

Guo Hongwei: *Painting is Collecting* at Chambers Fine Art, Beijing

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Caochangdi, Beijing



In so far as [Guo Hongwei](#) depicted objects close at hand in the paintings shown in the 2009 exhibition and immediately after, his works were to a certain degree autobiographical. With *Painting is Collecting*, he moves out of the studio into a much broader arena that incorporates mankind's curiosity concerning the world in which he lives, the classification and understanding of the relationships between the infinite variety of animals, insects, plants and minerals. Not only has he visited natural history museums and botanical gardens with their ancient herbaria, he has also read widely in historical literature and developed a keen appreciation of the artistry of botanical illustrators of previous centuries. From this vast amount of material, he has selected certain images that appeal to him as a result of their cultural patina and has also created arrangements of his own that show his interest in tracking relationships between closely related forms.

The series of watercolors devoted to plants, for example, are closely based on botanical specimens in which the date of collecting, inventory number etc. are only partially revealed as a result of the free-flowing pools of watercolor. Contrasting are the sheets in which rows of birds and insects are freely arranged, the minute differences between them beautifully replicated by the subtle adjustments of color and density of pigment. As Sun Dongdong comments, however, "thanks to Guo's expressive painting style that breaks through the boundaries of scientific representation, the watercolors in the exhibition are not documentary studies meant for natural history museums. The naming of these paintings, "Flowers, Birds, Fish, and Insects," is at best a playful allusion to scientific methods of categorization."

Although capable of being highly developed, traditionally, watercolor has been reserved for informal studies and small-scale works. Guo Hongwei appreciates the fluidity and transparency of the medium but is prepared to place a greater burden on it, exaggerating its qualities in order to transform the physical characteristics of the objects he chooses to paint. For *Painting is Collecting I*, Guo Hongwei has transformed the galleries of Chambers Fine Art into a hauntingly beautiful reflection on mankind's need to classify, preserve and depict, to pin down the qualities of living forms whether in watercolor on paper or in the vitrines of a natural history museum.