Today's World is a World of Machines
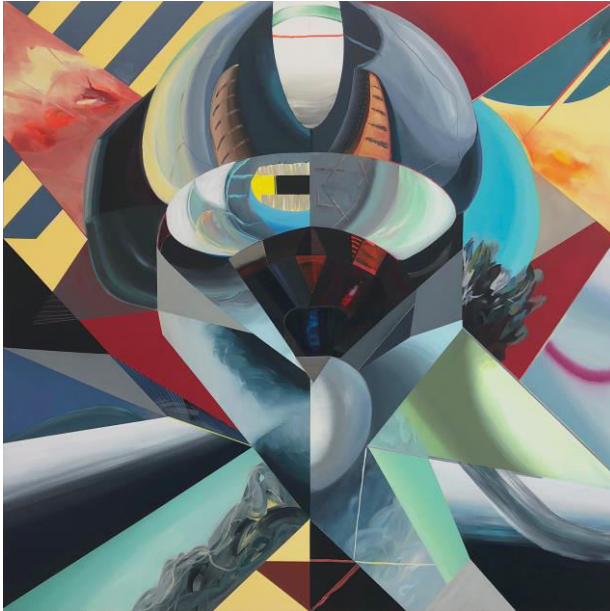
From the *Manifesto del Macchinismo* (1938) by Bruno Munari

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Translated by Allison Moseley

Ce Jian, *Bannermen (6)*, 2018, acrylic, spray paint, marker, oil pastels on canvas, 160 x 160 cm
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"Today's world is a world of machines" is the first sentence in the *Manifesto del Macchinismo* published in 1938 by the Italian painter and Futurist Bruno Munari (1907-1998). Eighty years after Munari's alarming declaration, his words are all the more unsettling. Munari's fear that humans would soon become slaves to the machine has become reality in many areas of life today, and there are both negative and positive signs of it in the labor market, medical technology, the weapons industry, and social services, among other sectors. The headline of an article that appeared four years ago in the British daily newspaper *The Guardian* went to the heart of the enduring skepticism about the profound changes expected in society: "The Robots are Coming. Will They Bring Wealth or a Divided Society?".[1]

According to Munari, it is the artist's job to take on the task of researching machines, studying their anatomies, and developing strategies for their applications that will lead to the peaceful co-existence of humans and machines. In compliance with Munari's demand, many artists put their brushes and easels aside and, especially in the 1960s, began seriously working at the intersection of art and technology. Artists worked in interdisciplinary laboratories as part of the project *Experiments in Art and Technology*, initiated by Robert Rauschenberg (1925-2008), or with engineers, or, like Nam June Paik (1932-2006), in close communication with technicians, in order to

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[1] https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/jan/04/robots-future-society-drones (accessed on March 13, 2018).

test the latest technological innovations, which were then built into Paik's installations and actions. Both sides profited from this exchange.

For a generation of young artists who work primarily with computers and take advantage of the bottomless source of Internet data and images, the field of opportunities for combining art and technology has again expanded. Most recently, the dancing, talking robot made by the American artist Jordan Wolfson (b. 1980) drew a great deal of attention. Last year a humanoid robot in chains performed a *danse macabre* at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. The frenzied automaton, the overwhelming technology, and the human-like features of the machine all had a thoroughly disturbing effect on the show's visitors.[2]

Jordan Wolfson, *Colored Sculpture*, 2016, mixed media, dimensions variable.
Exhibition view: Jordan Wolfson, *MANIC / LOVE / TRUTH / LOVE*, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, 2016-17
© Sadie Coles HQ, London and David Zwirner, New York

Bannermen

Borrowed from the sciences and the popular culture of the computer game and science-fiction industries, the motif of the so-called human-machine—in the form of cyborgs, androids, automatons, or purely virtual avatars—is a theme that has occupied Ce Jian for quite a while already. Distorted faces, masks, deformed bodies, and bodies equipped with technology and defamiliarized comprise the field of research that interests Ce Jian in her search for new motifs, which she adopts and processes through her art. She is fascinated by the uncanny and strange qualities inherent in these faces and bodies, which constrain them inside an abnormal, pathological category or relegate them to distant worlds of horror and fantasy.

An earlier series of works, *New Folks* (2016), features a group of characters inspired by mythology, fantasy, anthropology, and history. *New Folks* recall the protagonists in the freak shows that became popular in the mid-sixteenth century in Great Britain by presenting to sensation-seeking audiences "human freaks," whose physical deformities triggered horror and shock in viewers. To

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[2] In 2016-17, the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam presented a solo show of Wolfson's work, in which a robotic figure danced to loud pop music and could be seen rolling on the floor. Resembling a marionette, the robot was attached by heavy chains to a steel structure, and in this configuration, performed a programmed piece of choreography. The robot's resemblance to the children's book character Pinocchio is disconcerting. See https://www.stedelijk.nl/en/exhibitions/jordan (accessed on March 13, 2018).

this day the fascination for the unknown and the uncanny is manipulated in the freak shows that take place on Coney Island in Brooklyn.[3]

Yet another point of reference consists of the early concepts of empirical criminology. In the nineteenth century criminology dealt with the investigation of criminal dispositions, which manifested physically, branding anyone born with certain physical traits as a potential criminal. In the early twentieth century the Italian physician and psychiatrist Cesare Lombroso (1935-1909) assembled a catalogue in which he stereotyped criminals by their external physical features, especially their physiognomy.[4] In her larger-than-life-sized portraits of *New Folks* and *Bannermen,* which reveal a strong physical presence, Ce Jian attempts to capture the intensity of the discomfort felt toward the unknown or deviations from the norm.

"Banner men" is the plural of "banner man," whose origins are unclear; the Scottish clan Bannerman derives its name from the privilege of the clan's ancestors, who were the carriers of the royal standard (banner bearers) in the tenth and eleventh centuries. In medieval England, banner men were army standard bearers, but the plural form of the word, "banner men," has been popularized by the American television series *Game of Thrones,* in which the word refers to the allies of any liege lord. The six large canvases in the series each measure 160 x 160 cm, and are "portraits" of artificial, mechanical creatures that look as if they have been peeled out of an abstract, geometrical picture surface.

The brilliant colors, the flat layers of paint, and the compositions recall onscreen images, leading to the impression that the *Bannermen* are a user interface for a computer game. The virtual world's armory or weapons chamber is presented as just such a user interface, through which players can assemble selected armor and weapons for their avatars.[5] At the start of a game the user has to choose a player and may equip it with armor, helmet, weapons, and other accouterments to prepare it for battle in virtual war. Depending upon the game's historical site, virtual heroes can appear against a historical medieval background, or as star fighters in a utopian vision of the future. Ce Jian uses painterly means to assemble the banner men, sentinels, and knights on the canvas, enlarging them greatly for us, in contrast to the size usually desired in historical portraits. They are portrayed from the front, presenting themselves to the viewer as if they were part of a selection board. *Select a Character* could very well be the subtitle of the *Bannermen* series. The canvas becomes a screen.

Ce Jian uses acrylic and spray paints, markers, crayons, and oil pastels to transform the classic canvas into a screen. The portraits, comprising an assembly of geometrical shapes, anatomical

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[3] *The Elephant Man* (1980), a film by David Lynch, tells the true story of Joseph Merrick (1862-1890), a man with a deformed physiognomy who was exhibited as a monster, becoming a freak show attraction. Merrick's sad fate is exemplary of the other side of freak shows, and shows how the freaks lived as outcasts and monsters.

[4] The Nazis used Lombroso's research as scientific justification for their scientific racism, also known as raciology.

[5] In his book *Mittelalter Computerspiele - Zur Darstellung und Modellierung von Geschichte im populären Computerspiel* Carl Heinze explores to what extent computer games refer to medieval historical images. See Carl Heinze, *Mittelalter Computerspiele - Zur Darstellung und Modellierung von Geschichte im populären Computerspiel* (Bielefeld: Transcript 2012), 90-94.

props, and architectural building blocks, are separated from their fragmented backgrounds by their painterly plasticity. However, the obvious brushstrokes and dynamic style do not fulfill the perfect, smooth look of a screen's anonymous surface aesthetics. Instead, they take the motif back to analogue, to the medium of the painting made by hand. Ce Jian uses painterly means to access the three-dimensional space that computer games create with 3D graphics and glasses. With their sharpened (and hence vivid) contours and their plastic-looking shapes, the figures appear separate from the two-dimensional background, becoming active inside of a painted, illusory space.

The figure of a warrior with a drawn submachine gun pointed upward stands in the foreground of 2017's *Sentinel (2)*, in front of a utopian background made up of colorful, geometrical planes. The potential for action inherent in the figure—whose weapon is at the ready, prepared for an act of war at any second—sets the motif in motion and builds tension into the picture, accelerated by the physical presence of the warrior on the oversized canvas. The unpredictable and sinister nature of Jordan Wolfson's robotic sculptures translates to the tense and potential aggression of Ce Jian's characters, which look as if they are capable of walking out of the two-dimensional surface of the picture. This works particularly well in the pieces *Sentinel (2)* and *Bannermen (6)*. The *Bannermen* seem to practically leap out of the picture, trying to get to the next level of the game.

Ce Jian, *Venus in Armor* (from the *New Folks* series), 2016, acrylic, spray paint, marker, oil pastels on canvas, 230 x 160 cm
© White Space, Beijing

Shield Hall

The historical ancestral gallery containing the portraits of individuals whose alliances are based on familial relationships, reinforces a claim to rulership by presenting the claimant's genealogy. Especially in the late Middle Ages and the early modern era, the nobility need to display the history of its ancestry as the basis for attaining higher positions in clerical and secular communities. In the twelfth century only the nobility could be accepted into the orders of knights, convents, monasteries, or other privileged social groups, after undergoing so-called *Adelsprobe* or *Wappenprobe* (proving one's ancestry or one's skill in handling weapons).[6] A person's emblem, symbolizing his status, is the coat of arms, which was attached to shields or standards. As a kind of individual mode of identification, it provided information about the social and private life of the weapon bearer. Toward the end of the twelfth century the shield's heraldry took on increasing importance, and artful embellishment of the shield continued to develop until the sixteenth century, culminating in the heraldry used in war and tournaments, with shields, helmets, tunics, and caparisons decorated with coats of arms. A family's pedigree and coat of arms were, therefore, evidence of status in medieval society. These historical references are important influences on the series *Shield Hall* and *Bannermen*.

For the *Shield Hall* series Ce Jian worked her way through the basics of heraldry. Each one of the six *Bannermen* heads has a shield assigned to it. As was the case with the *Bannermen,* she was interested in composing a figure or an abstract imprint out of various colors, symbols, and geometrical shapes. Within the fixed rules of heraldry, a large variety of motives can be generated by combining different elements. The six artworks in the *Shield Hall* series represent an abstract, yet highly individual imprint, which encodes historical social information.

To elaborate upon various geometrical textures and to reproduce surface stimuli, Ce Jian uses the visual collage as a tool in her *Shield Hall* series. Bringing together and juxtaposing geometrical fields evokes a decorative effect similar to the pattern in a carpet or tapestry, but which is technically tied to imitation wood grain, and thus achieves a relief-like, textured effect on the surface. Brilliant signal colors set the images in motion and give a sense of dynamism to the co-existing planes of color.

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[6] Elizabeth Harding/Michael Hecht, eds., *Die Ahnenprobe in der Vormoderne* (Münster: Rhema 2011), 9-14.
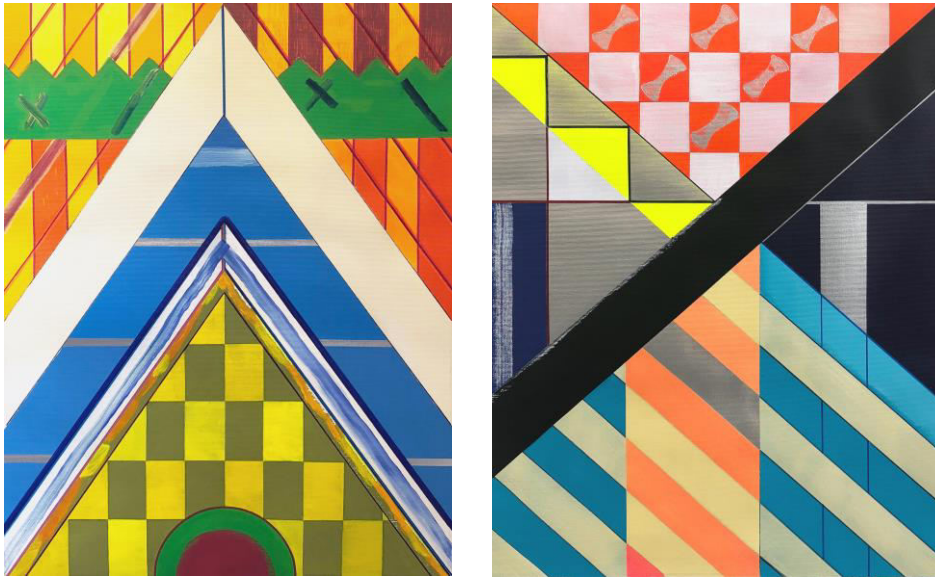
Ce Jian, *Shield Hall (1)* and *(2)*, 2018, acrylic, marker, crayon, oil pastels on canvas, 57 x 45 cm
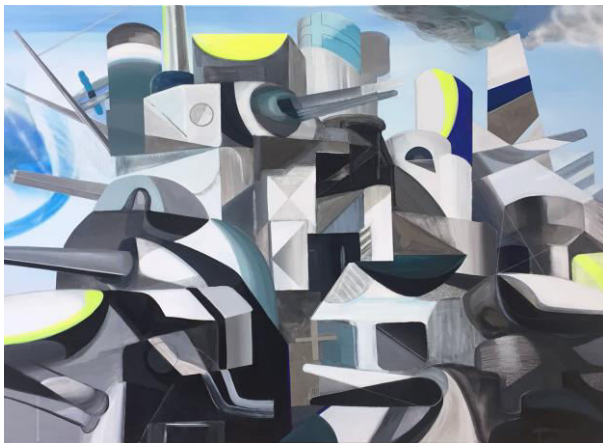© GALLERY SU:

AS Series

The title for the *AS* series refers to the warships from the series *Armada*, produced at the same time, and can be translated from the Spanish *fuerza armada* as "armed force." The seven pictures from the series in this exhibition are abstract, geometrical compositions that give a sense of dynamism and movement to the fragmented forms in the pictorial space through the occasionally shrill coloration. The process of working out the plasticity of individual set pieces, such as a chimney, cannons, portholes, or the indication of a hull, makes it possible to see the dissection of the original template. Some of the architectural building blocks seem to almost exit the painting, as if they were sculpture. In the painting *AS Grey (2)* the mechanical weapons system, featuring a cannon barrel, looks as if it were about to turn to the right and target the viewer.

Ce Jian carries the dissolution of the motif to an extreme in the series. *AS Red Seven* is a radical reduction, operating mainly with color and the picture's concentration on individual, fundamental building blocks, out of which a geometrical structure is assembled. As before, one can recognize an image of a ship's hull with a smokestack on top, but at the same time, the piece is a free collage made of abstract geometrical shapes and elements from the real world. The play on contrasting color and form bears the weight of the basic idea for the series and builds on comparable attempts by the French painter and architectural draftsman Fernand Léger (1881-1955). Léger's *Discs* (1918) depicts the optimistic spirit of the new age of technology, and brings it to the canvas in abstract, dynamic, strident forms and colors. Merging mechanical and live worlds was one of the central themes at the end of nineteenth century. Artists like Léger observed the accelerating rhythms of life in the modern metropolis and looked for the artistic means to depict this on canvas.

In the early twentieth century the Cubists reacted to the technological innovations and modernization, were inspired by the aesthetics and functionality of machines, and formulated a

visual vocabulary that reacted to a newly emerging, dynamic worldview. Cubism's name (from the Latin *cubus,* or "cube") can be traced back to the art critic Louis Vauxcelles, who, in a review of George Braque's painting *Houses at L'Estaque* (1908), wrote that all of this, "whether landscape, people, or houses, are [reduced] to basic geometrical forms, to cubes." This method of painting "in small cubes" served to dissect the form, its three-dimensional depiction, and the multiple perspectives of the motif.

Ce Jian's assembled visual compositions are in the Cubist tradition. The fascination for aesthetics and the reverence for the efficiency of the machine, however, has given way today to increasing skepticism toward technology.[7] *Bannermen, Shield Hall,* and *Armada Small (AS)* show the beauty of a technically generated motif or product, yet at the same time suggest a sinister presentiment of the dangers that could come from autonomous human machines in the near future. Contrary to Bruno Munari's prophecy, the traditional medium of painting still provides the means—as it always has—to devote itself to humankind's urgent questions, as well as to explore the machine and the digital world.


Ce Jian, *AS Grey (2)*, 2018, acrylic, marker, crayon, oil pastels on canvas, 90 x 120 cm
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[7] The enthusiasm for technology reached its apex in 1934 in the legendary exhibition *Machine Art*, curated by the architect Philip Johnson for the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. The show collected around four hundred objects from home and kitchen, science and industry. In the catalogue, Johnson talks about "the history of machine art," and is enthusiastic about mechanical design, which he celebrates as the perfection of "precision, simplicity, smoothness, reproducibility," while proclaiming the age of mechanical engineering and art. See Andreas Broeckmann, *Machine Art in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA/London: MIT Press 2016), 12.

Ce Jian, *AS Red Seven*, 2018, acrylic, enamel, marker, crayon, oil pastels on canvas, 70 x 80 cm
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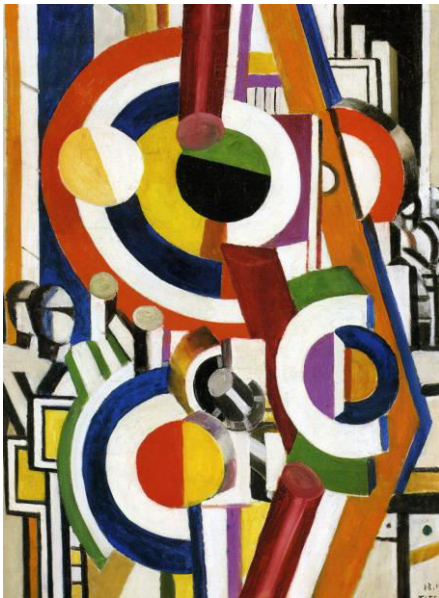
Fernand Léger, *Discs*, 1918, oil on canvas, 240 x 180 cm
© Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris

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