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TEXTS: Barbara Pollack

IMAGES: Courtesy of Chambers Fine Art and the artist

The Pre-existent Painting is what Beijing artist Guo Hongwei calls ancient elements found in nature: minerals, crystals, stones and coral. Cognizant that such materials take a millennium to form, Guo studies their colors, surfaces and forms and recreates their beauty in the more ephemeral medium of watercolor. He is a master of this technique, able to create totally convincing, almost photographic renditions of intricate objects using the most delicate of methods.



Guo Hongwei 郭鴻蔚, The Pre-existent Painting No.1 / 天然 No.1, 2017.  
Oil on coral, 19 7/10 x 15 7/10 x 11 4/5 in, 50 x 40 x 30 cm.

For this exhibition, Guo Hongwei turned the main gallery of Chambers Fine Art in something of a hall of minerals found in a natural history museum. The heart of the show is Guo's Illustrated Book of Natural Form, an on-going project currently comprised of more than seventy stunning paintings, each depicting a different mineral. Presented in a grid, the works invite viewers to make comparisons between the various rock formations and to spot the differences between

quartz and malachite. At the same time, we grow to appreciate the artist's acute eye and obsessive practice which capture the layers of these petrified patterns.

Less accessible but equally fascinating is Guo Hongwei's study of what-he-calls "artificial natural form." According to the artist, these mineral-like objects are discards from a commercial painting plant where layers upon layers of spray paint accumulate on the wall and chip off in shards. It is a process of creative entropy, not dissimilar from the way sedimentary stone is created in nature, albeit, in a much shorter time period. Here, samples of this material are displayed within a frame while watercolor studies hang nearby, like a geological report.

Guo Hongwei knows this mode of inquiry all too well, having grown up in Chengdu with a father who held an administrative position at a mining company. Exposed to geological material from an early age, he developed an intimate understanding of minerals and became fascinated with how such natural forms outshine even the most accomplished creative efforts. By introducing such irregular shapes and fractal patterns into his work, Guo adds a kind of spontaneity to his otherwise meticulous process.

Adding to the museum-like installation were a pair of vitrines in the center of the room. They held examples of natural coral, painted in highly unnatural hues with oil paint. These sculptures were titled *Pre-existent Painting No. 1* and *No. 3*. (Another one, *No. 2*, hung on the wall.) Clearly the artist, looking at the intricate forms and fascinating coloration of coral when found in the ocean, deemed these creatures living works of art, preceding all human attempts to capture beauty.



Guo Hongwei 郭鸿蔚, The Landscape of Natural Form No.3 / 自然形式的风景 No.3, 2017.  
Watercolor on paper, 102 x 152 in, 259.1 x 386.1 cm.

The exhibition, *The Pre-existent Painting*, is but the first of two solo shows by this artist that will be held at this gallery this fall. On November 16, Chambers Fine Art will open Plastic Heaven, a series of new oil paintings that examine decidedly manmade objects, ranging from a magnified view of an apple hidden within webbed wrapping material to the multicolored door of a garish child's playhouse. In order to make these paintings, Guo experimented with a wide variety of materials and techniques, in order to create different textures. From a quick preview, I can already spot a winner in this collection: *Transformed by the Setting Sun, 1917*. In this painting, the object in question is covered by a purple blanket, mysterious and unidentifiable, against a dark black background.

The Pre-existent Painting by Guo Hongwei is an Asian Contemporary Art Week THINKING PROJECT, curated by ACAW director Leeza Ahmady. She paired the Chinese artist with New York based artist Judy Blum-Reddy's whose imaginative pictograms of her trips to India were displayed in Chambers Fine Art's front gallery.

### **About the artist**

Guo Hongwei is born in Chengdu, China in 1982 and now based in Beijing, he has gained international recognition in the contemporary art world for his unconventional treatment of his chosen medium and the simplicity at which he renders his subject matter. He first established his career and name with a series of work that is highly personal in nature. They are based on his own childhood photographs and mostly monochromatic in colour. What stands out is his technique of building and blurring his images, achieved from applying and diluting each layer of paint; which is meant to mimic the way memories get eroded, replaced and deleted. Using a similar technique, he moved on to other subject matter, such as everyday or mundane objects, nature and animals. The subject matter is not as important as the composition and treatment of them, and the artist's idea behind it all.

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### **Barbara Pollack**

Since 1994, Barbara Pollack has written on contemporary art for such publications as The New York Times, the Village Voice, Art in America, Vanity Fair and of course, Artnews, among many others. She is the author of the book, *The Wild, Wild East: An American Art Critic's Adventures in China* and has written dozens of catalogue essays for a wide range of international artists. In addition to writing, Pollack is an independent curator who organized the exhibition, *We Chat: A Dialogue in Contemporary Chinese Art*, currently at Asia Society Texas and she is a professor at the School of Visual Arts in New York. She has been awarded two grants from the Asian Cultural Council as well as receiving the prestigious Creative Capital/Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writer Grant.