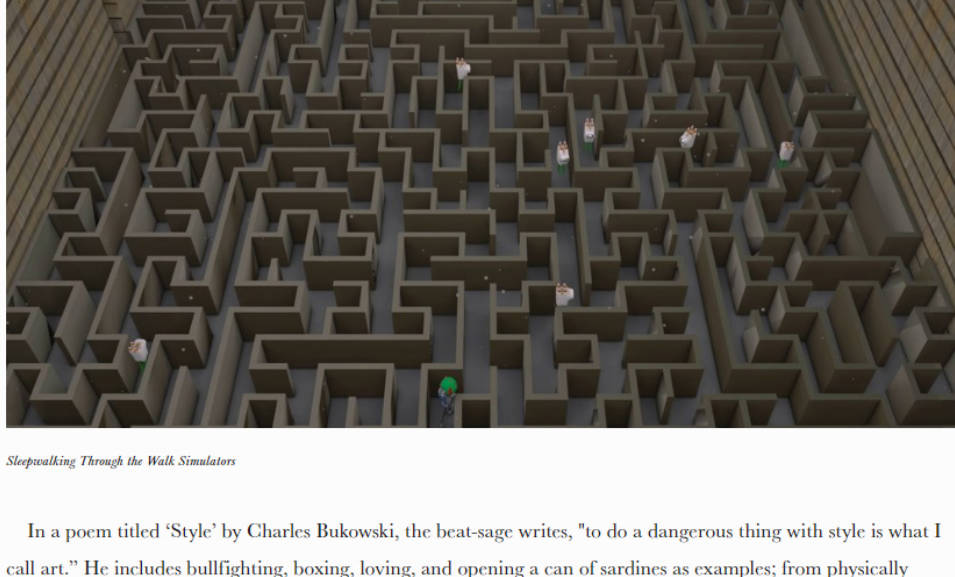


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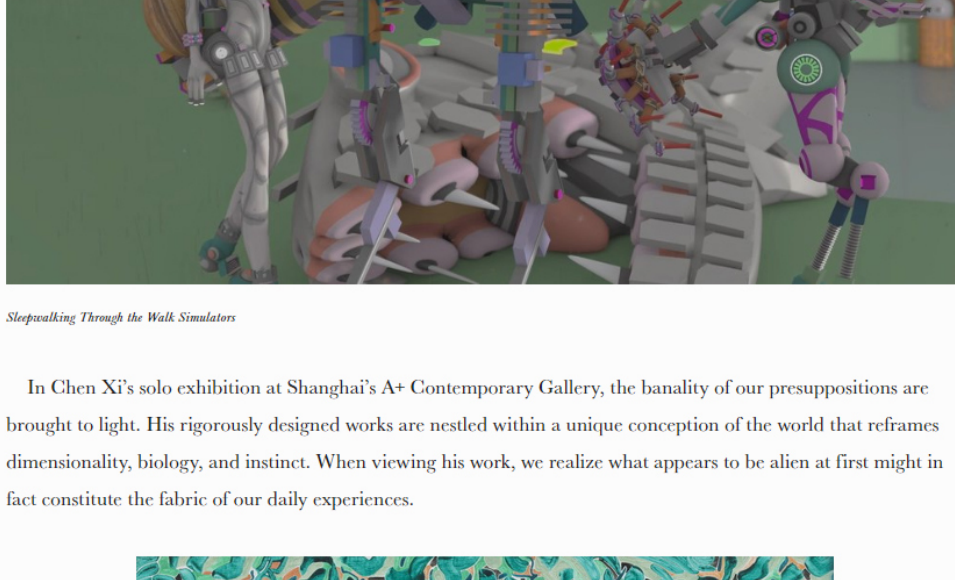
Chen Xi: On the Artist's Terms

Author: Joshua Poverda



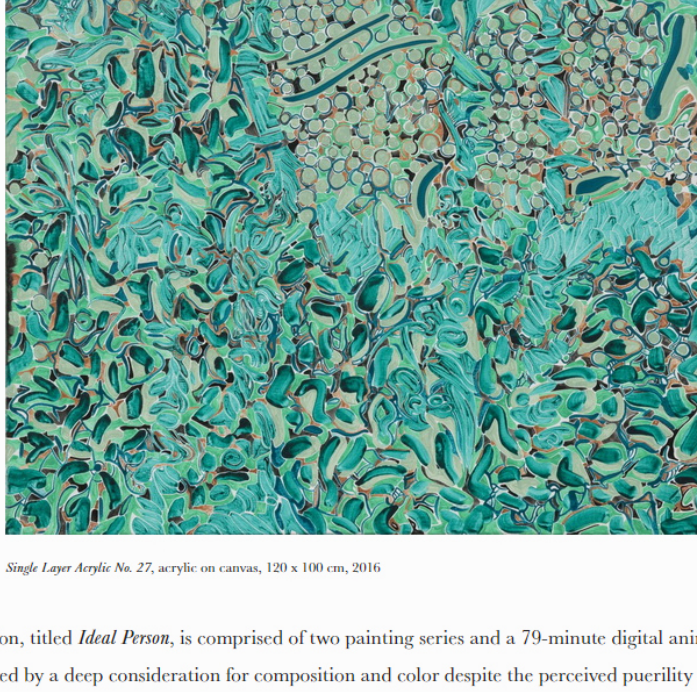
Sleepwalking Through the Walk Simulators

In a poem titled 'Style' by Charles Bukowski, the beat-sage writes, "to do a dangerous thing with style is what I call art." He includes bullfighting, boxing, loving, and opening a can of sardines as examples; from physically treacherous and spiritually demanding to completely mundane. The point being there is a choice: either we bring style to a dangerous act, or make the ordinary seem dangerous by means of style. The latter is the domain of artists, who are able to represent the quotidian in new and often intimidating ways.



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In Chen Xi's solo exhibition at Shanghai's A+ Contemporary Gallery, the banality of our presuppositions are brought to light. His rigorously designed works are nestled within a unique conception of the world that reframes dimensionality, biology, and instinct. When viewing his work, we realize what appears to be alien at first might in fact constitute the fabric of our daily experiences.



Single Layer Acrylic No. 27, acrylic on canvas, 120 x 100 cm, 2016

The exhibition, titled *Ideal Person*, is comprised of two painting series and a 79-minute digital animation. Both are characterized by a deep consideration for composition and color despite the perceived puerility of the former. In the 'Single Layer Painting Series,' Chen uses a coordinated, yet sparse palette of bright colors to create compositions of agglomerated forms. It is reminiscent of Brice Marden's woven line work, albeit more dense and varied.



Single Layer Acrylic No. 33, acrylic on canvas 120 x 100 cm, 2016

According to the artist, these paintings prove "we are able to paint complex compositions in a single layer of paste." They are the result of a unique process only known to him; a self-inflicted limitation—possibly a challenge—to translate 3-dimensionality onto a 2-dimensional plane.



I Am Your Matters No. 20, acrylic on canvas, 120 x 100 cm, 2016

When I asked Chen who some of his artistic heroes are, he replied "Rick and Morty, Yves Netzhammer, and Henry Darger," among others. It didn't surprise me that his influences range from the comically absurd, the acutely designed, to the deeply pathological (as is the case with the reclusive Henry Darger). There is a mixture of each in his work, particularly in his 'Unexceptional Painting Series.' For example, in *I Am Your Matters No. 20*, a caricatured carrot is suspended in a black void, donning eyes fraught with panic. The subject detailed with agitated brushstrokes of varied thickness.



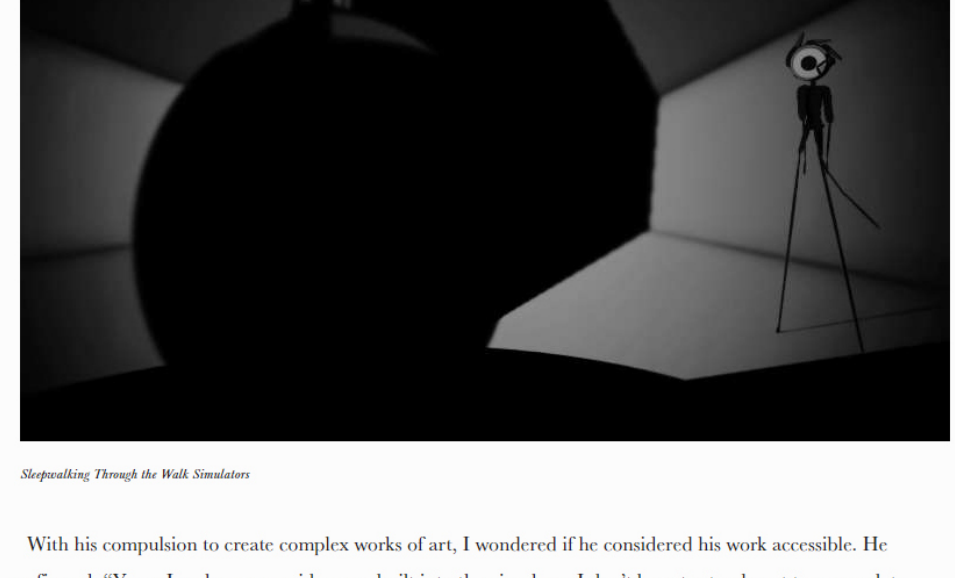
I Am Your Matters No. 27, acrylic on canvas, 120 x 100 cm, 2016

My personal favorite, *I Am Your Matters No. 27*, is a combination of both painting series. What appears to be the head of a caricatured ghoul is hollowed out and replaced with intricate patterns of blue and green lines. Both series exemplify the artist's indifference towards painterly clichés, which include the pitfalls of genre-defining styles within expressionism, abstraction, and impressionism.



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Chen graduated from Jiangnan University with a BA in Fine Art in 2008 and from East China Normal University with an MFA in 2012. Initially a painter, I asked when he decided to learn 3D animation. He said "I painted and painted, and my room was full of paintings. They wouldn't go away. I ran out of space. Then I started to learn programming in 2015. Now I have to buy 3 Terabyte hard drives every year."



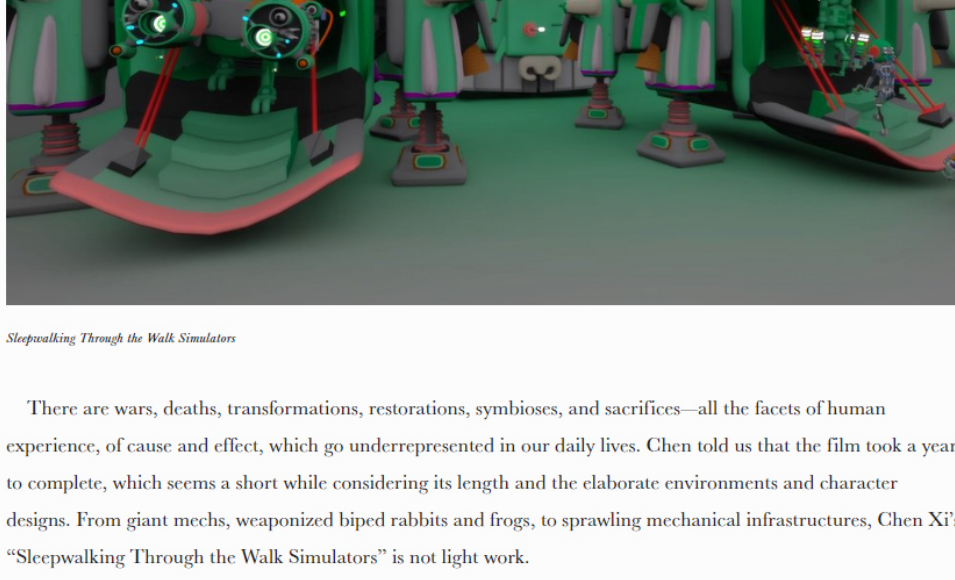
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With his compulsion to create complex works of art, I wondered if he considered his work accessible. He confirmed, "Yes... I make sure my ideas are built into the visuals, so I don't have to stand next to my work to explain it... [and] children love my animations too... watching 'Sleepwalking Through the Walk Simulators' is like watching a video game play itself for you."



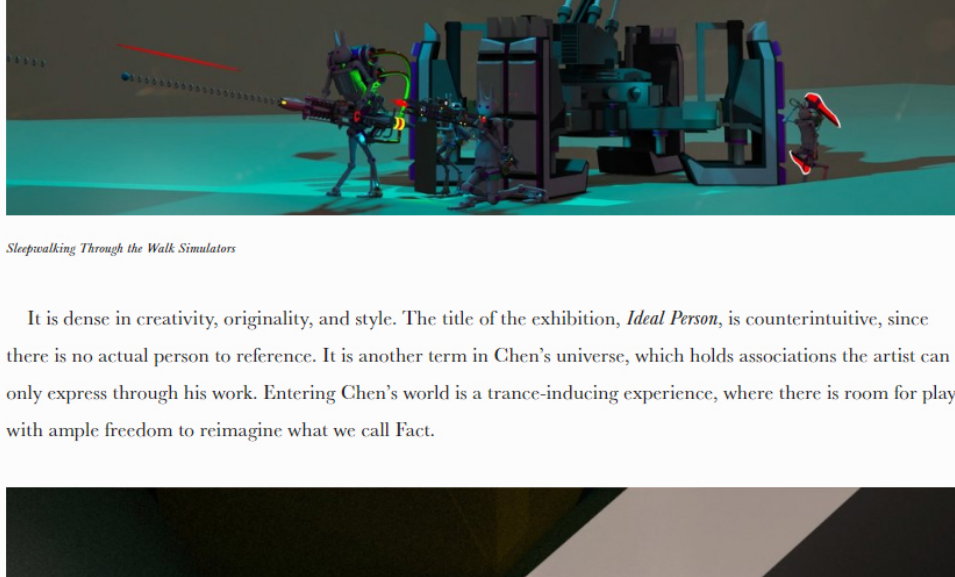
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Much like Ian Cheng's "Emissaries"—where the artist retrofitted a video game engine to play out computer-generated simulations—Chen's work is derivative of a digital visual language. But unlike Ian Cheng, who takes full advantage of predictive technologies, Chen imposes his own narrative as auteur (this is evident in the closing credits, where he thanks himself under multiple roles of production). If this were a film—which he considers it to be—it would transcend genre entirely. Its intersecting narratives develop across peculiar ecosystems as we follow characters that evolve not in character but in design and function. In essence, the artist has created parameters for the processes of natural selection which thrust his characters forwards into the story.



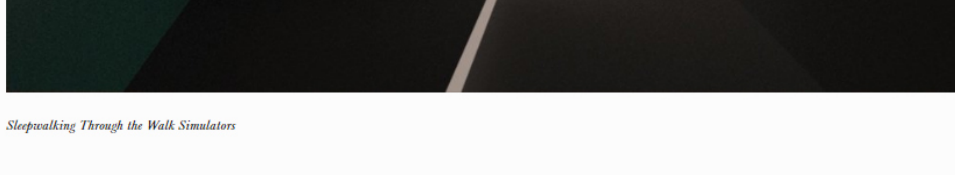
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There are wars, deaths, transformations, restorations, symbioses, and sacrifices—all the facets of human experience, of cause and effect, which go underrepresented in our daily lives. Chen told us that the film took a year to complete, which seems a short while considering its length and the elaborate environments and character designs. From giant mechs, weaponized biped rabbits and frogs, to sprawling mechanical infrastructures, Chen Xi's "Sleepwalking Through the Walk Simulators" is not light work.



Sleepwalking Through the Walk Simulators

It is dense in creativity, originality, and style. The title of the exhibition, *Ideal Person*, is counterintuitive, since there is no actual person to reference. It is another term in Chen's universe, which holds associations the artist can only express through his work. Entering Chen's world is a trance-inducing experience, where there is room for play; with ample freedom to reimagine what we call Fact.



Sleepwalking Through the Walk Simulators