

# First Impressions

Hailing from Beirut, Beijing and Tehran, three artists impacted by their surroundings make work with materials at hand



1

## Caline Aoun

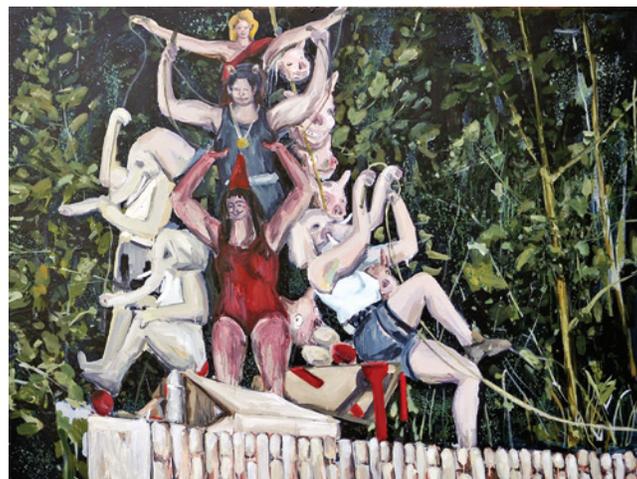
*Pine Needles* (detail), 2015, 4000 copper casts of a pine needle, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and Grey Noise, Dubai.



2

## Yang Yuanyuan

*#40 Linjiang Road*, 2015, from the series "Nearly There, Nearly Concrete, Chongqing," archival pigment print, 53 x 80 cm. Courtesy the artist.



3

## Ramtin Zad

*Bissy Bunder Band*, 2015, acrylic on canvas, 150 x 200 cm. Courtesy the artist.

2

## Yang Yuanyuan

BEIJING

1

### Caline Aoun

BEIRUT/LONDON

While gravity defines sculpture as much as light does photography, digital images flatten objects and atmosphere alike into immaterial data—only to return as physically printed apparitions mounted on surfaces all around us. The nettlesome creations of Caline Aoun toy with this disjuncture, heightening the material properties of pictures and the imagistic properties of sculptures, to the point of being neither one nor the other. *Blue Paperplane* (2015), for instance, resembles a kid's classroom creation, unfolded, with each facet printed with increasingly saturated increments of sky-blue, as Aoun slyly mixes associations between things that imitate flight and pictures that replicate the sky's color. When not looking up, Aoun has also made numerous works about the spaces underfoot. In *Carbon Copy* (2013), she cast a gallery's wooden floorboards in carbon paper, giving the resulting object a kind of semantic redundancy: a copied copy. The linguistic riddles proliferate, with works such as *Beirut Art Center Square Meter* (2012), in which she made impressions of the concrete floor from the material pulp of pink invoices and brown envelopes, or blue envelopes and receipts, as institution waste is recycled to give an "impression" of the place.

Aoun produces such oxymoronic-sounding things as "unique" or "site-specific" inkjet prints, as in the sensual gradations of color mapped onto several meters of Negative Permajet transfer film in her November 2015 show at Dubai's Grey Noise gallery. Other works of hers delightfully defy material logic. Most notably are her copper casts of a pine needle, produced by the thousands—at the 2015 Art Basel, 4,000 of them covered the floor of Grey Noise's booth—with painstaking precision and then scattered on the ground with the same laissez-faire attitude as a pine tree itself. The original pine needle came from outside her studio, as did a four- and five-meter carbon paper cast of the nearby road, replicating the conditions around her place of working in a richly tactile manner. Like an inkjet print, the cast is a method of reproduction, done one by one, giving each thing its unique qualities as a replica of something else.

HG MASTERS

Beijing artist Yang Yuanyuan may primarily work in photography, but approaches the medium with an unorthodox set of priorities that shifts the focus away from her own photographs to the power of forgotten archival images, as well as photography's connections to travel and literature. For *Nearly There, Nearly Concrete, Chongqing* (2014), a photobook that has also been presented in exhibition form, Yang was inspired by the chance purchase of 300 architectural photographs of 1960s Chongqing from an online bookseller. During a 2014 summer residency in the southwestern Chinese city, Yang used the archival images as her guide to locate the original scenes. In the finished product, photographs of Chongqing's past sit beside Yang's shots of the contemporary metropolis, tracking the city's radical transformation over the past half-century, but also the unexpected continuities where old buildings remain.

Fittingly, Yang uses the metaphor of "weaving" to describe her work process, recombining images to capture the "threads" that run through cities, noting the personal experiences and strands of the past and present that merge within local histories. The photobook *10 Days in Kraków* (2014) juxtaposes her own images of the Polish city with source material that influenced her perception of the city, ranging from Jean-Luc Godard's film *Two or Three Things I Know About Her* (1967) to found images that indirectly evoke Poland's tragic history in World War II. As the title suggests, the period of active photography in Yang's work can be quite concentrated and short, but editing, layering and research take many months more.

As such, Yang is currently refining several projects, including her research of Beijing's 1950s social housing sites such as the Fusuijing building, once iconic and now semi-abandoned. *Lateral Roots*, a zine collaboration with artist Zhu Lanqing and designer Yang Lutong, has just come to fruition with the release of its first issue, which draws attention to incidental details in found family photographs. Each issue includes a supplemental format inspired by its content (this time around a wall calendar). The multiple formats of *Lateral Roots* and her other work speak to Yang's desire to keep her art accessible, granting viewers the same exploratory experience that fuels her own research.

SIMON FRANK

3

### Ramtin Zad

TEHRAN

Explosions of hybrid human and animal forms burst forth through vivid colors that are set against a backdrop of nature at night. Iranian artist Ramtin Zad's large-scale paintings bring natural landscapes together with the Persian miniature tradition when, in the 16th century, figures within the composition were no longer constrained and static but painted in a more lively and natural manner. However, contrary to the thin brushstrokes and delicate detailing seen in such historic miniatures, Zad reinterprets the style using dynamic lines and abstraction.

Informed by popular literary works or religious tales, such as the Biblical story of Noah's Ark, Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* (1472) or Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), Zad's surrealist imagery is filled with characters that hail from a realm that lies between the real and the imagined. Each hybrid figure begins as an individual ink drawing sketched into the artist's notebook and is later adapted onto canvas. In his most recent series, "Elysium Nocturnal" (2014–), Zad delves into lush foliage as a means of fleeing from urban life. With the evening sky as a backdrop in *Animal Party* (2015), nothing is quite as it seems—a collision of light and dark paint frames the beast-human creatures that revel in the privacy of the forest. Similarly, in his painting *Bissy Bunder Band* (2015) these crossbreeds are piled up in a pyramid-like configuration, as if they are part of an elaborate circus act or freak show.

Blurring myth and reality, fact and fiction, Zad draws his motifs from both his subconscious and his regular retreats to the Iranian countryside. Using saturated colors to express the energetic force of nature, the artist creates uncanny works that are illogical, but also serve as a poignant reminder of an alternative world where freedom and imagination prevail—perhaps a form of escapism from realities of instability and strife in contemporary Tehran.

JAREH DAS