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Elena Nesi

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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ELENA NESI

Independent Scholar

Review of

Yan Pei-Ming. *Painting Histories*. Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi, Florence, Italy.

July 7 – September 3, 2023.

History has consistently served as a prevailing motif for artists across centuries. The passage of time, individual and collective odysseys, and the intricate interweaving of human lives have consistently kindled the creative imagination of artists hailing from diverse backgrounds and genres. Yan Pei-Ming's exhibition at Palazzo Strozzi in Florence offers a distinctive rendition of history. Under the elucidating title *Painting Histories*, the artist guides us through a journey that resonates with us all. Even when observing the trajectory of his personal life, we find ourselves able to connect with his struggles and extend empathy toward his experiences.

Commencing on July 7th and concluding on September 3rd, 2023, the exhibition featured an impressive collection of more than thirty artworks. Curated by Arturo Galansino, the exhibition has been organized in collaboration with the Fondazione Hillary Merkus Recordati.

Yan Pei-Ming was born on January 1, 1960, in Shanghai, China. He moved to France in the 1980s and later became a French citizen, where he pursued his artistic education at the École

nationale supérieure des beaux-arts in Dijon. Growing up during the Cultural Revolution in China, Yan Pei-Ming's early life was shaped by significant historical and political events. Yan Pei-Ming's life story is marked by his journey from China to France and his subsequent development into a prominent contemporary artist on the international stage.

Yan Pei-Ming's artistic compositions often assume a monumental and monochromatic demeanor. He invites us to immerse ourselves in his canvases, akin to the experience of being within a movie theater—a source of artistic inspiration for him.

Yan Pei-Ming's approach to the canvas is marked by a raw intensity. Upon approaching the paintings, one becomes aware of the weighty, tactile brushstrokes that permeate the canvas. His canvases depict a world rife with animalistic apocalypse, where predators and prey not only engage in strife among themselves but also contest their own kin. This mirrors the underlying philosophy behind his artistic endeavors that asserts a tragic nature of history and a bleak reality wherein humanity faces an insurmountable plight.

This encapsulates his overarching concept.

In interviews, the artist expounds upon his belief that the survival of humanity is intrinsically linked to that of the animal kingdom. Disregarding animals—a tendency often rooted in human arrogance and conceit—can yield profound peril, a sentiment that appears to be disregarded even in artistic expression.



Figure 1
"Yan Pei-Ming. Pittore di storie," Palazzo Strozzi, Firenze, 2023. Foto Ela Bialkowska, OKNO Studio. © Yan Pei-Ming, ADAGP, Paris, 2023.

Amidst his array of works featuring animals, one encounters his landscapes: somber, haunting, and conducive to losing oneself within their depths. The interpretation of this darkness as either a sanctuary or a harbinger of naturalistic catastrophe is incumbent upon the viewer. Personally, I found myself experiencing a blend of emotions when confronted with the towering black forests that exude an air of menace and isolation at the peripheries of the canvases.

Indeed, the narrative of natural history converges with the artist's personal life. This is particularly evident in the dual portraits depicting the young painter

alongside his father, symbolizing a departure from the natural order. By departing before his father, Yan Pei-Ming invokes an ancient Chinese adage: *White hair attends black hair's funeral*. Beyond a mere representation of father and son, the paintings evoke the profound, primal essence of the human archetype.

Portraiture is the fulcrum of Yan Pei-Ming's oeuvre. His approach to portraiture seeks to unveil the inherent essence of an individual, a process he views as an introspective endeavor. While he playfully jests about his limited colour palette, suggesting that he refrains from using colours to avoid challenging the prowess of the old masters and assuming the responsibility of competing with them, he predominantly employs black and white techniques.

Evident throughout his works are tributes to illustrious painters of the past. Notably, a massive triptych rendition of the Mona Lisa, the painting that initially ignited his passion for art during his youth, pays homage to Leonardo da Vinci. Similarly, tributes to Jacques-Louis David, Diego Velazquez, and Francisco Goya are discernible through his interpretations of *The Death of Marat*, *Portrait of Pope Innocent X*, and *The Third of May 1808*.

The recurrence of triptych compositions further evinces Pei-Ming's affinity for Medieval and Renaissance artistic traditions. He identifies himself as an artist rather than tethering his identity to a specific national or cultural context, seamlessly bridging the gap between Eastern and Western artistic sensibilities.

Amidst the diverse tapestry of histories Pei-Ming explores, a thematic thread of



historical personas and events emerges, perhaps serving as a reminder that history cyclically echoes, often in ways devoid of optimism.

The exhibition leads observers through a gradual historical progression of tragedy and realism, ultimately culminating in the 20th and 21st centuries. The presentation of pivotal moments in Italian history resonated deeply—events with which I, naturally, possess a particular familiarity. Instances such as the execution of Benito Mussolini, the assassination of Pier Paolo Pasolini, and the kidnapping of Aldo Moro assume prominence within the narrative.

Of special note is a room housing a portrayal of a barking dog juxtaposed with one of Yan Pei-Ming's evocative landscapes, positioned between depictions of Mussolini and Hitler. This

Figure 2
"Yan Pei-Ming. Pittore di storie," Palazzo Strozzi, Firenze, 2023. Foto Ela Bialkowska, OKNO Studio. © Yan Pei-Ming, ADAGP, Paris, 2023.



Figure 3
"Yan Pei-Ming. Pittore di storie," Palazzo Strozzi, Firenze, 2023. Foto Ela Bialkowska, OKNO Studio. © Yan Pei-Ming, ADAGP, Paris, 2023.

particular setting struck a chord, not only due to the malevolence associated with the subjects depicted, but rather due to the realization that the foreboding ambience of a dark forest or the threat of a fierce dog pales in comparison to the disconcerting aura emanating from these two individuals of our own species. In my estimation, this prompts an introspective consideration of the relative dangers posed by a rabid canine, an ominous environment, and the actions of two human beings.

Ultimately, the exhibition segues into contemporary times and the history currently unfolding. Portraits of Volodimir Zelensky and Vladimir Putin feature prominently, perennially presented as a triptych and employing a monochromatic palette, whether black and white, red, or yellow and blue, reminiscent of the Ukrainian flag.

Between these two portraits, set within a lengthy and narrow chamber, a vast painting adorned with innumerable red skulls commands attention. This field of skulls symbolically signifies the ultimate outcome of history—not solely its current state but also its past and, regrettably, its anticipated future, according to both the artist and my personal viewpoint.

Amidst this unending saga of tragedy, paramount is the imperative to participate in a constructive manner, at the very least through a lens of realism. Documenting and recording events persists with the purpose of nurturing the hope that perseveres even in the face of adversity.