

YAN PEI-MING

PAINTING HISTORIES

Firenze
Palazzo Strozzi

7 July - 3 September 2023

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Within the project
"Palazzo Strozzi
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YAN PEI-MING

PAINTING HISTORIES

Firenze
Palazzo Strozzi

7 July - 3 September 2023

Yan Pei-Ming
Painting Histories
(7 July - 3 September 2023)

From 7 July to 3 September 2023, Palazzo Strozzi in Florence presents '*Yan Pei-Ming. Painting Histories*;', the largest exhibition ever devoted to the Franco-Chinese artist in Italy. The exhibition is part of the *Palazzo Strozzi Future Art* project, developed in partnership with the Fondazione Hillary Merkus Recordati.

Curated by Arturo Galansino, '*Yan Pei-Ming, Painting Histories*' will explore the artist's powerful and highly original research into the **relationship between image and reality** through painted depictions of his personal life alongside important moments, figures and icons from our collective history.

It will feature over 30 works, several of which have been created especially for the exhibition, including two *TIME* magazine covers portraying Russian President **Vladimir Putin** in 2008 and Ukrainian President **Volodymyr Zelensky** in 2023. Making direct links with Italy, the exhibition will also showcase a trilogy of new paintings based on famous photographs documenting dramatic moments in Italian's recent political history: the discovery of Aldo Moro's body in the boot of a car in Rome in 1978; the body of Pier Paolo Pasolini at the Idroscalo in Ostia in 1975; and the bodies of Benito Mussolini and Claretta Petacci hanging upside-down in Milan's Piazzale Loreto in 1945. The exhibition alternates these emblematic images with monumental self-portraits and portraits of his mother and father or historical figures such as Mao Zedong and Adolf Hitler, along with original interpretations of such canonical artworks as Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* or Velazquez's *Innocent X*.

Renowned for his deep and passionate reflection on painting in today's art, Yan Pei-Ming urges us to rethink the **relationship between history and the contemporary world, between memory and the present**. Exploring such genres as portraiture, landscapes, still lifes and historical painting, his pictures take their cue from the model of photographic images from different sources such as the artist's own personal archive, **magazine covers, film stills or celebrated works from art history**. Yan Pei-Ming urges us to reflect on the contradiction between reality and depiction, truth and the construction of images – an increasingly topical theme in the digital age where boundaries between private and public, past and present and the reliability of authorship are increasingly blurred.

Born in Shanghai in 1960, Yan Pei-Ming moved to France in 1980 where he still lives and works today. As he says himself: "I presume I am a Chinese and European artist, but I am first and foremost an artist." Growing up in China during the Cultural Revolution, he trained in European art history, merging techniques, sources and themes from the **East and West**. The iconography of Western visual culture plays a crucial role in the artist's work, combined with subjects that find a direct echo in China, such as the tiger and the dragon or the figures of Mao and Bruce Lee, his childhood idol and an iconic link between East and West, between Hollywood and Hong Kong.

Yan Pei-Ming is a painter of history and of stories, revisiting iconic moments from the past but also exploring personal histories and bringing an immediacy and human touch to images that have become ubiquitous through their reproduction. As he himself puts it: "I am not a romantic painter, I am a **painter of our time**." In portraying himself or his family, or celebrated figures or moments in history, Yan Pei-Ming extols a direct, almost brutal relationship with his models through a style based on vigorous, broad brushstrokes applied directly onto the canvas without any preparatory drawing. He attacks the canvas with immense energy, almost coming to blows with the paint. His palette is often a two-colour affair: black and white, red and white, blue and white. Colour becomes a way of amplifying the expressive force of his paintings, which are often created in a **monumental format** that the observer seems to be able to "enter." His images become almost abstract when seen close up, blotches of colour that meld and overlap, acquiring a sharper definition only from afar – that very definition that we perceive for events in our recent past which require a certain chronological distance in order to be understood and analysed.

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"Yan Pei-Ming's painting is powerful and direct, as himself states: 'It's not a caress'" says **Arturo Galansino**, Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi Director General of and curator of the exhibition "With this exhibition, Palazzo Strozzi continues its mission of creating a dialogue between the past and the present, involving artists who know how to interpret our time. Yan Pei-Ming reflects on the human condition, merging diverse sources between reality and imagination, private life and public history. He is a painter of stories, not just History, as his paintings bring together images that have marked the recent past alongside masterpieces of art history and the intimate narrative of his own personal experience. The artist explores the potential of painting and its ability to be current, accessible, and engaging for everyone."

Our virtuous journey alongside Palazzo Strozzi continues with an extraordinary event," says **Andy Bianchedi**, President of the Hillary Merkus Recordati Foundation, "a luminous embodiment of both 'perturbation' and pride. Yan Pei-Ming is a visionary artist, a true 'assault' painter, imaginative and courageous, who compels anyone approaching his talent to reflect upon an irreversible synthesis between the present and the past. Each of his works, every stroke, beckons, or rather, compels us to think and rethink, as emphasized by his admirers, in an infinite temporal leap, sublimated in a perfect storm that envelops and upheaves, in all its visual and emotional power, sensitive souls."

The exhibition is promoted and organised by the Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi, Firenze as part of its *Palazzo Strozzi Future Art* project developed in partnership with the Fondazione Hillary Merkus Recordati. Main supporter: Fondazione CR Firenze. Supporters: Comune di Firenze, Regione Toscana, Camera di Commercio di Firenze, Intesa Sanpaolo and the Palazzo Strozzi Partners Committee. With a contribution from the Città Metropolitana di Firenze. With thanks to MASSIMODECARLO and Galerie Thaddeus Ropac.

Biography

Yan Pei-Ming was born in Shanghai in 1960 and grew up at the peak of the personality cult of Mao and the Cultural Revolution. In 1978, two years after Mao's death, the Chinese Communist regime embarked on a major "de-Maoisation" and liberalisation programme. Towards the end of the Beijing Spring, the Shanghai Academy of Art and Design rejected Yan Pei-Ming's application, so taking advantage of the education reform introduced by Deng Xiaoping in 1977 allowing Chinese students to study abroad, he left China for France in 1980 at the age of 19. He enrolled at the École des Beaux-Arts in Dijon in 1981 and graduated five years later. He soon met with success thanks to his monochrome portraits, especially those of Chairman Mao, combining Western tradition with Chinese cultural references.

Yan Pei-Ming's presentation at the Venice Biennale in 2003 turned him into a leading figure on the international art scene. Six years later the Louvre invited him to interact with the *Mona Lisa* in a series of paintings entitled *Les Funérailles de Monna Lisa*. In recent years he has held one-man shows at the Des Moines Art Center, Des Moines (IA), in 2008; the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing, in 2009; the QMA Gallery, Doha, in 2012; the Beijing Center for the Arts, Beijing, in 2014; the CAC Málaga, Málaga, in 2015; Villa Medici, Rome, in 2016; and the Museo Belvedere, Vienna, in 2016.

To mark the 200th anniversary of the birth of Gustave Courbet in 2019, Yan Pei-Ming interacted with the painter in two exhibitions, at the Musée Courbet in Ornans and at the Musée du Petit Palais in Paris. At the same time he produced for the Musée d'Orsay *Un enterrement à Shanghai (Montagne céleste, Ma mère, L'adieu)*, a monumental triptych as a tribute to his late mother. This was followed by an exhibition exploring his work through his personal history at the Musée Unterlinden, Colmar, in 2021, while he explored the ambiguity of power and its representation at the Collection Lambert and the Palais des Papes, Avignon, in 2021. In 2023, in addition to the Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi exhibition, his work is due to be shown at the Francisco Carolinum, Linz and the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, San Diego (MCASD). Yan Pei-Ming has been living and working in Dijon and Paris since 1980.

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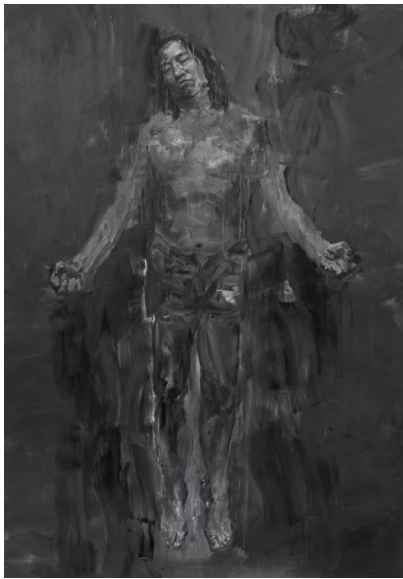


YAN PEI-MING

PAINTING HISTORIES

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PHOTO SHEET

<p><i>Nom d'un chien ! Un jour parfait</i> 2012</p> <p>triptych, oil on canvas, 400 x 280 cm each Private collection</p> <p>Photography: André Morin © Yan Pei-Ming, ADAGP, Paris, 2023.</p>	
<p><i>Ma mère</i> 2018</p> <p>oil on canvas, 350 x 350 cm Private collection</p> <p>Photography: André Morin © Yan Pei-Ming, ADAGP, Paris, 2023.</p>	
<p><i>Bouddha pour ma mère</i> 2023</p> <p>oil on canvas, 300 x 200 cm Courtesy MASSIMODECARLO and Thaddaeus Ropac gallery</p> <p>Photography: Clérin-Morin © Yan Pei-Ming, ADAGP, Paris, 2023</p>	

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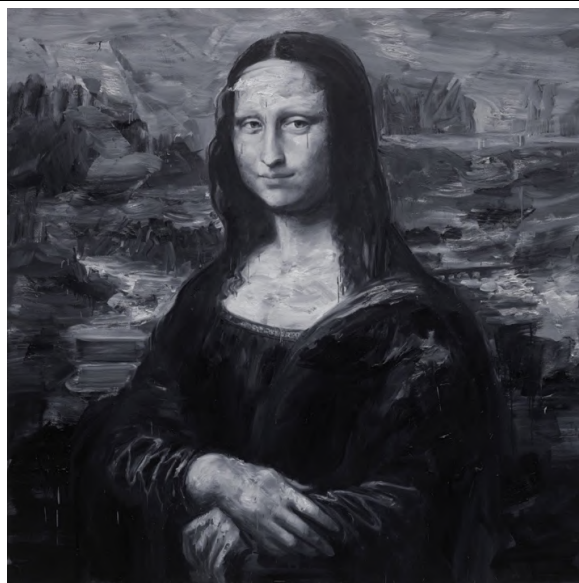
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Les Funérailles de Monna Lisa

2009

Polyptych oil on canvas,
(canvas n. 3) 280 × 280 cm
Private collection

Photography: André Morin
© Yan Pei-Ming, ADAGP, Paris,
2023.



Exécution, après Goya

2012

oil on canvas, 280 × 400 cm
Private collection

Photography: André Morin
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2023.



Marat (13 July 1793, Paris)

2014

tryptych, oil on canvas,
180 × 180 cm each
Private collection

Photography: André Morin
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<p><i>Napoleon, Crowning Himself Emperor – Purple</i> 2017</p> <p>oil on canvas, 200 × 100 cm Private collection</p> <p>Photography: André Morin © Yan Pei-Ming, ADAGP, Paris, 2023.</p>	
<p><i>Pape Innocent X bleu</i> 2022</p> <p>oil on canvas, 250 × 200 cm Private collection</p> <p>Photography: Clérin-Morin © Yan Pei-Ming, ADAGP, Paris, 2023</p>	
<p><i>Vladimir Putin, Tsar of The New Russia</i> 2008</p> <p>tryptych, watercolour on paper, 210 × 154 cm each Private collection</p> <p>Photography: André Morin © Yan Pei-Ming, ADAGP, Paris, 2023.</p>	
<p><i>Volodymyr Zelensky & The Spirit of Ukraine</i> 2023</p> <p>tryptych, watercolour on paper, 76 × 54 cm each</p> <p>Courtesy MASSIMODECARLO and Thaddaeus Ropac gallery</p> <p>Photography: Clérin-Morin © Yan Pei-Ming, ADAGP, Paris, 2023</p>	

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<p><i>Champ de crânes rouges</i> 2023</p> <p>watercolor on paper, 154 x 405 cm</p> <p>Courtesy MASSIMODECARLO and Thaddaeus Ropac gallery</p>	
<p><i>Mao rouge</i> 2006</p> <p>oil on canvas, 350 x 350 cm Private collection</p> <p>Photography: André Morin © Yan Pei-Ming, ADAGP, Paris, 2023.</p>	
<p><i>Bruce Lee</i> 2007</p> <p>oil on canvas, 350 x 350 cm</p> <p>Photography: André Morin © Yan Pei-Ming, ADAGP, Paris, 2023.</p>	
<p><i>Tigre rouge vermillon de Chine</i> 2023</p> <p>oil on canvas, 240 x 280 cm Courtesy MASSIMODECARLO and Thaddaeus Ropac gallery</p> <p>Photography: Clérin-Morin © Yan Pei-Ming, ADAGP, Paris, 2023</p>	

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Aldo Moro (9 May 1978, Rome)

2017

oil on canvas, 250 × 300 cm
Private collection

Photography: André Morin
© Yan Pei-Ming, ADAGP, Paris,
2023.



Ostia, due novembre 1975

2023

oil on canvas, 250 × 300 cm
Courtesy MASSIMODECARLO
and Thaddaeus Ropac gallery

Photography: Clérin-Morin
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2023



Crucifixion (Il Vangelo secondo Matteo)

2023

oil on canvas, 400 × 300 cm
Courtesy MASSIMODECARLO
and Thaddaeus Ropac gallery

Photography: Clérin-Morin
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2023



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Hitler, d'après Hubert

Lanzinger

2012

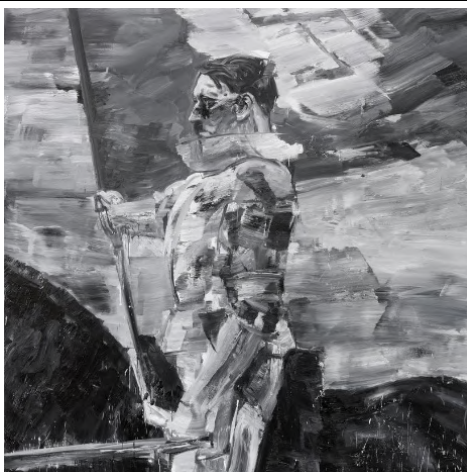
oil on canvas, 280 × 280 cm

Private collection

Courtesy M. Ars SA

Photography: André Morin

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2023.



29 aprile 1945, Piazzale Loreto,

Milano

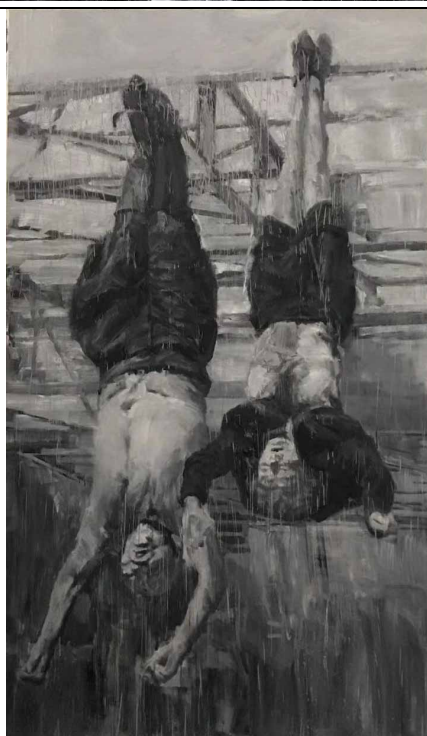
2022

oil on canvas, 350 × 200 cm

Private collection

Photography: Clérin-Morin

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2023



Chien hurlant

2022

oil on canvas, 240 × 280 cm

Courtesy MASSIMODECARLO
and e Thaddaeus Ropac gallery

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«LA PEINTURE N'EST PAS UNE CARESSE»

by Arturo Galansino (Essay from the catalogue)

"I paint with a lot of personal feeling. When you talk about feelings in contemporary painting, people are always a little suspicious. It seems you're never supposed to express your emotions, your heart: I always do the exact opposite! Painting speaks to me, it speaks to the viewer, it speaks of its time. I want to be an actor of my time"

The exhibition *Yan Pei-Ming. Painting Histories* explores the potential of painting, the traditional technique par excellence, and this medium's ability to speak clearly of our history. Yan Pei-Ming is, in fact, a painter of History and of stories, for among his works we find images that have marked our recent history alongside his reinterpretations of the creations of the great masters of the past, as well as intimate depictions of his own personal and existential experience.

"To me the subject itself is the act of painting"

In a perpetual shared dialogue between History, the stories contained in images, and autobiography, the subjects of Yan Pei-Ming's paintings echo and reflect one another throughout different times and places, between East and West. This is often an allusive and mysterious commingling, as in *Les Funérailles de Monna Lisa*, one of this artist's most famous works, where the large-scale reproduction of the most famous portrait in the world, known even in the China of the Cultural Revolution where the artist grew up, is set in a vast landscape and hung alongside the portrait of the painter's father and a self-portrait, in both of which the subjects are on their deathbeds.

"The portrait is a reflection on the passing of time. In this case, the Mona Lisa represents a metaphor of time in its infinity"

Yan Pei-Ming often says that "painting is not a caress." This statement proves he is aware of the power of his art and embodies its explosive style, the dramatic, often disturbing subjects he tackles, and his constant and daily practice in his studio: a direct relationship with painting that becomes vital, existential, and often cathartic. More at ease with his brushes than with theory, Yan Pei-Ming has continued to employ the figurative style he learned in his youth in Shanghai, though at the time of his debut in France this genre was anything but popular, and yet he still managed to be welcomed into even the most conceptual circles of the *École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts* in Dijon, where he arrived as a student in the 1980s. He likes to define himself a "combative painter," for when he paints, he attacks the canvas energetically, with vigorous, broad brushstrokes applied directly onto the support. He never uses preparatory sketches and creates his figures with great speed, using sparse, steady, almost ritual, gestures. His works are often monumental in size, and to produce them he uses extenders, scaffoldings, and aerial platforms. In these imposing works, the depicted images appear abstract when observed from close-up; interwoven, overlapping patches of color that take on a defined shape only when seen from a distance.

"For years I condemned myself to paint in black and white. At one point, I told myself that my sentence was a bit harsh... At first the absence of color was deliberate, necessary to forge my personality, to exist"

His style draws inspiration from the most celebrated Western pictorial tradition, blown up to gigantic proportions and nearly always employing a two-tone palette, which was at first exclusively black and white, like the pictures he saw in the newspapers when he was young. It later included red, the color of blood and of life, followed, gradually, by other colors, finally achieving polychromatic effects. This limited palette amplifies the expressive force of his paintings; at the same time, the artist declares that it allows him to avoid comparison

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with the great masters of the past, by whom he is inspired but from whom he seeks to differentiate himself. Thanks to this limited range of colors, the way the effects of light are rendered on the pictorial surface, the play of light and shadow, have a central function.

“My work always orients towards human beings, it’s the centre, the fundamental element of my work. If you ask me to do abstract painting, I can’t handle it. I am interested in human beings”

Whether drawing upon his personal experience or tackling the great pictorial art of the past and the facts of History, Yan Pei-Ming always favors crude subjects related to death, a theme by which he is obsessed and which he exorcizes by painting it. He has thus depicted his own funeral, portrayed himself being executed or crucified – as in his first full-figure self-portrait, the triptych *Nom d’un chien !*, in which the painter depicts himself crucified three times, interpreting Christ as well as the thieves – or in *vanitas* paintings, compositions of skulls reproducing the CT scan of his head. In this exhibition, his personal life is described through the trauma of the loss of his parents, as well as by images drawn from his early years in Shanghai. Among these are: the portrait of his mother, the large amber Buddha – the sign of a devotion that was able to resist the atheism of Mao’s China – , the vermilion animals from the Chinese horoscope, such as the dragon and the tiger, and his tribute to the pop Kung-fu icon Bruce Lee. The monumental portrait of Mao, the distant and ever present icon of the artist’s early years, also belongs to this Chinese imagery. This image was at the core of Yan Pei-Ming’s universe long before he arrived in Europe, and though this genre was considered minor in China at the time, ever since his childhood the artist practiced by drawing and painting portraits of his family. And yet, his portraits of the “Great Helmsman” were the works through which he became known in the West, emancipating him while at the same time binding him, personally and indissolubly, to the collective history in which this image was inescapable.

“Mao is like a laboratory for me. I do all my testing, my experimenting on his portraits”

Yan Pei-Ming measures himself with the extremely well-known features of a figure whose cult of personality he experienced firsthand, and thus from a very different perspective compared to other artists such as Gerhard Richter or Andy Warhol. Here Mao’s face is intentionally integrated into the artist’s existence, like an element connecting different moments of his life in an almost contradictory way. A ubiquitous image in China, a symbol of authority and of the lack of freedom of expression, it is what pushed Yan Pei-Ming to become an artist and lead a new life in France.

“Mao and my father aren’t all that different to me [...] In China, they always told us that Mao was more important than our father. I didn’t agree [...] Evidently Mao is the father”

His reflection upon the image of the great Communist leader ideally makes way for his work on the figures of world leaders, on their appearance and charisma, in a combination of news and fascination that has led Yan Pei-Ming to paint a potentially infinite series: *Game of Power*, portraits of power that include heads of state, sovereigns, dictators, and religious leaders. For Yan Pei-Ming, painting can be a political action, as we see in two portraits that counter one another in this exhibition: Putin and Zelensky, both drawn from the covers that *Time* magazine dedicates each year to a figure who has been particularly relevant on a global level, the first from 2007 and the second from 2022. This juxtaposition evokes the omnipresence of war in human history, morbidly validated by a large watercolor of a “field of red skulls”, a pile of skulls soaked in blood which seems to ooze from the canvas.

“I have no intention of being nostalgic about ancient painting: it’s just a starting point for a reinterpretation. You need to understand the power of Caravaggio and immediately delve into contemporary history”

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Yan Pei-Ming's interest in the portrayal of power also leads to the evocation of past masterpieces, represented here by his reinterpretations of Velázquez's *Innocenzo X* – a portrait that Francis Bacon was incapable of looking in the eye –, of the imperious self-coronation of Napoleon Bonaparte based on a preparatory sketch by Jacques-Louis David for his large *Le Sacre de Napoléon*, and of a rhetorical propaganda portrait of Hitler by Hubert Lanzinger. Struck by the violence inherent in history, Yan Pei-Ming reflects upon dramatic historical subjects, such as the execution of Spanish revolutionaries by Napoleon's troops, depicted by Goya as faceless automatons, or the assassination of the Jacobin Marat, a crime scene carefully studied by David to depict a martyr of the revolution.

“I am not a romantic painter. I am a painter of our times”

While these paintings by the great masters of the past have been a starting point for the reinterpretation of certain historical themes or events, a series of photographs referring to more recent news items has led the painter to depict some of the most dramatic moments of the past century in Italy in a disturbing triptych: the bodies of Benito Mussolini, executed and hung upside down in Piazzale Loreto in Milan, of Pier Paolo Pasolini, discovered at the seaplane base in Ostia, and of Aldo Moro, left by the Brigate Rosse in Via Caetani in Rome.

“History plays a fundamental role in my work, partially because it is governed by the conflict between life and death, or the idea of the end of the human condition. I believe it is this constant struggle that moves us”

These three killings, which have deeply affected the past decades in our country's recent history, enter into an allusive dialogue with a *Crucifixion* – inspired by Pasolini's movie *Il Vangelo secondo Matteo* (The Gospel According to St. Matthew) – and with a “sombre” landscape, seemingly painted in tar, the fierce barking of a dog with its jaws wide open echoing throughout its pitch-black night.

“The black of night interests me quite a lot; it plays a fundamental role in my work, but grey is required, too, for the black to become truly intense”

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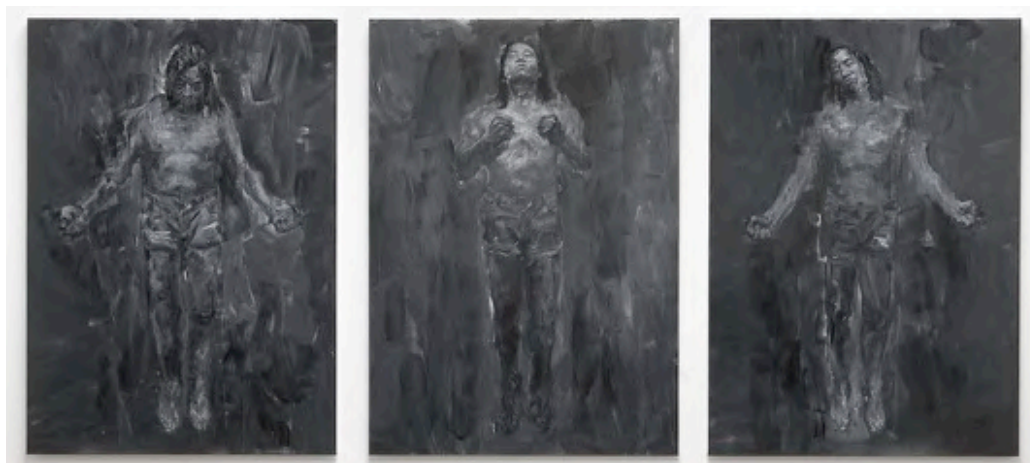
PAINTING HISTORIES

Firenze
Palazzo Strozzi

7 July - 3 September 2023

EXHIBITION WALKTHROUGH
(from the catalogue)

Room 1
NOM D'UN CHIEN !



“A portrait is like a mirror, it reflects who we are, what we are”

Powerful and intense self-portraits have a unique standing in Yan Pei-Ming's art; as for all artists, they reveal his thought process and his sensitivity. *Nom d'un chien ! Un jour parfait* (Dammit! A Perfect Day), a title that originates from an exclamation by a critic standing before this canvas, is a frontal, full length self-portrait, in which the subject's pose evokes the crucifixion, one of the themes drawn from Christian iconography frequently explored by the painter as part of his attempt to establish a cultural syncretism between East and West.

In this monumental triptych he therefore chooses to impersonate Christ as well as the two thieves, and he eliminates the crosses while preserving the traditional position of the feet. The figures are floating in an indefinite space, the classic loincloth replaced by anachronistic cutoff jeans. The tightly clenched fists which the central figure brings to its chest evoke the idea of surfacing from a great depth, as if seeking air.

There is a cart, too, in this room, to which the artist has applied layers of paint left over from his paintings: it is a digest of more than twenty-five years of work, a tridimensional portrait of sorts, which also concretely represents the passing of time, layer upon layer.

Nom d'un chien ! Un jour parfait, 2012
triptych, oil on canvas, 400 x 280 cm each
Private collection

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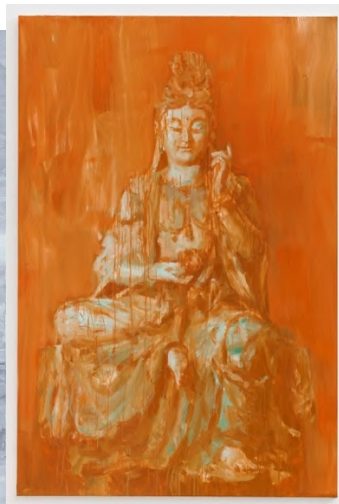
YAN PEI-MING

PAINTING HISTORIES

Firenze
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7 July - 3 September 2023

Room 2
FOR MY MOTHER



“Portrait is the center of my universe”

Yan Pei-Ming's portraits are often related to his private life. An example of this are his depictions of his mother, whom he portrayed only once while she was alive. After her death in 2018, he produced a series of monumental works that are a heartfelt tribute to her memory and bear witness to his filial affection. The artist's focus on the figure of the Buddha is also an act of obeisance towards his mother, a profoundly religious woman, as well as a nostalgic recollection of his childhood: “I've been attracted by everything that concerns Buddhism since I was very young,” he explains, “because I was born in a temple and was enveloped in Buddhist culture from the very first moment.”

The first Buddha he painted as a child was for his mother; during the Cultural Revolution, worship was banned and these images were forbidden, so the young Yan Pei-Ming painted them for his relatives. As an adult, recalling his mother's piety, he began to produce figures of the Buddha in series, evoking the rows of sculptures lining Buddhist temples. The delicate scenery instead represents “an ideal landscape, a kind of paradise, where I would like my mother to live.”

Ma mère, 2018

oil on canvas, 350 × 350 cm

Private collection

Paradis Céleste pour ma mère, 2023

oil on canvas, 280 × 280 cm

Courtesy MASSIMODECARLO e Thaddaeus Ropac gallery

Bouddha pour ma mère, 2023

oil on canvas, 300 × 200 cm

Courtesy MASSIMODECARLO e Thaddaeus Ropac gallery

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Room 3
MONNA LISA



«The funeral of Mona Lisa is to bury Mona Lisa. Mona Lisa is a mystery, like death itself»

When he lived in China, Yan Pei-Ming's knowledge of western art of the past was mostly limited to the *Mona Lisa* and Michelangelo's frescos in the Sistine Chapel. For this reason, Leonardo's work acquired great significance in his imagery. Since 2009, when he was invited by the Louvre to measure himself with the masterpiece, the artist has reworked the most famous portrait in the world depicting the subject's funeral and inserting his own personal experiences into the scene. Not only has he extended the original landscape into two canvases flanking the *Mona Lisa*, but he has also placed a portrait of his father at the hospital on the left-hand wall and arranged his own imaginary funeral facing it, in which he depicts himself as a young man. With this private interjection into one of the most iconic works in the history of art, Yan Pei-Ming tackles the theme of the father-son relationship, one of the primeval archetypes, by staging a death that goes against the natural principle of life, according to which children should be the ones to bury their fathers, producing a tragedy that is perfectly described in a Chinese saying: "White hair attends black hair's funeral." Though Yan Pei-Ming doesn't recall being close to his father, a silent, reserved man, in his paintings we perceive a very deep, ancestral sentiment that elevates the portrait to a paradigm of Man.

Les Funérailles de Monna Lisa, 2009

polyptych, 5 canvases, oil on canvas

canvases 1 and 5: 400 x 400 cm; canvases 2 and 4: 280 x 500 cm; canvas 3: 280 x 280 cm

Private collection

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PAINTING HISTORIES

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Room 4 ART HISTORIES



“I am interested in the great painters; I keep finding nourishment in their work”

Yan Pei-Ming appropriates images produced by artists of the past and reworks them to give them new life, as is the case of *Marat assassiné* (The Death of Marat), represented by Jacques-Louis David in 1793, where the image is crystallized, its sole purpose that of propaganda.

The artist has also produced a blood red *Exécution, après Goya* (the original was painted in 1814), from which he has removed the bodies lying on the ground, turning them into flashes that light the nighttime scene, focusing on the execution: all of the depicted figures are still alive, for the artist wishes to display only “those who resist.”

Like Bacon, Yan Pei-Ming was profoundly impressed by Velázquez’s *Ritratto di Innocenzo X* (Portrait of Innocent X) from 1650: “I was fascinated... the color is fantastic. It inspired me greatly.” The figure of the pope becomes a symbol of power, its personification, much like his *Napoleon*, drawn from a preparatory sketch for the large canvas by David at the Louvre (1805–07), in which the Corsican crowns himself before a defeated Pope Pius VII – eliminated by Yan Pei-Ming – to manifest his rejection of papal authority. As Pope Innocent X embodies both political and religious authority, similarly these same prerogatives are combined in Napoleon, whose gesture marks a significant historical moment.

Napoleon, Crowning Himself Emperor – Purple, 2017

oil on canvas, 200 x 100 cm

Private collection

Exécution, après Goya, 2012

oil on canvas, 280 x 400 cm

Private collection

Marat (13 July 1793, Paris), 2014

triptych, oil on canvas, 180 x 180 cm each

Private collection

Pape Innocent X bleu, 2022

oil on canvas, 250 x 200 cm

Private collection

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Room 4 bis TIME



“History is a cruel tragedy that lays waste to humanity”

On December 31, 2007, Vladimir Putin appeared on the cover of Time magazine, chosen as “Person of the Year”, and described as the “Tsar of the New Russia,” which stimulated Yan Pei-Ming to depict the Russian leader in a triptych. In December of 2022, the last cover of the month, traditionally dedicated by the magazine to the most significant figure of the year, was entitled to “Volodymyr Zelensky & The Spirit of Ukraine,” and Yan Pei-Ming drew upon it for another watercolor triptych, imagining that “the two works would be able to confront and challenge one another.” To strengthen the central image of this second work, the artist used the colors of the Ukrainian flag, where blue represents peace and yellow the wheat fields, a powerful symbol of the independence and identity of a people. More recently, stimulated by the reiterated reports of atrocities committed during the military operations in Ukraine, Yan Pei-Ming added to these portraits a new large piece in which countless skulls – a “field of skulls” – are submerged in blood, a powerful and dramatic reference to the horrors of every war. Skulls are a subject frequently explored by Yan Pei-Ming, who has drawn upon the ancient vanitas, which allude to the impermanence of life, to produce a number of intimist works related to his self-portraits using an CT scan of his skull.

Vladimir Putin, Tsar of The New Russia, 2008
triptych, watercolor on paper, 210 × 154 each
Private collection

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PAINTING HISTORIES

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7 July - 3 September 2023

Room 5 bis
TIME



“History is a cruel tragedy that lays waste to humanity”

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Volodymyr Zelensky & The Spirit of Ukraine, 2023

triptych, watercolor on paper, 76 x 54 cm each

Courtesy MASSIMODECARLO e Thaddaeus Ropac gallery

Champ de crânes rouges, 2023

watercolor on paper, 154 x 405 cm

Courtesy MASSIMODECARLO e Thaddaeus Ropac gallery

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7 July - 3 September 2023

Room 5 PAPER TIGER



“I assume I am both a Chinese and a European artist, but I am first of all an artist”

Yan Pei-Ming's first portraits depicted anonymous people, except for those portraying Mao Zedong, the inevitable subject of all propaganda painting during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). The Chairman's image became central for our artist, who integrated it into his personal experience especially when, having left China, he was able to extrapolate the leader's figure from its celebratory dimension. A part of Yan Pei-Ming's work is devoted to subjects that belong to the imagery associated by Westerners with China: the tiger and the dragon, the Buddha and Bruce Lee. The actor – a mythical figure who perfectly embodies the birth of globalization and is considered the link connecting Hollywood to Hong Kong – is related to the tiger and the dragon, which are both Shaolin Kung Fu forms, one of the most important and ancient styles of Chinese martial arts. The Dragon, a good omen and the emblem of China itself, plays a predominant role in mythology and embodies the concept of yang, the masculine element. Along with the Tiger, it is also one of the twelve signs of the Chinese zodiac, with its long whiskers and its paws ending in sharp claws, though it is the only legendary beast of the twelve. It appears that the precepts of oriental martial arts apply to Yan Pei-Ming's painting as well.

***Dragon rouge vermillon de Chine*, 2023**

oil on canvas, 350 × 200 cm

Courtesy MASSIMODECARLO e Thaddaeus Ropac gallery

***Bruce Lee*, 2007**

oil on canvas, 350 × 350 cm

Private collection

***Tigre rouge vermillon de Chine*, 2023**

oil on canvas, 240 × 280 cm

Courtesy MASSIMODECARLO e Thaddaeus Ropac gallery

***Mao rouge*, 2006**

oil on canvas, 350 × 350 cm

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PAINTING HISTORIES

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Room 6
ITALIAN STORIES



“The current events I describe will one day become examples of history painting”

The discovery of Pasolini's body at the seaplane base in Ostia on November 2, 1975 and of Aldo Moro's corpse left on May 9, 1978 by the Brigate Rosse in the trunk of a red Renault 4 in Via Caetani in Rome, a spot equidistant from the headquarters of the Italian Communist Party and those of the Christian Democracy, are among the most dramatic events in recent Italian history. Yan Pei-Ming chooses to present the public aspect of these incidents which have already acquired historical relevance, even though they are not chronologically distant from the present.

The images, which are almost abstract when seen from close up, composed of overlapping, intertwined patches of color, acquire clarity only when viewed from a distance; the same distance that is required to understand and analyze events of the near past. During a stay in Rome in 1993–94, Yan Pei-Ming became enamored of ancient art, but also Italian movies, in particular Rossellini's *Roma città aperta* (Rome, Open City) and Pasolini's *Mamma Roma*. He has used frames from both films in his works. More recently, in his *Crucifixion*, inspired by Pasolini's *Vangelo secondo Matteo* (The Gospel According to St. Matthew), he has magnified the extremely crude scene of the discovery of the director's body.

Aldo Moro (9 May 1978, Rome), 2017

oil on canvas, 250 x 300 cm

Private collection

Crucifixion (Il Vangelo secondo Matteo), 2023

oil on canvas, 400 x 300 cm

Courtesy MASSIMODECARLO e Thaddaeus Ropac gallery

Ostia, due novembre 1975, 2023

oil on canvas, 250 x 300 cm

Courtesy MASSIMODECARLO e Thaddaeus Ropac gallery

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Room 7
EAST OF EDEN



“For me the theme is painting, first and foremost”

The title of the work refers to a quote from *Genesis* (4:11-16), where after killing Abel, Cain is cursed by the Lord, who banishes him “from the ground that opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand. If you till the ground, it shall no longer give you its produce. You shall become a constant wanderer on the earth [...] Cain then left the Lord’s presence and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.”

Yan Pei-Ming turns humans and their primeval instincts into wild beasts – bears, lions, wolves, buffalo, eagles, tigers, gorillas – who, exiled from the Garden of Eden, violently challenge and tear each other to pieces, alluding to the struggle for survival that has always gone hand in hand with the history of humanity.

This monumental diptych – dark and heavily textured – was painted by Yan Pei-Ming “as if I were waging a war” engaged in a struggle, wrestling with the painting, in a series of violent brushstrokes, like blows striking the canvas. For the animals fighting in the woods, where landscape painting and animal painting come together, Yan Pei-Ming drew inspiration from the works of Gustave Courbet, an artist whom he knew and loved from his days in China, where this painter was held in high regard mainly because he had been a revolutionary and had participated in the socialist Commune of Paris in 1871.

À l’est d’Eden, 2015

diptych, oil on canvas, 400 x 600 cm

Private collection

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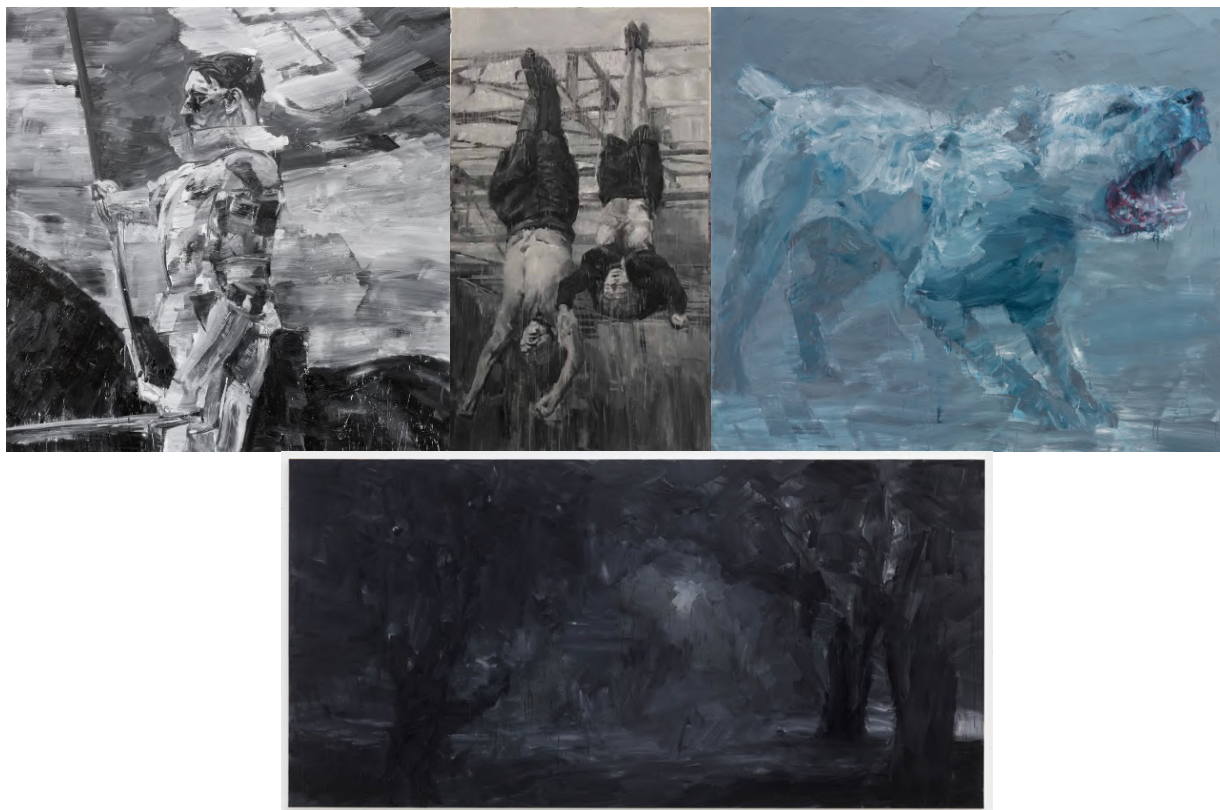
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PAINTING HISTORIES

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7 July - 3 September 2023

Room 8 THE NIGHT



“Death is ever present. For everyone, and at all times, it is present”

The tragedy of WWII, presented here in its final moments, is contained in two powerful works by Yan Pei-Ming: the body of Mussolini – executed on April 28, 1945 in Como and hung upside down the following day in Milan in Piazzale Loreto, alongside his lover, Claretta Petacci – and the portrait of Adolf Hitler, inspired by *Der Bannerträger* by the Austrian artist Hubert Lanzinger (1880–1950). The latter painting, produced in 1933, celebrated the rise to power of National Socialism by depicting the Führer on horseback, wearing Medieval armor and holding a standard with a Swastika. At the end of the war, the US Army confiscated the work, and after disparagingly making a hole in the eye of the personification of evil, they shipped it to the United States Army Center of Military History in Washington, D.C., where the historical archives of the United States Army are preserved. Yan Pei-Ming used a photograph and a painting as a source of inspiration for his depiction of this dark, tragic time, evoked by the dog that represents human brutality and by a dark woodland landscape by night, upon which color and scale bestow an allegorical dimension. The smudge of paint on Hitler’s eye further underlines the desire for a *damnatio memoriae* of an epoch that was terrible in its lack of humanity.

Hitler, d’après Hubert Lanziger, 2012

oil on canvas, 280 × 280 cm

Private collection

Courtesy M. Ars SA

29 aprile 1945, Piazzale Loreto, Milan, 2022

oil on canvas, 350 × 200 cm

Courtesy MASSIMODECARLO e Thaddaeus Ropac gallery

Chien hurlant, 2022

oil on canvas, 240 × 280 cm

Courtesy MASSIMODECARLO e Thaddaeus Ropac gallery

Paysage sombre, 2023

oil on canvas 250 x 500 cm

Courtesy MASSIMODECARLO e Thaddaeus Ropac gallery

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CHARACTERS AND REFERENCES

Room 3

“MONA LISA

LEONARDO DA VINCI, MONA LISA (THE GIOCONDA), 1503–18

The portrait of Lisa del Giocondo (1479–1542) was commissioned from Leonardo in Florence by her husband Francesco (1460–1539), a silk merchant. The artist began the painting in 1503 before taking it with him, unfinished, to Milan and then to France, where it was purchased by Francis I, possibly in 1518. Leonardo used a poplarwood panel, a usual choice in Tuscany, for a work that portrays a woman, life size, seated in a tub chair, her hands crossed over her belly, in front of a balustrade behind which we spy a sweeping panorama with mountain chains, roads and a river crossed by a bridge. Scholars have identified the landscape variously with certain areas in the provinces of Pisa and Arezzo.

Yan Pei-Ming recalls: “I didn’t want to produce the portrait from a painting. For me Mona Lisa is a model, she isn’t a painting but a woman who posed for Leonardo and who is now posing for me. Hence my realistic treatment of her face and hands (...). I said to myself that she was too beautiful, that I couldn’t maltreat her.” “I wanted to give her another life, and so the most effective way to do that was to bury her.” “Bury the myth” that inspired Duchamp,

Warhol, Botero and Banksy, among others, “in order to breathe new life into the act of painting.” So he has prolonged the icon with two broad landscapes at the sides and added the portrait of his dying father and an imaginary portrait of himself dead to the side panels. With this personal addition to one of the world’s most iconic artworks, Yan Pei-Ming also addresses the father-son relationship, one of the primordial archetypes.



Leonardo da Vinci, *La Gioconda* (Mona Lisa), 1503–19, oil on wood, 79.4 x 53.4 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des Peintures.

Room 4

“ART HISTORIES”

NAPOLEON BONAPARTE

Ajaccio, 15 August 1769 – Island of St. Helena, 5 May 1821

Born into a family of Italian origin, Napoleon studied in France. A General during the French Revolution, after his first Italian campaign he seized power in a coup in 1799 and became First Consul in 1804. With a view to his proclamation as Emperor of the French under the name of Napoleon I, Pope Pius VII travelled to Paris to attend the solemn ceremony, which took place on 2 December 1804. Napoleon held onto the title until April 1814, when he abdicated after a series of disastrous military campaigns, first and foremost the campaign in Russia. Exiled to Elba, he fled, returned to Paris and to power for his “One hundred days” until 22 June 1815 when his defeat at Waterloo brought his career to a close. He spent his final years in exile on the island of St. Helena, which was under British rule at the time, in the south-central Atlantic Ocean. Yan Pei-Ming has revisited Jacques-Louis David’s preparatory cartoon for the large painting entitled *Le Sacre de Napoléon* (The Coronation of Napoleon, 1805–7, Paris, Musée du Louvre) in which both the Emperor and the Pope are portrayed, but Ming excludes the Pope,

focusing on the novel gesture of Napoleon’s self-coronation. New rituals were introduced in the course of the ceremony, with which Napoleon sought to emphasise the fact that he was being crowned Emperor for his own merits and the will of his people rather than by religious consecration. Yan Pei-Ming’s interest, as he tells us, is in “the story of men of power” emblematically embodied, in this instance, by Bonaparte.



Jacques-Louis David, *L'Empereur Napoléon Ier se couronnant lui-même*, étude pour *Le Sacre de Napoléon* (The Emperor Napoleon Crowns Himself, study for The Coronation of Napoleon) 1804-07, black pencil on paper, 292 x 252 mm. Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des Arts graphiques.

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Within the project
“Palazzo Strozzi
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YAN PEI-MING

PAINTING HISTORIES

Firenze
Palazzo Strozzi

7 July - 3 September 2023

FRANCISCO GOYA, THE THIRD OF MAY 18 or LOS FUSILAMIENTOS DEL TRES DE MAYO, 1814

At dawn on 3 May 1808, Napoleon's troops which had invaded Spain executed dozens of rebels in various areas of Madrid in retaliation for their attempt to oppose the French on the previous day. Despite King Charles IV de Borbón having abdicated in favour of his son Ferdinand VII in March of that year, both men had had to give up the throne, which was given to Joseph-Napoléon Bonaparte. However, Napoleon's weakness after his disastrous Russian campaign and England's provision of aid subsequently allowed the Spanish guerrilla fighters to win a victory, and Ferdinand was able to return to the throne in May 1814.

Francisco Goya was commissioned to paint his large painting by the Regency Council, although it was not displayed in the Prado until 1872. The crudely realistic scene is dominated by the highlights on the figure of a peasant in a white shirt and the lantern illuminating the figures of the prisoners, shown in various different attitudes in order to convey feelings at times contrasting, while the French are shown only from behind. The painting, like others by Goya, aims to communicate the inhumanity of war.

Yan Pei-Ming, who painted his *Exécution, après Goya* in 2008, two hundred years after the massacre, explained: "I like tragic subjects because I find them eternal. Empathy is a way for me to express myself in painting. The subjects I choose stir an immense feeling in me, like Goya's Tres de mayo. I ask myself: how can one man shoot another man?"



Francisco Goya, *El 3 de mayo en Madrid* (The Third of May 1808), 1814, oil on canvas, 268 × 347 cm. Madrid, Museo del Prado.

JEAN-PAUL MARAT

Boudry, 24 May 1743 – Paris, 13 July 1793

A Swiss-born journalist, doctor of medicine and politician who moved to Paris, Marat was the Editor-in-Chief of *L'Ami du peuple*, founded in 1789: he himself was later to be known by that same monicker. One of the leading players in the French Revolution and a fervent opponent of the monarchy, elected to the National Convention and appointed President of the Club des Jacobins in April 1793, he was one of those responsible for the Girondin massacres and the start of what became known as the Reign of Terror. He was stabbed to death by a Girondin supporter named Charlotte Corday while he was in his bath tub attempting to alleviate the symptoms of a skin ailment.

Yan Pei-Ming has drawn his inspiration from Jacques-Louis David's painting *Marat assassiné* (The Death of Marat), now in the Musée Royaux de Beaux-Arts in Brussels. David, a friend of Marat, was tasked with capturing the scene and organising the public display of the body, which was presented in the nude to show the wound, "covered by a wet sheet supposed to represent the bath tub and which was hosed down every now and then to stem the putrefaction." In the picture – painted at a later date and given by David to the Convention on 14 November 1793 – the scene is reconstructed to resemble a "pietà" or a "republican deposition" in an effort to transform Marat into a martyr of the Revolution with the wound in his side oozing blood and his arm hanging down in a position that echoes the work of both Michelangelo (the Vatican *Pietà*) and Raphael (the Borghese Gallery *Deposizione*).

While Baudelaire, writing in 1846, highlighted the chilly quality of David's painting ("There is something at once both tender and poignant about this work; in the icy air of that room, on those chilly walls, about that cold and funereal bath tub, hovers a soul"), Yan Pei-Ming, on the contrary, makes it vibrate, revisiting it in three different dominants and placing the dramatic blood red version in the centre of his triptych.



Jacques-Louis David, *Marat assassiné* (The Death of Marat), 1793, oil on canvas, 165 × 128 cm. Brussels, Musée Royaux de Beaux-Arts.

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GIOVANNI BATTISTA PAMPHILI, POPE INNOCENT X Rome, 6 May 1574 – 7 January 1655

Innocent X, born Giovanni Battista Pamphili, was Pope from 1644 to 1655. Known for his nepotism, he was responsible for numerous major town planning projects in Rome, including the renovation of Piazza Navona with Gian Lorenzo Bernini's Fountain of the Four Rivers, the family palazzo designed by Girolamo Rainaldi, on which Francesco Borromini also collaborated, and the church of Sant' Agnese in Agone. His many surviving portraits include two marble busts carved by Gian Lorenzo Bernini (in the Galleria Doria Pamphili), a bronze statue by Alessandro Algardi (in the Musei Capitolini) and a portrait painted by Diego Velázquez in Holy Year 1650.

Yan Pei-Ming has taken his inspiration from the Velázquez portrait, veering away the Spanish artist's dominant shades of red towards a blue marked by very dark streaks. He has maintained the Pope's intense gaze but has transformed his hands: the left hand no longer rests listlessly on the arm of the chair but sports a closed fist in a gesture of power and determination, while the right hand no longer clutches

a paper with the names of the painter and his sitter on it but is transformed into a claw. Yan Pei-Ming recalls how this 17th century portrait also inspired Francis Bacon: "I was fascinated when I discovered the portraits of Innocent X. The colour is fantastic. I was very inspired and I wanted, like Bacon, to work d'après Velázquez."



Diego Velázquez, *Ritratto di papa Innocenzo X* (Portrait of Pope Innocent X), 1650, oil on canvas, 140 × 120 cm. Rome, Galleria Doria Pamphili.

Francis Bacon, *Study after Velázquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X*, 1953, oil on canvas, 153 × 118 cm. Des Moines, Des Moines Art Centre

Rooms 4 bis e 5 bis "TIME"

VLADIMIR PUTIN

Leningrad, 7 October 1952

After graduating in law in Leningrad, Vladimir Putin joined the KGB, working in the German Democratic Republic (DDR) from 1985 to 1989. Returning to Russia, he took a stance in favour of perestroika and left the KGB in 1991. Moving to Moscow in 1996, he became a close aide of Boris Yeltsin, whom he succeeded as head of state, initially in an acting capacity but subsequently confirmed by election in 2000. He has been re-elected, either as President or as Prime Minister, in every subsequent election since then. The approval of a referendum in 2020 eliminated the constraint on a second consecutive presidential mandate. In February 2020 he imparted a fresh boost to Russia's imperialist plan by annexing Crimea, invading Ukraine and recognising the independence of the self-proclaimed People's Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk in the Donbas region. In March 2023, the International Criminal Court in The Hague issued an arrest warrant for him on a charge of committing war crimes against Ukrainian children. In the course of his first mandate as President, the Russian economy grew considerably for eight years in a row, but democracy in Russia also suffered a gradual reversal of fortune. Putin appeared as "man of the year" on the cover of the last edition of Time magazine in 2007, at the end of his first presidential mandate, with the following motivation: "If Russia fails, all bets are cancelled for the 21st century. And if Russia is successful as a nation state in

the family of nations, it will owe a large part of that success to one man, Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin." Yan Pei-Ming recalls "The triptych entitled *Vladimir Putin, Tsar of The New Russia* (2008) was produced when I saw a cover of Time magazine for 2007. I instantly reacted: This is my subject, consistent with my interest in 'the story of men of power'."

VOLODYMYR ZELENSKY

Kryvyj Rij, 25 January 1978

A politician, actor, film director, comedian and scriptwriter, Volodymyr Zelensky graduated in jurisprudence in Kyiv before going on to found a production company called Kvartal 95, producing films, cartoons and, in 2015, the TV series *Servant of the People* in which Zelensky himself plays a teacher who is almost accidentally elected President of Ukraine. Following its success and the foundation of a party named after the series, Zelensky stood for election on 31 December 2018 and became President of Ukraine in April 2019. Since the Russian Army invasion in February 2022, he has become the symbol of Ukrainian resistance. Time magazine explained its choice of Zelensky, and the "spirit of Ukraine," as person of the year 2022 thus: "Whether the battle for Ukraine fills one with hope or with fear, Volodymyr Zelensky galvanized the world in a way we haven't seen in decades. In the weeks after Russian bombs began falling on February 24, his decision not to flee Kyiv but to stay and rally support was fateful. From his first

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forty-second Instagram post on February 25 – showing that his Cabinet and civil society were intact and in place – to daily speeches delivered remotely to the likes of houses of Parliament, the World Bank, and the Grammy Awards, Ukraine’s President was everywhere. His information offensive shifted the geopolitical weather system, setting off a wave of action that swept the globe.”

Referring also to the triptych depicting Putin, Yan Pei-Ming recalled: “When I saw Zelensky on the cover of Time magazine in 2022, I realised how the two works would clash. The art of painting is already a commitment. I make a statement, I express myself in the picture, I show it to the public and then it is up to them to react. I weep over our times and at the same time I am happy to live in this world. We are all passing through, while the earth will keep going round.”

Room 5 “PAPER TIGER”

BRUCE LEE

San Francisco, 1940 – Hong Kong, 20 July 1973

An actor, director and the most famous martial arts expert, Bruce Lee was born in San Francisco’s Chinatown in the year of the Dragon during a tour of the Cantonese company of which his father was a member. The name Lee Jun Fan, which means “come back again Lee”, shows that his parents hoped he would soon return to the United States, but he lived for many years in Hong Kong where he learnt various styles of Kung-fu and began to work in the film industry. Moving to the United States where he adopted the stage name Bruce Lee, he studied “drama/philosophy” at the University of Seattle and taught martial arts there before transferring to Los Angeles in 1966. He started to work in TV series but returned to Hong Kong where he achieved stardom with a number of films, including *Fist of Fury* (1972).

Yan Pei-Ming’s iconographic source is a still from the film *Enter the Dragon*, the fourth film in which Bruce Lee played the starring role. The film, designed for the Western market, was his greatest international success and also the last film he ever played in before his sudden death. Ming said that one of the reasons he painted the Kung-Fu master – a perfect link between East and West – was that Warhol had not done so, perhaps because “he wasn’t upmarket enough.”

MAO ZEDONG

Shaostan, 26 December 1893 – Beijing, 9 September 1976

A revolutionary, politician, philosopher, poet, Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party from 1945 until his death and President of the People’s Republic of China from 1949 to 1959, Mao Zedong was responsible for, among other things, developing Marxist-Leninist thought in a Chinese vein – “Maoism” – and launching the proletarian Cultural Revolution in 1966. The object of a widespread personality cult which also made use of images, he was known as “Chairman Mao” or “The Great Helmsman.”

Yan Pei-Ming grew up with the figure of Mao: “On my first day at school, as indeed in the rest of China during the Cultural Revolution, our first lesson was a good morning with ‘Long live Chairman Mao’. Everyone had to do it.” Portraits of Mao – with which Ming began to make a name for himself in the West – form the common thread of his painting: “Every time I do a portrait of Mao there’s a problem. For me it’s a kind of word or energy. It’s also a kind of fetish and it’s like a pause or a focal point.” He added: “I was interested in mankind, not in individuality. To give a meaning to all of these anonymous people I painted just one recognisable man: Mao”, whom he calls “the *maître à penser* of all my generation, a man at once brilliant, cruel, a strategist and cultivated.” The image that Yan Pei-Ming has chosen for this picture shows the Great Helmsman looking earnest, clapping (one of the frequent attitudes that he adopted in his official portraits), painted in red and white, while in his early works Ming painted him in black and white.

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Room6 "ITALIAN STORIES"

ALDO MORO

Maglie, 23 September 1916 – Rome, 9 May 1978

A politician and jurist, Moro was one of the founder members of the Christian Democratic Party (DC), its Secretary from 1959 to 1964 and the creator of the "Morotea" faction which centred around him. A cabinet minister (of Justice, of Education and of Foreign Affairs) in several governments and himself five times President of the Council of Ministers, he was one of the promoters of the "historic compromise" involving overtures to the Communist Party (PCI), which resorted to abstention to back the third and fourth Andreotti governments. Moro was abducted by the Red Brigades in Via Fani, in Rome, on 16 March 1978, in the course of an ambush in which five members of his bodyguard were killed. He was kept hidden in what the terrorists called a "people's prison" for fifty-five days, in the course of which the political parties debated whether or not it would be appropriate to negotiate with the terrorists. His body, riddled with bullets, was found in the boot of a red Renault 4 in Via delle Botteghe Oscure, one hundred and fifty metres from the PCI headquarters and two hundred metres from the headquarters of the DC.

Yan Pei-Ming has drawn his inspiration from a photograph taken by photojournalist Domenico De Carolis with his Nikon Reflex from the window of a nearby building at around 2.30 pm on 9 May. De Carolis recalled that when the boot was opened and the blanket concealing the body moved aside: "We saw him, in the position everyone knows. And at that moment our eyes on Moro became part of that story."

PIER PAOLO PASOLINI

Bologna, 5 March 1922 – Idroscalo di Ostia, night of 1/2 November 1975

One of the 20th century's greatest thinkers, Pier Paolo Pasolini was a poet, writer, scriptwriter, film and theatre director, journalist, essayist and literary critic tirelessly committed to testifying and to defending his sexual preference. He wrote numerous collections of poems in Friulano dialect, while *Ragazzi di vita* (1955) and *Una vita violenta* (1959) rank among his best-known and most controversial novels, and his articles for *Corriere della Sera* (from 1973) have been collated in the celebrated *Scritti corsari*. After working as a scriptwriter, he directed such milestones in cinema history as *Accattone* (1961), *Mamma Roma* (1962), *La ricotta* (an episode in a collective film entitled *Ro.Go.Pa.G.*, 1963), *Il Vangelo secondo Matteo* (1964), *Uccellacci e uccellini* (1966), *Edipo re* (1967) and *I racconti di Canterbury* (1972); *Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma* was released after his death. He was barbarously murdered on the night of 1/2 November 1975.

The photograph of the scene showing the discovery of Pasolini's body, from which Yan Pei-Ming has drawn his inspiration, is one of the many taken in the rundown area of the Idroscalo in Ostia where he was found. A Carabinieri officer and men from the Rome Flying Squad and Homicide Squad squat next to his battered body. In the painting, the scene focuses on the lower part of the photograph, eliminating the shacks in the background, while the number of standing onlookers has been cut to four and their faces and busts have been erased.

During his time in Rome, Yan Pei-Ming felt a deep admiration for *Mamma Roma* and *Il Vangelo secondo Matteo*, drawing his inspiration for the paintings from them. About the second painting, on display in the exhibition, he said: "The film is stunning. The presence of the Crucifixion and the scene of the discovery of Pasolini's body in the same room creates a visual tension in the exhibition. I wanted to pay tribute to the greatness of this outstanding man and personality

Room 8 "THE NIGHT"

ADOLF HITLER

Braunau am Inn, 20 April 1889 – Berlin, 30 April 1945

Of Austrian descent, Hitler was the leader of the Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei (NSDAP), Chancellor of the Reich from January 1933 and Führer

from 1934 to 1945. Snubbing the international community, he invaded Poland on 1 September 1939, triggering the outbreak of World War II and ending up conquering a large part of Europe. From 1942, however, he had to face an alliance of the British, the United States

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and the Soviet Union which succeeded, after a long and extremely bloody conflict, in prevailing over the nationalist and racist ideology that had led to the extermination of ethnic groups (chiefly Jews, but also Roma people and Slavs) and to the elimination of political opponents, homosexuals and the handicapped. Hitler committed suicide in his bunker with Eva Braun, whom he had wed the day before.

Yan Pei-Ming drew his inspiration from an encomiastic portrait on wood of the Führer known as *Der Bannerträger* (The Standard Bearer), but also entitled *Schirmherrn der Deutschen Kunst* (The Protector of German Art), painted by Hubert Lanzinger in 1933. Hitler – in emulation of Albrecht Dürer's engraving *Ritter, Tod und Teufel* (Knight, Death and the Devil) – is depicted as a medieval knight on a black horse, clad in shining armour and holding a banner with the swastika in his right hand. The painting was given to the Führer in 1935 and taken to the "Braune Haus", the National Socialist Party's headquarters in Munich, where it hung above the desk of the architect and Minister Albert Speer. After the fall of the Reich, an American soldier stuck a bayonette through one of the sitter's eyes and the picture was taken to the United States as a spoil of war, ending up in the U.S. Army Center of Military History's German War Art Collection in Washington D.C. Every age has witnessed the destruction or defacing of symbols – particularly propaganda statues or pictures such as this

one of Hitler – of political regimes whose memory people wished to erase in order to shake off the past. Yan Pei-Ming said: "I, too, wished to give the impression that the canvas had a hole in it by putting a black stain on Hitler's face."



Hubert Lanzinger, *Der Bannerträger* (The Standard Bearer), 1933, oil on wood, 160 × 160 cm. Washington, United States Army Center of Military History.

Albrecht Dürer, *Ritter, Tod und Teufel* (Knight, Death and the Devil), 1513, burin engraving, 246 × 190 mm.

BENITO MUSSOLINI

Dovia di Predappio, 29 July 1883 – Giulino di Mezzegra, Dongo, 28 April 1945

Benito Mussolini was a politician, a journalist, the founder of Fascism, President of the Council of the Kingdom of Italy from 31 October 1922 to 25 July 1943 and, from 1925, leader of the government, Prime Minister, Secretary of State and First Marshal of the Empire after the war in Ethiopia in 1938. Drawing close to Hitler's Germany, he signed the Pact of Steel in 1939 and promulgated the race laws. He decided that Italy would join World War II in June 1940. Losing a confidence motion in the Great Council of Fascism on 24 July 1943, he was arrested. Freed by the Germans, he set up the Italian Social Republic, leading it from September 1943 to April 1945. He left Milan on 25 April to try to reach Switzerland, but he was captured by partisans at Dongo on Lake Como and shot, together with his mistress Claretta Petacci, by order of the National Liberation Committee on 28 April. On 29 April the bodies of Mussolini, Claretta Petacci and three Fascist hierarchs were hung upside down from the beams of the Esso petrol station canopy in Piazzale Loreto, where the Fascists had executed 15 partisans in 1944.

Yan Pei-Ming has drawn his inspiration from the photograph – taken, along with many others, probably by Fedele Toscani for the Publifoto agency founded by Vincenzo Carrese – in which the frame is restricted to Mussolini and Claretta. The artist focuses on the figures, highlighting such details as the belt around the woman's skirt and the man's missing boot.

The image of Mussolini conjures up a sensation of barbarity, which has a long and terrifying tradition in the "pittura infamante" or defamatory painting of numerous artists, including Andrea del Sarto whom the Florentine Republic commissioned to fresco, on a public building, the portraits of three captains who had deserted in February 1530 and were hung "in effigy" by one foot in accordance with a consolidated tradition for this kind of picture. Such punishment, reserved for people found guilty in absentia and thus with it being impossible for the authorities to carry out the sentence, was linked to an ancient code of honour in which being branded with infamy was an insulting sentence made even more dishonourable by being hung upside down, thus being deprived of all dignity. This long and horrible trail of barbarity, which has not stopped in recent times, is hinted at by Luciano Fabro in his "upside down" *L' Italia* of 1968.

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The polysemous theatricality of the various disguises that Mussolini adopted while in power (peasant, worker, serviceman, sportsman, man of the institutions) to encompass the different nuances of people's expectations, is completely effaced in this photograph, which encapsulates its nature both as an image of partisan propaganda and as an expression of the sense of liberation that marks the end of a nightmare.

Yan Pei-Ming said: "Images taken from the press constitute important documentation, sometimes they are by a great reporter. Thanks to oil painting the image becomes a picture. This gives it a sacred aura. What interests me is working on history, particularly on Italian history. This allows us to see the strength of painting. Scale plays an important role: the observer can enter the picture, which is produced in a giant format. Death is the tragedy of mankind, we cannot be indifferent."



Andrea del Sarto, *Studio per l'affresco dei capitani disertori impiccati in effigie* (Study for the fresco of the deserter captains hung in effigy), February–March 1530, red pencil, 245×118 mm. Florence, Gallerie degli Uffizi, Gabinetto dei disegni e delle stampe.

Luciano Fabro, *L'Italia* (Italy), 1968, iron and map, 127 × 75 × 4 cm. Lugano, MASI.

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