



# GALLERIA CONTINUA

SAN GIMIGNANO BEIJING **LES MOULINS** HABANA

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# CHEN ZHEN

## *Jardin Lavoir*

21/05/2016 – 25/09/2016

Opening on Saturday, May 21<sup>st</sup>, as from 4.30 pm

Galleria Continua is pleased to present the solo exhibition *Jardin Lavoir* with work by the late artist Chen Zhen in its Les Moulins exhibition space. Chen Zhen, an artist of Chinese origin was based in Paris from 1986 until his death on December 13, 2000 following a serious illness. He gained international recognition for the quality of his artworks and his open-minded approach.

The exhibition title *Jardin Lavoir* has been taken from the title of the large installation piece at the entrance to the old watermill. This artwork was first presented in 2000 at the Cimaïse and Portique regional center of Contemporary art in Albi in the center of an old mill. Eleven bed frames (the number refers to the number of essential organs in the human body) are transformed into metal washbasins filled with all sorts of quotidian objects arranged by category in the space. The flowing water washes the objects and transforms the beds into placid lakes.

These "bed basins", a metaphor for the human body and the materialization of Man's life, become a perennial site of ablution and natural therapy. Water is at the center of this artwork just as it englobes the space: with a river (le Grand Morin) in its exterior, and in its interior a source, by which the site is transfigured into a "garden of purification."

The exhibition continues with a selection of mural installations created by the artist between 1992 and 1993 during the initial years of his career in France that revolve around the idea of a shrine. Objects are submerged in water and rest on a bank of sand. Chen Zhen referred to this work as a "gesture that becomes a sort of rite of passage in which objects are purified and given a new life after use, a final rest after a life of consumption. They become anonymous and lose their past identities, living once again in a mental sphere."<sup>1</sup>

The path to purification intensifies in the hallway with the work *Instrument Musical* in which the artist transforms the process of the traditional and quotidian gesture of washing Chinese chamber pots into a cleansing act of the human spirit.

Two additional works *Testament/ Déchiffrer* and *Six Roots/ Enfance* are also shown in this exhibition dedicated to the artist Chen Zhen. In these works the artist reflects on Man and his existence.

The ashes that are part of the installation *Testament / Déchiffrer* are according to the artist, "the body of a disinfected memory and fertilizer for the earth. Fire is the symbol of purification, regeneration, death and rebirth. We here discover a positive side to destruction."

The work *Six Roots / Déchiffrer* is part of a series of six pieces that are an allegory for human life: birth, childhood,

conflict, suffering, memory, death – rebirth”.

“Nothing exists by accident... It was during my visit to the MOCA in Zagreb in 2000 with six successive rooms linked together by doors, that I conceived *Six Roots*. The space has a human scale that made me think of a series of organs: a body in six parts, a life in six stages... *Six Roots* is a Buddhist expression that describes the principle bodily senses: sight (eyes), hearing (the ears), smell (the nose), taste (the tongue), touch (the body) and knowledge (consciousness). These fundamental “capabilities” of Man condition and tie together our diverse behaviors and thoughts. They evolve with age and different temperaments for better or for worst. Adopting this Buddhist theme is a pretext for questioning the six stages of life and the multiplicity of contradictory aspects to human behavior”.

Chen Zhen was born in Shanghai in 1955 into a family of francophone doctors. He grew up during the Cultural Revolution in the former neighborhood of the French concession. At a very young age the artist became interested in the links between traditional Chinese philosophy and Western culture. He studied at the Beaux Arts school and the Applied Art school in Shanghai (1973) then at the Dramatic Arts Institute of Shanghai where he was initiated in set design.

At the age of 25, Chen Zhen was diagnosed with hemolytic anemia, an incurable disease that led him to develop a deep knowledge and appreciation for the value of time and space.

When he arrived in France in 1986, he experienced culture shock from a first hand perspective. He thus put his painting practice on hold to work on installation pieces. The work of Chen Zhen follows a line of thinking that is transcultural, a concept that the artist calls “transexperience.” He studies the relation between Man, consumer society and Nature.

Two years before his death, Chen Zhen decided to learn the theories behind traditional Chinese medicine. He

transforms and distills this knowledge in his last works, creating a dialogue between the body, Spirit, Man and the universe.