

BERN, SWITZERLAND

Zhang Enli

KUNSTHALLE BERN

Zhang Enli is dissatisfied with the image of contemporary Chinese art as defined by pop and politics. For him, the most commonplace objects are what connects China to the rest of the world: tables, chairs, benches, pots, boxes. 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. As peaceful and intimate as these recent paintings—in an exhibition previously seen at the Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, UK—first appear, they offer a drastically unsettling vision of the world. In *Apartment 2* and *3*, both 2008, a building facade is rotated from a frontal perspective into a distended, slanting plane that seems to produce a strange movement even in the space in front of the picture. Paradoxically, we gaze down at the facade as if from above. The discrepancy is made all the more palpable by the fact that the orthogonal grid inscribed on the picture to aid in enlarging the grid of the facade when it was transferred is no longer holding firm. Every object creates a separate atmosphere in this kind of painting, as if it constituted a world in its own right. In *Football and Basketball*, 2007, two balls are caught in a carrying net yet appear to move in tandem with the observer's changing distance from the picture. The branches of bare trees (*Tree in Winter 3, 4, and 6*, all 2008) or a coiled garden hose hanging from a nail (*Water Pipe*, 2008) bring a fleeting, sketchlike swiftness to paintings that at first appear defined by stasis. Above all, depicted light—emanating from a ceiling lamp (*White Bulb*, 2008) or drifting across as highlights—lends these rough objects a fragile presence in their nondescript interiors. A bucket makes a grand entrance; delineated with striking contours in *Bucket 4*, 2007, it offers itself up for use. Yet in its painted hyperpresence, this utilitarian object suddenly appears threatening: The black interior of this cauldron becomes an abyss.

In painting these mundane objects, Zhang is also rendering his own personal journey from the countryside to the metropolis. At home in Shanghai, he once more assures himself of those things that remain as they always were. Even then, what is subject to constant change is his view of things. Thus the same motifs show up again and again, but with variations. The swift, confident gestures of his painting appear to hold the subjective possibility of responding to precipitous societal developments. If something about these paintings is realistic, in other words, it is not so much the objects portrayed in them as the artist's use of painting itself. Wherever the brush and a few, thinly applied colors show their traces, the vulnerability of perception is made apparent. 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. The empty spot in a room where a bed used to stand (*Bed 3*, 2008) becomes an intricate constellation of nested images, threatening to burst open the horizontal rectangle of the canvas.

—Hans Rudolf Reust

Translated from German by Oliver E. Dryfuss.



Zhang Enli, *Football and Basketball*, 2007, oil on canvas, 43 x 59".