauty of the American dream in particular, and Western culture in general. Yet, again, he understands he is part of the world he is describing. In his painting of a home in flames, he presents us with a maladaptive metaphor made more poignant by a spiritual saying promoting a feeling of belief that is in opposition to the house whose existence is severely threatened. The home symbolizes a metaphor as a site of safety, both physically and psychologically, but safety is surely not happening here. The idyllic expectation of home as shelter rings false in the face of imminent disaster.

The title of Siyuan Tan's show, *Face Off*, suggests two people in opposition yet in close proximity to one another. In other words, the idea of hostility, or a clash, is here occurring in very direct terms. Siyuan Tan's use of language is powerfully present throughout the show, and one senses that the disconnect between the phrases and the imagery is meant to acknowledge a gap that likely cannot be bridged. Perhaps this is an overly somber reading of the show, but perhaps not. In a way, Siyuan Tan is challenging our mythologies of achievement and careless enjoyment, and it feels strangely right, coming as it does from a recent immigrant, someone who carries a kind of objectivity by not being fully established within the culture he has chosen to inhabit. If we, as viewers with a longer history within American culture, can sympathize with Siyuan Tan's dystopian outlook, it starts to make sense that America is no longer what it used to be (but then neither is China!). Given Siyuan Tan's merit as an artist, and his point of view as an individual, we cannot dismiss his participation in America's ongoing self-critical dialogue, something that remains active among its intelligentsia. Indeed, it makes him a contributor to a discussion about the American experience. He is to be praised for the acuity of his insight.