

Song Dong: “I Don’t Know the Mandate of Heaven”

21 January – 26 March 2017

Rockbund Art Museum,

Curators: Liu Yingjiu, Xu Tiantian



Left: Song Dong, *Wisdom of the Poor: Song Dong Para-Pavilion*, 2011, dimensions vary. Courtesy of the artist. Right: Song Dong, *At Fifty, I Don't Know the Mandate of Heaven*, 2016 – 2017, ceramics, dimensions vary. Courtesy of the artist.

16 December 2016 – Shanghai, China – From 21 January to 26 March 2017, Rockbund Art Museum (RAM) will host a monographic exhibition by leading Chinese artist Song Dong. The exhibition, entitled “I Don’t Know the Mandate of Heaven”, will be the first major survey of Song’s work in Mainland China in 8 years. The exhibition will include some of the artist’s best-known works that have been fundamental to establishing his career, as well as several rarely exhibited works. Amongst the works on display, some pieces have been specially commissioned for this exhibition by RAM such as *At Fifty, I Don’t Know the Mandate of Heaven* and *Back Image*, manifesting the museum’s long-term commitment to supporting creativity and production of contemporary art through exhibition projects.

RAM's entire building will be transformed both inside and out for the exhibition, boldly conveying an expression of both Song's artistic creation to date, as well as taking a fresh look at his current state of creative exploration. The comprehensive exhibition constitutes a reflection on his life and career, which subsumes his past work into a coherent unity, infusing it with a regained sense of vitality, while imbuing his new creations with the richer context of his development.

The title of the exhibition is a fitting reference to Confucius' famous aphorism in the Analects, 'At fifteen, I had my mind bent on learning. At thirty, I stood firm. At forty, I had no doubts. At fifty, I knew the mandate of heaven. At sixty, my ear was an obedient organ for the reception of the truth. At seventy, I could follow what my heart desired, without transgressing what was right.'¹ Song's own take on the progress of the sage is playfully contradictory. 'At 10 I was not worried. At 20, I was not restrained. At 30, I wasn't established. At 40, I was perplexed.' and, 'At 50, I don't know the mandate of heaven.'

The reference to Confucius accentuates Song's preoccupations with Chinese tradition and the inherited wisdom of the common people, while the playfulness owes more to the predominance of Zen and Taoist themes in his work. Throughout his career, humble objects from everyday life have formed the core material of his often transformative and elaborate creations.

Following the Chinese literary tradition, the exhibition is divided into seven 'chapters,' each represented by a Chinese character, which together form a line of verse: *Jing* (镜 mirror), *Ying* (影 shadow), *Yan* (言 word), *Jue* (觉 revelation), *Li* (历 experience), *Wo* (我 self), *Ming* (明 illumination). Each floor of the museum will be dedicated to a chapter of the exhibition, with the seventh chapter (明 illumination) reserved for the exterior of the building itself, where ***Sketch (RAS Exterior)*** will see LED lights trace the contours of the building's facade. The measurements in the original plans for the architecture will also be marked out on the building's exterior in LED lights, posing a question on how this historical architecture fits into the contemporary context. It is no coincidence that what greets the visitor at the beginning of the exhibition is also its final chapter. One could say that this paradox adroitly encapsulates the spirit of the exhibition as a self-reflective totality.

Upon entering the building the visitor will find one of Song's more recent works, ***Mirror Hall***, a dazzling mirror series installation composed of recycled window frames and numerous mirrors, amongst which another artwork of Song is placed. ***The Use of Uselessness: Bottle Rack Big Brother***, a chandelier consisting of an array of household liquid containers reminiscent of surveillance cameras, turns the hall

¹ James Legge translation (1869), with slight modification.

of mirrors into an oddly homey panopticon. In the next room there is ***Eating the City***, a meticulously arranged biscuit metropolis free for the public to consume.

The second floor showcases selected video works from 1992 along the walls. The imposing centerpiece, ***Back Image***, is a physical representation of travelling lights projected onto a large canvas screen; instead of actual light, the artist employed strings of yarn to mimic the effect of light projection. The work is reminiscent of Song's childhood experiences viewing open-air screenings of revolutionary films. Other highlights include ***Wisdom of the Poor: Song Dong Para-Pavilion*** (displayed on the 4th floor). Originally produced by Song for the 2011 Venice Biennale, the work has been adapted to specific context of its new place at the Rockbund Art Museum. Through an intricate maze-like structure comprised of recycled architectural fragments, Song Dong's old work will be recreated and functions as a personal pavilion showcasing a number of his sculptures, videos and paintings.

Song's ambitious new work and the anchor of the exhibition, ***At Fifty, I Don't Know the Mandate of Heaven***, will be found on the 6th floor. The work features 50 clay dolls representing the artist during previous performances of his career, spread across the atrium's floor. Lining the walls of the gallery are photos of Song with his favorite childhood doll, documenting a personal story of identification and self-exploration. As visitors complete their journey down the length of the gallery, a final installation piece can be discovered on RAM's outdoor terrace. A large neon sign faces the view out onto the Huangpu river, writing in light the artist's personal take on Confucius' model life story: 'At 10 I was not worried. At 20, I was not restrained. At 30, I wasn't established. At 40, I was perplexed. At 50, I don't know the mandate of heaven.'

About the artist

Beijing-based Song Dong (b.1966, Beijing, China) has emerged from a strong Chinese avant-garde performing arts community and developed into a significant contemporary art figure in the progression of Chinese conceptual art. Song graduated from the fine arts department of Capital Normal University in Beijing in 1989. His work ranges from performance and video to photography and sculpture, exploring notions of impermanence and the transience of human endeavor. Song Dong and his wife Yin Xiuzhen together created a new way of collaboration: THE WAY OF CHOPSTICKS in 2001. He is also the co-founder of an artist collective "Polit-Sheer-Form Office", which was initiated by Hong Hao, Xiao Yu, Liu Jianhua, Song Dong, and Leng Lin in 2005.

The artist has been honoured on various occasions, including 2012 when he won "Power 100 of Chinese Contemporary Art: Artist of the Year" and "The First Kiev International Biennale Award". In 2011 he received the San Francisco Certificate of Honour; in 2010 the Artron Art China (AAC) Awards named

Song Dong the Artist of the Year (Video and Installation); and in 2006 he received The Grand Award of *The Gwanju Biennale* in Korea. He was also recognized in 2000 as the UNESCO / ASCHBERG Bursary Laureate.

About the curators

Liu Yingjiu is the deputy director of Rockbund Art Museum. As one of the founding members of the museum, Liu has been responsible for organizing the opening series of exhibitions in 2010, including “Cai Guo-Qiang: Peasant Da Vincis” (2010) and “2010 Zeng Fanzhi” (2010). Before joining Rockbund Art Museum, he was a curator at He Xiangning Art Museum in Shenzhen, where he curated and organized a number of exhibitions and public programs, including “Immendorf “(2005), “Paula Modersohn-Becker” (2006) and “Fresh Eyes: Paintings from National Art Academy Graduates across China” (2006, 2007).

Holding an MA in Museum Studies from the University of Leicester, Liu Yingjiu has extensive knowledge of contemporary art and museum theories, as well as rich experience in museum administration and project management. As a deputy director of RAM, he participates in the programming of exhibitions and education projects, directs the daily operation of all professional platforms, as well as conceives and leads the museum’s strategic development and innovations.

Xu Tiantian graduated from Fine Arts College of Shanghai University and École supérieure des beaux-arts Tours Angers Le Mans. She joined Rockbund Art Museum in 2014 as a curatorial assistant. She has been involved in the production of several solo exhibitions of both Chinese and international artists including Chen Zhen, Heman Chong, Ugo Rondinone, Mark Bradford, and Felix Gonzalez-Torres, as well as group exhibition such as “Tell Me A Story: Locality and Narrative” (2016).

Xu was the project manager of the inaugural “RAM HIGHLIGHT: Zhang Ding: Devouring Time”. Xu and Liu Yingjiu, deputy director of Rockbund Art Museum, co-curate the exhibition “Song Dong: I Don’t Know the Mandate of Heaven”.

About Rockbund Art Museum

For over 6 years RAM has been at the forefront of the growing contemporary art scene in China, presenting world-class programmes in a unique museum setting. A boutique Museum of the upmost quality, RAM holds a unique position within Shanghai’s continually expanding cultural scene. The Museum is located within the Bund district and housed in an exquisite heritage Art Deco building which was renovated by architect David Chipperfield before opening in 2010.

The museum's exemplary curatorial, education and research programmes showcase acclaimed and emerging Chinese and international artists, responding to and reflecting on present and urgent challenges of society locally and internationally. RAM presents a bold and pioneering programme of 3 exhibitions and a special project "RAM HIGHLIGHT" per year; exploring and realising artists' most ambitious projects and working with them to tailor exhibitions to the Museum and to the Shanghai context, often with a large proportion of works being new commissions. RAM devises, produces and curates its programme in-house, in conjunction with carefully selected international collaborations of the highest quality.

For more information, please visit: <http://www.rockbundartmuseum.org>

About ROCKBUND

As an integral element of the historic Bund waterfront, Rockbund is situated at the birthplace of modern Shanghai with her dazzling array of architectural styles. In order to protect this valuable aspect of the urban fabric and cultural heritage, the Rockbund preservation and development project has the stated aim of "restoring the original style and remodeling its function." The project stretches from Yuanmingyuan Road and Park 33 in the east, Suzhouhe Road in the north, Huqiu Road in the west and Beijing Road in the east, and sits at the confluence of the Huangpu and Suzhou rivers.

Aside from restoring eleven protected historical buildings, Rockbund will also build six new buildings with the goal of creating a high-end luxury district with a captivating environment for luxury retail, fine-dining, serviced apartments and commercial offices, recreating the glamour of Shanghai for a new age. With the opening of the Rockbund Art Museum, the first of the eleven historic buildings, Rockbund is re-establishing the origin of the Bund as a hub for arts and culture.

For more information on ROCKBUND, please visit: www.rockbund.com

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