

# PearlLam Galleries

Hong Kong

## WILDERNESS: A Solo Exhibition by Ma Kelu

Exhibition Dates 24 May–30 July, 2022 Monday–Saturday, 10am–7pm

Venue Pearl Lam Galleries, 6/F, Pedder Building, 12 Pedder Street, Central, Hong Kong

Hong Kong—Pearl Lam Galleries is delighted to present *Wilderness*, a solo exhibition by Beijing-based painter Ma Kelu. On view is a rare selection of landscape and abstract paintings spanning from the 1970s to the present. This exhibition conveys the relationships between form, free will, and life existing totally free in an uninhibited environment.

As one of the key members of the avant-garde artist collective No Name Group during the 1970s in China, Ma's lifelong interest has been to remain faithful to the process of painting. Grappling with different ways of working with a two-dimensional visual field, he demands complete creative freedom for his practice. Ma's reliance on painting to create meaning has gradually led him to question detachment and even denial from the very object of his own making. The object means nothing without life, nor does the artist set any distinction between the two. In fact, art and life run parallel with one another and converge at some points to guide him. Ma claims, "Painting is almost a madness and impossibility. We tirelessly enjoy it, even though it gives us no path of return; painting is a way of existence, a spiritual drift."

The term "drift" in many ways encapsulates Ma, a humble individual who has experienced many changes and difficulties throughout his life. Despite all he has gone through, he still believes in the process of making art wholeheartedly. Born in Shanghai in 1954, Ma took an early interest in art as a young man. During the early 1970s, he was one of the key members of an artist group commonly known as the Yuyuan Tan Lake School of Painting. This initiative paved the way for the formation of the No Name Group or "Wuming", a grassroots collective composed of mostly self-taught artists who would frequently venture to the outskirts of Beijing to paint from life. Wuming held its first underground exhibition in 1974 and its first public exhibition at Beihai Park in Beijing in 1979. Disinterested in the official style of socialist realism, the painting styles and genres of Wuming's members were diverse. More importantly, this anonymous art for art's sake approach signified a collective outcry for creative freedom that went against the grain of a decade marked by social division and class struggle. The depictions of nature by Wuming members were not intended to capture reality par excellence. One must not discount their painting style as derivative of Western modernism; in retrospect, these historic artworks convey a deep sense of longing albeit in an era of conformity. The 1970s marked an important period for Ma. He learned to understand modernism through nature, specifically through his use of colour, light, and colour tone. By the early 1980s, many of the members of Wuming went their separate ways.

Ma was invited to participate in a joint exhibition of American and Chinese artists at the Beijing Art Institute in 1988 that subsequently travelled to the Shanghai Art Museum and The Snug Harbor Cultural

Center in New York. He went to Europe in the same year and then to the United States, where he was awarded a residency at the reputable Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine. Following the footsteps of many Chinese artists of his generation, Ma settled down in New York. The influences from modernist figures like Jasper Johns, Mark Rothko, and Willem de Kooning were unavoidable. Ma was drawn to the writing of Ad Reinhardt, an American abstract painter, and his notion of non-art in particular. According to Reinhardt, the sole mission of modern art is to be aware of "art-as-art", its own process, own means, and reasons, which resonates with the original intent of Wuming. Ma also reaffirms himself as a modernist at heart when he says, "I don't want my art to be used for something else, except for the art itself."

With respect to Ma's search for purity in art, the intention behind *Wilderness* is to simulate a viewing condition of estrangement and to encourage a comparative formal reading of the artworks. On view are eight groups of paintings drawn from different periods and organized in chronological order to shed light on Ma's disciplinary approaches toward subject matters, surface treatments, and materials. For example, a representational landscape painting will be hung next to a non-figurative abstract painting.

The desolate landscape painting *Lake in Gray* (1974), depicted with subdued hues and without a trace of humans, is emblematic of the activities of the Wuming group. While still residing in Beijing, Ma reduced the impression of a landscape in *Autumn Lotus Pond* (1983) by limiting his palette to black and white hues. He also began to delve more deeply into the format of non-representational painting as shown in *White* (1985). During the early 1990s, Ma investigated the relevance of colour field painting as a breakaway from the abstract expressionist movement. *Composition in Black No. 1* (1991) is a diptych work on paper with a painterly quality that bears stylistic traits from Chinese ink painting. A bleak vertical line on the left-hand panel that complements a curved line on the right-hand panel is intended to question the frontality of the picture plane.

*Bada Series No. 6* (1994) is named after Bada Sharen, a literati painter also known as Zhu Da from the Qing dynasty. What appears to be a traditional landscape painting is actually made with oil, mixed media, and encaustics. It was a conscious strategy on the artist's part to incorporate Chinese ink painting traditions to negotiate with the language of Western abstraction. Done in the same year, *Bada Series No. 2* (1994) is a large-scale monochromatic painting that maintains a good balance between achieving a coherent colour field with layers of brushwork behind its surface. This work reminds us of the lyrical abstraction by Brice Marden and his interest in spirituality in abstraction.

*Autumn Breeze, Ripples and Willows* (1975) and *1989 No. 6* (1989) present two distinct takes on Ma's memories of Beijing. The colour yellow in *Autumn* (1991) is directed at life and death, light and heaven. *The Motorcycle Repair Shop on North 3rd Street* (2000) is a painting from life, a practice that never quite left Ma and which provided a necessary connection with his immediate neighbourhood in Brooklyn.

Faced with an unfortunate family tragedy, Ma returned to Beijing in 2006 and pondered his next step forward. It was not until 2008 that he resumed painting. *Twilight* (2008) projects a white blank field-like illumination, consciously emptying out what is excessive from a painting. Ma says, "I will tell you what abstract art is in the wilderness. This painting of mine is about light, a kind of blinding light." *Imprison* (2015) is a statement of liberation, cutting ties from all kinds of constraints. Ma never takes his creative freedom for granted, although his thought process with art is often met with self-doubt and reservation.

Ma began his *Ada* series in 2016. It is another attempt for him to do away with familiar elements, as he uses a special image transfer method to suppress the traces of painting and to further embrace the incidental nature of painting. The artist continues with a paradoxical journey towards achieving purity in painting. As Oscar Wilde in his essay "Art and the Handicraftsman" put it so succinctly, the mission of artists is not to reconcile themselves with the world deliberately, but rather to abide by the making of independent forms not limited by reality.

## About the Artist

Beijing-based artist Ma Kelu was born in Shanghai in 1954. As one of the founding members of the avant-garde artist collective No Name Group during the 1970s in China, Ma is a crucial practitioner of “Return Art to Ontology”, in which he demands complete intellectual freedom for his art practice. In the late 1980s, he won a prize from the Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture Art Foundation in Maine and settled in New York. In 2006, he returned home with a broader perspective and continued his abstractionist style. Ma is known as an “unofficial” painter, who developed a rather innovative artistic career independent from official Chinese art practices during the Cultural Revolution. His early works are close to “en plein air”, an impressionist variation of landscape painting. A series of his artworks have been exhibited in Asia, Europe, Canada, and the United States.

In 1974, No Name Group held its first underground art exhibition, in which Ma was one of the participating artists. He also played an important role when the art group held its first public exhibition in 1979. In the late 1980s, he travelled around Europe before moving to the United States. It was only 20 years later that he returned to China to continue making abstract works. The artist reduced the impression of a landscape to a loose pattern of limited sets of colours. As one of the few artists who carried out such a practice at that time in China, he didn't want or have to draw any references from a commonly shared reality. The pure existence of his canvas and his oil paint was the reality he was interested in. Within these limitations, he found the boundless world of universal abstraction. In his recent series titled *Ada*, the paintings are free from meaning, interpretation, responsibilities, established artistic criteria, and Western-Oriental controversy; instead, they are infused with individualism.

## About Pearl Lam Galleries

Pearl Lam Galleries is a driving force within Asia's contemporary art scene. Founded in 2005, the gallery plays a vital role in stimulating international dialogue and cross-cultural exchange between the East and West.

Following a rigorous programme, Pearl Lam Galleries presents museum-quality exhibitions that re-evaluate and challenge perceptions of cultural practice in Asia. With a thoughtfully balanced roster of Chinese and international artists, the gallery is strategic in its curation, positioning itself as an educator.

The gallery maintains a flagship space in the historic Pedder Building in Hong Kong, whilst the Shanghai gallery is situated in the heritage architecture in the Bund district. With a team of international staff, Pearl Lam Galleries' reach is global, having presentations at major international art fairs including The Armory Show, Art Cologne, Art Basel Hong Kong, Frieze Masters, and West Bund Art and Design.

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