

ZHDK, Z-KUBATOR WHAT'S UP, Oct. 2024



Valentin Rilliet graduated with a MA Fine in Arts at ZHdK in 2023. His focus lies on oil painting, and he currently works with motives of architecture and nature in the Southwest region of China. Since his graduation, he has been in the What's next_Compass programme and – through the support of Pro Helvetia and a scholarship by Yvonne Lang-Chardonnens Foundation – has recently been able to leave Switzerland for a residency opportunity in Chongqing, China, for six months. In the Organhaus Art Space, he made valuable connections in the local Chinese art scene and was able to expand his research in parallel to his art-making.

VALENTIN, HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR ARTISTIC PRACTICE?

I work mostly on canvas with oil. My main focus in my works is on transculturality and intercultural subjects between two places. While I was studying at ZHdK, I became inspired by Chinese art history. I am half Chinese, and Chinese history is something I never really had access to at school. I wanted to see how I could combine it with what I already know, which is a Western artistic language. That's where this intercultural aspect of it comes to play. This way I learned, in what realm both histories can overlap.

HOW DID YOUR STAY ABROAD CHANGE YOUR ARTISTIC PRACTICE?

Everything in art has a meaning in Europe, and almost every object is a symbol. In the same vein, I was using a lot of figurative people to tell a story in my paintings before I left for China. My figures drew inspiration from small Chinese picture books made in the 20th century, a time subject to the Cultural Revolution. As a result, my paintings were starkly relating to socialist realism characters, an aesthetic originally adopted for propaganda and education purposes. I was interested in this because, again, it was a completely different art history that I had never explored. It is also a part of history that my family witnessed, so it was quite personal. What I'm looking at through my works is what my family looked at as well. But for them it was very much a reality, and not just a painting. Those were the projects I applied with when I went to China. In Chongqing, everything changed, and I found new interests that I wasn't expecting to explore. I became more interested in nature and architecture, things that can stand the test of time. These things have witnessed history much longer than a human or a book has. In rural China, not so far from my residency, there are so many abandoned buildings with an apocalyptic feel to them, where you can witness nature completely taking back what was originally hers. That is where I mainly drew my inspiration from.

WITH WHAT GOALS DID YOU EMBARK ON THE RESIDENCY AND WHAT DID YOU GAIN?

I wanted to firstly explore my culture and its art scene as well as expose my art to a different audience. Since I reappropriate Chinese historical elements in my work, I need to make sure I'm doing it in a respectful way. So

going to China was kind of like standing in front of them naked and saying: "Tell me what you think about my work." The reactions were quite positive, also because I opened up my focus in my work. Generally, people were very supportive. Something I learned at the end of the residency is how to exchange my dual cultural standpoint with the Chinese audience so that they can relate. However, coming back to Switzerland afterwards, to engage with an audience who has never been to China also became an interest of mine.



Valentin Rilliet, Compound III
© Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich/Paris
Photo credit: Sebastian Schaub

In a Nutshell

Name: Valentin Rilliet

Number of people involved: 1

Website: valentinrilliet.com

Important links: [Exhibition at Galerie Peter Kilchmann](#)

Course of ZHdK studies: MA Fine Arts

Graduation: 2023

Z-Kubator connection: What's next_Compass participant 2023/24

HOW DID YOUR STAY ABROAD IN CHINA INFLUENCE YOUR VIEW OF SWITZERLAND AND THE SWISS ART SYSTEM?

Switzerland has a completely different scale of issues such as inclusivity regarding race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality. In China, the obstacle starts way earlier than this, for instance, cultural censorship. They have to tackle this problem first before they can talk about the issues Switzerland's art scene is dealing with. To my knowledge, the underground art scene in China is thriving because the idea of community and trust prevail over individualism. In Switzerland, offspaces are supported by the city or the canton and there is way more opportunity for every artist. The offspaces I visited in Chongqing are completely independent and self-run organisations, mostly aiming at establishing a safe space for creators. This creates a super exciting art scene because the artists love art for its communitarian value and are willing to support and take care of each other in every way possible. After coming back, I realized I'm very lucky to be Swiss and I really appreciate the support you receive as an artist. The downside of the art scene in Switzerland is self-censorship, unironically. As mentioned before, every piece you make must have a meaning and a purpose. You start to become more careful with using certain symbols because it could mean something. In Chongqing, everyone was more genuine in their practice. This made for some very jarring works as well as very fun works. Ultimately, it validated my way of making art.

HOW DID YOU COMBINE YOUR STAY ABROAD WITH THE WHAT'S NEXT_COMPASS SUPPORT PROGRAMME?

Z-Kubator offered me the chance to receive one-to-one coachings with experts who might be helpful for my work. For example, I spoke with a lawyer and an accountant. They helped me move on safely into the professional world, especially when it comes to important legal and financial matters. Moreover, I had the freedom to leave for China while being part of the programme. I was even able to extend my time in the studio so that I can prepare for my upcoming exhibition, which is a huge support.

WERE YOU ABLE TO IMMERSE YOURSELF IN THE LOCAL ART SCENE AND HOW DID YOU GO ABOUT NETWORKING?

I speak a bit of Mandarin, which had proven to be very useful or else networking would have been much more challenging. People in Chongqing were also way more about the art than the money, so it felt like a family setting in a way. They were extremely generous and helpful. I think they were just happy to give me a chance and were genuinely interested in my work.

WHAT'S NEXT?

My solo exhibition opening is coming up on the 31st of October in the Galerie Peter Kilchmann (Rämistrasse 33) in Zurich. I am presenting most of the works I have created during my residency. Then, I will go into residency again – this time in Shanghai – for three months. After that, who knows!



Valentin Rilliet, The Geographer © Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich/Paris
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