

BERNHEIM

DING SHILUN

Spectres in Rehearsal

BERNHEIM, Zurich

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Bernheim is delighted to announce the third solo show of Ding Shilun with the gallery. Titled *Spectres in Rehearsal*, the exhibition presents four large scale paintings that revolve around theatrical and historical imagery. The show precedes the artist's forthcoming major institutional solo exhibition at the Song Art Museum opening in May in Beijing, China.

Conceived as majestic tableaux, the paintings unfold throughout the gallery in the tradition of grand history painting - a genre historically regarded as the most elevated form in both Western art history and the Chinese pictorial canon.

Shilun positions himself as a master puppeteer, orchestrating a cast of extraordinary characters as though directing from beneath the stage. He exercises total command over their lives, gestures, costumes and personalities through a virtuoso painterly execution. Drawing on references that range from Goya to Dalí, he interweaves figures from popular culture such as the Cookie Monster, Cinderella and Japanese anime, into traditional Eastern mythologies, expanding their resonance and rendering them universal.

Across these epic scenes, the artist seeks to articulate his own experience of everyday reality, filtering the mundane through fable and myth as a means of comprehension, for both the viewer and himself. Describing these works as "personal fables", Ding Shilun emerges as a storyteller of contemporary life. In *Portrait*, he addresses the impossibility for any artist to accurately represent in any shape or form the delirious and extraordinary present reality. Recalling Goya, the figure of the painter appears with a palette and brush in hand attempting to depict a scene where a giant Kool-Aid man is being restrained by two men, visibly overwhelmed by the situation. The large bursting figure references the Kool-Aid Man popularised in 1990s advertising, while also alluding to the darker connotations of the phrase "drinking the Kool-Aid", linked to the tragic events surrounding The People's Temple cult where members were made to drink "kool-aid" ultimately leading to their deaths.

In one of the exhibition's most intricate, complex and unhinged compositions, Shilun imagines a Robin Hood like narrative in which the thieves' costumes are inspired by the Cookie Monster from Sesame Street or by the McDonald's character Hamburglar. They share the canvas with a Ghost Rider figure tearing through a dinner party on a flamed motorbike as an ode to a Nicholas Cage film.

Another market scene, inspired by Shilun's recent trip to Italy, focuses on a nearly floating head that references Gustave Courbet's *The Desperate Man*, while a corpulent figure emerging from the opposite side draws from anime imagery with its carriage referencing Disney's *Cinderella*.

Through these unlikely juxtapositions, the artist demonstrates a profound understanding of contemporary consciousness, as if painting with every tab of the collective subconscious left open at once.

It is through his extraordinary mastery of painting that the artist is able to translate his feelings and emotions into image. Employing ancient traditional techniques, he dilutes oil paint until it behaves like ink on paper, creating translucent layers that invite the viewer to decipher what is concealed beneath the surface. His command of texture and atmosphere amounts to a masterclass in painting, affirming his position as one of the most skilled artists of his generation. The works recall the grandeur of Jacques-Louis David and the humour of Bruegel; through caricature and wit, Shilun brings the absurdity of everyday life into focus. Beneath the spectacle lies a driving force: the instinct of self-preservation that compels us to persist through even the most dramatic circumstances. Violent, universal and deeply human, this force animates the exhibition. In this major presentation, Ding Shilun reveals himself as a Balzac of our time, painting a Human Comedy for the 21st century.

Born 1998, Guangzhou, China, Ding Shilun lives and works between London and Guangzhou. His recent solo shows include *Janus* at ICA Miami (2024); *Invites: Ding Shilun* at Zabłudowicz Collection, London (2023); *Paradiso* at Bernheim, Zurich (2022); and *Mirage* at Bernheim, London (2024). Forthcoming shows include Song Art Museum, Beijing, China and Albertina Museum, Vienna, Austria. Shilun's work is included in the permanent collections of The Nancy A. Nasher and David J. Haemisegger Collection of Contemporary Art, Dallas; Albertina Museum, Vienna; Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas; High Museum of Art, Atlanta; Rose Art Museum, Waltham; The Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami; The Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth; Guangdong Museum, Guangzhou, China; The Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas; Museu Iníma De Paula, Belo Horizonte, Brazil; K11 Art, Shanghai; Asymmetry Art Foundation, London; The Rachofsky Collection, Dallas; among others.

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