

GALLERIA CONTINUA

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QILIAN RANGE, REDUX

Zhuang Hui

Opening: April 24th, 2021

Galleria Continua is honoured to announce Zhuang Hui's new solo exhibition "Qilian Range, Redux" at the Beijing gallery space. The exhibition is curated by Karen Smith.

Zhuang Hui is one of the most important conceptual artists of his generation. Born in Gansu, but based in Beijing since 1995, he has been at the forefront of developments in the capital's art scene, contributing works to a number of seminal 1990s exhibitions of China's "new art" and, through the same timeframe, assisting in the compilation of several highly influential self-compiled books on the subject of conceptual practice by the new generation of artists in the 1990s. Continuing through to the present, Zhuang Hui's work in the field of contemporary art has often extended to research across the length and breadth of the Chinese mainland, and to the support of artists living in remoter regions, as well as to those who chose to try their fortune in Beijing. His influence upon the scene through the recent several decades is profound, if not always immediately obvious to the new generation of art lovers and collectors.

Zhuang Hui's career began in 1992, with a series of performative, site-specific works

that are credited as important examples of land art projects in China, as well as conceptual acts of artistic engagement that embody concerns that Zhuang Hui continues to explore. Through the ensuing several decades, Zhuang Hui has consistently return to places, regions, and pathways with which he gained familiarity in his early life, where the style of his engagement and interventions involves roaming over the land, digging holes, investigating communities, and generally channeling local social phenomena. These concerns underscore the concept and process of this latest solo presentation "Qilian Range, Redux", an exhibition which combines works of moving image and photography, objects and installations that are at once documents of his performative actions and independent works of art.

As signalled by a first iteration of works from the project – the exhibition "Qilian Range" curated by Colin Siyuan Chinnery and presented at Continua in 2017, the starting point for Zhuang Hui's Qilian Range Project is a fascination with "place"; this being primarily the region and landscape of Zhuang Hui's youth. The beginning of the Qilian Range Project can be traced back to 2011, but travel has long been a function of the

artist's process; a mechanism for research, for social engagement, and for achieving inspiration, as much as a means of relaxation. A first tour of China's northwestern region in 1990 made by bicycle established a preference for self-conducted journeys guided by intuition and not rigid itinerary. Through the ten years in which Zhuang Hui has been working on this concept, the completion of the Qilian Range Project necessitated travel by car for the distances covered from one end of the Hexi Corridor to the other were vast, and the country roads and mountain paths challenging. Throughout, the spirit guiding the project remained as strong and compelling as that which set him on the road thirty years ago.

What we see in "Qilian Range, Redux" is the result of several years of intensive work, specifically for the works here beginning in 2018. In the exhibition, the approach to presenting these latest works takes its cue from the motif of a journey in the context of a vast physical space with particular geographic characteristics. By such means, visitors can experience a sense of the expanse of space that is the setting for Zhuang Hui's project. It is within such boundless natural environments that the frailty of human life is felt intuitively without recourse to overt reference.

A linear mapping of points across the surface of the wall in the main gallery represents space, motion, and distance, evoking the journey undertaken by the artist. The route "mapped" here further contains the image of five QR codes. Each represents an actual site along the journey where Zhuang Hui paused, and set to work to carve the QR code on a rock. Each was completed as an act of artistic labour, painstakingly carved by hand by the artist on site. These sites lie deep within the Qilian Mountains, thus rendering the QR codes mysterious cultural "relics" for anyone who

stumbles upon them, now or in the future, much like the large installation works created earlier by Zhuang Hui and which he chose to abandon in the Gobi Desert in 2014. The QR codes are functioning, not merely decorative, both in situ and in the gallery, where visitors can scan them to receive information about the landscape and history the Qilian Mountains.

If this "map" attempts to articulate a vast landscape of space, the element of the "tent" brings the artworks back to a human scale: the "map" transports visitors out into the vast region of the Hexi Corridor and the Qilian Mountains, while the "tents" draw them into the intimate space that is Zhuang Hui's mind-space, as it were. The tents carve out a space within the space of the gallery, referencing shelter from the elements, and providing "safe" intimate structures in which visitors can pause on their journey through the exhibition to watch Zhuang Hui's videos works. Titled only by their number within the sequence of Qilian works, these videos of various but usually short lengths, are deftly subtle sequences of the artist engaged in a series of performative interventions in the landscape. Intended to represent human endeavor, these show the artist pitting himself, bodily, physically against the natural landscape at tasks that replicate stages of human evolution – the need to move earth, to construct structures, to excavate and reform the landscape – yet which, viewed today, feel as futile as they are innocent. The artist is not advocating the need for collective rather than individual action. His focus remains on the essence of human nature. Each video carries its own specific emotion and energy, which build through the course of the exhibition, guiding the visitor through the emotional range of the artist as well as promoting awareness of their own response to such element forces and physical challenges.

To give a sense of how certain threads run through Zhuang Hui's artworks, the exhibition begins in the project space with a journey through the world that is Zhuang Hui's career, highlighting works in which some of the thoughts and impulses seen in "Qilian Range, Redux" first appeared, and the various iterations that evolved. Echoing the roots of an early impulse, here, within this context is the new video work Qilian 22, which shows the performative action of Zhuang Hui digging holes in the dry, yet delicate and crumbly red earth of a barren hillside in the western part of the Qilian Mountains. This dual-channel piece makes echo of Longitude 109.88 Latitude 31.09, a 1995 performative action, which saw Zhuang Hui dig holes in the earth at three locations in close proximity to the Three Gorges project.

On the second floor, a focal piece of "Qilian Range, Redux" is Qilian 27, a 10-channel installation and the largest video work in the exhibition. This shows the artist wandering in various parts of the vast landscape that his journey through the Hexi Corridor and the Qilian Mountains covered, and in the simple but mesmerizing act of banging a gong in the spirit of a shaman. That the artist is naked reflects the sense of freedom he experienced in this world of nature, where human intervention is almost absent, and a state of innocence in giving himself to the experience of freedom in this way.

The intuitive response expressed through Qilian 27 finds its most extreme contrast in Qilian 28, in which Zhuang Hui is seen stumbling back and forth over a stretch of dry, dark gravel, making futile attempts to set light to sprays of pure alcohol that he spurts from his mouth. Frustration builds both as he continually fails to achieve his aim, and as he inevitably becomes inebriated by the strength of the alcohol.

A second large installation, also on the second floor, comprises a mix of large, heavy, partially shiny "balls". These are fashioned from natural stone harvested from the mountains, and traditional ceramics. Both were shaped by human hand. The stone used for the 30 natural balls was "found" material, gathered and transported by the artist to the workshop of local craftsmen who ground the rough shapes into perfect spheres. The 30 ceramic balls were equally shaped by local craftsmen, who were given the challenge of using the "Tang sancai" glazing technique to decorate the surface, such that when mixed with the natural stone their materiality would acquire a sense of ambiguity. A simple, subtle means of referencing the present penchant for confusing actual reality with manmade versions of the physical world as much as what we call "facts".

In sum, the various works Zhuang Hui presents in "Qilian Range, Redux" echo his personal history as an artist, yet, of greater significance, is how they speak to this unsettled period of human history, to the disastrous parting of ways between human communities and the natural world. In the words of British land artist Andy Goldsworthy: 'We often forget that we are nature. Nature is not something separate from us. So, when we say that we have lost our connection to nature, we've lost our connection to ourselves.'

Over the extended course of an entire decade, "Qilian Range, Redux" has been Zhuang Hui's process of reconnecting to nature. His art, like those works presented in "Qilian Range, Redux", is a pathways which gives us means to reconnect to ourselves.

Biography:

Zhuang Hui was born in 1963 in Yumen Town, Gansu Province, China. He left his hometown to study in Luoyang City at the age of thirteen and started to study painting by himself. In 1979, after graduating from high school, he became a worker at the state-run Luoyang No.1 Tractor Factory. During that period, he travelled extensively to experience first hand the many facets of Chinese society in transformation. In 1992 Zhuang Hui created his first major public art project *Serve the People*. In 1995, he started a series of works examining the roots of Chinese socialist class structure and his place within it, first with *Thirty and One* and also his most celebrated series of photographs – self-portraits with entire work units such as army battalions, villages, or hospitals, comprising up to hundreds of people. With projects such as *Longitude 109.88 E and Latitude 31.09 N*, Zhuang expanded his examination of the transformation of Chinese society to larger socio-political issues, and with the photography project *Ten Years* he documented his own peripatetic and unconventional life. After 2000, Zhuang continued his portrayal of the troubled side of China's economic development with a series of sculptural installations such as *Chashan County* and *Factory Floor*. In 2006, Zhuang Hui started working with Dan'Er, with whom he developed a number of projects including the *Yumen Project* for which they opened a photography studio in his hometown, creating a social portrait of the inhabitants of a city in decline. Zhuang started regularly visiting the Qilian Mountain range, and in 2014 started making work arising from the relationship he has formed with the landscape there, which has since developed into a long term project.

During his engaged and fruitful artistic career Zhuang Hui participated in a number of exhibitions including "1650 B.C.", New Century Art Foundation, Beijing (2019); "Qilian Range", Galleria Continua (Beijing); Lian Zhou Museum of Photography (2017); Xi'an Art Museum (2015); Galleria Continua, Beijing (2014); Folkwang Museum, Bonn (2014); 9th Shanghai Biennale, Power Station of Art, Shanghai (2012); Today Art Museum, Beijing (2011); YUZ Museum, Jakarta (2010); Salt Lake Art Center (2009); The Groninger Museum, Groningen (2008); Tate Modern, Liverpool (2007); Galleria Continua, Les Moulins (2007); Galleria Continua, San Gimignano (2006); Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin (2005); Kunstmuseum Bern (2005); Musée d'art contemporain de Lyon (2004); Centre Pompidou, Paris (2003); Deichtorhallen Hamburg, Hamburg (2002); Beyeler Art Museum, Basel (2001); Ghent Art Center (1999). He also participated in the 48th International Art Exhibition Venice Biennale (1999).