

PARIS

Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac

YAN PEI-MING

HELP!



For his first Paris show in almost a decade, the Chinese-born French artist Yan Pei-Ming took over the entire three floors of Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac.

On the spacious main floor were works in which Yan, a pioneer of what one might call “documentary expressionism,” reinterpreted contemporary war images from the media as epic-sized, black-and-white paintings, using enormous brushes and rapid-fire strokes to create his signature aesthetic that hovers between abstract and figurative. The exhibition had a filmic flow, due to the panoramic installation of the images. The first work seen upon entry was the three-by-four-meter *Tank* (2013), in all its violent glory, in which Yan’s brutal strokes blur together the machine and its driver. The erect gun barrel of the tank seemed to be aimed at the scattered victims depicted in *Help* (2011), a diptych hung on an adjacent wall.

*Help*’s first panel contains a barefoot boy on his knees, paint dripping like blood down his body, and arms thrown up to the heavens like Auguste Rodin’s *Prodigal Son* (c. 1885–87). Only bullets and bombs answer his hopeless cry as he blends into the surrounding war-torn wasteland. The fragmented nature of war is reinforced in the work’s two-part structure. In the second panel, shrouded fighters run away from the boy, their eyes focused on the ground, as bombs thunder down from a merciless heaven.

On the opposite wall, fighter jets flew in formation like birds. Nine different military aircraft, each painted on a separate one-by-two-meter canvas, comprised one large, polytypic installation, *The Other Bird* (2013). Hung high on the wall of an adjoining inner gallery were *12 Doves* (2013), a set of small paintings depicting

a dove in various states of flight. “Man makes war to gain peace—but it comes in small morsels,” says Yan of the work.

In the downstairs gallery hung another painting installation, this time consisting of four portraits of Isabelle Huppert, through which Yan chronicles the passage of time, with the French actress as his muse. In the work, a girl (Huppert) gazes with curious caution toward her future, represented by images of herself as a young adult, in middle age and as she is today. Yan’s expressionistic strokes capture the aging Huppert and evoke both the eternity of a moment and the fleetingness of a lifetime.

Further examining fortune and death, in the upstairs gallery were two watercolor paintings of a scan of the artist’s skull superimposed on a dollar bill. The year of the currency mint is 2003, perhaps a reference to the beginning of the US-led invasion of Iraq. “Money is a big force that people think drives the whole world,” says the artist, though adding that in death—another formidable force—“you can’t take your money with you, it’s just paper.”

Yan’s works often extract horrific images from the context of oversaturated news media, to allow people to look at them with more empathy—much in the way that Andy Warhol did with electric chairs and car-crash scenes in his iconic “Death and Disaster” series (1962–64). But unlike Pop art’s flat, mechanical approach, which specifically seeks to remove the artistic hand, Yan’s pieces—which are created without the aid of assistants or a printing press—revel in the depth of his individual, painterly presence.

Within the frame of his painted documentary images, Yan unleashes freewheeling brushstrokes, drips and heavy impastos, providing a three-dimensional element to news imagery, which is usually flattened out in print, film, television and computer screens. For the artist, it matters not which particular conflict to portray, but rather the general and inevitable state of war. Death and disaster can fall upon the poor and anonymous, as well as the rich and famous.

Desensitized by the media, people living beyond conflict zones are comfortably numb to death and destruction. Combining the objective immediacy of photography with the emotional power of the painter’s strokes, Yan provides a new and more humane perspective to the alienating daily news channels and papers, urging us to face the helpless horror that is war.

ANDREW COHEN

**Opposite page**

**HELENE KAZAN**

*A Domestic Image of Preemption*  
2013

Video still from stop-frame animation,  
multimedia installation.  
Courtesy the artist and Beirut Art Center, Beirut.

**This page**

**YAN PEI-MING**

*Portrait of Isabelle Huppert IV*  
2013

Oil on canvas, 80 x 80 cm.  
Photo by André Morin.  
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Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris/Salzburg.