**Even the Air Smells Sweet**

**A review of the exhibition “Forget the Horizon” at K11 Shanghai**

I’m not quite sure when it began, but Shanghai’s luxury shopping malls are always filled with the same smell. It’s a very delicate aroma, which smells a little sweet, making one think of the cakes and fine crockery on the table at a luxurious English afternoon tea party. Research by scientists has proved that smells dictate 70 percent of our daily emotions — humans are creatures whose actions are often based on impulse, and the sense of smell affects these actions more than the senses of hearing or sight. Why do all the McDonalds restaurants in the world emit the fragrant aroma of freshly cooked French fries? This smell, which makes middle-aged people feel nostalgic and children become obsessed, ensures that the homely scene of the family having a filling meal together after a shopping trip or a visit to an amusement park remains etched in our minds, securing McDonalds a place in the nuclear family’s collective consciousness, which is passed down the generations.

The smell of luxury malls is luscious, opulent, disarming. In some unfathomable way, it makes you feel that you have become more refined, richer, so that you can’t help opening your wallet, apparently convinced that as long as you own some consumer goods that are as fragrant as the store itself, you will have a beautiful life that is just as fragrant as these products.

When you walk into the “Forget the Horizon” art exhibition in the K11 mall in central Shanghai, you can immediately feel your body being enveloped by the luscious aroma that permeates the air. In 2020, curating a contemporary art show in a shopping mall is like taking measures against the coronavirus — it has become the new normal in these strongholds of consumerism. The diffusion of the term “curate”, from the four white walls of art museums focused mainly on the elite to consumer venues visited by the general public, seems to have restored the attention to the word’s original sense of ‘looking after’ and ‘taking care of’.[[1]](#endnote-1) It’s already November 2020, and there are too many shattered souls and lost faiths that need to be looked after and taken care of. The Coronavirus pandemic is still biting hard in most countries around the world, and a fresh lockdown is once again testing humanity’s patience, confidence and empathy. Since the millennium, the world has been marching triumphantly forward, amid soaring stock markets and technical innovation. Humanity seemed to have attained the “Star Trek” vision of “Live long and prosper”, ahead of schedule.[[2]](#endnote-2) And when biotechnology can now replicate even the human organism, what could stop the advance towards a future that seems to be already here?

To put it fatalistically, the sudden emergence of the Coronavirus has felt like the biological world giving humanity a rude awakening — a warning that, amidst all their revelry, humans need to reflect on their behaviour. Many ancient debates remain unresolved, and there are also fresh problems to challenge the human soul. What is freedom? What is truth? Even more importantly, what is “alternative truth”? And in the face of all this, what can art do? In the midst of this onslaught, in this time of contemplation, the exhibition “Forget the Horizon”, a group show curated by Lu Mingjun, featuring the artists Song Ta, Wang Xingwei and Xu Zhen, opened at the chi K11 Art Museum in Shanghai.

“The Tower of Babel has no top; it stretches straight up into the clouds”. This dedication, on a basket of flowers given to Xu Zhen and placed at the entrance to the exhibition, already hints that this is not an exhibition that will leave you indifferent. It also reminds me of the Jedi Knights in “Star Wars”. In George Lucas’ world, these guardians of the galaxy, armed with light sabres and trained in martial arts, are the protectors of faith and the Force. In the “Forget the Horizon” exhibition, the curator categorizes Wang, Xu and Song as three male artists born in the late 1960s, ’70s and ’80s respectively, who grew up in three different geographical regions: the north-east, southern China and eastern China. They each dance with light sabres and wear trendy footwear, striding with one foot towards the boundless creative Force of the artist, while the other foot moves in synch with the rhythm of our age — sometimes, they themselves are the rhythm of the age.

Walking into the exhibition space, no one can miss out the step of going across to squeeze the hand sanitizer bottle in the shape of St Paul’s Cathedral, to wash and disinfect their hands. Xu Zhen® ‘s work “Tool”, made during the pandemic, maintains his customary quick-witted, caustic approach, somewhere between teasing and provocative, tackling the present head-on. In a large display case, a blue-green “What’sUp” dialogue box sends out the apparently concerned greeting: “Are You OK?” Whether the participants in this conversation are two specific women, or Artificial Intelligence, is not important: in a place where commerce and culture interweave, producers and consumers are the same, they are all “humans at play” (“Homo Ludens”).[[3]](#endnote-3)

Among the trends in the development of global contemporary art over the past decade are the dramatic increases in exhibition space, in demand for exhibition content, and in the number of people attending exhibitions. Art has taken on the role of the “social lubricant of our great cities”. [[4]](#endnote-4) Yet has the expansion of exhibition spaces into society given roots and a voice to contemporary art’s social criticism? Or has art simply been re-fermented into a gamified experience, a cultural commodity? Not long ago, Xu Zhen, who previously took over parts of Huaihai Road[[5]](#endnote-5) for an exhibition he curated, said mockingly in an interview with a journalist: “People in every industry all seem to think that art is like *Laoganma* [[6]](#endnote-6)— all you need to do is dip things in it and they’ll taste good.” In the exhibition hall of the chi K11 Art Museum, where the aromatic scent lingers in the air, art has turned into a fragrance, and it smells a little sweet.

If we take the Jedi Knights as a metaphor for this exhibition, then Master Yoda, who channels the Force, is definitely the eldest of the three, the north-easterner Wang Xingwei. His work, “For That Star Again”, depicts a strange scene of soaring through space: here Jupiter shimmers, the Milky Way beckons. If you’re starting to hear the classic theme tune from the “Star Wars” movies echoing in your ears, well, when you notice that Wang Xingwei’s version of the “Millennium Falcon”, as it surges into space, has metamorphosed into a giant sweet corn cob, the space travel soundtrack in your head will certainly come to an abrupt halt. It feels both unexpected and not really relevant. In Wang Xingwei’s paintings, the assemblage of images is like music that’s slightly out of tune, leaving you wondering whether it’s the result of some deviation in the standard of the musician’s performance, or a problem with the sound system. In his pictures, the combination of impressive realist technique and the perplexing surrealist mood is – to go back to the language of painting – a response to the study of painting’s social nature by modernist painters from Manet on. As painting’s nurturing of self-awareness continues to develop, Wang Xingwei’s contribution includes the celebratory folk style of a crop-planting song from north-east China, and the humour and cunning wit of a north-eastern song and dance duet.

The popularity over recent years of the “north-eastern cultural renaissance”, which began in the literary world, raises an issue of great relevance to this exhibition: the nostalgia and nativism of the new north-eastern literature not only caters to the tastes of members of the “new middle class”, but also touches on their own situation. These incomers to the big cities, who are still energetically charging along the path towards economic success, are also the main group of consumers for malls like K11 in first-tier cities like Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou. Whether they come to the mall to buy a brand-name handbag, or spend 99 yuan to visit the exhibition “Forget the Horizon”, an art show of the same nature as these consumer goods will also bring the shoppers some delight during their shopping trip, leaving a trace of new dreams in the daily lives of these working people. This is the eternal truth of art’s existence — a spiritual token, something rare in our increasingly material contemporary world.

At least the next generation among this group will certainly have more of a common language with Song Ta, the youngest of the three artists participating in the exhibition. Wearing a very bling wristwatch and the most fashionable vulcanized rubber-soled shoes, Song Ta has turned the exhibition space into a fashion show, screening a film of the fashion brand he founded, ‘Urban Chigga’, participating in New York Fashion Week. The scene is decorated with fluttering red and white flags with Song Ta’s name printed on them, accompanied by the pounding beat of hip-hop music, and Song Ta delivers every visitor who enters the room onto the brilliantly lit catwalk. Song Ta’s ‘nonsense’ and ‘political incorrectness’ do not stand up to scrutiny [[7]](#endnote-7) — yet as an artist, in a bastion of consumerism like K11, they chime with key elements of the campaign to promote China’s “national brands”: middle school uniforms and domestic-brand Huili shoes.

When did this begin, that the childhood of the one-time “flowers of the nation”[[8]](#endnote-8) has been turned into the nostalgic consumer goods of today — and nostalgia has become the reflex reaction of modern people seeking to protect themselves against an insecure society? Thirty years ago, when the world was only just getting to know contemporary Chinese art, ‘Chineseness’ made its debut with “political pop” and “cynical realism”, both rich in symbolism. Big-character posters, Tian’anmen, and even traditional Chinese intellectuals like the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove, came to represent ‘Chineseness’ in the eyes of the west. Today, in a globalized world, to talk about Chineseness is really just like flaunting the “national brand wave” — its limitations are obvious. A quick browse through TikTok, the international version of Douyin, shows that the nostalgia of teenagers all over the world is cloaked in similar ‘military-style’ school uniforms — the world of young people, held together by social media, has long since been seamlessly interconnected.

In the symposium that preceded the opening of the exhibition, the curator Lu Mingjun stressed repeatedly that this was perhaps an extremely ‘incorrect’ exhibition, which the majority of people might even dislike; it was part of his strategy to make offending the audience a litmus test for assessing the exhibition — and turn content into attitude, regardless of whether or not it was wrong. Richard Hamilton once said the audience would only remember art exhibitions that invented a “new display feature”. If we combine these two standards to consider this exhibition, its bright spot is the unapologetic attitude of the three artists, who each use a “new feature” to critique consumer society — by turns mocking, clever, warm, witty, provocative, passionate… At the same time as subverting audience members’ ideas and expectations, they also ask them to pay for the privilege. This is precisely the type of freedom of personal choice in a “liquid-modern society” discussed by Zygmunt Bauman: “Culture is turning now into one of the departments in the ‘all you need and might dream of’ department store.”[[9]](#endnote-9)

K11 is not just a department store crammed full of desire, it is also an art museum where even the air smells sweet.

1. The English word “curate” is derived from the Latin “cura”, which means “care”; a “curatore” is “someone who provides care”. The word “curator” was first used in the Roman empire to describe an official of the empire in charge of public matters of all [various] kinds. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The greeting used by Vulcans in the television series “Star Trek”. It expresses the belief that there is no limit to interstellar beings’ ability to expand to other planets where they will flourish and achieve immortality. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. *Homo Ludens* was a term invented by the Dutch cultural theorist Johan Huizinga in 1938, meaning “man the player”. It emphasizes the importance of play to humankind. In today’s world, where humans suffer from a serious attention deficit, this concept has been refined to mean that whatever people do, all experiences are seen as a game. Gamified thought has spread to all areas – in the view of this writer, art exhibitions in shopping malls are designed to cater to gamified consumers. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Nick Foulkes, “ Why art is the social lubricant of our great city, “ London Evening Standard, 10.7.2009 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. [Translator’s note: An upscale shopping street in Shanghai, on which the K11 mall is located.] [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. [Translator’s note: A popular Chinese chilli sauce brand] [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. According to the online “Urban Dictionary’, “Asian people who are influenced by urban Hip Hop culture” are known as ‘Chigga’, meaning “Asian people who want to be Black.” The word, made up of the Chi from “China” and “gga” from “Nigga”, suggests that Asian people who like Hip Hop want to become Black. This kind of fashionable internet vocabulary is based on habitual perception and judgment — and in the opinion of this author it contains racial prejudice. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. [Translator’s note: refers to the generation of Chinese children who grew up in the late 1970s and early 1980s, in the years after the Cultural Revolution.] [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Zygmunt Bauman, “44 Letters from the Liquid Modern World”, (Chinese edition); p. 90; Lijiang Publishing House, 2013 [↑](#endnote-ref-9)