

PRESS RELEASE

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DAVID DIAO

KIN

13 October – 17 November 2018

Preview: 12 October, 6-9pm

Tanya Leighton is pleased to announce 'Kin', a solo exhibition of new paintings by Chinese-American artist David Diao, whose pioneering approach to painting has pushed the medium into new territory over the past five decades. This is Diao's second solo exhibition at the gallery and his first since 2009.

We are also delighted to announce the upcoming release of Diao's new monograph published by Prestel. The book accompanies his solo exhibition at the Ullens Centre for Contemporary Art in Beijing in marking the first full-scale retrospective of Diao's practice. It includes new essays by Philip Tinari, Michael Corris, Pi Li, Sarah K Rich, Felicia Chen and Kerry Doran.

After making important contributions to the movements of colour field painting and geometric abstraction in the late 1960s and 1970s, Diao grew increasingly critical of the medium, reducing his output and reconsidering the ability of painting to communicate meaning. When he again began exhibiting his works in the mid-1980s, they had markedly shifted – taking up major movements and figures in 20th century art as subjects, probing the inspiration they provided to Diao as well as his proximity to them. This conceptual and self-reflexive approach has been a central feature of Diao's paintings since, growing to include the artist's personal history. His methodology results in paintings that employ text, iconography, reproductions, charts and diagrams. These elements of visualised information are reclaimed by painting, as Diao employs them to compositional ends as well as communicative. His work slyly operates on two levels: didactic and painterly, occupying both with the resolve that painting can tackle concepts far outside of the medium itself.

The eight paintings featured in 'Kin' explore various meanings of the word. The most literal, *Maternal Grandfather's Book 2*, 2017, reproduces pages from a treatise on ethics that was written by the artist's grandfather. Yin Changheng was a powerful man, albeit one of complicated ethics, and Diao's narrative does not attempt to revise any of this history, only to re-present it. The artist remembers meeting his grandfather as a child, but only learned about his life in depth while visiting his mother in China after 30 years spent outside of the country. Yin Changheng was hailed as a revolutionary hero who played a role in defeating the Qing dynasty and then went on to quell a Tibetan revolution for independence. This imperialist family history is complicated by Diao's own history, in which he fled mainland China to Hong Kong as a six year old and eventually settled in New York at age 12.

Another painting on view, *Seal 2*, is emblazoned with the stamped Chinese characters that translate to, "Let a hundred flowers bloom; let a hundred schools of thought contend." These lines of verse lent their name to a short lived campaign of debate initiated by Mao Zedong in 1956 in which intellectuals, students and everyday citizens of China were encouraged to share their critiques of the communist regime. This moment of critical discourse was short lived as Mao subsequently interned many of those who spoke out in prison labour camps.

Seal 2, along with two other paintings in the exhibition, borrows the sweeping arcs of the Russian artist and designer El Lissitzky's. Lissitzky famously broke with his Constructivist colleagues over his use of three dimensional space and references to architecture – signaling a world of objects and relationships outside of art for art's sake. Diao continues this theme by pairing Lissitzky's curves with emblems and ciphers of those that followed Lissitzky but who preceded Diao, building a century-long narrative arc and associatively coupling formal elements into new compositions. The logo of the famous, modernist furniture manufacturer Herman Miller can be seen in one painting and a birds eye view of Marcel Breuer's acclaimed UNESCO headquarters in another.

TANYA LEIGHTON

Beyond his personal history, Modernism can equally be seen as *kin* to Diao. The movement has given his work a foundation and Diao places himself within the artistic lineage begun in the early 20th century. References to his artistic predecessors are abundant in the exhibition, with nearly every painting in the show borrowing a technique, motif or image from the previous century of art and design. Two of Gerrit Rietveld's iconic chairs appear as deconstructed collages – their component parts depicted at half scale and used to compose abstractions through the chance procedures favoured by Jean Arp.

For all of this complex family history, Diao's work remains enlivened by its predecessors. These citations are treated as welcome interlopers, not burdensome or dogmatic forebears. And while absolutism played a large role in the art, architecture and politics that Diao looks to for inspiration, his own work celebrates the pluralism, complexity and ever-changing narrative that give meaning to our past and present.

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David Diao was born in Chengdu, China. His work has been shown extensively in the US, Europe, and Asia, with recent exhibitions including ShanghART Beijing; Postmasters Gallery, New York; Office Baroque, Brussels and Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing.