

Mao Tongqiang
Da Shi Tang (The Great Dining Hall)
Curated by di Marco Scotini

Prometeogallery is pleased to announce its first solo exhibition of a great master of Chinese conceptual art, Mao Tongqiang (b. 1960). The exhibition opening on April 11 into the spaces of the Via Ventura gallery in Milan presents three major works, and extends into the spaces of the former Saint Matthew's church, in Piazza San Matteo, Lucca, (from April 28).

Mao Tongqiang's work can be inscribed in the current of contemporary art, known as *Historiographic Turn*; his art is defined by a drive toward archival practice and by the passion for an uncompromising excavation of the past. If Mao Tongqiang's archaeological imaginary fits well into the canons of Western art, it appears rather isolated from the Chinese art scene. This peculiar trait of Mao Tongqiang's art is indeed one of the main reasons for the undeniably importance of his practice. Behind his oeuvre, we see the uncertainties following the rapid evolution of China from a rural to a modern economy based on goods and services, and the struggle to maintain its own political identity intact

When Mao presented his project *Tools* at the China Art Archive and Warehouse in Beijing in 2008, his three-year-long research was brought to an end. He collected and amassed tens of thousands of sickles and hammers to reach the total saturation of the exhibition space; the emblem of communism here multiplies in its physical, material and mimetic presence. Far from being a shapeless pile of objects, each piece is meticulously numbered and classified, but also positioned according to a basic classification that recognises identities and differences, with all the sickles on one side, and all the hammers on the other. Yet, the impression that this archive of silent witnesses leaves on the beholder derives from the choral, epic and tragic *mise en scène*, and is comparable to the image of a genocide.

The same thing applies to another series of found objects that, despite substantial differences, Mao Tongqiang has presented in later exhibitions until 2017. With the acts of land ownership of *Leasehold* (2009) and the bibles of *Scriptures* (2011), Mao Tongqiang attempted to stage a metaphorical trilogy that represents the sky, the earth, and the man as basic principles of Chinese thinking. What remains after their mutation? One of these three great works is at the centre of *Da Shi Tang*, the exhibition that Mao Tongqiang conceived for his first Italian show. The title refers to the great communal dining hall that is paramount to the process of collectivisation during the period of the Great Leap Forward (1958-60). What the viewer finds in the spaces of the once-Church of San Matteo are hundreds of bibles on rugs, traditional Chinese stools and chairs – denoting different

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social statuses – in addition to a dining table, placed in the apse, and furnished with table pottery from the period of the Cultural Revolution.

With the opening of the markets, it seems that Western capitalism had imported a new wave of Catholicism to China, albeit freed from social equality. Despite all, in Mao Tongqiang's installations, the collective character continues to prevail on the individual one. The same process of enumeration is played on the repetitive character of substantially homogeneous objects and signs that acquire meaning only when placed one in relation to another, going back to larger and larger groups, uncountable and endless. It is not only the nature of such display that anonymises each object represented and subjects it to dominating powers. It is also the documentary nature of the collected objects that performs the act of archiving as institutional. There is no form of narration, but the sole evidence – voiceless yet questioning – of an object next to another, in a practical disposition which makes manifest the constructedness and performativity of our realities through technologies of control and surveillance devices. The archive is the last trace left behind by history, states Mao Tongqiang since 1998, the time of his pictorial oeuvre fighting amnesia and oblivion, *The Files*.

The exhibition is completed by the showcase of *Order*, a faithful representation of Tiananmen Square, and an installation of original documents taken from the rectification movement, which bears the name of *Archive*.

Mao Tongqiang, Private Archive

Curated by Marco Scotini

Opening: 11 April 2018 | h 6.30pm

From 12 April to 31 May 2018

Via G. Ventura 6, 20134 Milano

Mao Tongqiang, Da Shi Tang (The Great Dining Hall)

Curated by Marco Scotini

Opening: 28 April 2018 | h 6.30pm

From 29 April to 1 June 2018

Ex Chiesa di San Matteo, Piazza San Matteo 3, 55100 Lucca

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