

ULLENS CENTER FOR CONTEMPORARY ART 尤伦斯当代艺术中心

WANG MAI: DIRE STRAITS

July 21, 2012. Beijing China

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/VIP Preview:

July 21

Exhibition dates:

July 22 – August 30, 2012

Exhibition Space:

UCCA Nave

Press material also available for
download from the UCCA website

The Ullens Center for Contemporary Art (UCCA) is pleased to announce the opening of *Wang Mai: Dire Straits*, opening on July 22 (press conference, July 21, 16:00). For this exhibition, Wang has created an immersive environment that completely fills the UCCA's soaring Nave, transforming it into a spectacular, absurdist landscape that is part waterway and part forest, an analysis of both a disappearing past and an uncertain future. The metaphor of the strait — a narrow divide that must be controlled and that often creates tension — allows Wang Mai to posit a parallel between the physical space in which the exhibition takes place and the wider geopolitical background against which it unfolds.

Wang Mai's deep interest in geopolitics is made manifest in his choice of materials. The walls of The Nave are papered in blue foil wrappers from Zhongnanhai cigarette boxes (a Beijing brand named after the compound were the central leadership reside); its floors are covered in pieces of corrugated blue metal cut directly from the roof of Wang's own nearby studio. Within this tense passageway, Wang presents a walk-through collage. An oversized cradle made from birch bark and a perilously suspended tent covered in cured fish skin form a semi-natural habitat for the boxy, metallic robots and lamprey-like "oil monsters" (so named because they are stamped with the logos of global petroleum companies) that perhaps best define his artistic practice. However, the forest's unseen inhabitants are inspired by the Hezhen people—a nomadic ethnic group from Wang's native Heilongjiang province popularly known for crafting clothes from the skins of fish.



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As one of the first Chinese artists to take interest in the aesthetics of postindustrialism, not to mention one of the first artists to establish a studio in the former Factory 798 district where UCCA is located, Wang also focuses on the more recent past. The exhibition includes a sequence of oil paintings—jokingly titled “Memoirs of a Loser,” (*Diaosi Huiyi Lu*) which position the artist’s own subjectivity against this historical matrix, reminiscing on texts such as “Heart of a Maiden,” a popular romance that was transmitted in early reform-era China by hand copying. Other sculptures incorporate white “climate boxes,” the once ubiquitous casings for meteorological equipment that now serve as nostalgic relics of a centralized yet pre-digital socialist system and the mass cooperative effort to gather information on which that system relied.

At this crucial meeting point, Wang Mai attempts to juxtapose the ancient and modern, the lasting and the fleeting, all the while referring constantly back to a motif in his work that in this exhibition lies just beneath the surface: oil. The strait here constructed contains references to corporate branding and national interests, a race toward modernity that ignores fading cultures and environmental degradation. Asking the viewer to step into this playful dystopia, Wang Mai entreats us to reflect on China’s fraught position in a rapidly degenerating world.

Related Programs

Children’s Art Workshop: Creating Monsters

Time: 10:00-11:30, Saturday, July 28
Venue: UCCA La Suite
Special Guest: Wang Mai (UCCA exhibiting artist)
Language: Chinese with English translation

smart Artists’ Talk Series: “Confucian Analects” – Wang Mai’s Art and Creative Language

Time: 14:00-15:30, Saturday, July 28
Venue: UCCA Auditorium
Special Guest: Wang Mai (UCCA exhibiting artist)
Language: Chinese with English translation

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This series is sponsored by Mercedes-Benz smart.

About the artist

Wang Mai was born in Yichun, Heilongjiang Province in 1972. Wang Mai is widely regarded as a multi-media pioneer, and one of the most versatile artists of his generation. Since the 1990s, his work has spanned from painting and poetry to performance and installation, deconstructing social ideologies to reflect on global issues. Drawing on aesthetics inherited from the past to form visions of the future, his transdisciplinary working method has been hugely influential on subsequent generations of artists in China. Wang Mai has led group performance pieces, and used installation work to voice broader concerns, such as “Petro-Monsters”, which comments on the global energy crisis.

Selected exhibitions include the *Spring Festival Show*, Beijing Design Museum, (1999), *X/change*, Beijing and Cologne, Germany (1999), the *7th Nippon International Performance Art Festival*, Japan (2000), *Asian Factory*, Bologna Museum of Contemporary Art, Italy (2004), *Face*, Minsheng Art Museum, Shanghai (2011) and the *54th International Venice Biennale* (2011) for the collateral event *Future Pass*.

About UCCA

The Ullens Center for Contemporary Art (UCCA) is a comprehensive, not-for-profit art center serving a global Beijing public. Located at the heart of the 798 Art District, it was founded by collectors Guy and Myriam Ullens and opened in November 2007. Through a wide array of exhibitions and programs, UCCA promotes the development of the local artistic environment, fosters international exchange, and showcases the latest in art, design, and other fields. UCCA's cultural and educational programs bring the public into close contact with cutting-edge thought in art and the humanities, advancing the public cultural sensibility and bringing new experiences to its audience.

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