

AO ON SITE – NEW YORK: ZHANG ENLI AT HAUSER AND WIRTH THROUGH OCTOBER 29, 2011

September 29th, 2011



Artist Zhang Enli with *A Bunch of Balls* (2009-2011). All photos on site for Art Observed by Jen Lindblad, unless otherwise noted.

Currently showing at [Hauser & Wirth](#) in New York is a new body of work by celebrated Chinese artist Zhang Enli. Comprised of twenty new paintings and one sculptural group, the story he tells is one of cultural relocation—namely, the artist's move twenty years ago from a small provincial town in northern China to Shanghai, where he now lives and works. Wherever we go we carry objects—ordinary objects that remain present and constant in our lives. All of the objects Zhang depicts are real, found in and around his studio: empty cans, a carpet, an umbrella, pipes, metal and rope netting. Familiar enough to be accessible but reduced enough to be seductive, Zhang considers the objects carefully, stripping them to their essence. His quiet, subtle paintings bear almost no resemblance to the bold, political work of his Chinese contemporaries. "I want to strip the object to the bone," he says, "just leave what it actually is. If you leave a glass on a table, it leaves a watermark. That mark is what I want to express."

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***Empty Paint Cans* (2011). Oil on canvas. Image courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth.**



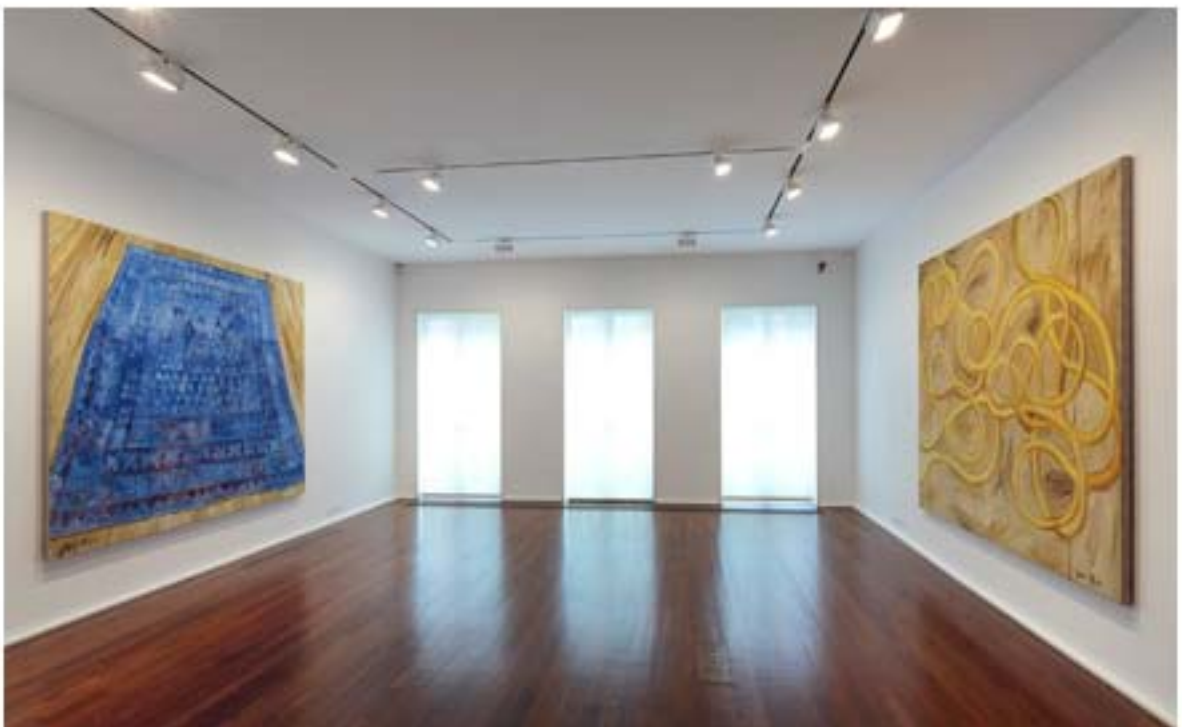
Installation view. Photo by Thomas Mueller, courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth. Left: *A Part of a Pipe* (2011). Right: *Ball with Net* (2011).



A Part of a Pipe (2011). Oil on canvas. Image courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth.

Departing from the tradition of still life painting, where artists typically paint objects from life, Zhang uses aids like photography and pencil grids. On the day of the exhibition's opening, Zhang stood in front of *Metal Net* (2010). Responding to an inquiry about the visible pencil guides, he gestured to them with tai-chi-like movements. He attributed the grid to a need to control space and create a visual illusion, but also to leave a visible trace of the entire painting process. These traces create what Zhang calls a "visual journey for the viewer," bringing them closer to the painter himself, and how he experiences the subject.

According to *The International Art Magazine of Contemporary China*, Zhang uses a camera to capture objects he intends to paint, but photography itself does not interest him. "We look with our eyes," the artist says, "but this is using another kind of eyes. [Photography] is simply a tool, just for detail. You can't remember details because everything is constantly changing."



Installation view. Photo by Thomas Mueller, courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth. Left: *A Carpet*, 2011. Right: *Ball with Net*, 2011.

It is not the object itself that interests Zhang, it is the mystery it evokes. One of his earlier paintings is comprised solely of empty red walls and a wooden floor; it is the result of a question the painter asked himself—"what would a museum without paintings look like?" In removing all the notable characteristics of the space, it becomes something unknown. One of the paintings on view at Hauser & Wirth is *A Sack* (2010), an onion-shaped bag of indeterminable size. By making the viewer question what is in it—and if it even matters—the object draws the viewer into a deep state of contemplation.

"Everyday things only become seductive when they are covered," Zhang explains, "because the circumstances are different." *A Part of a Pipe* (2011), for instance, does not reveal its real-life counterpart until the title is read. Although it isn't covered, it is stripped bare of all recognizable contextual clues. It appears to the viewer as a wave, a snake, a hose, a line of calligraphy... perhaps even bringing to mind Urs Fischer's *Mackintosh Staccato* (2006), a 30-foot-long epoxy resin sculpture of the same shape that snakes, suspended, through any venue at which it is displayed.

The same circumstantial shift is true of *A Bunch of Balls* (2009-2011). Using plastic globes as his canvas, Zhang paints them over in bright color blocks. Disguised as basket-, soccer-, and volley-balls, the orbs receive a change of context—and essence. Instead of being passive objects of study, they are now active objects meant for play. Signals of the objects' former use is left, however, in the thin paint that reveals the geographical markings beneath, as well as in the decision to retain their stands. They are transformed again into objects of contemplation.



Installation view. Photo by Thomas Mueller, courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth. Left: *A Bunch of Balls* (2009-2011). Right: *A Corner of Studio* (2011).



Detail, *A Bunch of Balls* (2009-2011).

This new body of work represents somewhat of a departure from his previous, more figurative work. Zhang leaves behind murky caricatures of country folk and swims into clearer, stiller waters. As Hans Rudolf Reust writes in *Artforum*, "The artist has moved away from his former, wildly gestural and figurative pictures to arrive at a sober style of painting featuring a smaller range of hues distributed over fewer fields and depicting everyday things." Zhang attributes that transformation to a long process of change that is invisible to the ordinary viewer. Speaking in one of his characteristically multilayered statements, he says, "When you are young you are sharp. Now that I am older I am more interested in subtle expressions, in pure forms." He describes himself as sensitive to his surroundings—both as an artist and as a human.

Reust writes that "Just as Walter Benjamin saw Paris through the details of its arcades, Zhang seems to make palpable the rapid changes Shanghai is experiencing by means of its interiors. Large-scale changes can be traced to their consequences in the smallest details." When asked if the spaces he depicts are real, Zhang replied that they were. They are portions of his studio; *A Space with Sewer* (2011) is his studio bathroom, mid-renovation.

When asked, however, if the color in *A Carpet* (2011) was true to life or not, Zhang offered a more enigmatic response: "We observe color in reality, but it changes subconsciously, because we all have our own taste. Actually, the sense of the color to us is stronger than the color itself." Viewers can make their own guess about if the color is true to life or not by visiting Hauser & Wirth on East 69th St. in New York, where the exhibition is on view through October 29th, 2011.

Zhang Enli was born in Jilin, China, in 1965. He was educated at the Arts & Design Institute of Wuxi Technical University. He now teaches at the Arts & Design Institute of Donghua University. Along with exhibitions at Hauser & Wirth's other outposts in London (2010) and Zurich (2007), recent solo exhibitions include the Shanghai Art Museum (2011), the Minsheng Art Museum (2010), Ikon Gallery in



Installation view. Photo by Thomas Mueller, courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth.



The Space with Sewer (2011). Oil on canvas. Image courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth.

The Space with Sewer (2011). Oil on canvas. Image courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth.



Art Glass (2009). Oil on canvas. Image courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth.



Installation view. Photo by Thomas Mueller, courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth.
Left: *Long Pipe* (2011). Right: *Umbrella* (2011).

Installation view. Photo by Thomas Mueller, courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth. Left: *Long Pipe* (2011). Right: *Umbrella* (2011).



Installation view. Photo by Thomas Mueller, courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth. Left: *A Part of a Pipe* (2009-2011). Center: *Ball with Net* (2011). Right: *Metal Net* (2011).



The artist with *A Bunch of Balls* (2009-2011).

The artist with *A Bunch of Balls* (2009-2011).



Detail, *A Bunch of Balls* (2009-2011).



Detail, *Empty Paint Cans* (2011).

Detail, *Empty Paint Cans* (2011).



Detail of the artist's signature from *Drooped Pipe* (2011). Oil on canvas.

- J. Lindblad

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Exhibition Site [[Hauser and Wirth](#)]

Zhang Enli – Kunsthalle Bern [[Artforum](#)]

Sozialkritische Stilleben (in German) [[Der Bund](#)]

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Zhang Enli at Minsheng Art Museum, Shanghai [[LEAP](#)]
