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"From the Beijing Zoo to a Hong Kong Gallery: Wang Wei's Dioramic Landscape Paintings Consider Life in Captivity" by M.A Wholey

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From the Beijing Zoo to a Hong Kong Gallery: Wang Wei's Dioramic Landscape Paintings Consider Life in Captivity

In 2007, Chinese artist Wang Wei paid a visit to the Beijing Zoo, and was struck by the background art on display in the animal enclosures. This experience inspired a series of installations and the latest one, *Two Rooms* (2015), is the basis of the artist's new solo exhibition at Hong Kong's Edouard Malingue Gallery.

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Wang Wei, Two Rooms, 2015. Courtesy Edouard Malingue Gallery and the artist.

Comprised of life-sized landscape paintings that envelop entire rooms, the zoo exhibits that inspired Wang Wei offer imitations of a "natural" habitat and present a sort of analog virtual reality. His perception of these unusual, unassuming artworks led him to create a series of works investigating this type of painting, questioning its purpose and function, and developing a dialogue through creating his own. The resulting large-scale installations have been shown at Kunsthalle Vienna, among other international venues, and now, a new iteration of the series fills Edouard Malingue Gallery.



Detail of Wang Wei, Two Rooms, 2015. Courtesy Edouard Malingue Gallery and the artist.

To create paintings in these dioramic settings, artists utilize a specific technique in which space is compressed, creating an illusion of great depth upon a flat or gently curved plane. This method is designed for maximum viewer impact, heightening the feeling of being “within” the scene depicted. Wang Wei’s imitations of zoo dioramas explore the strange, but almost wholly accepted custom of collecting and displaying animals in faux habitats. We remove animals from the natural world, enclose them, and painstakingly recreate the places we took them from.



Wang Wei
Two Rooms (兩個房間), 2015
Edouard Malingue Gallery

“Two Rooms,” on view concurrently with Art Basel in Hong Kong and Art Central, is Wang Wei’s most recent exploration of zoo artifice, consisting of two floor-to-ceiling paintings, each occupying the entirety of a gallery wall. The piece takes its inspiration from the mountainous landscape paintings in the Beijing Zoo’s Baboon House; taken outside of its normal context, one must consider the painting anew. On of the towering panels encapsulates dusk and autumn, while the other presents dawn and spring, each with color palettes and landscapes that reflect these seasonal moments in time. The inclusion of both dusk and dawn, key markers of daylight, may be a commentary on the absence of natural light for the sheltered zoo animals. By surrounding a human audience in the captive animals’ environment, the installation forces viewers to experience a sort of cognitive dissonance. The paintings are extracted from the overall zoo experience and become mere props, set paintings used to create an atmosphere, to fabricate the illusion of nature, and perhaps even to give humans a taste of their own medicine.



—M.A. Wholey

“Two Rooms” is on view at Edouard Malingue Gallery, Hong Kong, Mar. 12–Apr. 15, 2015.

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Wang Wei, Two Rooms, 2015. Courtesy Edouard Malingue Gallery and the artist; Detail of Wang Wei, Two Rooms, 2015. Courtesy Edouard Malingue Gallery and the artist; Detail of Wang Wei, Two Rooms, 2015. Courtesy Edouard Malingue Gallery and the artist.

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