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BEIJING





ATKINS & AI GALLERY
BEIJING



J. S. TAN
"A CULTURE OF ENTITLEMENT"

DESIGNED, COMPILED & EDITED BY EMILY DE WOLFE PETTIT

- WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY IAN CHARLES STEWART -

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The Seal and the Fish
海豹和鱼
Oil on Canvas
涂底帆布油画
2009
200 x 150 cm



Screaming Girl
吼叫的女孩
Oil on Unprimed Canvas
原色帆布油画
2010
60 x 40 cm

AN INTRODUCTION TO J. S. TAN

Ian Charles Stewart

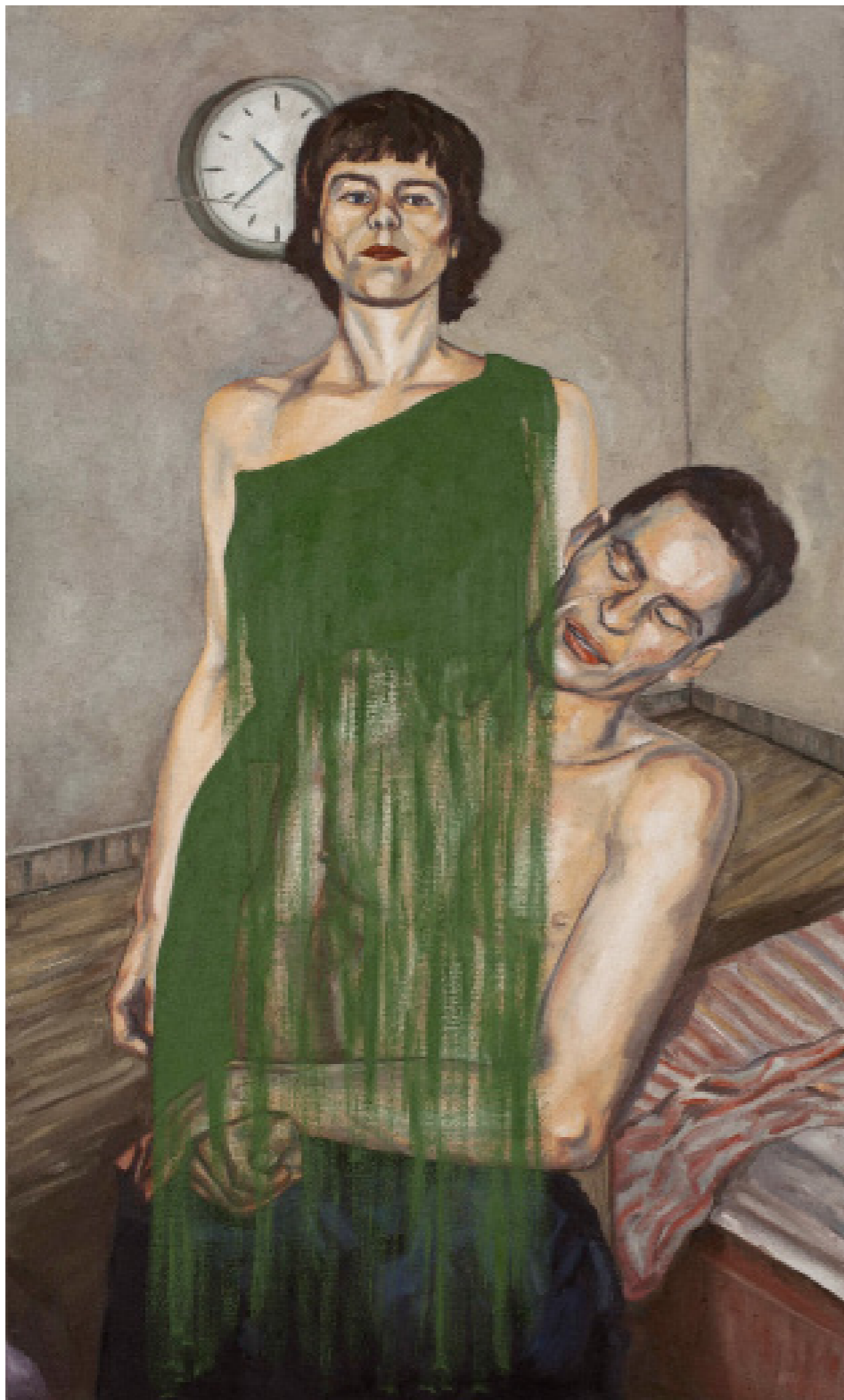
I started coming to China in 2001, initially on cultural exchange and discovery trips organised in association with London's ICA (Institute of Contemporary Arts), and the University of the Arts, London. As a Board Member / Trustee at each institution I came seeking a source of new excitement for a European Art scene that had started to stagnate after a promising resurgence associated with England's YBA generation. At first all seemed well in Beijing and Shanghai, as we flitted from gallery opening to party to artist's studio. But as the years passed and my China trips became more frequent, I started to realise that there was a problem in this brave new Art world; and the problem was money. Every new Chinese artist exposed to the extraordinary sums being paid for the decorative cartoonish images then sought by foreign (not yet local) collectors seemed to freeze like the earth in a Beijing winter and be unable to progress. From that point of first outrageous purchase forward each artist would then produce exactly the same image, with minor variants, over and over again, forgetting their original intent, unable to shake the greed that easy money brings. By the time we moved here in 2006 I had already scaled back my time in the Chinese Art world, disillusioned with what I saw, and started to concentrate on social entrepreneurial ventures.

Then I encountered the artist JS Tan. JS was an extremely talented student at the Western Academy of Beijing, gifted both academically and artistically, and well liked by his peers. He is friendly, soft spoken and thoughtful and had the respect of both teachers and fellow students. Never angry, often laughing, he is honest and open in conversation and always had time for his friends; even with the heavy workload of his studies and the time he spent in the studio painting.

The first time I encountered one of his early works the influence of Lucian Freud was obvious, but so was the sensitivity to his subjects and the quality of his draughtsmanship. Blessed with an intellectual curiosity that guides his choice of subjects his body of work has grown to include challenging and probing topics. His work shows an optimism and depth of feeling that few contemporary artists in China today exhibit. He has a willingness to explore and push himself through new genres and styles to test his own boundaries. He feels no need to repeat something already conveyed, and yet there is a continuity to the spirit of the work he produces.

I was drawn to his work by a notion of beauty too often missing in contemporary painting. As a collector or observer, I seek representations of beauty in a complex, sometimes difficult world and I am interested in other people's views of what beauty is. And I see this in JS's work. I was pleased to read in a recent interview that JS himself said he was “searching for a type of beauty” even as he moves from the figurative into more abstract work. Long may that search continue and long may we enjoy the fruits of that labour.

Ian Charles Stewart is a well-known entrepreneur and co-founder of WiReD magazine and Artworld Salon, a moderated blog for news and opinion on the international contemporary art scene. Ian has taught on the entrepreneurship, venture capital and social venture capital programmes at London Business School, has been a Trustee of the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, for over ten years, and is a visiting professor at University of the Arts, London. Ian has lived in Beijing, China with his family since 2006 and is currently the Executive Chairman of The PAE Group and the Chairman of Khunu. He is also a keen sportsman, having been a member of the New Zealand Olympic volleyball team, Team Principal of China's America's Cup Sailing Team between 2008 and 2011 and is currently active volleyball coach at the Western Academy of Beijing.



Four Figures in a Room (central panel)
室内四人
Oil on Unprimed Canvas
原色帆布油画
2010
180 x 100 cm

Nun with Child (opposite)
尼姑和儿童
Oil on Unprimed Canvas
原色帆布油画
2010
175 x 100 cm

"A CULTURE OF ENTITLEMENT"

Emily de Wolfe Pettit

"Always go too far, because that's where you'll find the truth."
- Albert Camus (1913-1960)

Where lie rights when there are no responsibilities? Has the social cradle that has swung between Church to State over centuries led to an erosion of personal and communal responsibility to now negligible levels - while the 'bonus' corporate cradle just keeps swinging? What future for swathes of our societies where weakness is rewarded, passivity engendered, and where a sense of entitlement to have material ownership, however petty, by whatever means possible, proliferates, just as spiritual entrapment in its many forms, persists? Over the course of recent years, J. S. Tan, a young man who has strived to place the world at his feet through education, has explored such contemporary dilemmas of man's existentialism in relation to disempowering social (amongst other) systems. The result has been a body of predominantly large-scale work that intends to arrest, provoke, and subtly unnerve the viewer in its open-minded examination of such 'hierarchies of entitlement', where the link between rights and responsibilities has eroded. Beyond his works' intensity, Tan's range is also impressive, be his focus religious (*Children in White*), socio-economic (*Four Figures in a Room*) or gender-based (*The Seal and the Fish*). A number of this artist's works indeed go "too far", in the sense to which Camus once alluded.¹ Begun several years ago, his trajectory could not be of more immediate and wider application today. On entitlement as social policy, controversial debate wavers (for reasons admittedly economic rather than social) on its reform in the context of the massive, and growing, debt of the United States.² Elsewhere, in the UK, the rioting without clear cause in the summer of 2011 has prompted public outcry that a person's entitlement should be rescinded if convicted of such a criminal offence. In

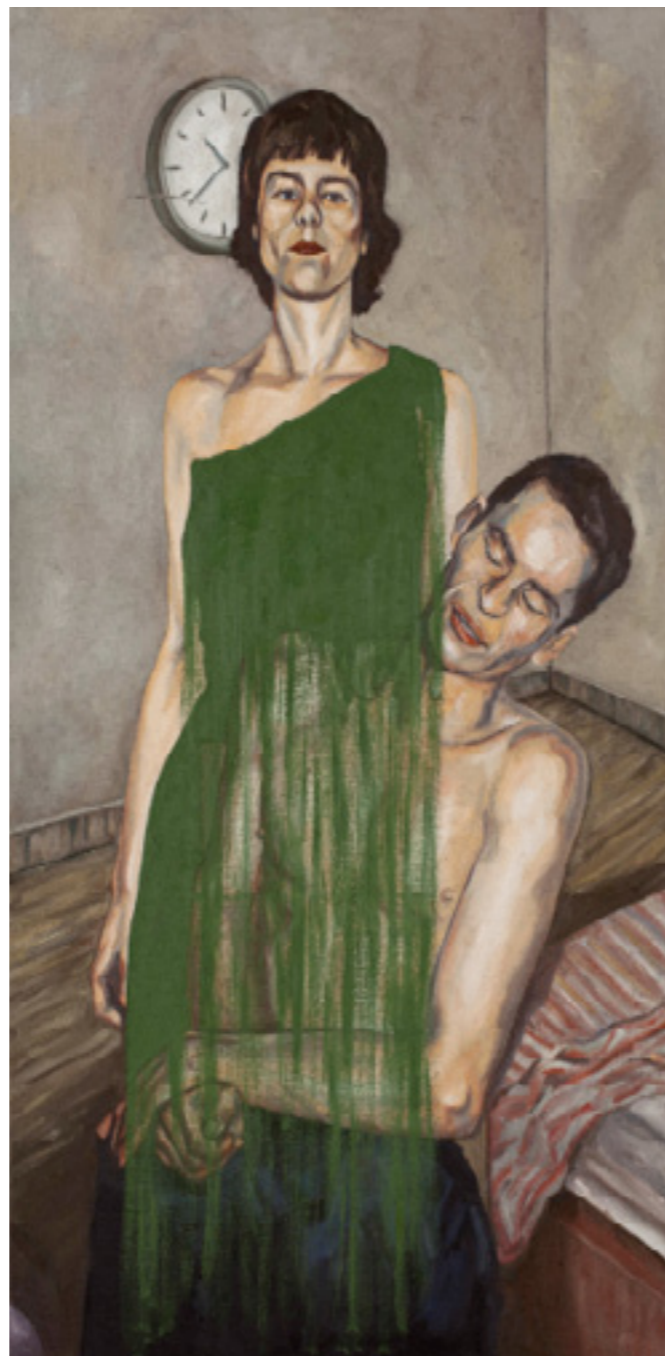


recent years, another brand of entitlement rescindment has gripped that part of the world, with the uncovering of British MP's fraudulent expense claims. What were the beginnings of such a prolific sense of entitlement (in its broadest meaning) in the West, where instant gratification and a 'want everything for nothing' culture, to the ultimate detriment of the individual as responsible, free agent, and how could it proliferate in the East? How did entitlement come to be a dirty word, synonymous with an abdication of responsibilities, loyalties and even ethics? And how all-pervasive is this malady, as explored by Tan in other forms:- coveted by religious missionaries (Tan's *Nun with Child*), imposed by colonial powers on weaker states (*The Glutton*), and even the entitlement of the modern-day artist idol, Tan's *Kneeling Man*, symbolically seeped in non-vital yet noxious amber orange, however underwhelming in talent and overwhelming as 'rebels without causes', to celebrity and over-indulgence - essentially further disempowerment of the fawning masses?

¹ A small number of works have been excluded from this exhibition by mutual agreement between the artist and myself, to avoid causing any offense to the victims of certain regimes

² "FDR began the entitlement era with the New Deal and Social Security, but for decades it remained relatively limited. Spending fell dramatically after the end of World War II and the U.S. debt burden fell rapidly from 100% of GDP. That changed in the mid-1960s with LBJ's Great Society and the dawn of the health-care state. Medicare and Medicaid were launched in 1965 with fairy tale estimates of future costs". - The Road to a Downgrade - A short history of the entitlement state, Wall Street Journal, opinion piece, July 28th 2011

Four Figures in a Room
室内四人
Oil on Unprimed Canvas
原色帆布油画
2010
180 x 100 cm (central panel);
140 x 100 cm each (side panels)





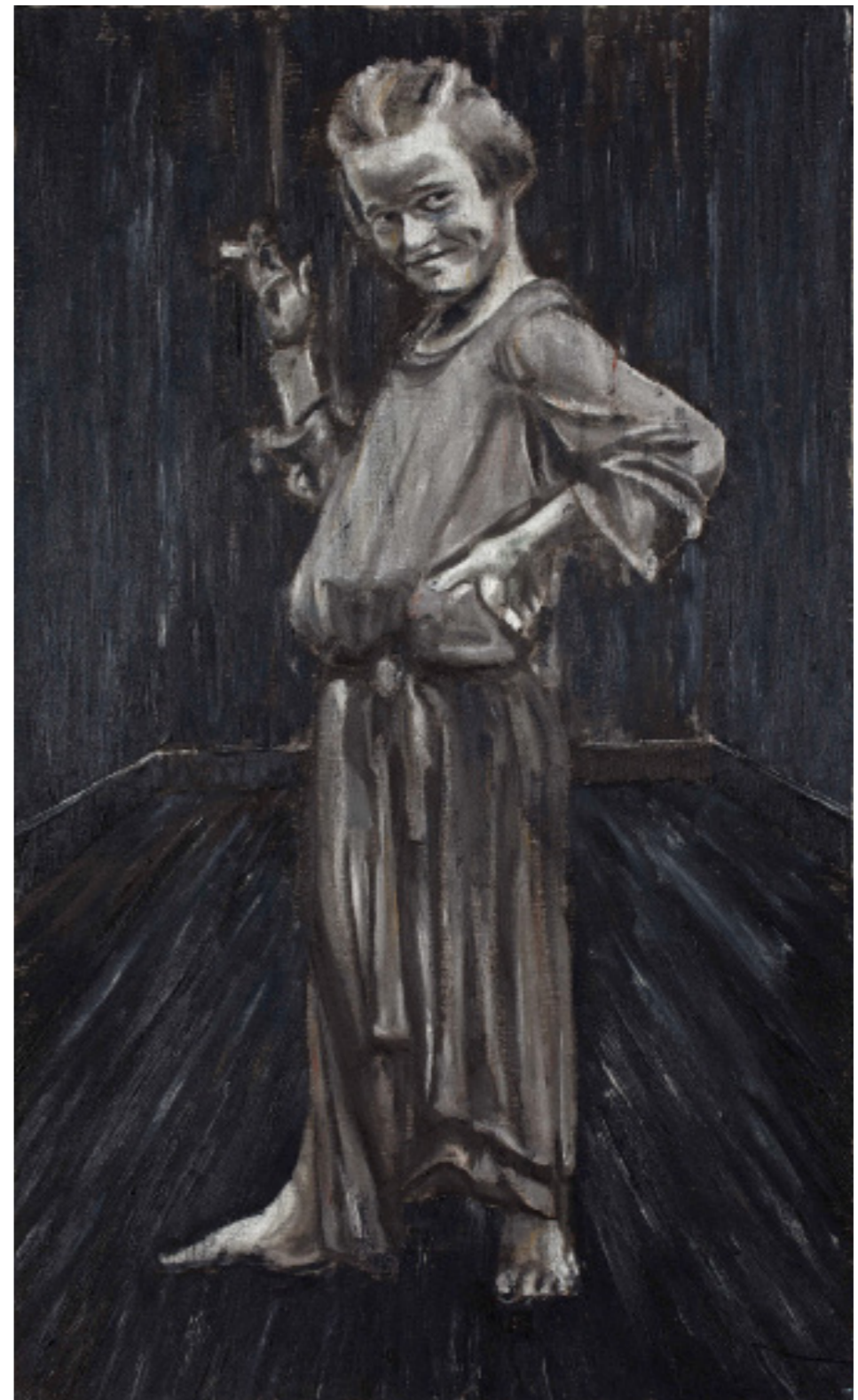
Cornucopia II
聚宝盆 II
Oil on Canvas
涂底帆布油画
2009
100 x 140 cm

Entitlement as social policy has been a powerful force in Western political history, with persuasive arguments linking it to the first moves to centralize particular Western governments. Some scholars cite the 1818 American Pension Act, aimed at assisting the veterans of the Continental Army, America's first National social policy, to the founding of the centralized National American State - long before the Civil War and its aftermath in the 1860's.³ Far from a design to engender passivity as current versions of social policy, such benefits were originally intended to encourage loyalty to government through active service. In its earliest incarnation, the welfare state created by the Liberal government of the United Kingdom in the early twentieth century, paid pensions only to those considered the "deserving poor", personified by Tan's browbeaten *Old Man*. This quickly fell by the wayside as welfare became universal, based on needs-tested criteria, and often neglectful of individual merit or system manipulation; effectively contributing to a "dumbing up" of the population (or worse), particularly amongst the young.

As Tan powerfully sums up in his *Girl with Cigarette*, we have all seen the youth who care so much about looking smart or strong that they actually act dumb. Beyond the active discouragement of talented individuals in favour of nurturing impudent ignoramuses, who have little stake in society and whose only release is the kind of materially-motivated rebellion witnessed in the United Kingdom in 2011 (and alluded to in Tan's *Cornucopia* works, the psychological entrapment of youth portrayed in his large diptych, *Metamorphosis' Prism*)⁴, there are of course further scales of inequality in relation to a more pervasive entitlement culture that are just as frighteningly related to ineffectiveness. At the other end of the spectrum, the theorist and author of social studies, Malcolm Gladwell, has undertaken recent research on the corporate culture of entitlement and the over-compensation to its 'talents' over the past quarter century - not necessarily aligned to experience, nor effectiveness - as poignantly highlighted in 2008's banking crisis and the related public backlash to bonuses. Gladwell cites the beginning of this trend in America of the 1970's, with the abundance of capital that

³ "Patriots, Settlers and the Origins of American Social Policy", by Laura Jensen; Cambridge University Press, 2003

⁴ When Hegel, as a professed architect of the modern state, made claim that the whole has a greater claim to reality than the individuals composing it, he did not envisage two central legacies of the twentieth century, both polarizers and disenfranchisers of large sectors of society. Firstly, that the vast majority of worldly capital would be held in the hands of the few. Secondly, the proliferation of the welfare state and its aggressive, anti-social sub-culture of non-conformity to the whole as a means to fit an ideological brand of individualism (that, paradoxically, ultimately disempowers the individual)



Girl with Cigarette
抽烟的女孩
Oil on Unprimed Canvas
原色帆布油画
2010
150 x 90 cm



The Glutton
 格鲁顿一家
 Oil on Canvas
 涂底帆布油画
 2010
 150 x 200 cm



Anna (left panel)
安娜
Oil on Canvas
涂底帆布油画
2008
160 x 90 cm

Old Man (below)
老人
Oil on Canvas
涂底帆布油画
2008
50 x 40 cm



Left on the Floor (right)
落在地板上
Oil on Canvas
涂底帆布油画
2009
228 x 146 cm



led prominent figures of almost all professions, be they CEO's, fashion models, or professional athletes who no longer wanted to work winter jobs, to start demanding exponentially higher salaries. It is indeed hard to imagine how relatively little such professions of the 50's and 60's earned in our present age.⁵ In his 2002 paper *The Talent Myth*, Gladwell questions the functionality of high premiums placed on degrees from first-tier business schools and the lavish compensation packages for top executives as very dubious.⁶ As to what constitutes 'talent' in the competitive corporate, ditto political, arena, it is fair to say that it may be a talent at avoiding difficult decisions, a talent for plotting against ones rivals, or a talent for narcissistic self-promotion.⁷ The culture of entitlement that has been bred in many modern era corporations, captured succinctly in Tan's *Left on the Floor* (which unabashedly links the corporate titan to political despot, in the guise of Lenin), thus also introduces questions of alliances based on selfishness, over-inflated egotism and the over-feted few. Such murkiness may be the inherited face of entitlement that began with religious orders vesting such power in

missionaries who exert very worldly influence in the name of another worldly One, to the contemporary celebrity culture where the measure sticks of entitlement are general conformity to superficial standards (cue Tan's *Three Hundred Ninety Thousand Dollar Girl*) in a world where the vast potential of microblogging pays more immediate heed to news of a celebrity's pregnancy above a world-changing tsunami hitting an economic superpower.⁸ As the song goes, "In a world full of people, only some want to fly. Isn't that crazy?"⁹ Or maybe it is our systems, social, economic, gender-based - man-made fabrications after all - that are prohibiting more of us to fly. Entitlement certainly raises more paradoxes in the very inequality that it once aimed to fight.

As an artist, and general blithe sybarite, Tan enjoys sustaining paradoxes in his work, whether it be the paradox of linear age or sanctimonious, yet disempowering institutions; he is also a paradox on many levels himself. Blessed with a prodigious painterly technique, he could be forgiven for resting on his laurels in creating lighter works of expression that would rival notable artists many,

⁵ These may be questions not exclusively pointed to the West for much longer as capital swirls in great volumes in China, labour costs rise exponentially, and just as great is the disparity between the 'haves' and 'have-nots'. New, sedentary classes are also being created in an increasingly capitalistic China as property prices in urban areas rise and homeowners of older buildings marked for demolition 'wait it out' for a compensation cheque from the government to buy 'smarter' homes. J. S. Tan, as an artist who happens to be Asian-born and American-based, is perhaps well-placed to interpret from the dual perspective of insider and outsider of both Eastern and Western perspectives

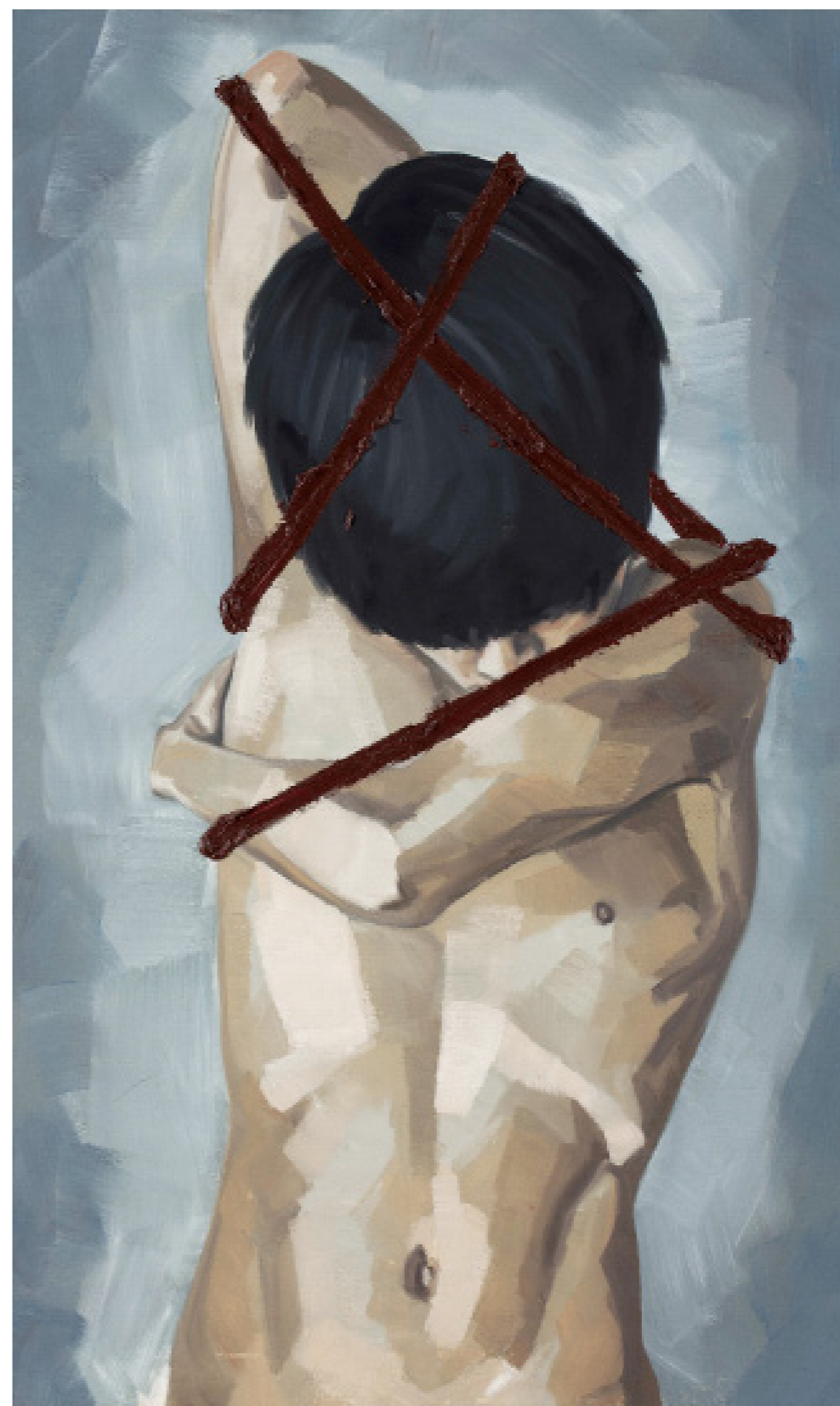
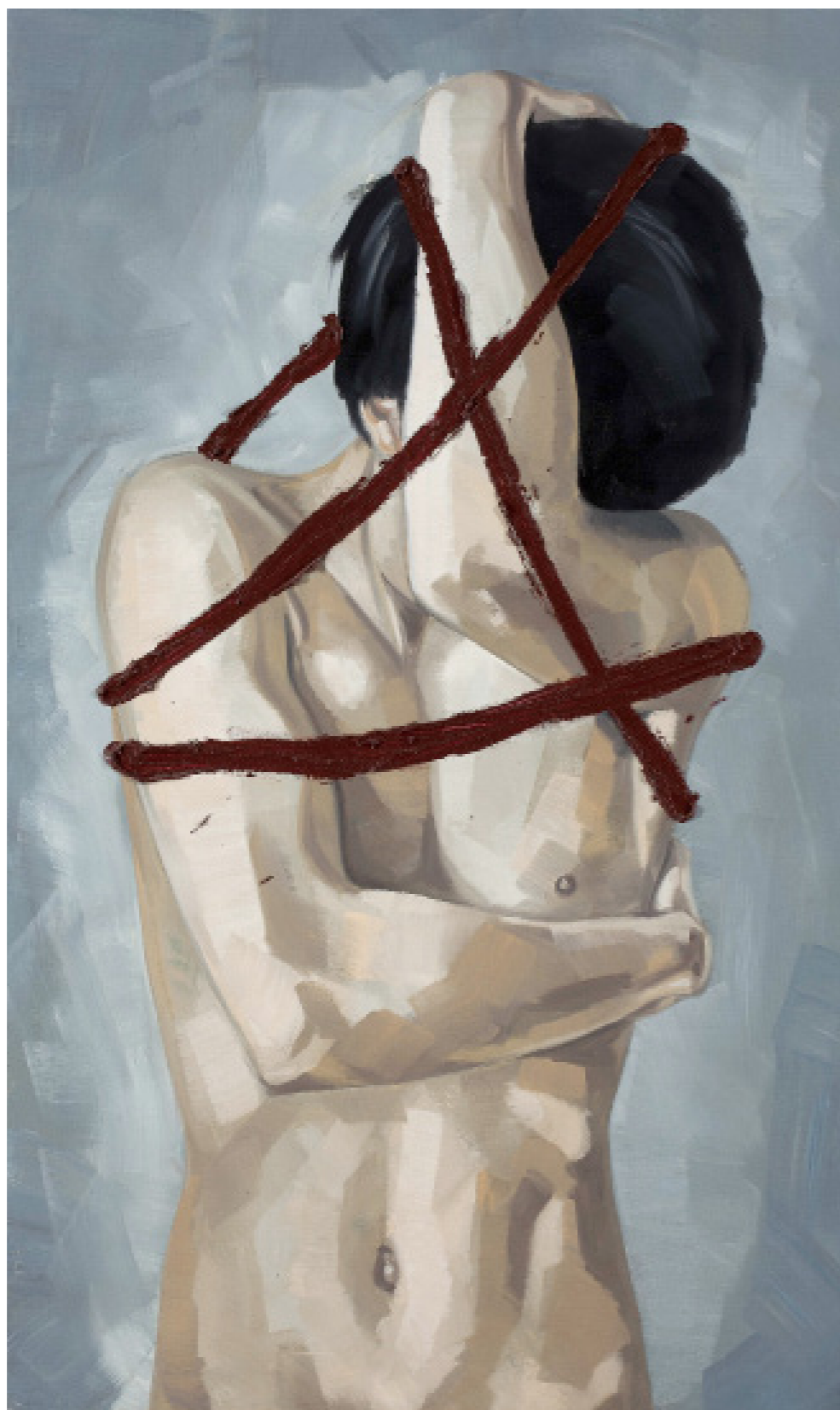
⁶ In a pre-2008 world of banking crises, Gladwell pointedly refers to Enron as a warning example of performance evaluations not based on performance, with rewards assigned disproportionately away from shareholders to those very employees who score well on such questionable tests

⁷ See 'The Dark Side of Charisma' by Robert Hogan, Robert Raskin and Dan Fazzini; Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2007

⁸ Online social communication site, Twitter, recorded 8,868 Tweets per second upon rockstar, Beyonce's, news of her pregnancy in August 2011. 5,530 Tweets per second were recorded upon the news of the Japanese tsunami in March 2011

⁹ "Crazy", music and lyrics by English soul artist Seal (1991)

Metamorphosis' Prism
 变形棱镜
 Oil on Canvas
 涂底帆布油画
 2009
 200 x 240 cm overall





Woman in Bath
浴缸里的女人
Oil on Unprimed Canvas
原色帆布油画
2010
100 x 75 cm

many years his senior in their fleshy renderings of naked men (*Metamorphosis' Prism*) or seeping washes over images of rural outcasts (*Boy Eating Corn*). Moreover, with an Ivy League education, Tan has of course elected to step far beyond his cosy empirical world (also afforded him by fine looks and demeanour) in his examination of racist regimes, the devil of dogmatic religious servitude, and youth that use aggression as their means of empowerment. At turns, Tan's subjects are anti-social, indignant and provocative in their desperate search for a sense of self and of belonging, which, ironically, ultimately takes the form of the subject's further isolation. Paradoxes abound in Tan's approach to his craft, through his resistance of categorization of his highly suggestive works - to the point of not precluding judgement by revealing his age. Instead he prefers to keep the viewer guessing, to interpret his works without prejudice of the subjects and little preconception of the artist whose hand has painted them. He is consistent in his resistance of labeling and ideological associations through his choice of predominantly elliptical titles that offer no clues. Indeed, as I learnt, Tan is of few words, and it is with some reluctance that he reveals the motives behind his works. This distance, concealment or reserve, call it what you will, is also partly the means by which Tan seeks to 'capture' the viewer psychologically (along with his experimentation with, at turns, spatial domination, even oppression, and apparent distortion). Children and juveniles therefore often appear as the unlikely faces of mature subjects, the not-so-innocent agents, brainwashed and manipulative at a frighteningly early age, engrossing and repelling the viewer simultaneously. Elsewhere, Tan presents a posture, which would be innocent or unassuming in itself, and infers something taboo which is not always immediately apparent to the viewer until it is 'too late' - and the viewer finds himself complicit, with illicit license. This is particularly striking in *Girl with Red Shoes* and *Girl Falling (Homage to Marlene Dumas)*, both capitulating to voyeurism made darker due to the extreme innocence of its veneer. In this body of work such understatement actually affords the viewer himself the all too easy, but uneasy, experience of a proscribed claim of entitlement.

Tan seeks to arrest the viewer not only through his selection of subjects, but also the dark, haunting chords by which he gives them voices of expression. These may range from firm physicality to dream-like hue, but when he finds one of his figurative works "too pretty" he keenly sets about to redress this:- lithe young male figures splattered

Kneeling Man
跪着的男人
Oil on Unprimed Canvas
原色帆布油画
2010
160 x 100 cm





Girl Falling (Homage to Marlene Dumas)
 坠落的女孩
 Oil on Unprimed Canvas
 原色帆布油画
 2010
 140 x 100 cm



Girl with Red Shoes
 红鞋女孩
 Oil on Unprimed Canvas
 原色帆布油画
 2010
 120 x 80 cm



The Janitor
看门人
Oil on Canvas
涂底帆布油画
2009
180 x 100 cm



Boy Eating Corn
吃玉米的男孩
Oil on Canvas
涂底帆布油画
2009
70 x 58 cm

with what appears to be blood in the *Cornucopia* works; elsewhere an innocent-looking group of children in *The Glutton* captioned with a haunting line, re-worked by Tan, from a poem by Sylvia Plath; Tan has even been known to destroy works that did not contain “enough grit”. Other artists such as Francis Bacon notoriously destroyed some of his canvases, for reasons deeply personal, whilst Joan Miro slashed a body of his works in protest against Franco’s regime. Whatever his motives, internal, external, or both, Tan’s requisite treatment of his subjects, must, in his eyes, be intense and abrasive, that is not to say devoid of a certain kind of haunting beauty. In achieving this emotional or psychological control over the viewer, Tan is also interested in the possibility for the domination of physical spaces over his figures, in his words “being eaten up by space”, possible symbol of society consuming the individual, notably in his works *Kneeling Man*, *Woman in Bath*, and in *Girl with Cigarette* and *Girl Falling* (*Homage to Marlene Dumas*), where the build up of vertical lines almost consume the central figures. In the same vein, Tan has shown a fascination with the possibilities for application of forms of religious painting, and how they can literally and metaphorically constrict a subject. The *Woman in Bath*, for instance, is confined in an exaggerated arch, traditionally utilized to symbolize the sacred or holy in religious icon paintings and places of worship. *Four Figures in a Room* most obviously draws on the Christian triptych form, taken up by artists for non-religious purposes from Hieronymus Bosch to Francis Bacon, used by Tan here for “a kind of visual imprisonment”. In

this work the artist also sought to question present-day social hierarchy by creating a contemporary reference to Chinese ‘ancestor’ paintings. Whilst Tan retains their stiff and rather listless characteristics, he entirely subverts their hierarchical application to noteworthy families of influence, and instead depicts the disempowered and disenfranchised, the slashed clock in the background a reference to legacies that will, or should, not be passed on. In the same scantily furnished room, the disconnected figures are only connected through the space they share. Tan’s treatment of spatial fields for oppressive effect is also related to one of his chief stylistic processes. Just as the space “eats into the figure”, so too Tan’s process of overlay of paint with a charged brush, his final undertaking upon full rendering of the image. This device of simultaneous haziness and subconscious reality with almost dream-like effect is predominant in *Four Figures in a Room*, and further, in *Nun with Child* and *Kneeling Man*, it implies a form of control of dogma or environment over their respective subjects. Further expressive tools of note are Tan’s restrictive palette, and elongated, angular brushstrokes, epitomized in, amongst others, *The Glutton*. This confident application of the pigment is seen repeatedly, and in large scale, through *Metamorphosis’ Prism*, *The Janitor* and *Anna*, a large oil on canvas diptych, presenting two angles of a friend of the artist in two poses, one that questions (at left), and then seemingly turns to defiance. It is testament to J.S. Tan’s artistic prowess that he is able to produce works of such depth of expression without artifice, fussiness nor cliché.

INTERVIEW WITH J.S. TAN

Emily de Wolfe Pettit

The influences of artists Lucian Freud and Marlene Dumas are clear in your work. What first drew you to these artists and has your relationship to their work shifted?

Initially I was drawn to Freud's work for aesthetic reasons. But that changed as I familiarized myself with his work. I became interested not only with the seemingly distorted spaces that he created for his figures, but also with the emotional and psychological control he had in his work. The relationship I had with Dumas's work was very different. Visually, her influence was not huge. But the blatantness and power of the imagery she used made me think twice about what art can do.

Could you elaborate on other artistic influences and, of the major influences, in what ways they have affected your approach to subject and/ or practice? And non-artistic influences?

Anselm Kiefer. Francis Bacon. Egon Schiele. Luc Tuymman. David Hockney. Some of the non-artistic influences are from books/poetry/movies, my contact with religion, living in an international community in China and observing different family dynamics.

How important to you is a knowledge and/ or contact, that is a connection of some sort, with art history?

Very important. Back when I produced work in 2008-2010, I didn't think that a connection to art history was essential. But today, after being immersed in constant art history discussions with friends and understanding the importance of art in context, I feel that all artists should share an intimate connection with art history. Especially because we live in a post-modernist world where the parameters of art have been redefined over and over again. Also, being able to appreciate and understand other artists' work is essential to finding out one's own sensibilities and one's general knowledge on fine art. Without a solid background in art history, I think it is difficult to engage and understand many of the great artists who lived during the modernist and post-modernist period. For example, without understanding art history, one will not be able to appreciate how revolutionary Pollock's paintings are in using an all-over composition, utilizing process as an essential part when viewing the work and exploring the materiality of paint. Art is an intellectual pursuit. And it is the case with any intellectual subject that there are pre-requisites to being relevant in today's world. A scientist could not contribute to the study of the String Theory if he didn't have the required knowledge in quantum physics and relativity. I think artists are, for the most part, not so different.

This also raises the question of individuality. I recently heard a talk between young Chinese and German artists Qiu Xiaofei and Christian Schoeler. One concern leveled during this talk was that where artists working in China once lived in communal arrangements for one reason or another, and exchanged ideas, philosophies and techniques, feverishly and frequently, the vast majority now work and live in isolation in large studios without a great deal of exchange with their fellow artists. Some of the younger artists with whom I have discussed this claim that communal living and working might erode their individuality. Do you think communal versus solitary artistic creation is a question of diminishing individuality versus increasing egocentricity? Do you have much contact with a community of artists where you work in America and if so, how important is this to you? I know when you arrived in Beijing to create your new body of work you spent days on end in total isolation without any human contact for the first time. Did you find your work changed dramatically under such circumstances?

Communal living has nothing to do with diminished individuality. And besides, striving to be original, to have an individual voice, is marketable but unnecessary. I think doing what you want to do is more important.

In terms of communal living versus isolation, I think that they both work at different times. Picasso and Matisse met constantly and pushed each other's art throughout their lives. The Abstract Expressionist artists also frequently met each other, but retained this so called 'individuality'. I personally find communal living a good thing. Having lived with friends who have similar views of art this past year, I felt that my growth has been significant.

The days I spent this summer in isolation were only temporary. It wasn't even 'total isolation'. But even during this period, my work had connections to ideas that my friends and I had talked about. This experience changed the process in which I worked. Intellectually, I was still moving in the same direction. But because I lived alone and in a studio with walls filled with my own work, I worked in an almost meditative, trance-like manner. Because I was completely surrounded by my work, I was forced to keep looking and thinking about it.

You have previously said to me that when you've found one of your figurative works "too beautiful" you have set about to redress this - a lithe young male figures splattered with what appears to be blood in the *Cornucopia* works; elsewhere an innocent-looking group of children in *The Glutton* captioned with a haunting line, re-worked by you, from a poem by Sylvia Plath. Do you think this apparent rejection of beauty, sentimentality and vulnerability will become a signature of your approach?

No. I rarely do figurative work now. In fact, with the abstract work that I am currently working on, in some sense, I guess I am searching for a type of beauty.

You've even been known to partially or completely destroy works. Francis Bacon was known to destroy some of his canvases, for reasons deeply personal; and Joan Miro slashed some of his works in protest against [Franco's] regime. Do one or other of these motives lie behind your part or whole destruction of your works?

I think the word 'destroy' may be pushing it a little. The work that I "destroyed" was only small pieces that I considered test work.

But suppose we call what I've done with some of my pieces "destroying art"; it is not for reasons similar to either Miro or Bacon. I guess it was mainly because I just didn't like the piece. There was one point where I thought my work was too pretty, not enough grit.

With the world set to undergo unprecedented changes, some commentators suggesting "the new world order will be replaced with no world order", do you think there can be such a thing as an artist being 'before their time' in the context of great upheaval and unpredictability? How do you think an artist stays 'relevant' and their work, for want of a better word, 'fresh', amidst such fast-paced change?

I don't think that being relevant to a world-wide audience is necessarily important for artists in this time.

I've heard you have fairly pronounced views on the malaise of social inequality. Artists who set out to achieve in their craft toil, and I know you yourself work very intensely, but many outside the industry would level that artists are generally over-indulged dilettantes, disconnected from real issues. How would you reply to such criticism and would you like to see your work having wider social implications in time? If so, how?

I would like to contest the idea that artists are 'over-indulged dilettantes, disconnected from real issues'. I think that often they are connected to real issues and the work does create some kind of tangible change.

We had a conversation about Kantian transcendental idealism a few weeks back. As East-West relations become evermore a focal point over the coming years, do you believe it is equally important for the architects of future Western states to be empiricists with first-hand experience of the East (and China in particular) as much as they are a priori rationalists?

Should the West come to China and experience things first-hand? Definitely.

Do you think a prerequisite of a great artist is an ability to empathize?

It depends on the artist.

You followed a friend for a year to her place of worship, seeking to understand the impetus behind her faith, and it inspired you to paint several intense works. What else did you take from this experience?

The main realization I had was that logic and reason is not the only way that people acquire knowledge. Religious people depend on faith, which after this experience, became much more real to me.

Albert Camus once said that "... a work of art is a confession". Do you see the process of creating art works as cathartic for yourself, in this confessional sense?

Not really.

I think you mentioned once that you do not believe in the notion of an all-powerful deity. Lately you seem to have embraced study of Buddhism and have spoken several times of the practical application of meditation. Are you equally drawn to the spiritual side of Buddhism, or do you see yourself as a pure pragmatist? Has this study impacted your art practice in any way or do you envisage it having an impact in the future?

I am unsure about Buddhism. I have trouble with anything that depends on having faith. However, Buddhism has impacted my art. I think it is clearer in my newer work.

You were born in Hong Kong, grew up in Beijing, and are now based in America, a dual degree at Brown University and the renowned Rhode Island school of Design soon under your belt. Are you very conscious of the disparate peripheral worlds around each of these places or would you say your daily life fairly insular to the point that these worlds seem to seamlessly blend into one another?

I am conscious of the differences between each of these places. But in terms of art making, I feel that my work is not culturally dependent and is unaffected by where I am. In China, I would draw a Chinese chair. In America, I probably wouldn't only because it is much harder to find.

Do you feel yourself gravitating to one or any of these places now? And in the future where do you see yourself based, if anywhere?

Art-wise, I am probably most drawn to America. Food-wise, probably China. So I could be based in either place.

You have mentioned misconceptions / prejudices you have encountered amongst a younger American demographic about / towards China. What has surprised you most in this regard?

No comment.

Do you think that attitudes towards gender for instance in China are more deep-seated in cultural rather than economic reasons?

I don't know. I would guess cultural, but I could argue both sides.

You are from a family of very high achievers and have a great education behind you that allows you to pick and choose your career to some extent. If you weren't an artist, what else might you have pursued?

I have no idea. Maybe a bartender.

You seem to be equally comfortable with oils as a new body of substantial charcoal works that will be exhibited in a 2012 solo show. Do you see yourself gravitating more to one medium over another, at least over the next five years?

I honestly have no idea what I will be doing even one year from today. But if I had to pick one, it would probably be painting.

There are very notable artists who eschew public attention, the British graffiti artist, Banksy, springs to mind for instance. Do you associate yourself with such modus operandi in the artist's relationship with a public that can be sycophantic and fickle at turns? Do you see privacy as a tool of survival in the art world which increasingly craves celebrity just as the film industry?

I don't see privacy as a tool of survival either. I think you just have to do what you have to do to make what you want to make.



Untitled
无题
Oil on Canvas
涂底帆布油画
2009
60 x 60 cm

- FURTHER CATALOGUE OF WORKS -



Three Hundred Ninety Thousand Dollar Girl
三十万美金女孩
Oil on Unprimed Canvas
原色帆布油画
2010
180 x 100 cm approx.



Young Girl
女孩
Oil on Canvas
涂底帆布油画
2009
50 x 40 cm



Children in White
白衣儿童
Oil on Canvas
涂底帆布油画
2010
200 x 150 cm



Woman in Bath
浴缸里的女人
Oil on Unprimed Canvas
原色帆布油画
2010
100 x 75 cm



Cornucopia I
聚宝盆 I
Oil on Canvas
涂底帆布油画
2009
60 x 50 cm



Anna
 安娜
 Oil on Canvas
 涂底帆布油画
 2008
 160 x 180 cm overall



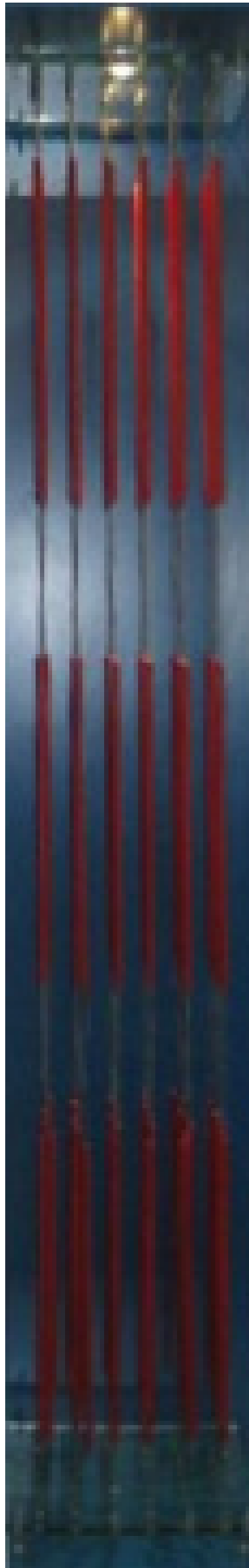


Fantasma
 幻想
 Oil on Unprimed Canvas
 原色帆布油画
 2010
 120 x 80 cm approx.

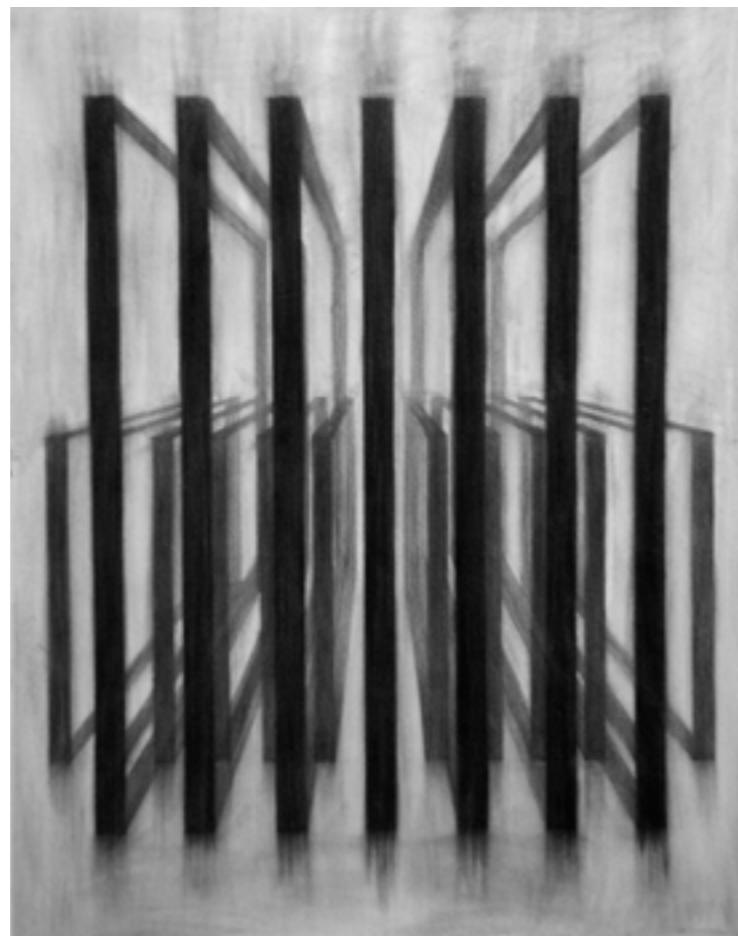


Left on the Floor
 落在地板上
 Oil on Canvas
 涂底帆布油画
 2009
 228 x 146 cm

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS



Untitled Installation
 无题 (装置)
 Aluminium rods threaded with steel cable, calibrated
 and weighted with glass plate
 铝合金棒螺纹钢电缆, 校准和玻璃板加权
 180 x 38 x 38 cm
 2011
Chevron Corporate Collection,
 Nanjing, China
 雪佛龙公司收藏, 中国



Study of Space 6
 研究空间 6
 Charcoal on Paper, Mounted on Canvas
 纸木炭
 140 x 115 cm
 2011
Chevron Corporate Collection,
 Nanjing, China
 雪佛龙公司收藏, 中国



Man with Cap
 男子戴帽子
 Oil on Canvas
 涂底帆布油画
 120 x 80 cm
 2009
Collection of the Western Academy of
 Beijing, Beijing, China
 中国北京京西学校, 中国

CATALOGUE ESSAY

"A CULTURE OF ENTITLEMENT"

Emily de Wolfe Pettit

“Always go too far, because that’s where you’ll find the truth.” - Albert Camus (1913-1960)

Where lie rights when there are no responsibilities? Has the social cradle that has swung between Church to State over centuries led to an erosion of personal and communal responsibility to now negligible levels - while the ‘bonus’ corporate cradle just keeps swinging? What future for swathes of our societies where weakness is rewarded, passivity engendered, and where a sense of entitlement to have material ownership, however petty, by whatever means possible, proliferates, just as spiritual entrapment in its many forms, persists? Over the course of recent years, J. S. Tan, a young man who has strived to place the world at his feet through education, has explored such contemporary dilemmas of man’s existentialism in relation to disempowering social (amongst other) systems. The result has been a body of predominantly large-scale work that intends to arrest, provoke, and subtly unnerve the viewer in its open-minded examination of such ‘hierarchies of entitlement’, where the link between rights and responsibilities has eroded. Beyond his works’ intensity, Tan’s range is also impressive, be his focus religious (*Children in White*), socio-economic (*Four Figures in a Room*) or gender-based (*The Seal and the Fish*). A number of this artist’s works indeed go “too far”, in the sense to which Camus once alluded.¹ Begun several years ago, his trajectory could not be of more immediate and wider application today. On entitlement as social policy, controversial debate wavers (for reasons admittedly economic rather than social) on its reform in the context of the massive, and growing, debt of the United States.² Elsewhere, in the UK, the rioting without clear cause in the summer of 2011 has prompted public outcry that a person’s entitlement should be rescinded if convicted of such a criminal offence. In recent years, another brand of entitlement rescindment has gripped that part of the world, with the uncovering of British MP’s fraudulent expense claims. What were the beginnings of such a prolific sense of entitlement (in its broadest meaning) in the West, where instant gratification and a ‘want everything for nothing’ culture, to the ultimate detriment of the individual as responsible, free agent, and how could it proliferate in the East? How did entitlement come to be a dirty word, synonymous with an abdication of responsibilities, loyalties and even ethics? And how all-pervasive is this malady, as explored by Tan in other forms:- coveted by religious missionaries (Tan’s *Nun with Child*), imposed by colonial powers on weaker states (*The Glutton*), and even the entitlement

of the modern-day artist idol, Tan’s *Kneeling Man*, symbolically seeped in non-vital yet noxious amber orange, however underwhelming in talent and overwhelming as ‘rebels without causes’, to celebrity and over-indulgence - essentially further disempowerment of the fawning masses?

Entitlement as social policy has been a powerful force in Western political history, with persuasive arguments linking it to the first moves to centralize particular Western governments. Some scholars cite the 1818 American Pension Act, aimed at assisting the veterans of the Continental Army, America’s first National social policy, to the founding of the centralized National American State - long before the Civil War and its aftermath in the 1860’s.³ Far from a design to engender passivity as current versions of social policy, such benefits were originally intended to encourage loyalty to government through active service. In its earliest incarnation, the welfare state created by the Liberal government of the United Kingdom in the early twentieth century, paid pensions only to those considered the "deserving poor", personified by Tan’s browbeaten *Old Man*. This quickly fell by the wayside as welfare became universal, based on needs-tested criteria, and often neglectful of individual merit or system manipulation; effectively contributing to a "dumbing up" of the population (or worse), particularly amongst the young. As Tan powerfully sums up in his *Girl with Cigarette*, we have all seen the youth who care so much about looking smart or strong that they actually act dumb. Beyond the active discouragement of talented individuals in favour of nurturing impudent ignoramuses, who have little stake in society and whose only release is the kind of materially-motivated rebellion witnessed in the United Kingdom in 2011 (and alluded to in Tan’s *Cornucopia* works, the psychological entrapment of youth portrayed in his large diptych, *Metamorphosis’ Prism*)⁴, there are of course further scales of inequality in relation to a more pervasive entitlement culture that are just as frighteningly related to ineffectiveness. At the other end of the spectrum, the theorist and author of social studies, Malcolm Gladwell, has undertaken recent research on the corporate culture of entitlement and the over-compensation to its ‘talents’ over the past quarter century - not necessarily aligned to experience, nor effectiveness - as poignantly highlighted in 2008’s banking crisis and the related public backlash to bonuses. Gladwell cites the beginning of this trend in America of the 1970’s, with the abundance of capital that led prominent figures of almost all professions, be they CEO’s, fashion models, or professional athletes who no longer wanted to work winter jobs, to start demanding exponentially higher salaries. It is indeed hard to imagine how relatively little such professions of the 50’s and 60’s earned in our present age.⁵ In his 2002 paper *The Talent Myth*, Gladwell questions the functionality of high premiums placed on degrees from first-tier business schools and the lavish compensation packages for top executives as very dubious.⁶ As to what constitutes ‘talent’ in the competitive corporate, ditto political, arena, it is fair to say that it may be a talent at avoiding difficult decisions, a talent for plotting against ones rivals, or a talent for narcissistic self-promotion.⁷ The culture of entitlement that has been bred in many modern era corporations, captured succinctly in Tan’s *Left on the Floor* (which unabashedly links the corporate titan to political despot, in the guise of Lenin), thus also introduces questions of alliances based on selfishness, over-inflated egotism and the over-feted few. Such murkiness may be the inherited face of entitlement that began with religious orders vesting such power in missionaries who exert very worldly influence in the name of another worldly One, to the contemporary celebrity culture where the measure sticks of entitlement are general conformity to superficial standards (cue Tan’s *Three Hundred Ninety Thousand Dollar Girl*) in a world where the vast potential of microblogging pays more immediate heed to news of a celebrity’s pregnancy above a world-changing tsunami hitting an economic superpower.⁸ As the song goes, “In a world full of people, only some want to fly. Isn’t that crazy?”⁹ Or maybe it is our systems, social, economic, gender-based - man-made fabrications after

1 A small number of works have been excluded from this exhibition by mutual agreement between the artist and myself, to avoid causing any offense to the victims of certain regimes.

2 “FDR began the entitlement era with the New Deal and Social Security, but for decades it remained relatively limited. Spending fell dramatically after the end of World War II and the U.S. debt burden fell rapidly from 100% of GDP. That changed in the mid-1960s with LBJ’s Great Society and the dawn of the health-care state. Medicare and Medicaid were launched in 1965 with fairy tale estimates of future costs”. - The Road to a Downgrade - A short history of the entitlement state, Wall Street Journal, opinion piece, July 28th 2011.

3 “Patriots, Settlers and the Origins of American Social Policy”, by Laura Jensen; Cambridge University Press, 2003.

4 When Hegel, as a professed architect of the modern state, made claim that the whole has a greater claim to reality than the individuals composing it, he did not envisage two central legacies of the twentieth century, both polarizers and disenfranchisers of large sectors of society. Firstly, that the vast majority of worldly capital would be held in the hands of the few. Secondly, the proliferation of the welfare state and its aggressive, anti-social sub-culture of non-conformity to the whole as a means to fit an ideological brand of individualism (that, paradoxically, ultimately disempowers the individual).

5 These may be questions not exclusively pointed to the West for much longer as capital swirls in great volumes in China, labour costs rise exponentially, and just as great is the disparity between the ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’. New, sedentary classes are also being created in an increasingly capitalistic China as property prices in urban areas rise and homeowners of older buildings marked for demolition ‘wait it out’ for a compensation cheque from the government to buy ‘smarter’ homes. J. S. Tan, as an artist who happens to be Asian-born and American-based, is perhaps well-placed to interpret from the dual perspective of insider and outsider of both Eastern and Western perspectives.

6 In a pre-2008 world of banking crises, Gladwell pointedly refers to Enron as a warning example of performance evaluations not based on performance, with rewards assigned disproportionately away from shareholders to those very employees who score well on such questionable tests.

7 See ‘The Dark Side of Charisma’ by Robert Hogan, Robert Raskin and Dan Fazzini; Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2007.

8 Online social communication site, Twitter, recorded 8,868 Tweets per second upon rockstar, Beyonce’s, news of her pregnancy in August 2011. 5,530 Tweets per second were recorded upon the news of the Japanese tsunami in March 2011.

9 “Crazy”, music and lyrics by English soul artist Seal (1991).

all - that are prohibiting more of us to fly. Entitlement certainly raises more paradoxes in the very inequality that it once aimed to fight.

As an artist, and general blithe sybarite, Tan enjoys sustaining paradoxes in his work, whether it be the paradox of linear age or sanctimonious, yet disempowering institutions; he is also a paradox on many levels himself. Blessed with a prodigious painterly technique, he could be forgiven for resting on his laurels in creating lighter works of expression that would rival notable artists many, many years his senior in their fleshy renderings of naked men (*Metamorphosis' Prism*) or seeping washes over images of rural outcasts (*Boy Eating Corn*). Moreover, with an Ivy League education, Tan has of course elected to step far beyond his cosy empirical world (also afforded him by fine looks and demeanour) in his examination of racist regimes, the devil of dogmatic religious servitude, and youth that use aggression as their means of empowerment. At turns, Tan's subjects are anti-social, indignant and provocative in their desperate search for a sense of self and of belonging, which, ironically, ultimately takes the form of the subject's further isolation. Paradoxes abound in Tan's approach to his craft, through his resistance of categorization of his highly suggestive works - to the point of not precluding judgement by revealing his age. Instead he prefers to keep the viewer guessing, to interpret his works without prejudice of the subjects and little preconception of the artist whose hand has painted them. He is consistent in his resistance of labeling and ideological associations through his choice of predominantly elliptical titles that offer no clues. Indeed, as I learnt, Tan is of few words, and it is with some reluctance that he reveals the motives behind his works. This distance, concealment or reserve, call it what you will, is also partly the means by which Tan seeks to 'capture' the viewer psychologically (along with his experimentation with, at turns, spatial domination, even oppression, and apparent distortion). Children and juveniles therefore often appear as the unlikely faces of mature subjects, the not-so-innocent agents, brainwashed and manipulative at a frighteningly early age, engrossing and repelling the viewer simultaneously. Elsewhere, Tan presents a posture, which would be innocent or unassuming in itself, and infers something taboo which is not always immediately apparent to the viewer until it is 'too late' - and the viewer finds himself complicit, with illicit license. This is particularly striking in *Girl with Red Shoes* and *Girl Falling*, both capitulating to voyeurism made darker due to the extreme innocence of its veneer. In this body of work such understatement actually affords the viewer himself the all too easy, but uneasy, experience of a proscribed claim of entitlement.

Tan seeks to arrest the viewer not only through his selection of subjects, but also the dark, haunting chords by which he gives them voices of expression. These may range from firm physicality to dream-like hue, but when he finds one of his figurative works "too pretty" he keenly sets about to redress this:- lithe young male figures splattered with what appears to be blood in the *Cornucopia* works; elsewhere an innocent-looking group of children in *The Glutton* captioned with a haunting line, re-worked by Tan, from a poem by Sylvia Plath; Tan has even been known to destroy works that did not contain "enough grit". Other artists such as Francis Bacon notoriously destroyed some of his canvases, for reasons deeply personal, whilst Joan Miro slashed a body of his works in protest against Franco's regime. Whatever his motives, internal, external, or both, Tan's requisite treatment of his subjects, must, in his eyes, be intense and abrasive, that is not to say devoid of a certain kind of haunting beauty. In achieving this emotional or psychological control over the viewer, Tan is also interested in the possibility for the domination of physical spaces over his figures, in his words "being eaten up by space", possible symbol of society consuming the individual, notably in his works *Kneeling Man*, *Woman in Bath*, and in *Girl with Cigarette* and *Girl Falling*, where the build up of vertical lines almost consume the central figures. In the same vein, Tan has shown a fascination with the possibilities for application of forms of religious painting, and how they can literally and metaphorically constrict a subject. The *Woman in Bath*, for instance, is confined in an exaggerated arch, traditionally utilized to symbolize the sacred or holy in religious icon paintings and places of worship. *Four Figures in a Room* most obviously draws on the Christian triptych form, taken up by artists for non-religious purposes from Hieronymus Bosch to Francis Bacon, used by Tan here for "a kind of visual imprisonment". In this work the artist also sought to question present-day social hierarchy by creating a contemporary reference to Chinese 'ancestor' paintings. Whilst Tan retains their stiff and rather listless characteristics, he entirely subverts their hierarchical application to noteworthy families of influence, and instead depicts the disempowered and disenfranchised, the slashed clock in the background a reference to legacies that will, or should, not be passed on. In the same scantily furnished room, the disconnected figures are only connected through the space they share. Tan's treatment of spatial fields for oppressive effect is also related to one of his chief stylistic processes. Just as the space "eats into the figure", so too Tan's process of overlay of paint with a charged brush, his final undertaking upon full rendering of the image. This device

of simultaneous haziness and subconscious reality with almost dream-like effect is predominant in *Four Figures in a Room*, and further, in *Nun with Child* and *Kneeling Man*, it implies a form of control of dogma or environment over their respective subjects. Further expressive tools of note are Tan's restrictive palette, and elongated, angular brushstrokes, epitomized in, amongst others, *The Glutton*. This confident application of the pigment is seen repeatedly, and in large scale, through *Metamorphosis' Prism*, *The Janitor* and *Anna*, a large oil on canvas diptych, presenting two angles of a friend of the artist in two poses, one that questions (at left), and then seemingly turns to defiance.

It is testament to J.S. Tan's artistic prowess that he is able to produce works of such depth of expression without artifice, fussiness nor cliché.



Old Man

老人

Oil on Canvas

涂底帆布油画

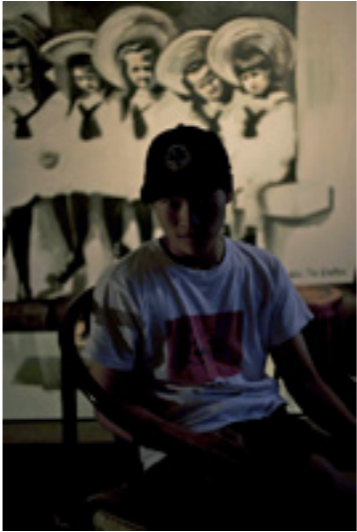
2008

50 x 40 cm



The Glutton
格鲁顿一家
Oil on Canvas
涂底帆布油画
2010
150 x 200 cm

ARTIST’S BIOGRAPHY



J. S. Tan

Born in Hong Kong
Currently undertaking his Batchelor of Arts Degree at Brown University and Batchelor of Fine Arts Degree at the Rhode Island School of Design, USA
Living and Working Rhode Island, United States of America

EXHIBITIONS

2010

Western Academy Beijing, China

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Chevron Corporation Collection, Beijing and Nanjing, China
Western Academy of Beijing, China

艺术简历

陈建升

生于香港
目前在布朗大学进修艺术学士学位，在美国罗德岛设计学院进修美术学士学位
在美国罗德岛生活和工作

展览

2010 年

中国北京京西学校

公共收藏

雪佛龙公司收藏，北京，南京，中国

中国北京京西学校，中国

这取决于艺术家。

你跟随一位朋友到她礼拜的场所长达一年，希图理解她的信仰背后的动力，这启发你创 作了几幅激烈的作品。你从这个经验里还得到了什么？
我主要领悟了逻辑和理性并不是人们获取知识的唯一途径。信徒依靠信仰，在这次经验后，这点对我来说更真实了。

加缪曾经说过，“..... 一件艺术作品是一次忏悔”。在这个忏悔的意义上，你认为艺术创作 的过程是一种自我宣泄么？

不见得。

你曾提到你不相信全能的神的概念。最近，你似乎开始研究佛教，并发表关于冥想的实 际应用的言论。你是被佛教的精神所吸引，还是作为纯粹的实用主义者？这种学习是否以某 种方式影响你的艺术实践，或者你设想它在未来会有影响？

我对佛教还有疑惑。我对任何依靠信念的东西都有障碍。不过，佛教确实影响了我的艺术。我觉得在新作品中这点更加明显。

你出生在香港，在北京长大，现在生活在美国，拥有布朗大学的双学位，并即将获得著 名的罗德岛设计学院的学位。你是否清晰地意识到这些地方所代表的迥异的外部世界，或者 你认为日常生活相当孤立，所以这些世界似乎无缝地彼此融合呢？

我意识到这些地方之间的差异。但在艺术创作方面，我觉得我的作品并不依赖于文化，与我身在何处也没有关系。在中国，我会画一把中国的椅子。在美国，我可能不会画，但仅仅是因为很难找到中国椅子。

现在这些地方对你来说有吸引力吗？将来如果你要定居的话，会选择哪里？

出于艺术的考虑，我最可能会选择美国。出于美食的考虑，当然是中国。所以，这两个地方都有可能。

你认为在中国对待性别的态度是根植于文化而不是经济的原因？

我不知道。我猜是文化，但两方面都说得通。

在 2012 年的个展中，油画笔作为木炭画的新载体而出现。你是否偏好某种载体，至少在 未来五年内？

老实说，我甚至不知道一年以后我会做什么。不过如果必须选择一个的话，那么我选油画。

有些知名艺术家们刻意回避公众的关注，脑中立刻浮现的是英国涂鸦艺术家班克斯。你 认为艺术家与公众的关系的模式是时而奉承时而善变的吗？艺术界像电影界一样越来越渴望 名人，你认为隐私是生存的手段吗？

我不认为隐私是生存的手段。我认为，你得做你不得不做的，才能画你想画的。

集体生活并不会削弱个性。此外，努力做原创，拥有独立的声音，这当然很有市场，但并不必要。我觉得做你想做的事，这个更重要。至于是要集体生活还是离群索居，我认为在不同的时代两者皆宜。毕加索和马蒂斯终生保持会面，不断推动彼此的艺术。抽象表现主义艺术家也经常会面，但保留了各自所谓的“个性”。我个人认为，集体生活是一件好事。在过去的一年，我与拥有相似艺术看法的朋友一起生活，我感觉我的成长很显著。今年夏天闭关的日子只是暂时的，甚至也不算“彻底闭关”。即使在此期间，我和朋友谈到的想法也影响到了我的创作。这个经验改变了我创作的过程。在智性上，我仍然在向同一个方向移动。但是因为我独自生活，我的工作室里堆满了自己的作品，我几乎是在一种冥想、恍惚的状态下工作。由于我完全被自己的作品包围，我不得不继续观看和思考它。

你之前对我说过，当你发现你的写实作品“太好看了”，你会着手去调整 ——在《聚宝盆》作品中，一个体态轻盈的年轻男性沾满看起来是血的东西；在《格鲁顿一家》中，一群无辜的儿童配着醒目的标题，改编自西尔维亚·普拉斯（Sylvia Plath）的诗句。你认为这种对美丽、感伤和脆弱的明显排斥会成为你的标志性手法么？

不会，我现在很少做写实作品了。事实上，我目前正在创作一件抽象作品，从某种意义上说，我在寻找一种美感。

据我们所知，你曾部分或完全破坏自己的作品。弗朗西斯·培根为个人原因毁掉过自己的一些油画，胡安·米罗为抗议（弗朗哥）政权砍掉了他的一些作品。在你部分或整个销毁作品的背后是否存在着这些或其他的动机？

我认为“破坏”这个字眼可能有点言重了。我“破坏”的只是作为测试的小件作品。事实上，反正我的大部分作品都是测试品。但假设把我对某些作品所做的称为“破坏艺术”，那么也不是出于类似米罗或培根的原因。我想主要因为我就是不喜欢这一件。也有可能是我觉得这个作品太好看了，不够有力。

世界正经历着前所未有的变化，一些评论家提议“世界新秩序将被世界无秩序所取代”¹，你认为在大动荡和不可预测的大背景下，艺术家“超越时代”这样的事情可能发生吗？在如此快 节奏的变化中，艺术家要想与世界保持“关联”，使他们的作品保持“新鲜”，对此你是怎么看的？

我认为与世界各地的观众相关联对如今的艺术家的来说并不那么重要。听说你曾公开表达社会不平等问题意见。艺术家辛勤耕耘，渴望成功，我知道你工作很 辛苦，但很多外行认为艺术家都是被宠坏的半吊子，与现实问题脱节。你如何回应这样的批 评，你是否想让自己的作品拥有更广泛及时的社会影响？如果想，该怎么做？

我要反驳艺术家“都是被宠坏的半吊子，与现实问题脱节”的看法。我认为他们常常关注现实问题，他们的作品也确实产生了某种切实的变化。

几个星期前，我们就康德的先验唯心主义谈过一次话。由于东西方的关系成为今后几年内 的一个焦点，你是否认为未来西方国家的建筑师应该拥有东方（尤其是中国）的第一手经 验，在先验理性主义者之外，成为经验主义者？西方人是否应该来中国亲身体验一切？那当然应该。

你认为伟大艺术家的先决条件是同情的能力么？

陈建升 (J S TAN) 访谈

裴衣珊 (Emily de Wolfe Pettit)

你的作品明显受到卢西安·弗洛伊德和马琳·杜玛斯的影响。最开始是什么吸引了你，你与他们作品的关系有什么变化么？

最初，我被弗洛伊德作品的美感所吸引，但当我逐渐熟悉他的作品后产生了改变。我不仅对他为人物所创造的那些看似扭曲的空间感兴趣，而且他在作品中体现的情感和心理上的控制也很有意思。我与杜玛斯的作品的关系则很不同。她在视觉上的影响是巨大的。而她所使用的意象的公然和力量让我重新思索艺术的作为。

你能否阐述一下其他的艺术影响，在哪些方面影响你对主题和 / 或实践的处理手法？非艺术的影响有哪些？

安塞姆·基弗、弗朗西斯·培根、埃贡·席勒、吕克·图伊曼斯、大卫·霍克尼。非艺术的影响来自书籍 / 诗歌 / 电影，我与宗教的接触，生活在中国的国际社区，观察不同的家庭动态。

与艺术史具有某种连接的知识和 / 或接触，对你来说有多么重要？

非常重要。回想我 2008-2010 年进行创作时，并不认为与艺术史的连接是必不可少的。但如今，通过不断与朋友们讨论艺术史，在某种背景下理解艺术的重要性，我觉得所有的艺术家都应该建立与艺术史的密切联系。尤其是因为我们生活在后现代主义的世界，艺术的参数已被不断地重新定义。此外，能够欣赏和了解其他艺术家的作品，对于发现自己的感受力和对美术的了解是必不可少的。如果不具备对艺术史的专业背景知识，我认为很难欣赏并理解那些生活在现代主义和后现代主义时期的画家的作品。比如说，不理解艺术史的人就无法理解波洛克画作的革新意义——使用整体构图，将过程引入观看本身，并探索颜料的物质性。艺术是一种智性的追求。任何智性的主体都必须要与当今世界相关联。一位科学家如果缺乏量子物理和相对论的知识，就不能对弦理论的研究作出贡献。我认为对艺术家而言，情况也是如此。

这里引出了个性化的问题。最近我听到一对年轻的中德艺术家仇晓飞和克里斯蒂安·思科勒之间的对话。他们担心说，在中国工作的艺术家曾经因为种种原因居住在一起，经常狂热地交流思想、理念和技巧，现在绝大多数在巨大的工作室孤独地生活和工作，与同行艺术家缺乏交流。我与一些年轻艺术家曾经讨论过这点，他们认为集体生活和工作可能会削弱他们的个性。你认为集体创作会削弱个性，而独立的创作会助长自我中心吗？你在美国与艺术家群体是否有很多接触？如果有，这对你来说有多么重要？我知道，当你来到北京创作新作品的时候，你第一次连续几天完全处于隔离状态，不与任何人接触。在这种情况下，你是否觉得你的作品有显著的变化呢？

由陈建升改编自西尔维亚·普拉斯的诗句。他甚至摧毁一些“不够有力”的作品。弗朗西斯·培根等其他艺术家也曾因为个人原因摧毁过一些油画，胡安·米罗为抗议佛朗哥政权而砍掉了他的一些作品。无论陈建升的内部或 / 和外部的动机是什么，在他看来，对主题的处理手法必须是激烈和有利的。在实现对观者的情感 / 心理控制的过程中，陈建升也对控制人物所处物理空间的可能性感兴趣，用他的话来说就是“被空间吃掉”，可能象征了个人在社会中的消耗，特别是在他的作品《跪着的男人》，《浴缸里的女人》，《抽烟的女孩》和《坠落的女孩》，垂直线的堆砌几乎盖过了中心构图。同样的脉络下，陈建升迷恋于利用各种宗教绘画形式的可能性，以及如何能从字面上和比喻上精简主题。例如，《浴缸里的女人》紧闭在一个夸张的拱形中，在传统上用来象征庄严圣洁的宗教圣像画和礼拜场所。《室内四人》很明显借鉴了基督教的三联画的形式，曾被希罗尼穆斯·波希和弗朗西斯·培根等艺术家用作非宗教的用途，这次则被陈建升用作“某种视觉监禁”的目的。在这个作品中，艺术家通过创造当代中国的“祖先”画像，来质疑现今的社会阶级。陈建升保留了其僵硬而冷漠的特征，但完全颠覆了他们在权势家族阶级里的形象，反而描绘了被剥夺权利的对象，背景中被砍掉的钟表象征着这份遗产不该或不会被传承下去。在同一个简陋的房间里，同在屋檐下的人物彼此疏离。陈建升对压迫效果的空间的运用也关系到他的主要风格。正如空间“吃掉人物”，陈建升用充满情感的笔触涂抹颜料的过程，是他对图像的最终呈现的承诺。这种既朦胧又富有梦幻般的效果的潜意识现实的设计，在《室内四人》中相当突出，此外，在《脑力外流》和《跪着的男人》中，它意味着对个别主题的教条或环境的一种控制。其他值得注意的表现手法包括陈建升的局限的用色，以及加长且棱角分明的笔触，在《暴食者》里都可窥见其缩影。这种对颜料的自信运用处处可见，在《变形记之棱镜》和《门卫和安娜》有更大范围的展现，这幅大型双连帆布油画呈现画家一位朋友的两个姿态和角度，一个在质问（在左），然后似乎转为挑衅。它证明了陈建升的技术实力，他有能力创作如此深度的作品，不要花招，不浮躁也不陈腐。

并运用了列宁的形象），进而针对基于利己主义的结盟、过度膨胀的自我中心心态和过度高薪的少数人提出质疑。权利的本来面目可能就是这样阴暗的，从宗教团体赋予传教士权力开始，他们就以另一个世界的名义对这个世界施加各种影响，到当代名人文化，其间权利的度量通常只是符合表面的标准（陈建升的《五万美金女孩》），而在这个世界里，微型部落格对名人怀孕消息的关注，可能高于足以改变世界的经济强权金融海啸。⁸正如那首歌唱的：“在这个人山人海的世界，只有一些人想飞。这是不是很疯狂？”⁹或许我们的制度就是这样，无论是社会、经济、性别层面，毕竟只是人为所制定，好限制我们自由飞翔的机会。权利确实在它曾经声称反对的不平等上引起了很多悖论。

作为艺术家和一个无忧无虑爱好享乐的人，陈建升喜欢在作品中制造矛盾，无论是线性年龄的矛盾，还是看似神圣实际却剥夺权力的制度。他自身在许多方面也是矛盾的。依靠惊人的绘画技巧，他创造了轻盈的作品，并以此获得殊荣，那些作品以对裸体男子丰满的展现（《变形记之棱镜》），或农村弃儿的形象的挥洒（《吃玉米的男孩》），而能与那些年长他许多的知名艺术家相媲美。此外，尽管拥有常青藤名校的教育经历，陈建升超越了他舒适的经验世界（赋予了他优雅的相貌和举止），体现在对种族主义政权、教条式宗教奴役的邪恶，和以侵略来获得权力的青年的检视中。有时，陈建升的主题是反社会的，愤怒而挑衅，努力寻找自我和归属感，具有讽刺意味的是，最终表现却是主体的更加孤立。陈建升对自己的作品的态度同样存在着矛盾，他反对给富有影射性的作品分类，以至于不肯揭露他的年龄以免造成先入为主的判断。相反，他更喜欢让观者不断猜测，对主题不带偏见、也对画出作品的艺术家不带任何成见地去解读作品。他坚持反对给那些省略的、不提供任何线索的标题贴标签或作出意识形态的解读。事实上我了解到，陈建升沉默寡言，不愿透露他作品背后的动机。这种距离、隐藏或说保留，也是陈建升用来“俘获”观众心理的一种方法（连同他对空间的支配、甚至压迫，以及明显的扭曲所做的实验）。因此，儿童和青少年经常呈现出成熟的面容，像是些许世故的代理人，从小被洗脑和操控，既吸引了观者，同时又引起了厌恶。此外，陈建升展示了一种姿态，其本身是无辜或不做作的，并引出某种禁忌的特质，观者不会立刻发现，而一旦发现，则为时已晚，观者发现自己成为了同谋，带着非法的许可。这在《红鞋女孩》和《坠落的女孩》中特别引人注目，两幅作品都臣服于窥淫癖，并因其外表的极端无辜而更显罪恶。在这件作品中，这种轻描淡写反而上给予观者一种太过简单却又不安的经验，而且是一种权利被剥夺的经验。陈建升不仅通过对于主题的选择来吸引观者，同时对挥之不去的黑暗情绪赋予表情的声音。从坚实的肉体到梦幻般的色调，但当他发现自己的写实作品“太好看了”，他会着手去调整：在《聚宝盆》里，一个体态轻盈的年轻男性沾满看起来是血的东西；在《暴食者》里，一群无辜的儿童配着醒目的标题，

曝光，近年也引发了对于撤销权利的呼声。西方强烈的权利意识（在其最广泛的意义上），及时行乐和不劳而获的文化，何时开始让个人不再是负责任的自由媒介？它又是如何蔓延到东方的？权利怎么会变成了一个肮脏的字眼，成为放弃责任、忠诚、甚至道德的代名词？这个弊病无孔不入，正如陈建升在其他作品中展现的：宗教领袖对权利的覬覦（陈建升的《脑力外流》），对弱小国家的殖民（《暴食者》），乃至现代偶像艺术家的权利，陈建升这幅《跪着的男人》）象征性地以死气沉沉的琥珀调橙色晕染，不论“达人”如何平庸，“没有原因的反叛者”其实师出有名，甚至是名人与过度放纵——到底这种病症是如何进一步从本质上剥夺了谄媚群众的权利？

在西方政治史上，权利作为社会政策时一直是一股强大的力量，有力证据存在显示它与某些西方政府开始集权化的动作互有关联。有学者引用 1818 年《美国养老金法案》，该法案旨在帮助大陆军的退伍军人，是美国历史上第一个国家社会政策，直到中央集权的美国民族国家成立——这都远在 1860 年代的内战时期之前。³不同于如今造成被动性的社会政策，这样的权利最初目的是鼓励现役军人对政府的忠诚。其最早的形式是二十世纪初由英国的自由党政府创建的福利国家，只为那些“有功劳的穷人”支付退休金（陈建升的《老人》中有形象的体现）。当权利变得普遍、基于需求的准则，它就迅速败下阵来，并且往往忽略个人价值或系统的操弄。陈建升在《抽烟的女孩》里强烈地总结道，我们都见过急欲表现出聪明或强悍的年轻人，结果却显得无知。大力压抑有才华的人，却鼓励无礼又不学无术之徒这类对社会毫无贡献、唯一的贡献正如 2011 年的英国所见证的那种受物欲激发的反叛。（陈建升的《聚宝盆》作品里有所暗指，大型双连画《变形记之棱镜》中描绘了年轻人的心灵陷阱）⁴，当然还有更进一步的不平等，而这种更为普遍的权利文化，与效率低落之间有令人毛骨悚然的关联。就另一个极端来看，社会心理学研究的理论家和作者马尔科姆·格莱德威尔（Malcolm Gladwell）研究近年来企业的权利文化和对“人才”的超高薪酬已有四分之一世纪之久，发现这两项并不一定根据经验或者绩效——2008 年的金融业危机和公众对红利的反弹中尤其深刻地突显出这一点。格莱德威尔引述了这股始于 1970 年代美国的趋势，当时充裕的资金使得几乎所有行业的领军人物，无论是 CEO、时尚模特或职业运动员，再也不想在冬季工作，开始要求成倍增长的薪水。的确很难想象，相较之下五六十年代的 CEO 和体育明星比我们这个时代要挣得少。⁵在 2002 年的论文《人才的神话》中，格莱德威尔提出质疑，对一流商学院的学位给予高额奖金，以及慷慨的高管人员薪酬方案，其成效实在令人存疑。⁶在充满竞争、类似政坛的企业舞台上，所谓“人才”甚至可说是懂得避免做出艰难决策的人才，懂得暗算对手的人才，或是自恋而懂得自我推销的人才。⁷陈建升的《放在地上》对于现代企业孕育出来的权利文化有着简洁的表述（毫不掩饰地将企业大亨与政治独裁者联系起来，

⁶ 在一次 2008 年前的世界银行危机中，格莱德威尔尖锐地指出安然公司的例子是值得警示的，其业绩评估不是基于业绩，股东的分红和给那些在可疑的测试中获得高分的员工不成比例。

⁷ 参见《领袖魅力的阴暗面》，罗伯特·霍根、罗伯特·拉斯金、丹·法齐尼著。

⁸ 2011 年 8 月，在线社交网站“推特”一秒钟有 8868 个推文关于摇滚明星碧昂丝怀孕的消息。2011 年 3 月，一秒钟有 5530 个推文关于日本海啸的消息。

⁹ 参见《疯狂》，由英国灵乐艺术家 Seal 创作（1991）。

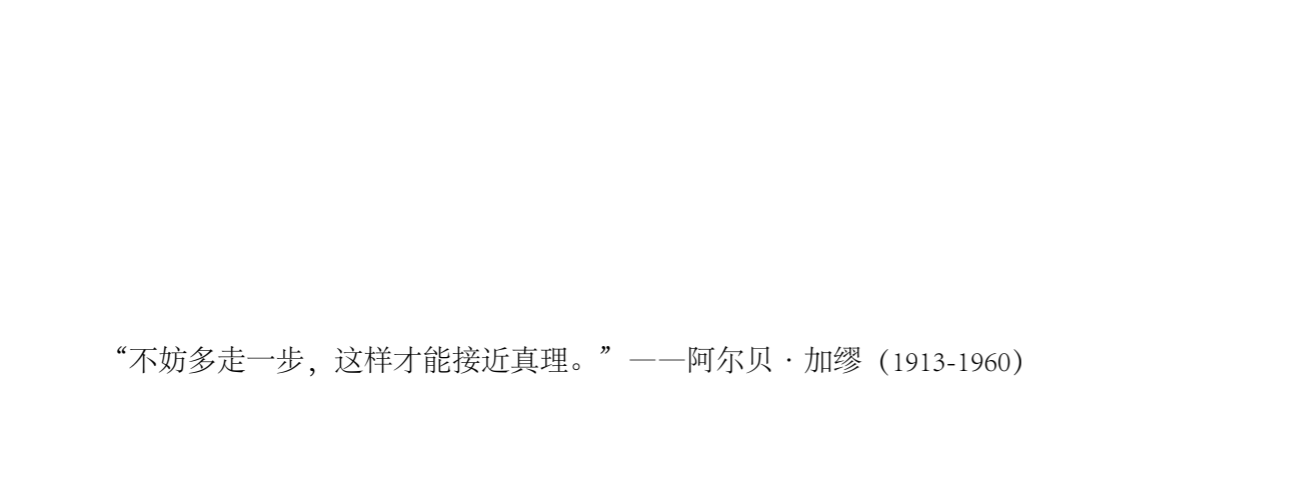
³ 《爱国者、移民和美国社会权利政策的起源》，劳拉·约翰逊著，剑桥大学出版社 2003 年。

⁴ 黑格尔，作为一个现代国家的设计师，声称整体比组成的个体具有更大的现实性，他没有预见到 20 世纪两个重要遗赠，使得社会大部分两极分化和失去权利。首先，绝大多数的世俗资本将掌握在少数人手中。其二，权利国家的扩张及其好斗、反社会、不服从于整体的亚文化，适应于个人主义的意识形态，但事与愿违，最终剥夺了个人的权利。

⁵ 这些问题可能不再单单指向西方，当中国面临巨大的资本漩涡，劳动力成本急剧上升，贫富差距加大。在越来越资本主义的中国，新阶层也在产生，城市地区房价崛起，老建筑的住户等待拆迁后从政府得到补偿，以购买“更智能的”家园。陈建升作为出生于亚洲，活跃于美国的艺术家，正可以从东方和西方的局内和局外人的双重的角度提供解释。

“权利的文化”

裴衣珊 (Emily de Wolfe Pettit)



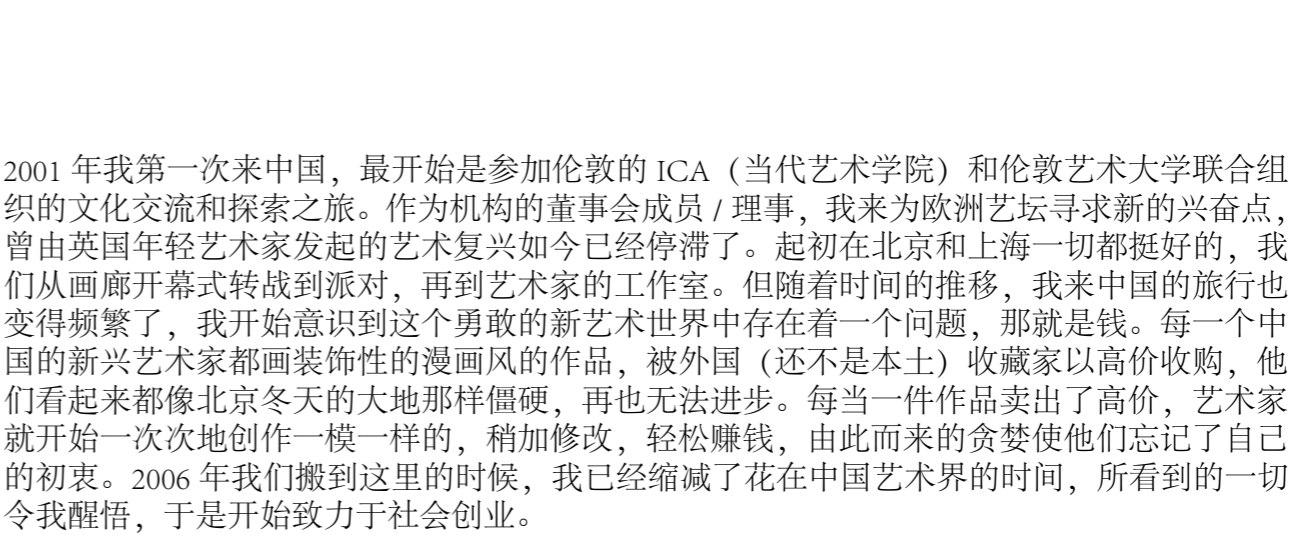
没有责任，哪来权利？几个世纪以来社会在教会与国家之间摇摆，是否已经造成了个人和公共责任的侵蚀以致遭人忽视的地步，而“额外的报酬”却是企业仍继续在两者间摇摆不定？大部分的社会鼓励软弱、造成被动心态，想要拥有物质的权利意识扩张，哪怕这物质只有一丁点或需要用尽任何手段，有如种种形式的心灵圈套，这样的社会还有什么未来？在过去几年里，陈建升这个一直致力通过教育追求功成名就的年轻人，探讨了现代人在存在主义及去权性社会制度之间的两难。成果成就了一件大型作品，以开放的态度检视这种让权利与义务之间连结遭到侵蚀的“权力阶级”，意图捕捉、挑起，并巧妙地触动观者。除了力度之外，陈建升的作品在广度上也很出色，无论是关注宗教（《白衣儿童》），社会经济（《室内四人》）或性别（《海豹和鱼》）。这位艺术家的某些作品确实是走得“太远”了，正如加缪所暗示的那样。¹从几年前开始，他的路线就已经可以直接且广泛地应用在今日的情况。在美国债务庞大并不断增长的背景下²，如将权利视为一种社会政策，相关改革的争议开始动摇（显然是出于经济而不是社会的原因）。此外在英国，2011 年夏天爆发的原因不明的骚乱，引起舆论认为一个人如果参与刑事犯罪则应撤销其权利。随着英国议员“骗补门”

¹ 经过艺术家和我本人的协定，一小部分作品没有进入此次展览，以避免冒犯某些体制的受害者。

² “罗斯福以新政和社会保障开始权利的时代，但几十年来，它仍然比较有限。二战结束后消费急剧下降，美国的债务负担从 GDP 的 100% 迅速下降。20 世纪 60 年代中期约翰逊的伟大社会和保健国家的曙光使得这一情况得到改变。1965 年推出医疗保险和医疗补助，对未来成本抱有童话般的估计。” 《降级之路 - 权利国家简史》，“华尔街日报”评论，2011 年 7 月 28 日。

陈建升 (JS Tan) – 简介

司马岩 (Ian Charles Stewart)



然后，我遇到了艺术家陈建升 (JS Tan)。建升是北京京西学校的学生，极富才华，在学术上和艺术上都很有天分，深受同学们的喜爱。他友好、周到，言辞温和，得到了老师和同学们的尊重。他从不生气，总是微笑，为人诚实，言谈开朗，总是为朋友们挺身而出，即使他功课繁重、还要在工作室画画。

我第一次看到他的早期作品的时候，能明显地感觉到吕西安·弗洛伊德的影响，不过他对主题的敏感和绘画的质量也很醒目。他有很强的求知欲，引导他选择主题，他的作品已发展到富有挑战性和尖锐的主题。他的作品显示出一种当今中国艺术家鲜有的乐观和深度。他愿意去探索新的流派和风格，并以此测试自身的边界。他从不重复表达，但他的作品体现了精神上的连续性。

他的作品中包含一种在当代绘画中缺少的美的观念，我为此而吸引。作为一个收藏家或观察者，我在一个复杂甚至艰难的世界里寻求美的化身，也很有兴趣了解别人眼中的美是什么样的。在建升的作品里我看到了。我很高兴读到最近的一篇采访，建升说他在“寻找一种美感”，即使他从具象转到更抽象的作品。探索之路漫漫，而我们尽可以享受那劳动的成果。

司马岩 (Ian Charles Stewart) 是一位知名的企业家，WiReD 杂志和 Artworld Salon 的联合创始人。Artworld Salon 是一个关于国际当代艺术界的新闻和观点的温和的博客。他还创办或参与投资了如下公司：Seven Peaks Capital、Blue Bamboo、UpMyStreet、AZTEC Internet 和 The Digital Village。

司马岩在伦敦商学院教授创业、风险投资和社会风险投资项目，并担任伦敦当代艺术学会的理事长达十年。他还是伦敦艺术大学的客座教授。司马岩自 2006 年以来一直与家人住在中国北京，目前是 PAE 集团的总裁和 Khunu 公司的总裁。他也是一个体育爱好者，曾是新西兰奥林匹克排球队的成员，2008 年至 2011 年间担任中国美洲杯帆船队队长。目前是北京京西学校活跃的排球教练。

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