LOT 1049
PROPERTY FROM AN IMPORTANT PRIVATE EUROPEAN COLLECTION
YUE MINJUN
B.1962
UNTITLED (BOATING)
signed in Chinese and dated 1994.8, framed
oil on canvas
138 x 196 cm.; 54 by 77 in.

ESTIMATE 3,500,000-5,000,000 HKD

PROVENANCE
Galerie Serieuze Zaken, Amsterdam
Acquired by the present owner from the above

EXHIBITED
Netherlands, Groningen, Groninger Museum, Go China! Writing on the Wall: Chinese New Realism and Avant-garde in the Eighties and Nineties, 23 March - 26 October 2008, unpaginated

CATALOGUE NOTE
Smiling Across Time
Yue Minjun
In the world of contemporary Chinese art, the symbolic smiling man by Yue Minjun no doubt remains at the forefront in representing the 1990s decade. These identical faces are not only self-portraits of the artist, but also portraits of a coming-of-age generation who must both live under the remnants of Cultural Revolution and at the same time experience the effects from the rapid modernisation of the Chinese society. Through accurately expressing the feeling of helplessness of the Chinese population, Yue has become a key figure in the notable movement “Cynical Realism” coined by pioneering art critic Li Xianting, revealing the disenchantment behind a seemingly perfect nation. Created in 1994, Untitled Boating) (Lot 1049) is a key work from Yue Minjun’s formative period and was exhibited in the important group show “Writing on the Wall: Chinese New Realism and Avant-Garde Art in the Eighties and Nineties” at the Groeniger Museum in the Netherland. Although featuring Yue’s signature smiling faces and multiplication of figures, the rich and complex composition of Untitled (Boating) is very rare among his works. Taking boating as its theme, the painting depicts urban structures in the background. It does not refer to any particular Chinese city, but evokes the process of urbanisation that all of China has been undergoing. Boating, an activity particularly representative of leisure in the 1990s, dramatises the ennui and desensitisation of the young generation of Chinese under their country’s rapid economic development.

Born in 1962 in Heilongjiang, Yue Minjun is part of the third generation of artists after the Cultural Revolution. In 1991, his move to the artist village Yuanmingyuan on the outskirt of Beijing was an important turning point in the young artist’s career. It was during his stay there that he could experience true artistic freedom away from the limit imposed by the government and academia. “This is exactly the life that I want. Everything is so great. It is not so difficult after all to become an independent artist. The rent is cheap, and the surrounding is better than studios. The most important thing is I can finally determine my own way of life.” Here, Yue Minjun came to know his neighbours Fang Lijun and Yang Shaowu, and the three became pioneers of Cynical Realism. Yue painted his artist friends and quotidian moments, as in Untitled (Boating). Such drawing material closely from life is radically different from his later, more programmatic approach, composition and figuration.

The thoughtfulness of Untitled (Boating)’s composition is very rare in Yue’s works and infused with symbolic significance. The left, middle, and right zones of the painting constitute respectively the foreground, middle ground, and background. The foreground features two halves of Yue’s signature smiling faces. A gigantic hand reaches over invasively, making the smiling figures on the small boat seem especially helpless and vulnerable. In the distance on the right are two other boaters. This layered composition creates a strong sense of perspective and realism, which is in stark contrast to the planarity of Yue’s later Cynical Realism and Pop styles. In terms of colour, Untitled (Boating) tends towards blue, with a richer and more varied palette than his later works. Boating was a popular leisure activity in 1990s Beijing, as well as a fashion among young couples. In his career Yue has created works around this important theme four times. This resulted in his “Boating Trilogy,” which includes Boating and On a Lake, both painted in 1994 like Untitled (Boating).

For the artist himself, living during the 1990s, laughter has become a way to confront life. During the ’85 New Wave movement came forward a group of Chinese idealistic artists who were inspired by modern ideas from the West to revitalise Chinese culture. For Yue’s generation, the “Cynical Realists”, their witness of the failure of the two previous generations instead raised fundamental questions for living. Unlike other artists, Yue has chosen to express his view on life through the absurdity of the big smiling face. “The image of a laughing face was to me an assurance that things would get better: that a future life could be as rewarding and meaningful as the Buddha promised.” Furthermore, for Yue, the action of laughing is essential to acquiring spiritual tranquility. “I believed that giving up everything was a way of life; avoiding conflicts in the society could attain inner peace. Giving up allows one to not hold grudge on anything, to be able to laugh things off
easily, and to turn problems into thin dust. It is through this that we can achieve ultimate peace with ourselves.”

Since late 1992, the smiling man has taken on Yue Minjun’s own image, further playing out to the idea of self-mockery. Untitled (Boating) is precisely one of these rare early works.

Curator Li Xianting has pointed out that the repetition of smiling men configured in lines was the artist’s attempt at parodying China as the economic machine, one that mass produces commodities and upholds consumerism, “using commercialism and his empty-headed characters to present the problem of a consumerism which has poisoned both Socialist ideals and the individual of our society. This seemingly arbitrary combination of consumerism and anti-individualism gives a cynical and humorous edge to his work.”

Clearly, the satirical tone and a critical examination into one’s state of being continue to be a consistent theme in the artist’s later works, where the smiling man began to don perfectly white aligned teeth, shaved head, and pink skin. The naturalistic rendering of the figures in Untitled (Boating) is without a doubt the origin to embody the artist’s vision in portraying the spiritual façade of Chinese people in the early 1990s.

1 Yue Minjun, Sichuan Art Publishing, 2007
2 Refer to 1
3 Faces Behind the Bamboo Curtain, Schoeni Art Gallery, 1994