



Yu Chen 余陈

Yu Chen's style originated from the realistic tradition of 20th century Chinese art. She dwells on portraiture but her subjects and aesthetics are unusual for a female painter. She focuses on babies alone, which she depicts with affection but also with a critical distance on the roles they are given in Chinese society. As one of the few female artists in a largely male-dominated art scene in China, she deals with social issues that are culturally and politically charged, through feminine eyes. Although an art academy teacher, she is not obsessed with painting technique. Rather, she tries to grasp the spirit behind the superficial image. For her, this insight has to be understood through the female instinctive sense. Her work takes on an unfinished quality, she uses a coarse canvas surface and applies her colours in thin layers. She complements unusual colour tones by sticking ornaments to the figures' attire, or depicts them holding treats. This unfinished aspect of her work is a way of acknowledging the gap between the presented image and the intrinsic spirit of it. Through various techniques and symbolism with her palette of bright, brash reds, her work depicts a raw, emotional quality.

Yu Chen's baby motif is overtly frank, in keeping with the unabashed nature of infancy and childhood. She dramatises the innocence of her subject matter, notably through a very accurate rendering of child like behaviour and facial expressions, studied from keen observation. However, her use of military uniform and her babies' physical likeness to Chairman Mao, along with the movements of the babies, often determined ironically add to this displacement of childhood in an adult attire. Sometimes they are playfully rendered with sweets and ice cream in their chubby hands. Other times they are satirically portrayed as an irked 'enfant terrible'. While Yu Chen uses obvious references to popular culture, easily identified symbols in contemporary Chinese art (a red five-pointed star, an octagonal hat, etc.), she uses them in such a way that leaves the work wide open to interpretation. Innocent baby faces, with their expression and clothing a surprising contrast to what viewers are used to seeing, instead bring out a personal identity, and reveal the artist's attempt at conveying the immense contrast between the configuration of personal identity and the reality of life. The paintings do not pretend to deliver one universal truth; instead, the answers remain open and vary according to each viewer's social background and life experience. Thereby, the truth is presented as a state of perpetual change—never graspable and always fleeting.

Yu Chen was born in Guizhou Province, China in 1963, and is the oldest child of the artistically talented Chen family, which also includes younger brothers Chen Yu and Chen Li. She graduated from the Guizhou Art Institute in 1981 and from the Engraving Department of the Central Academy of Fine Art in Beijing in 1998. She lives and works in Beijing. Yu Chen has had three solo exhibitions with Schoeni Art Gallery. She has participated in group exhibitions in a number of cities worldwide, including Cairo and London. She was an artist in residence at the Cite Internationale des Arts in Paris.

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