

Singing the Body Electric

11 July–10 August 2019

5–6/F, H Queen's, 80 Queen's Road Central, Hong Kong

Press preview: Thursday 11 July, 3 PM

Opening reception: Thursday 11 July, 6–8 PM



Wei Jia, *River Bay*, 2019. Acrylic on canvas, 108 1/4 × 78 3/4 inches (275 × 200 cm). © Wei Jia. Courtesy Michael Ku Gallery and David Zwirner

David Zwirner is pleased to present *Singing the Body Electric*, a group exhibition curated by Leo Xu at the gallery's Hong Kong location, featuring work by aaajiao, Philip-Lorca diCorcia, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Jian Yi-Hong, Wolfgang Tillmans, Wei Jia, and Lisa Yuskavage. The show's title is derived from Walt Whitman's ecstatic and politically nuanced poem "I Sing the Body Electric" from *Leaves of Grass* (1855). The exhibition includes work from across various media that likewise celebrates and complicates themes of the body and desire, while exploring physicality and identity in the context of the synthetic and alienating nature of a highly digitized world.

Known for his nearly two decades' body of work portraying his generation through images of sentimentality and solitude, Wei Jia (Mainland Chinese, b. 1975) has lately embarked on a series of paintings that is based on the edenic and provocative photographs of nude male swimmers from the 1880s by the American realist artist Thomas Eakins (1844–1916). On view will be a selection of new paintings, whose loose gestural canvases and lavish brushstrokes depict groups of bathing figures in bucolic landscapes that echo with Chongqing, China's famous river town, where the artist has spent most of his career. The lush surfaces translate Eakins's classical Greek ideals of physical beauty, vigor, and camaraderie into imagery that conveys, with heightened tension, sentiments underlying contemporary subjectivity and individual experience.

Also set by the water but in a fantastical landscape, *Pond* (2007) by Lisa Yuskavage (American, b. 1962) depicts two naked female figures in an embrace amidst the foliage around a pond—the two figures elaborately intertwined to the point where they almost appear to share a single body. The work is a prime example of the artist's psychologically charged "symbiotic portraits" begun in the mid-2000s. The simultaneously bold, eccentric, exhibitionist, and introspective characters who populate Yuskavage's canvases assume dual roles of subject and object, complicating the position of viewership. Yuskavage's motifs create an underlying dichotomy between high and low and, by implication, sacred and profane, harmony and dissonance.

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Photographer Philip-Lorca diCorcia (American, b. 1951) is known for images that are at once documentary and theatrically staged, operating in the interstices of fact and fiction. On view will be two portraits from his iconic *Hustlers* series (1990–1992). Photographed almost thirty years ago in Los Angeles in the vicinity of Santa Monica Boulevard, young male prostitutes posed within motel rooms, on street corners and parking lots, and in the backseat of cars, among other places. The title of each photograph indicates the name, age, and place of birth of the subjects, as well as the fee they would charge for their sexual services. As diCorcia notes, “These were men who portrayed themselves as a product in a city that sells fantasy, violence, and sex. As if they were one more thing to be consumed ... Photography is an exchange. The original title for the project was *Trade*, as in the street word for prostitutes, as the exchange of services for money, as the role reversal which voyeurs indulge and photography provides, as the desire to be anybody but you.” Alongside these works will be a selection of the artist’s *Lucky 13* series (2003–2004). Taken in various locations, including Los Angeles, Las Vegas, and New York, the series is made up of atmospheric, staged portraits of pole dancers at work. The women are referred to in the works’ titles by their stage names, and appear immortalized and monumentalized in these highly charged compositions.

The body is constantly reinvented and redefined by clothing. As Wolfgang Tillmans (German, b. 1968) has commented, clothes “are hugging our skin and in the process of that they carry an imprint of the body ... they become sculptural objects.”¹ Beginning in 1989, his ongoing *Faltenwurf* series is named for a German art-historical term that denotes classical drapery. Bridging several genres, Tillmans himself refers to these works as suggestive of how figuration and abstraction coexist within his oeuvre at large, as well as the tripartite relationship of photography to surface, three-dimensionality, and sculpture. As the artist notes, “In this sense the *Faltenwurf* pictures are at the same time abstract pictures, and about the social surface that we carry around with us in our clothes.”²

A room at the gallery will feature small-format ink paintings mounted on cream-colored paper and in traditional frames, providing a peek into the quotidian life of a young, gay man. Following the tradition of literati painting in the post-Song dynasties and its subversive stance, the artist Jian Yi-Hong (Taiwanese, b. 1988) has developed an idiosyncratic style of deliberately simplistic ink lines and ink wash, wittily pairing image and text. Homoerotic and humorous, his visual narratives present a millennial’s highly wired everyday life through fantasies of an ancient past, suffused with tenderness.

Also on view will be works by media artist, blogger, activist, and programmer aaajiao (Mainland Chinese, b. 1984), including the single-channel video *I hate people but I love you* (2017), which features two cyborgs—one that takes the form of an animated female android, the other disguised as a floating Möbius strip made of moving pop-up windows. The video traces a deadpan conversation between them and projects a dystopian, sci-fi image of love in the age of social media digital technology, in which everyone assumes multiple roles as users within different accounts. The video is accompanied by *Avatar* (2017), a pixelated GIF animation of a teenage girl whose hair is being blown by a gust of wind, shown on an obsolete, palm-sized digital screen. A seemingly random image reminiscent of any possible profile picture on an app or website, *Avatar* suggests that the multiplicity of online identities may in the end be reduced to homogeneity.

¹ Wolfgang Tillmans, “Artist’s writings,” in *Wolfgang Tillmans* (London: Phaidon, 2014), p. 154.

² Ibid.

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A focused presentation of works by **Felix Gonzalez-Torres** (American, 1957–1996) will occupy the last room of the show. One of the most significant artists to emerge in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Gonzalez-Torres employed simple, everyday materials in his work, including stacks of paper, puzzles, candy, strings of lights, and beads. His evocative work purposefully references the language of Minimalism and Conceptualism while embedding the work with content that is at once specific and mutable, rigorous and generous, poetic and political. The diaphanous blue curtains that comprise *“Untitled” (Loverboy)* (1989) cover the expanse of the windows across the gallery’s fifth floor, casting a blue glow within the room. The fabric extends from above the window, down to the ground, pooling gently on the floor. At once melancholic and sensual, the work is poised at the threshold between inside and outside, suggesting the personal and the public, and inviting further contemplation. The room will also feature *“Untitled” (March 5th) #2* (1991)—two unadorned lightbulbs suspended from intertwined cords, the first work by the artist to employ these materials. Twinned and paired objects—including mirrors, clocks, photographs, and lightbulbs, among others—recur as one of the significant motifs in Gonzalez-Torres’s oeuvre.

For all press inquiries, contact

Dylan Shuai +852 5984 6846 dylan@davidzwirner.com