

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Gang Zhao *Passage to Dynasty*

March 15th – April 19th, 2019
Ground Floor

Gang Zhao's work is shaped by a dialectic of displacement and encounter between Western painting practices and those of his native China. Currently based in Beijing and Taipei, Zhao has observed decades of political upheaval and social change both from within his native country and during a prolonged period of expatriation. After making his artistic debut as the youngest member of China's first avant-garde collective Star Star (星星画会), Zhao left China in 1983 to pursue a formal art education in the Netherlands before moving to New York, where he would live for over two decades. Zhao's diasporic trajectory and historical consciousness are distinctly reflected in his paintings: with a frenetic touch and irreverence that betray his iconoclasm and encounters with Western practices, his works perform and exaggerate the iconography of classical Chinese painting and Socialist Realism. For his first exhibition at Greene Naftali, Zhao presents a series of scenes of 19th and 20th century China as it underwent modernization, highlighting the anxieties of the period—the moral decay of China's brothels; the catastrophic implications of nuclear testing—and their echoes in contemporary life. For Zhao, history painting is a radical means through which he reveals the complexities of a diasporic Chinese subjectivity.

A descendant of the Manchus, a once-nomadic minority that overtook and ruled China for centuries, Zhao approaches Chinese identity as a construction along both hereditary and biographical axes—a concept that is communicated stylistically and thematically throughout the exhibition. On view at Greene Naftali are episodic, historically intermittent scenes of public and private Chinese life during modernization and Western Imperialism. *The Smoker* and *Ménage à Trois* (all works 2017 – 2018) portray the use of opium in China, which reached epidemic levels during the Opium Wars of the early 20th century, prompted by the infiltration of the British trade. *High Tea* depicts the peripheral entertainment in historical Chinese brothels, another decadent siren to aristocratic men under modernization. Customers at brothels would also gamble, listen to singers and musicians, and engage in quasi-intellectual conversation with courtesans. Overseeing the exhibition are several Chinese warlords, many painted in the style of specific, Western movements: *Bacon Emperor* parodies the eponymous painter's image of the screaming pope; *Losers Never Get Lost* and *The Lord* adopt the reductive style of Kazimir Malevich's figuration. *The Fruits I* and *II* articulate the tendrils of the Buddha plant, indigenous to China. Throughout the exhibition, a dark sienna background satirizes a convention of Old Masters. Chinese in content, but arrayed in style, and unbridled in gesture, Zhao's paintings underline the permeability of national identity, and the heterogeneity of its makeup.

This spring, Zhao will have his first solo museum show in the United States, at the Pérez Art Museum Miami. Other recent solo exhibitions include Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing (2015); Today Art Museum, Beijing (2011); Hong Kong Arts Centre, Hong Kong (2008); and a two-person exhibition with David Diao at the Asian American Arts Centre, New York (2003). Notable group exhibitions include *Painting: Now and Forever, Part III*, Greene Naftali, New York and Matthew Marks, New York (2018); *Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World*, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (2017); the Yokohama Triennale, Yokohama (2009; 2005); and *Harlem School of New Social Realism*, PERFORMA, New York (2007).

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