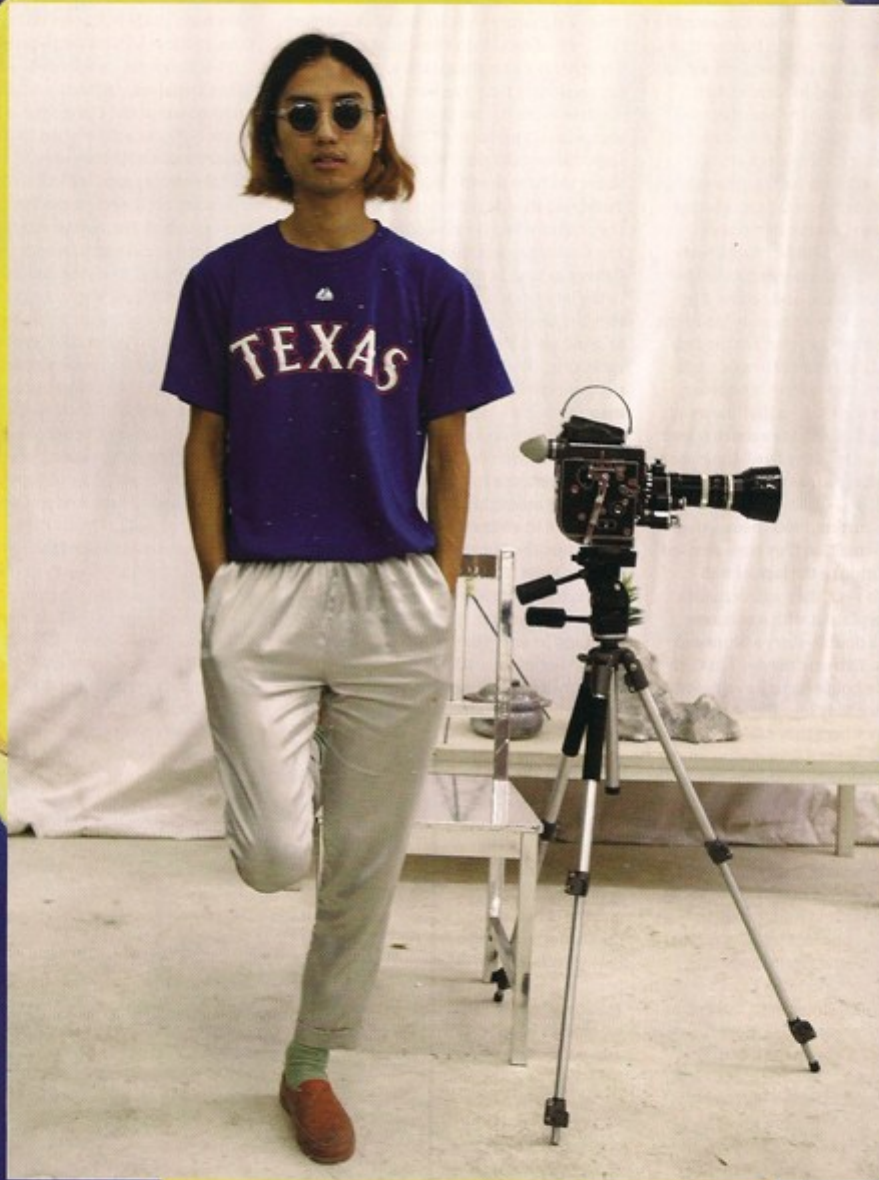


CHEN ZHOU



Portrait of Chen Zhou. Courtesy the artist and Aike Dell'Acio, Shanghai.

CHEN ZHOU, *The First Smile (detail)*, 2014, cotton canvas,
220 x 160 cm. Courtesy the artist and Aike Dell'Acio, Shanghai.

The Post-Happy Artist

BY MING LIN

Profiles

"When was the first smile?" This was the question that Chen Zhou asked himself when his current obsession with the ubiquitous smiley-face symbol began. Tracing the expression's roots, he found the logical answer embedded in the human skull: the jawbone's curvature and the vacant eye sockets can be seen as physiognomic precursors to the vacuous expression that is now known universally as a symbol for convivial feelings, friendship and general happiness. It was this perverse, if somewhat obvious, discovery that secured the yellow symbol's recurring status in Chen's videos and installations, which often look to the more unseemly and awkward undercurrents of the contemporary art world with a lighthearted and self-aware detachment.

In reference to this lineage, this past May, an ominous, lemon-tinged, Damien Hirst-esque skull painting, with round comical eyeballs, loomed two meters tall over nine television monitors lined up against the opposite wall. Together they made up Chen's exhibition "Andy Kaufman" at Aike-Dellarco gallery in Shanghai. A homage to the late American comedian, the nine videos depict facets of the contemporary art world by emphasizing, as Chen explained, "moments of silence that say more than the actions themselves"—a tactic frequently employed by Kaufman to highlight the absurdity of various situations. In one video, two security guards at a museum circumbulate a painting (recognizable as a work by popular Chinese artist Xu Zhen showing at the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing) with bemused expressions, while in another a young woman poses shamelessly for a selfie with a garishly painted depiction of Michelangelo's David by German artist Hans-Peter Feldmann. The feeling of detachment that pervades the scenes is enhanced by the characters' outsider statuses. The audience bears witness to an experience of art that departs from the normal parameters of viewing. These short vignettes can be read as emblematic of Chen's conflicted relationship to art—a world in which he is embedded yet also willfully estranged—and they further comment on China's changing relationship to art, in which uninitiated audiences engage with the novel through what are often alienating experiences.

In contrast to the cheery disposition conveyed in his work, in person Chen has an air of reserve, effectively maintained by small, dark, round glasses. Sparse tattoos grace his wrists and forearm, the former

encircled by the letters "S" "L" "O" "W" and "D" "O" "W" "N"—a reminder to himself to take things at his own pace. Born in Zhejiang province in 1987, Chen decided not to attend the well-regarded China Academy of Art in its capital, Hangzhou, instead moving to Beijing to study media art at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, from which he graduated in 2009. Fresh out of art school, he had his first solo show at Platform China gallery, where he exhibited six videos reflecting on youth coming of age, and since then his works have gained traction among a slew of younger, more experimental galleries in Beijing, Shanghai and Hong Kong. Having now lived in Beijing for ten years, the 27-year-old artist professes a desire to distance himself from what he views as an oversaturated art scene. The whirlwind of demand for his work has been exhilarating but exhausting, and thus he has decided to relocate to Shanghai, a move he hopes will facilitate the creation of new, in-depth films.

Chen describes his practice as "post-happy," and it is true that his smiley faces, with their black oval eyes turned slightly outward, reveal a subtly sinister nature that renders audiences both wary and disarmed. He defines his antithetical state as being distinct from "unhappy," and hopes to reach a point of provocation by heightening levels of awareness and discomfort. His main assertion is Buddhist in essence: for every positive phenomenon, there exists its antithesis. "You need both ends of the spectrum," he states. Part of his frequent allusions to celebrity is an effort to debunk dominant cultural narratives. In a video for his 2012 installation, *Muhammad Ali, Superman, and the Secret of Banana-1, Penis is Praying*, for example, an actor dressed up as Superman sits slouched on a chair eating a banana as Chen narrates. "What if Superman slipped on a banana peel?" he asks rhetorically, before proceeding to propose a number of scenarios in which the hero would be exposed as inherently human and flawed. This depiction of the vulnerable side of a revered mythological figure also illustrates another of Chen's contentions—that "power is rooted in fear." As the personification of society's physical and ideological constraints, superheroes' powers might also indicate precisely what is most feared.

While video is his central medium, Chen's works also tend to encompass the environments they inhabit. Perhaps this is the result of a distinct mode of gallery-artist collaboration that has grown popular in

China, fostering a generation of artists who, like Chen, are as mindful of the context in which their artwork is displayed as they are about the pieces they create. Last year, at Beijing's Magician Space, Chen transformed the white-cube gallery, which is centrally located in the 798 Art Zone, by covering the walls in a lurid yellow. This particular hue, in part a reference to Chinese "yellow movies," or pornographic films ("yellow movie" being the linguistic equivalent to the American "blue movie"), has, along with the iconic "smiley face," which lavished the gallery's concrete facade, become the artist's hallmark. Within the show, in his video *I Am Not Not Not Chen Zhou* (2013), two identical twins sit placidly pondering the passage of time—as indicated by two large clocks hung in the backdrop—and other philosophical matters. All the works in the show featured the same yellow tone, and were accompanied by a few haphazardly placed items, including a photo of the artist's close friend and fellow artist Yu Honglei smiling benignly from a far wall.

Looking ahead, Chen is secretly plotting his gradual withdrawal from the contemporary art world. For a while now, he has been writing a script for a feature-length film, with which he plans to make his great escape. The story will detail what he describes as "the everyday life of fingers," and will be a critique of society's reliance on the internet, which, he posits, brings both freedom and imprisonment. Drawing again on Buddhist principles, the film will incorporate the tale of the "Five Fingers" in which Buddha, tired of the Monkey King's antics, turns his hand into a mountain of five peaks entrapping the primate protagonist in order to teach him a lesson. "I am already controlled by my fingers," Chen admits, pantomiming the gesture of texting with one hand. Like his other works, this one seems to be some sort of exercise in humility and self-restraint. He harbors a utopian view of the silver screen and counts among his greatest inspirations cult directors such as John Cassavetes, Robert Altman and Harmony Korine, as well as art-house equivalents Apichatpong Weerasethakul and Hong Sang-soo—all of whom have been able to traverse the boundaries of film and art.

Compared to the elitism of the art gallery, Chen feels, the medium of film has the potential to reach a broader audience and also to influence ideological beliefs. It is in this space, where fantasy pierces allegory, that the artist hopes his future visions will play out.