



Chen Fei, *Painter and Family*, 2018. 290 x 290 cm. | 114 3/16 x 114 3/16 in. Acrylic on linen. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.

Chen Fei

Reunion

Opening Saturday, November 2, 6pm - 8pm
November 2 - December 21, 2019

Perrotin is delighted to present a solo exhibition of new works by Hongkong-born and Beijing-based artist Chen Fei, on view from November 2 to December 21. A prominent figure in China's post-1980s generation, this exhibition marks the artist's first major presentation in the Americas.

The following text is adapted from "The Human Theatre" by Uli Zhiheng Huang –

Over the past three years, Chen Fei has developed an artistic practice focusing on two genres: portrait and still life. Utilizing a unique visual language and perspective, Chen superimposes contemporary signifiers over art historical symbolism, resulting in paintings that function as containers of meaning rather than mere representations.

Painter and Family (2018), the earliest work completed in this series, shares a formal vocabulary with Velázquez's *Las Meninas* (1656) – both works delicately frame and balance perspective, figure, scale, and narrative. Most notably, *Las Meninas* depicts an expansive palace room wherein a series of paintings by Peter Paul Rubens are hung on the back wall. In the background of *Painter and Family*, Chen depicts an in-process portrait, thus creating a canvas within a canvas. From this, Chen then extracts this portrait from *Painter and Family* and positions it in the exhibition as a standalone work, appropriately titled *Portrait*. This device serves to both duplicate the work, while creating an alternate reality where the work is divorced from its maker, investigating issues of authorship and meaning. Finally, both *Las Meninas* and *Painter and Family* include a reference to the painter in the composition's left-hand corner, further destabilizing the role of the author.

Similarly, *Big Model* and *Studio Portrait* are embedded with aesthetic references from different historical periods and cultures. In *Big Model*, which is set against a meticulous Baroque background, the model is portrayed with a flatness heavily influenced by Japanese as well as European and American comic books, with the graphic patterns on the model's skin signaling the prevalence of tattoo culture. In contrast to *Big Model*, *Studio Portrait* is painted in a manner atypical of Chen's practice. The headgear is depicted with chiaroscuro, a painterly technique developed during the Renaissance period; while the portrait on the headgear is devoid of solid and thicker lines found elsewhere on the canvas. Instead, it makes use of sfumato, achieving a more realistic result with blurry, drawn lines. Both chiaroscuro and sfumato are crucial compositional techniques associated with the high Renaissance and Mannerist period. Moreover, these complementary works reflect the significance of counterpoint, a feature intrinsic to traditional Chinese culture. Counterpoint manifests in the two paintings through the use of corresponding elements: the depiction of flowers versus grass in the background; the use of male versus female subjects; the incline and the levelness of the wooden floor in the foreground; and the directions of the light source from beyond the canvas, bottom left versus top right.

Compared to Chen Fei's established portraiture practice, still life is a recent endeavor for the artist, which underlines his continued investigations into art historical tropes. During the Dutch Golden Age, still life rose to market prominence as a favorite of a newly developed European collecting class. However, the genre's low status in art history can be traced to the Italian intelligentsia of the late Renaissance. Giorgio Vasari, arguably the first-ever art historian, once said still life, with its depiction of inanimate objects, can never challenge artists or viewers in the same manner as portraiture. Chen revisits traditional still life in this new body of work, both playing with the genre's historical lineage while simultaneously translating it into a subversive contemporary context.

Notably, the painting *For Breadth and Immensity* – a massive work depicting an abundant feast – takes its title from a Confucian text. Entitled *The Doctrine of the Mean*, the text has often been used to articulate the expectations for Chinese art. In this way, the artist juxtaposes the Western genre of still life with *The Doctrine of the Mean*, creating a complex cultural layering. This synthesis is further emphasized in the subject matter of the work. The produce depicted in *For Breadth and Immensity* references the typical subject matter of Western still life – chayote as opposed to lemon, tofu as opposed to cheese – which indicates a dichotomous yet congruous cultural symmetry. The deliberate horizontal composition is redolent of traditional Chinese scrolls, suggesting a never-ending still life extending beyond the frames of the canvas. Additionally, Chen Fei's signature at the bottom of the painting pays homage to Pieter Claesz, a master of still life during the Dutch Golden Age, while the first utensil on the table is a copper candleholder designed by Tom Dixon. Finally, Chen includes a self-portrait at the far right of the painting, which is reflected on a container's mirrored surface, referencing the art historical lineage of this technique, which was first used in 1628 when Claesz portrayed his own likeness on an exquisitely carved glass sphere in *Vanitas with Violin and Glass Ball*.

In this new body of work, Chen speaks to the philosophies of two disparate cultures, as well as the localized rendition of Western art in the Chinese context, by embedding a spectrum of art historical references. Chen remarks that, "If you engage in artistic creation, you're bound to make an art historical connection. But whether you make it directly or indirectly; take advantage of it, or deliberately avoid it; this is your choice to make."

More information about the artist >>>