

IKON

Exhibition Guide

Zhang Enli

4 February – 29 March 2009

First Floor Galleries

Entering Zhang Enli's exhibition, we encounter paintings depicting everyday objects – buckets, pans, light bulbs, beds – and some outdoor scenes. The artist does not go searching for spectacular views or precious things; rather his subject matter, such as the tip of a shoe (*Leather Shoes*) can often be found, literally, at his feet.

The objects and locations in Zhang Enli's recent paintings refer to human presence, but no people are seen in them. The vessels stand idle and empty, the balls hanging in a net are not being played with, the sofa is waiting for someone to ensconce themselves, and there is no mattress on the bed to comfort a tired body. *Bed 3* depicts just an empty corner without any bed.

According to the artist the beds he painted were for migrant workers who, like him, had come from afar. In 1989 Zhang Enli moved from his native Jilin, a rural town in the north of China, to study and work in Shanghai, and, knowing this, we read the emptiness of the beds as being symbolic of displacement and absence.

The objects that feature in Zhang Enli's paintings are man-made to meet everyday needs. When they are not serving some useful purpose there seems to be no particular reason to pay them attention. They are often empty containers suggesting that there is no hidden content or message, no narrative attached. They are just things, humble things, plain and empty.

The meaning of the paintings, then, does not reside in their recognisable subject matter. It is the way in which Zhang Enli reveals his subjects that makes them remarkable for us.

The way the pictures are composed bears close resemblance to photography. Have another look at *Leather Shoes* or *White Bulb*. The scene is limited and framed as if seen through a viewfinder; naked eyes would have a wider perspective. Trees cast on a

backdrop of the sky (*Tree in Winter 3, 4, & 6*), a more recent theme in Zhang Enli's art, share the same effect. Also the building elevations (*Apartment 2 & 3*) seem to be a bit too close; we almost have an urge to step backwards to get a better look. Likewise, we are inclined to lift our gaze from the back of the sofa (*Sofa*) to see the room around it.

Zhang Enli does, indeed, use photographs as a basis for his paintings. Yet the work is carefully crafted. Very deliberately the artist chooses his subject, the focus, and each detail shown in the image. The physical action, the slow process of painting itself distances the image from the photograph.

Semi-transparent layers of paint and the traces of brush strokes make us focus on the materiality of the painting. In places, the paint has a life of its own, and we see traces of it wavering and dripping. Sometimes the artist leaves visible drawn lines of the grid that he used for translating the photographic image onto the canvas. Thus formal elements gain importance over the subject, and there are two realities in the work, that of representation and that of the painted canvas, an entity that exists in the same space as us. Eventually, all subject matter becomes open to pictorial investigation, a distinct kind of attention and care.

Zhang Enli's work embodies a very personal relation with stuff. He spends a lot of time in the company of objects and painting. The object becomes paint and the process of painting mediates the artist's communion with the object. It is no longer a question of a "surrounding" world; the object and the observer are the same.

Zhang Enli invites us to invest time observing painted images. As their process of creation was slow, so is everything they unfold for us. We can start from some detail or a corner and follow the lines, brush strokes and tones, taking us on a journey into painting.

Zhang Enli was born in Jilin Province, China, in 1965. He graduated from the Arts & Design Institute of Wuxi Technical University in 1989. Today he lives and works in Shanghai.