

FEATURE / ART & CULTURE

Michael Ho's 'Grotto Heavens' exploring diasporic experiences



By Tan Weiyun

12:12 UTC+8, 2023-08-19



Artist Michael Ho is holding his first solo exhibition "Grotto Heavens" at the Gallery Vacancy. Inspired by the ancient poetic folklore of China, the exhibition displays a series of paintings and a video work, exploring the artist's diasporic experiences as a second-generation Chinese immigrant in the West.

Through the recurring motifs of caves, mountains, water, and artifacts, Ho transforms the gallery into a liminal space, elucidating the prevalent tension between reality and myth as well as the in-betweenness that is cultural, historical, and personal.

"Echoes from the Void (2022)" sets the scene for "Grotto Heavens," inviting viewers to wander through the ancient caves in England. The video work simultaneously collages the English natural landscape with Ho's quest into the mythical connotation of the cave in Chinese culture.

Caves, where gods dwell and Taoists seek immortality, are sites that are viewed as mirrors of the heavens above and therefore connecting Heaven and Earth. In the artist's interpretation, this point of contact contains its own sense of time, scale, and temporal reality; myth and truth interchanges and interconnects.

In the video, the disconnected pearl beads materialize and drip out of the cave, transitioning into an unknown, fictional timespan, while the artist-posed figure is yelling in this ethereal setting. The words echo in forests, mountains, and caves, probably a metaphor of an echo chamber that propagates misinformation in our hyperconnected age of the Internet.

The investigation of myth in history is further revealed in the artist's depiction of Chinese artifacts. In "Buried Like a Certain Kind of Truth (2023)" and "Nothing But a Myth (2023)," Ho portrays material objects that oscillate between truth and myth over the course of history.



Tan Weiyun

"Buried Like a Certain Kind of Truth" (2023)



Tan Weiyun

"Nothing but a Myth" (2023)

"Buried Like a Certain Kind of Truth (2023)" recreates a jade suit rediscovered by the mountain site, whose existence was once a highly contested subject. The jade suit's existence was uncertain until an excavation of the imperial tombs of a Western Han Dynasty (202 BC-AD 8) prince in 1968. This history of jade suit characterizes the liminal space revealed through the exhibition, embodying a duality of authenticity and fictionality.

The duality is also manifested in the formal treatment of the mysterious imperial seal (Chuanguo Yuxi, 传国玉玺) in the painting "Nothing but a Myth (2023)," serving as a counter object to the jade suit.

The seal was said to be made in the Qin Dynasty (221-206 BC), and passed on from dynasty to dynasty, but its existence is still unknown in the present day, temporarily or forever lost to history. In the painting, Ho treats the object in a semi-translucent appearance, somehow showing its uncertainty, and dissolving the substantial object into the lush background of foliage.

The exhibition as a whole attempts at creating an immersive and holistic experience. The landscape of mountains, caves and water, real or ideal, have been frequently identified as sites of refuge, liberation, transcendence; all function in a similar manner for Ho's ongoing search for identity and belonging. Drawing on different layers of the personal and the cultural substance, Ho seeks to allegorize his aesthetic and social experiences under various cultural frameworks.

Exhibition info:

Date: Through September 2

Venue: Gallery Vacancy

Address: 6/F, 261 Yunnan Rd S.

云南南路261号6楼