

VACANCY

Press release

Artist: Michael Ho

Exhibition title: *Grotto Heavens*

Duration: July 29–September 2, 2023

Venue: Gallery Vacancy, Shanghai

Gallery Vacancy is pleased to announce Michael Ho's first solo exhibition *Grotto Heavens*, on view from July 29 to September 2, 2023. In this exhibition inspired by the ancient poetic folklores of China, a video work and a series of paintings concertedly explore the artist's diasporic experiences as a second-generation Chinese immigrant in the West. Through the recurring motifs of caves, mountains, water, and artifacts, Ho transforms the gallery into a liminal space, elucidating the prevalent tension between reality and myth as well as the in-betweenness that is cultural, historical, and personal.

Echoes from the Void (2022) sets the scene for *Grotto Heavens*, inviting viewers to wander through the ancient caves in England. The video work simultaneously collages the English natural landscape with Ho's quest into the mythical connotation of the cave in Chinese culture. Caves, where gods dwell and Taoists seek immortality, are sites that are viewed as mirrors of the heavens above and therefore connecting heaven and earth. In the artist's interpretation, this point of contact contains its own sense of time, scale, and temporal reality; myth and truth interchanges and interconnects. As the narrative unfolds, the disconnected pearl beads materialize and drip out of the cave, transitioning into an unknown, fictional timespan. Nonetheless, contemporaneity finds its way into the ethereal setting through words uttered by the artist-posed figure who is yelling anti-Asian conspiracy theory resurged under the global pandemic. Words echo in forests, mountains, and caves, seemingly emulating the echo chamber that propagates misinformation in our hyperconnected age of the internet.

The introduction of multiple timeframes, alongside the nocturnal sensibility and imagery from the video work lingers in the exhibition and on Ho's canvas. Locating the paintings in the mythical mountain range of Kunlun are mythological flora and deities encountered in *The Origin of the World* (2023) and *Of a Kind, One Never Had Seen* (2023).

The investigation of myth in history is further revealed in the artist's depiction of Chinese artifacts. In *Buried Like a Certain Kind of Truth* (2023) and *Nothing but a myth* (2023), Ho portrays material objects that oscillate between truth and myth over the course of history. *Buried Like a Certain Kind of Truth* (2023) recreates a jade suit rediscovered by the mountain site, whose existence was once a highly contested subject. After such funerary practice was abandoned post-Han dynasty, the jade suits were only proven of existence until an excavation of the imperial tombs of a Western Han dynasty prince in 1968. This history of jade suits characterizes the liminal space revealed through the exhibition, embodying a duality of authenticity and fictionality. The duality is manifested in the formal treatment of the Heirloom Seal in *Nothing but a myth* (2023), serving as a counter object to the jade suit. Carved out of Heshibi jade, the imperial seal was made in the Qin dynasty to be passed on from dynasty to dynasty, whose existence is still unknown in the present day, temporarily or forever lost to history. In the painting, Ho treats the object in a semi-translucent appearance, dissolving the substantial object into the lush background of foliage.

Grotto Heavens as a whole attempts at creating an immersive and holistic experience. The landscape of mountains, caves and water, real or ideal have been frequently identified as sites of refuge, liberation, transcendence; all function in a similar manner for Ho's ongoing search for identity and belonging. Drawing on different layers of the personal and the cultural substance, Ho seeks to allegorize his aesthetic and social experiences under various cultural frameworks. The intimate perception of in-betweenness, as a result, forges a link with the objects, myths, and space across time and culture. The rustling and illegible words echo in the exhibition space, threading together the past and the presence, the myth and the reality, and the permanence and the flux.

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Michael Ho, born in Arnhem, Netherlands in 1991, now lives and works in London. He graduated from the Architectural Association in 2019. As a second-generation immigrant from China, Ho's works investigate the notions of the Chinese diaspora, cultural mismatch, and subsequently cultural rediscovery through his painting practice. He employs a specific technique of painting from back to front, superimposing diluted images with resolved brush strokes, clashing Eastern traditions with Western aesthetics. Ho's critical engagement with the orientalist images and tropes is multifold: from the playful to the political and from the erotic to the domestic. From 2020 to 2022, Ho worked with Chiyan Ho (1993-2022) as an artist duo. The duo's solo exhibition includes: *Kūnlún*, V.O Curations, London, 2021. Ho's solo exhibition includes: *Grotto Heavens*, Gallery Vacancy, Shanghai, 2023; *Tryst*, Gallery Vacancy at Frieze London, London, 2022. His works have been featured in group exhibitions at GRIMM, New York; White Cube, Hong Kong; Blum & Poe, Tokyo; Nottingham Contemporary, Nottingham; ICA, London; Blindspot Gallery, Hong Kong; Gallery Vacancy, Shanghai; and Soft Opening, London. His film projects have been screened at Piccadilly Circus, London, ICA, London and Nottingham Contemporary. Ho's works are in the collection of Asymmetry Art Foundation, London; Domus Collection, New York; Labora Collection, Dallas; Longlati Foundation, Hong Kong; X Museum, Beijing.