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Chinese Cynical Realism: Fang Lijun and his “All Too Human World” – artist profile

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Hong Kong’s Hanart TZ Gallery presents recent paintings and prints by acclaimed Beijing-based artist Fang Lijun.

Art Radar profiles the artist to find out more about his art practice.



Portrait of Fang Lijun. Image courtesy the artist and Hanart TZ Gallery.

The Cynical Realist

The solo exhibition “**Fang Lijun: This All Too Human World**” at Hong Kong-based **Hanart TZ Gallery** is on view until 2 December 2017, showcasing the Chinese artist’s prints and paintings. Having experienced the rapid socio-economic changes in China, **Fang Lijun** expresses the anxieties of living in a society that has undergone radical transformation. Through his work, he explores the ideologies inherent in this process.

In the curatorial statement, Hanart TZ Founder **Chang Tsong-Zung** remarks:

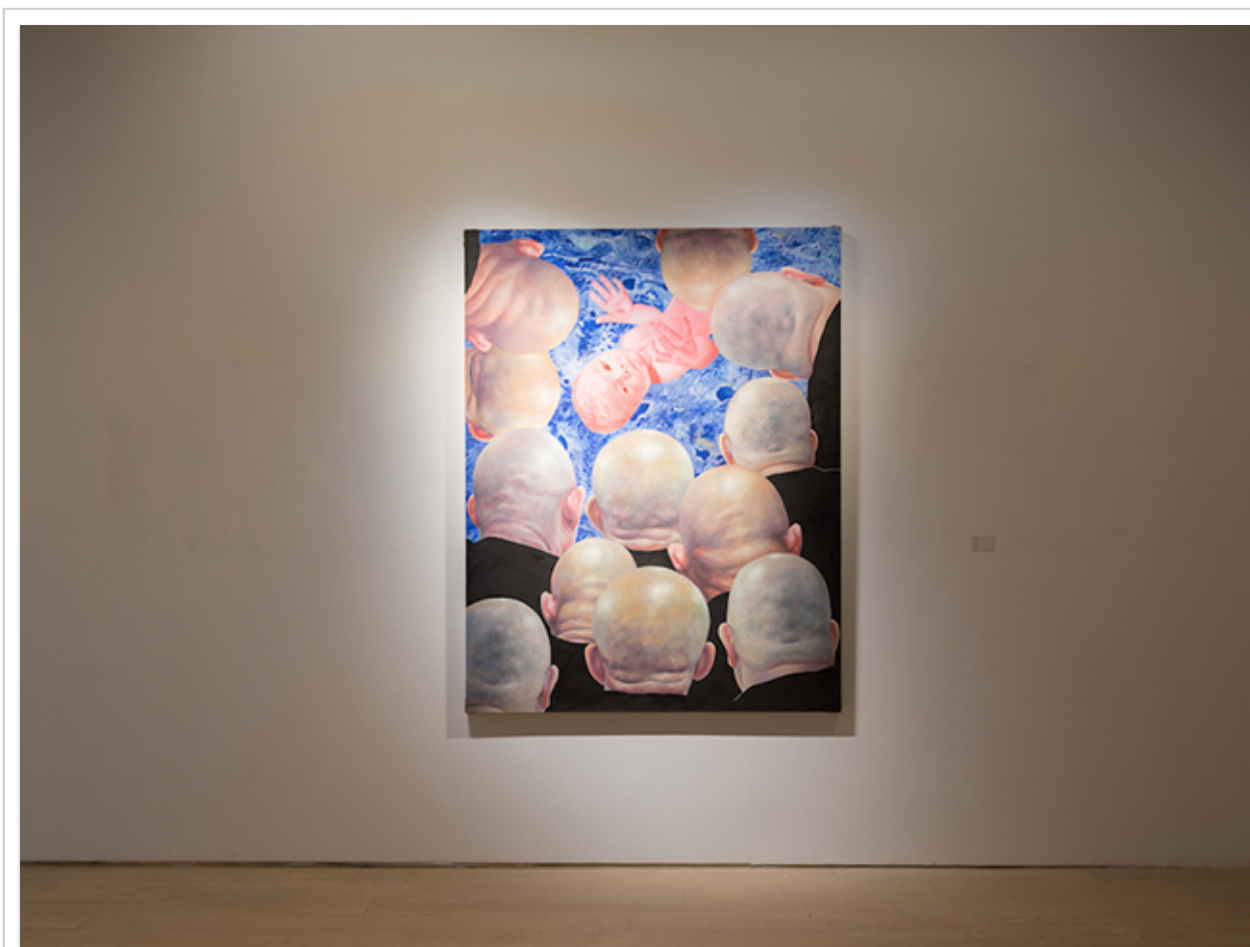
The new works Fang Lijun has produced over the last few years have not only surprised his audiences: They have shocked them. In these paintings, Fang questions exactly what kind of era we are living in today, in the wake of China’s intense cycles of social transformation. Is man-eat-man now the standard rule of the game? Is the overflow of lust and greed the natural condition? In the midst of a dramatically changing society, Fang Lijun opens a window into the world of the human heart.



“Fang Lijun: This All Too Human World”, 3 November to 2 December 2017, installation view at Hanart TZ Gallery. Photo: Kitmin Lee. Image courtesy Hanart TZ Gallery.

Fang Lijun (b. 1963) was born in Handan in Hebei Province in China. In 1989, he graduated from the Central Academy of Fine Arts (Printmaking department) in Beijing. As one of the artists in the post-89 generation, he was part of the Yuanmingyuan artists’ village in Beijing in the early 1990s. By the mid-1990s, he had gained international attention as one of the proponents of **Cynical Realism**. He was included in “China’s New Art, Post-1989”, a travelling exhibition held in 1993.

He has exhibited internationally, including at the **Venice Biennale** and São Paulo Biennial. His work can be found in collections such as the **Museum of Modern Art**, New York; **Centre Georges Pompidou**, Paris; the **National Gallery of Australia**, Canberra; Shanghai Art Museum, Shanghai; and the **San Francisco Museum of Modern Art**, San Francisco, among others.



“Fang Lijun: This All Too Human World”, 3 November to 2 December 2017, installation view at Hanart TZ Gallery. Photo: Kitmin Lee. Image courtesy Hanart TZ Gallery.

“China’s New Art, Post-1989” exhibition in 1993

This exhibition was one of the pivotal moments in Fang Lijun’s artistic career. As one of the youngest participating artists in the show in 1993, he gained international attention for his Cynical Realist works, which offered a satirical commentary of a critical moment in the history of China. Contemporary Chinese art emerged on the international stage following this seminal exhibition, as noted in the **catalogue** of the exhibition:

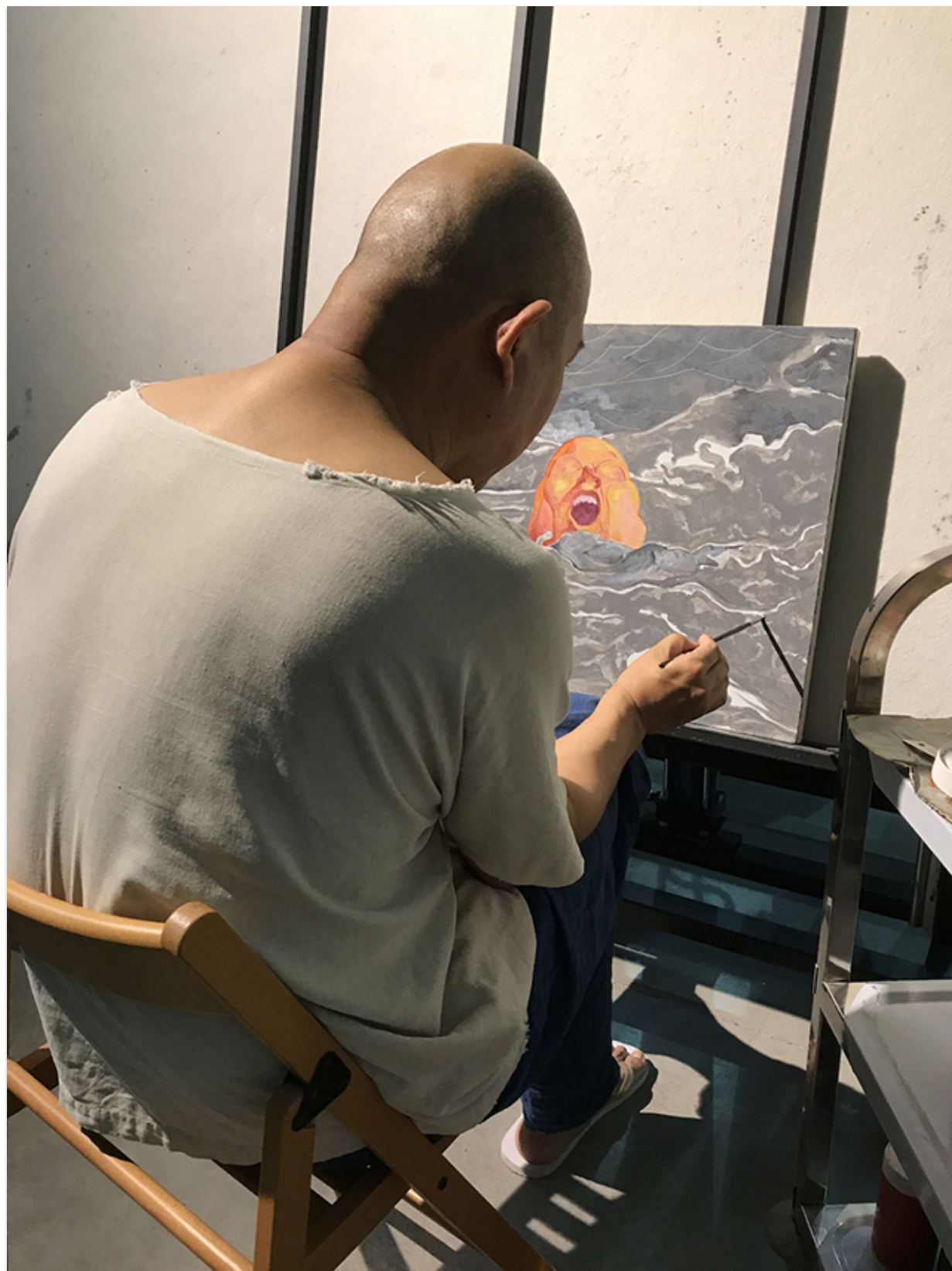
The art of the Post-1989 period was significant as it characterised the spirit of the new decade, closing the chapter of the 1980s. It was important also for the fact that it presented to the world the first major coherent overview of China’s experimental art scene, and has maintained a continuing dialogue ever since.



Fang Lijun, '2017', 2017, woodblock print, 60 x 80 cm, Ed. A/P (Edition of 68 + 6 A/P). Image courtesy the artist and Hanart TZ Gallery.

Collectivism and Individualism

The artist is known for his sharp social commentary in his works. The tension between the collective and the individual has been present throughout his oeuvre. In the curatorial statement, it is mentioned that the paintings in this exhibition reveal the "Darwinian situation" of "a society ruled by the law of the jungle" which "goes completely against the former ideology that had characterized modern socialist China". In some paintings, the masses are depicted as violent and vying for power. The animals portrayed are no less aggressive. As China transitions from one era to another, Fang Lijun's work re-examines the shift from collective self-sacrifice driven by ideology to the contemporary situation of individualism in which people fear for their own survival.



Fang Lijun working on his painting 2017 in his Beijing studio. Image courtesy the artist and Hanart TZ Gallery.

Speaking to *Art Radar*, the artist explains how the rise in consumerism in China has influenced his artistic practice. When asked whether he views the socio-economic change in China as something dystopian, or something to be celebrated, he comments:

Sometimes people build a bonfire and have a barbeque, sometimes they take a walk in the woods to enjoy the birdsong and the smell the flowers, sometimes they become refugees running away from catastrophe, sometimes they hold their breath to avoid being discovered [...] but always they act in such a way that responds to the conditions of their environment. I am a realist; I don't believe that utopia is necessarily the ideal state for society. Society's complexity, dynamism and plurality suit the human condition; I don't find emotional readings meaningful and certainly that is not my habit.



"Fang Lijun: This All Too Human World", 3 November to 2 December 2017, installation view at Hanart TZ Gallery. Photo: Kitmin Lee. Image courtesy Hanart TZ Gallery.

Motif of the baby

The symbol of a newborn infant is seen throughout the artist's oeuvre. Speaking to *Art Radar*, he explains why he chose to use this motif:

When a viewer looks at a portrait of an adult, he will try hard to discern which Tom, Dick or Harry is being portrayed; but when faced with a portrait of a baby, it is as though he is seeing himself. In any case, any image in an artwork is really just a kind of metaphorical hint or suggestion.

In various works, the baby is seen being surrounded by other menacing figures. Curator Chang Tsong-Zung interprets:

A newborn baby is being threatened by staring predators on all sides, its future in peril. A society's vision of the future should always be about building a world for the sake of future generations. Fang Lijun now depicts the 'future' as a newborn baby who is about to be 'gobbled up' by the avariciousness of contemporary life. We now live in an era where production is king, and rampant consumerism is promoted for the sake of the constant recycling of capital. Society today is rapidly consuming the future resources for the next two generations, with no controls. In the imagination of the artist, this 'gobbling of the future' becomes a world of human cannibalism.



Fang Lijun, '2014 – 2017', 2017, oil on canvas, 50 x 40 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Hanart TZ Gallery.



Fang Lijun, '2016', 2016, Woodblock print, 80 x 60 cm, Ed. A/P (Edition of 100 + 6 A/P). Image courtesy the artist and Hanart TZ Gallery.

Iconic depictions of bald heads

Commonly found in a number of works by Fang Lijun is the iconic depiction of bald heads. The artist himself has always kept his head shaved, and the figures portrayed in his art show a certain degree of self-reflexivity. As the masses are showcased in a similar fashion, the people being depicted lose individuality and look as though they are part of the crowd. Such aesthetics highlight the crisis faced in contemporary society by the population, struggling to keep an individual identity, as well as the artist himself in this "all too human world".

Valencia Tong

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"Fang Lijun: This All Too Human World" is on view from 3 November to 2 December 2017 at Hanart TZ Gallery, 401 Pedder Building, 12 Pedder Street, Central, Hong Kong.

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