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YUE MINJUN *The Artist and His Friends*. 1991. Oil on canvas, 187 × 198 cm. Private collection. Copyright the artist. Courtesy Fondation Cartier pour l'Art Contemporain, Paris.

THE SHADOW OF LAUGHTER YUE MINJUN

[REVIEWS](#) BY ANDREW COHEN [FROM JUL/AUG 2013](#)
FONDATION CARTIER POUR L'ART CONTEMPORAIN

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Yue Minjun's cartoon-like laughing men are among the most recognizable images in Chinese contemporary art. His paintings from the 1990s have fetched some of the highest prices at auction, setting a record in 2007 at nearly USD six million. Recently, Paris-based Fondation Cartier pour l'Art Contemporain sponsored "The Shadow of Laughter," the first major European exhibition devoted to the artist, which gathered nearly 40 of his early paintings showing Yue in his best light and representing a time when his output seemed less influenced by market trends.

In the early 1990s, under the influence of Cynical Realists such as Fang Lijun and Liu Wei, Yue began painting everyday images incorporating the movement's trademark irreverent laugh. In the wake of the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, sardonic laughter was used to mock the authorities, as many artists feared that overt criticism could lead to more killings or imprisonment. Riffing on the upbeat portrayal of proletariat and military heroes in propaganda art, these Cynical Realist smiles veil the protagonists' true emotions as they engage in everyday actions. In *The Artist and His Friends* (1991) we see a group of men laughing while military jets fly overhead, and one friend innocently waving as if to a camera. A similar scene appears in *On the Rostrum of Tiananmen* (1992), with more mocking laughter as the central figure jovially points to an out-of-frame camera.

Further exploring the Tiananmen theme, Yue seems to find his original voice with *Gweong Gweong* (1993). The onomatopoeic title refers to the revving engines of military fighter-jets. Instead of bombs, these planes drop dozens of identical images of the artist, falling like grimacing missiles over the Gate of Heavenly Peace and the portrait of Mao that it displays. The work comments on the tragedy of a nation conducting war on its own people. Yue's arsenal of repetitive alter egos and self-caricatures embodies the alienated and disposable individuals in Chinese society.

Ironically, perhaps his most original works are those he appropriated from earlier masters, which anachronistically place his laughing figure in historical settings. With *The Massacre at Chios* (1994), a take-off on Eugène Delacroix's 1824 painting of the massacre during the Greek Revolution, Yue seems to be referencing the 1989 bloodshed in Beijing. Couching this antimilitary statement through appropriation, and masking both the slaughterers and the slaughtered in identical grins, he surreptitiously comments on their interchangeable relationship, as well as the power of the artist to record or revise history.

Yue riffs on other iconic imagery of the Western canon. In *The Execution* (1995), based on Édouard Manet's *The Execution of Maximilian* (1867–69), Yue depicts the executed wearing only underpants and the executioners clad in T-shirts. All of the figures are virtually interchangeable self-portraits of himself, laughing heartily, as if killing were mere child's play. Meanwhile, in his iconoclastic *Liberty Leading the People* (1995), modeled after another Delacroix painting, Yue recasts Marianne—a national symbol of France—in his own laughing image, lampooning

revolutionary dogma, whether it serves democracy or communism.

In *Water* (1998), which targets the Communist Party's propaganda campaign that followed Mao's demonstrative swim in the Yangtze River in 1966, Yue renders the Great Helmsman swimming inside a huge, bisected head of a man with a tight-lipped, seemingly silenced mouth. After a few more attempts to deviate from his laughing man—such as *The Death of Marat* (2002), which depicts Jacques-Louis David's famous crime scene without the murdered body, and *Tiananmen Remains* (2002), in which Dong Xiwen's propagandistic *The Founding Ceremony* (1953) is rendered devoid of the founders—Yue has since continued with his familiar formula.

Still producing his brand of smiling men over 20 years later, many critics believe that Yue is now either mocking the art market or has "sold out" to it. Though no longer the darling of the auctions—buyers seem more discriminating since the 2008 economic crash—the high prices for his kitschy self-portraits still have Yue laughing all the way to the bank.

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