



River of Inferno
YIU NGOK YUEN

But the *River of Inferno* series was born from earlier influences. The road that led the artist to paint the most provocative and controversial works of his career grew out of artistic and social histories spanning back decades. Yuen was born at a unique crossroads, just prior to the fervent zeal of hegemonic Communist ideology. He absorbed foreign artistic influences during the tail end of an era open to outside cultural influences. Oil painting was new to China and in Yuen's skillful hands, his six decades of artistic experimentation in the medium attest to his important position as an innovator in modern Chinese art history.

Artistically, the *River of Inferno* series grew out of Yuen's long admiration for European oil painting, something the artist was forced to repress during his time teaching in China under Maoist rule. During the Cultural Revolution, the Red Guards confiscated many portrait paintings (except for the 1962 self-portrait that is featured in this exhibition; the artist folded and hid it under his bed). Only a handful of others were later returned to him, including portraits of his wife and his daughter. The others were destroyed or went missing, never to be recovered. Visiting the Louvre in the early 1980s, Yuen observed works of art firsthand that he had studied and admired since his youth. The historically powerful subjects and dramatically charged compositions he encountered renewed his interest in the European academic style and its artistic vocabulary formed the basis for the representation of subject matter in the *River of Inferno* series.

The four paintings on view in this exhibition stand together as a holistic summary of Yuen's artistic achievements in self-exile. His self-portrait, in homage to Baroque painters such as Rembrandt, is both a visual celebration of the artist's self-image and a way of ensuring his vicarious presence in an exhibition he dreamed of witnessing but was denied because of political complications. *Studio 1990* (1985-1999) displays Yuen's virtuoso draftsmanship and speaks to his influence from politically active European avant-garde artists such as



Detail of *Studio 1990's: The Painter and his Characters* (showing Mao Zedong), 1985-1999, charcoal on canvas, 200 x 440 cm.

Gustave Courbet. *River of Inferno* (1985-1999) and *Reunion in Hades* (1998-2000) critique the fallout of two phases of Chinese political and cultural history personal to the artist's life. Both paintings capture the expressivity of brushstroke common to the European-American neo-expressionist style and incorporate contemporary painting strategies of appropriation and the use of satire as subjective critique. Their visual message is forceful and accusatory, making explicit the tensions, problems and consequences arising in modern Chinese history when intersectional and transnational dynamics disrupted longstanding traditions.

Yuen did not want these final works to be read only as a critique of modern Chinese political and cultural movements. Rather, they hold a struggle in tension between what at that time were strongly polarized ideologies defined by "East/West" relations. Today such boundaries are critiqued, complicated or bypassed by globalization, yet injustices carried out by dominant nations, cultural groups and social organizations remain. As such, Yuen's paintings not only point a critical eye to a specific past, but also reflect a certain appearance of humanity today, within a mirror still clouded by privilege, corruption and exploitation.



Above: Studio 1990's: *The Painter and his Characters*, 1985-1999, charcoal on canvas, 200 x 440 cm.
Reunion in Hades, 1998-2000, oil on canvas, 172 x 200 cm.

