



# Xu Zhen: A MadeIn Company Production

2014.1.19 –  
2014.4.20

UCCA

Ullens Center for  
Contemporary Art  
尤伦斯当代艺术中心

# Xu Zhen:

## A MadIn Company Production

2014.1.19 – 2014.4.20

An irreverent artist with a voracious appetite for global information and a unique ability to produce work across multiple platforms and media, Xu Zhen is a key voice in the Shanghai art scene and a foundational figure for the generations of Chinese artists born since 1980. This exhibition, his most comprehensive showing to date, is curated by UCCA Director Philip Tinari and UCCA Chief Curator Paula Tsai.

Xu Zhen's practice incorporates a wide range of media, including painting, sculpture, mechanical installation, video, photography, and performance, often within a single piece. "Xu Zhen: A MadIn Company Production" comprises a similarly diverse set of works, with over 50 installation pieces, 10 videos, 40 painting and collage works, and several performances, filling UCCA's Great Hall. The exhibition spans Xu Zhen's early works made in his own name beginning in 1997, works made under the moniker MadIn Company between 2009 and 2013, as well as significant new pieces produced specially for this exhibition under MadIn Company's "Xu Zhen" brand.

The title "Xu Zhen: A MadIn Company Production" acknowledges the longstanding relationship between the artist's individual practice and his sprawling involvement with the Shanghai contemporary art scene. In 2009, Xu Zhen dissolved his art practice into the "contemporary art creation company" MadIn Company. Acting as the group's CEO, Xu Zhen continues to undertake creative projects, artworks, and exhibitions under this revised mantle. MadIn encapsulates Xu Zhen's unique conflation of art practice, curatorial work, and art promotion that has defined his multifarious career in the Shanghai art scene. The artist's withdrawal from his own name marks a rejection of the persona-driven contemporary art world while acknowledging that, since he first began working with art in 1997, Xu Zhen's artwork has always been a collaborative effort.

Presented together, Xu Zhen's oeuvre reflects the lingering concerns of an artist participating in the international art world while remaining deeply skeptical of it and its conventions, most immediately the label "Chinese contemporary art." Xu Zhen's artworks probe the various mediations that corrupt the viewer's experience of an artwork, particularly in observing a culture that is not one's own.

While the exhibition is arranged as a purposely chaotic intersection of multiple pieces set along a single symmetrical axis with no regard for chronology, this short booklet aims to show, through specific pieces on view, how Xu Zhen's practice has evolved.

The exhibition is generously sponsored by the following individuals and institutions: Ms. Lin Moru, Mr. Qiao Zhibing, Mr. Shen Qibin, Mr. Zhang Wei, White Rabbit Collection, CP Denmark, ShanghART Gallery, and Long March Space. The exhibition publication is supported by Beijing New Century Art Foundation founder Mr. Wang Bing.

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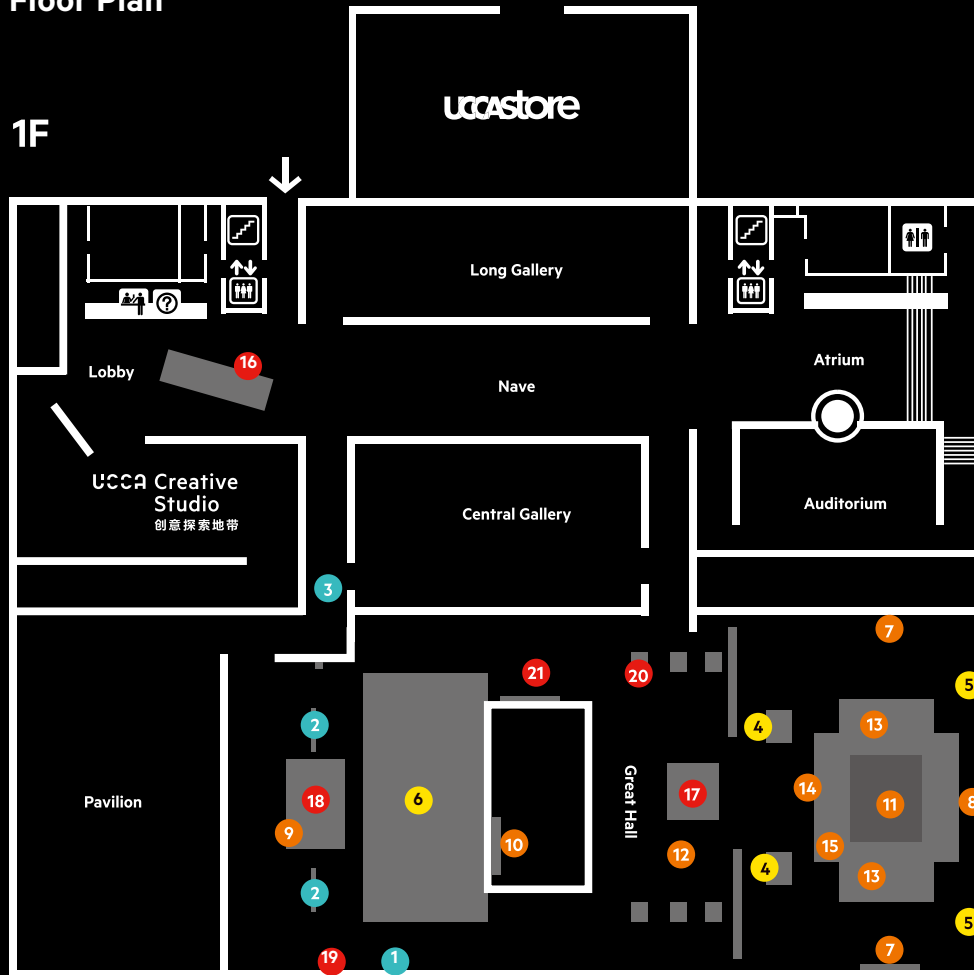
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# Floor Plan

1F



1. Xu Zhen, *Shouting*, 1998
2. Xu Zhen, *Rainbow*, 1998
3. Xu Zhen, *6th March*, 2002
4. Xu Zhen, *In Just a Blink of an Eye*, 2005
5. Xu Zhen, *8848-1.86*, 2006
6. Xu Zhen, *ShanghART Supermarket*, 2007
7. Xu Zhen, *The Starving of Sudan*, 2008
8. Madeln Company, *Perfect Volume*, 2009
9. Madeln Company, *Calm*, 2009
10. Madeln Company, *Action of Consciousness*, 2011
11. Madeln Company, *Physique of Consciousness*, 2011
12. Madeln Company, *Play - 2*, 2011
13. Xu Zhen, *Just as time is an object so all produced objects can be considered as crystalized time.*, material: photograph of young student, knives, 2012. Produced by Madeln Company.
14. Madeln Company, *Movement Field*, 2013
15. Xu Zhen, *Precious Prostate*, 2013. Produced by Madeln Company.
16. Xu Zhen, *Eternity*, 2013. Produced by Madeln Company.
17. Xu Zhen, *Eternity*, 2014. Produced by Madeln Company.
18. Xu Zhen, *New*, 2014. Produced by Madeln Company.
19. Xu Zhen, *Under Heaven - 1802TV2312*, 2013. Produced by Madeln Company.
20. Xu Zhen, *Madeln Curved Vase - Vault-of-Heaven Vase with Peach Design, Qianlong Period, Qing Dynasty*, 2013. Produced by Madeln Company.
21. Xu Zhen, *La Liberté Guidant le Peuple*, 2013. Produced by Madeln Company.

 Restroom
  Elevator
  Information
  Tickets

## The Early Xu Zhen

(1997 – 2004)

Xu Zhen's early works are largely confrontational, subverting social taboos and customs through dynamics of pain, discomfort, and desensitization. Works uncomfortably hone in on the body as an aesthetic terrain of menstrual blood, pubic hair, mysterious odors, and pornography. Exemplary works of this period include *Rainbow*, which Xu exhibited at the Venice Biennale in 2001 when Harald Szeemann's selection made him the youngest-ever Chinese participant. Xu returned to Venice four years later with *Shouting*, one of the earliest examples of the trickery and false imperative that would later pervade his practice.

After setting up a camera in a crowded public space—a subway station, an intersection, a plaza—Xu Zhen and a few friends unleash a primal scream. Almost in unison passersby look back in shock and concern, only to return to their course after a second's pause. Xu's momentary interruption of quotidian events reveals how quick people are to dismiss absurd, belligerent violations of public norms.



▲ Xu Zhen, *Shouting*, 1998, single-channel video, color, sound, 3'41"

▶ Xu Zhen, *Rainbow*, 1998, single-channel video, color, sound, 3'50"

▶ Xu Zhen, *6th March*, 2002, performance



Xu's iconic work from the 49th Venice Biennale, *Rainbow* questions the commonplace aestheticization of violence in contemporary art and culture in general. For nearly four minutes, a bare back is slapped repeatedly by an unseen assailant. Only the sound of the impact is recorded; the footage of the striking has been cut. What remains are merely indexes of violence: a resounding slap, and a back purpling with welts.

For *6th March*, Xu Zhen inverts the expected relationship between observer and observed within the gallery space. Actors dressed in clothing reminiscent of patients in a mental health institution follow visitors through the exhibition. They do not speak or interact with the visitors; they simply choose an individual and follow them as they move throughout the show, a playful acknowledgement of the power dynamics and institutional artificiality inherent in all cultural spectacles.



## Xu Zhen in Shanghai

(2005 – 2009)

Xu Zhen reached a turning point in his artistic career in 2005. His works increasingly took on a darkly contrived affect, as artificial backstories, pranks, and urban legends appeared in the forms of faked suicides, celebrity beatings, and whole preserved dinosaurs. Fabricated narratives became central to Xu's artworks as he began to use museums and galleries as staging grounds for satirical projects in which the institutions themselves joined in the deception.

In 2005, Xu Zhen formed My Club, members of which allegedly collected donations to fund travels around the world to beat up global leaders in a send-up of both nationalist ire and stereotypes of ugly populism. Documentation of these fights was published on the club's



▲ Xu Zhen, *My Club - Fought George W. Bush in Front of White House, Washington, D.C., USA, in July 2005*, 2005, photograph on PVC foam board, 73 x 90 x .8 cm

now defunct website, [www.okmyclub.com](http://www.okmyclub.com), where images were displayed with accompanying captions as they are here.

For the installation *In Just a Blink of an Eye*, actors recline on a hidden support framework a few inches above the ground, creating the illusion that they are frozen mid-fall. In an uncanny moment seemingly outside of time and gravity, both viewer and actor are frozen in a moment of suspended existence. In selected exhibitions abroad, illegal Chinese immigrants were hired to participate in the piece, adding a specific referent to the vulnerabilities and perilous uncertainties to which the piece alludes.



▲ Xu Zhen, *In Just a Blink of an Eye*, 2005, performance

In perhaps his most famous stunt, Xu Zhen claims to have summited Mount Everest with a team of three friends in August 2005 to slice off the tip of the mountain—an exact 1.86 meters, the artist's height—for display in China. *8848-1.86*'s "documentary" photographs, video, and objects from the journey are displayed alongside the peak itself in a refrigerated tank. Key to the farce was the exhibitor's straight-faced presentation of Xu's fabulous tale, such that during its inaugural exhibition at the Yokohama Triennial in 2005, the apparent authenticity of the project caused an uproar among media and concerned viewers.

*ShanghART Supermarket* sees a fully stocked Chinese convenience store installed in a gallery space or art fair. The shop is open to the public, and visitors are invited to browse the shelves and buy items from an attendant managing a cash register. The products for sale, however, are empty cartons—all packaging, no content, perhaps like much art today. The piece debuted at Art Basel Miami Beach in 2007 during the height of the contemporary art boom. The sale of empty, worthless objects as artworks highlighted the murky relationship between price and value in an overheating art market.



▲ Xu Zhen, *ShanghART Supermarket*, 2007, project, 15.7 x 11 x 4.7 m



▲ Xu Zhen, *8848-1.86*, 2006, video (Installation, photography, performance), 8'10"

In 1994, Kevin Carter won the Pulitzer Prize for his controversial photograph of a starving Sudanese child huddled under the gaze of a vulture. Faced with widespread criticism, Carter committed suicide shortly after receiving the award. For *The Starving of Sudan*, Xu recreates the iconic image with a live toddler and an animatronic vulture, and visitors are invited to take a photograph and inhabit the space for as long as they like. Xu's gut-wrenching *tableau vivant* exposes the strangeness of racial attitudes in contemporary China while playing off the viewer's lingering anxieties over the portrayal of race and suffering.

## MadIn Company

In 2009, Xu Zhen withdrew from his role as an individual “artist” and founded the ambitious Shanghai-based art production group MadIn Company, which began creating large bodies of work depicting politics, ideologies, and nationality as well as religious icons, cultural tropes, and sexual deviancy. Mirroring his retreat from the personality-driven concept of artist-as-solitary-genius, works from this period reject authoritative objecthood and authorship, accessing a new dimension of fiction and fabrication.

In 2009, MadIn Company curated the exhibitions “Seeing One’s Own Eyes” and “Lonely Miracle” by an imaginary group of Middle Eastern contemporary artists. The shows comprised paintings, sculptures, and installations playing off the stalest clichés in the region’s contemporary art world—burqas, calligraphy, militarism—highlighting the post-colonial problems of contemporary art made for international audiences.



MadIn Company, *Perfect Volume*, 2009,  
installation (100 pairs of military boots), dimensions variable

Many works made under the Madeln moniker exhibit an irreverent juxtaposition of childish icons in hyperviolent, sexual, or intentionally offensive contexts. For one series, the group produces a set of limited edition plush toys, including a homeless man (an artist, as the work's title states) proffering "dirty sex" for a dollar and an Energizer bunny with the head of Osama bin Laden. For the project *Spread*, Madeln Company collected and collaged political cartoons, arbitrarily juxtaposing them with children's cartoons and other pop culture icons in a meaningless lampoon of standard practices in Western contemporary art.



▲ Xu Zhen, *Precious Prostate*, 2013, limited edition toy (cloth, mixed media), 28 x 28 x 62 cm.  
Produced by Madeln Company.

Madeln's artworks increasingly began to question established systems of artistic production and reception within contemporary art. In one group of works, Madeln created a series of sculptures, photographed them, and then immediately dismantled the original pieces. The works were titled with abstruse quotes from classic philosophical texts, primarily to bait theory-steeped viewers into overwrought interpretations. In truth, the "artwork" is as much this process of negation—the destruction of the object and subsequent insistence on the uniqueness and value of its photographic trace—as it is any physical item or reproduction.



▲ Xu Zhen, *Just as time is an object so all produced objects can be considered as crystalized time.*,  
material: photograph of young student, knives, 2012, installation, 220 x 349 x 5 cm. Produced by Madeln Company.





*Physique of Consciousness* exists as both a performance and a large-scale installation. The performance, billed as the world's first set of "cultural fitness exercises," appropriates movements from religious rituals, worship ceremonies, and historical traditions for a series of ten workouts in an indictment of shallow yuppie spiritualism and its reduction of complex histories and cultures to lifestyle fads. Following the exhibition, Madeln created the *Physique of Consciousness Museum*, a pseudo-archaeological project collecting and classifying images and objects from various cultures and histories according to an authoritative yet absurd taxonomy based on the *Physique of Consciousness* exercises.



In *Play*, silicone models, dressed in tribal garb and tied in suggestive poses, are suspended using Japanese kinbaku bondage techniques. The shock value of the pieces is compounded by the variable preconceptions of the observer—some viewers might find resonances with slavery and colonialist attitudes, while others might see exoticized erotica.

- ◀ Madeln Company, *Physique of Consciousness Museum*, 2012, documents, installation, performance
- ◀ Madeln Company, *Physique of Consciousness*, 2011, performance
- ▲ Madeln Company, *Play - 2*, 2011, installation (silicon, iron, cotton filling, hemp cordage, fur, feathers, shells), 160 x 60 x 80 cm

## Xu Zhen: A MadIn Company Production

In 2013, MadIn announced the launch of their new art brand “Xu Zhen” in an experiment that further convolutes the relationship between artist, collective, and artist-as-brand. Several works are created as part of previous MadIn Company series, further obscuring questions of authorship. Works from this period retain MadIn’s characteristic interest in ideologies, cultural subjectivity, and the conditions of contemporary art production, thought they often push these issues to new extremes and dimensions.

Routes of various protest marches are tracked on maps (displayed for reference) and then overlaid to create a jagged grid. They then form narrow paths of white pebbles that wind across and around tiny grassy knolls and provocative cutouts. Evocative of well-tended gardens or memorial parks, *Movement Field* is a deadpan juxtaposition of bourgeois ideology and taste, indicating the inherent contradictions between the two.

In a ploy to “redefine the viewer’s right to observe,” *Action of Consciousness* situates a large white cube in the center of the exhibition space. Periodically, sculptures, often visual puns based on glaringly obvious juxtapositions of symbols—a Chinese lantern atop an Ionic column, a swastika made of cacti—appear above the top of the cube. These objects can only be seen for a few seconds before dropping out of view, mocking art-going audiences’ expectations of the gallery experience.



Xu Zhen's new work *Eternity* in the UCCA Lobby makes literal a rampant cliché of contemporary art and global culture—the idea of “East meets West.” In a gravity-defying large-scale sculptural installation, bodhisattvas and other Chinese religious figures are affixed neck-to-neck with statues from the east pediment of the Parthenon.

The tallest work in the *Eternity* series is an eight-meter-high statue of the Winged Victory of Samothrace, boat pedestal and all, atop a Tang Dynasty bodhisattva from the Tianlongshan Grottoes. The parallel is striking—each work is an exalted icon of its art historical tradition only known in its decapitated state. Likewise, both original statues reside beyond their country of origin—the bodhisattva in the Tokyo National Museum, the Victory in the Louvre.

Turning a critical eye on the dizzying proliferation of cheap, tacky, quasi-religious statues in tourist sites across China, *New* reimagines these figures of spiritual camp as if they aspired to true artistic merit and innovation. Appropriately, to make the sculpture the artist enlisted the Kunstgiesserei in Switzerland, one of the top foundries in the world.

▼ Xu Zhen, *Eternity*, 2013, installation, 3.5 x 13 x 1.5 m. Produced by MadeIn Company.



Madeln's "Xu Zhen" brand continues to investigate the predominate forms of production and reception in contemporary art. In *Under Heaven*, canvases are smothered with thick layers of oil paint as if it were icing on a cake. It is nearly impossible for such thickly applied oil paint to dry, so the works periodically need to be rotated to keep them from slumping. The visually alluring mass of color and texture speaks to the prevalence of impasto in contemporary painting while illustrating how such techniques are a convenient shortcut to striking visual effects.

In the series *Madeln Curved Vase*, famous Chinese vases are replicated with precise attention to their traditional design. The only difference is that the vases have curved necks, rendering them both unusable, indicating that they are defective, and strictly decorative, implying that they are not tools but treasures—a clever critique of both the aestheticization of functional items and the tendency of some Chinese contemporary artists to use conspicuous cultural symbols to quickly establish a work's "Chinese-ness."

In the *Light Source* series, classic works by European masters are recreated with an added flash glare of white paint. The paintings, made by skilled copyists, are based on images taken by Madeln cronies of works in international museum collections where flash photography is explicitly forbidden. The trompe l'oeil effect is an irreverent comment on the average museumgoer's relationship to artworks and a disruption of the putatively transcendent art experience.



- ▲ Xu Zhen, *Under Heaven - 20121020* (detail), 2012. Produced by Madeln Company.
- ▶ Xu Zhen, *Madeln Curved Vase - Vault-of-Heaven Vase with Peach Design, Qianlong Period, Qing Dynasty*, 2013, installation (porcelain), 42 x 42 x 58 cm. Produced by Madeln Company.





## About the Artist

Xu Zhen is a graduate of the Shanghai Art and Design Academy, a technical college. After graduating in 1996, Xu declined to continue his education, forsaking the standard art education system and instead moving to Beijing to participate in the flourishing contemporary art scene there. After a year living in Beijing, Xu returned to Shanghai and began making art.

Apart from his artworks, Xu Zhen is a leading figure in the Shanghai art scene, working as a curator, critic, entrepreneur, and broker. In 1998, Xu co-founded the independent, not-for-profit BizArt Art Centre, the first organization of its kind in Shanghai. The creative lab funded experimental exhibitions of young Shanghai artists through its graphic design, art advertising, and other commercial services. In 2006, Xu helped initiate the online contemporary art forum Art-Ba-Ba ([www.art-ba-ba.com](http://www.art-ba-ba.com)), which remains one of China's leading web platforms for discussion and criticism of contemporary art. In 2009, Xu dissolved his art practice into the "contemporary art creation company" MadelN Company. In 2013, MadelN Company launched the brand "Xu Zhen."

Xu Zhen won the Best Artist prize at the 2004 China Contemporary Art Awards. He is the youngest Chinese artist to participate in the Venice Biennale (2001). Solo exhibitions as himself and as MadelN Company include "Seeing One's Own Eyes: Middle East Contemporary Art" (ShanghArt Gallery, Shanghai, 2009; S.M.A.K., Ghent, 2009; Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, 2009); "Physique of Consciousness" (Kunsthalle Bern, 2011); "Xu Zhen: Forbidden Castle" (Muzeum Montanelli, Prague, 2012); and "MadelN Company" (Shanghai, Minsheng Art Museum, 2012). Major group exhibitions include the Venice Biennale (curated section, 2001 and China Pavilion, 2005); "Mahjong: Contemporary Chinese Art from the Sigg Collection" (Kunstmuseum Bern, 2004); "The Thirteen: Chinese Video Now" (PS1 Contemporary Art Center, New York, 2006); "Art of Change" (Hayward Gallery, London, 2012); the 7th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (Gallery of Modern Art and Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 2012); the 4th Guangzhou Triennial (Guangdong Museum of Art, Guangzhou, 2012); "Surplus Authors" (Witte de With, Rotterdam, 2012); and Arsenale (Mystetskyi Arsenal, Kiev, 2012).

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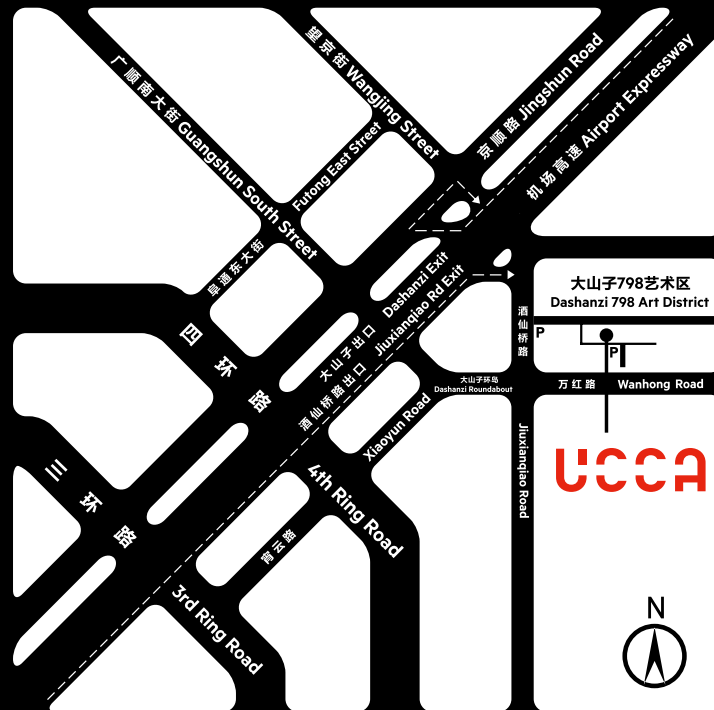


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**By Bus:** Take bus 401, 402, 405, 418, 445, 688, 909, 946, 955, 973, 988, or 991 to the Dashanzi or Wangyefen stops.

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