

Theta

Ann Zhao

Idiot Wind

November 2 - December 21, 2024

Theta is pleased to present Ann Zhao's first solo exhibition in New York, *Idiot Wind*. The show consists of several paintings and one film that provide spontaneous windows of reflection on the last year of the artist's life.

Ann Zhao's works stand against conformity, freely moving between subjects that on the surface appear radically different. Scraps of texts written in Mandarin; pastel harp strings glittering in the dark; hyper-fixated abstraction; plainspoken statements and realistic studies, all on flat color fields. There is a confidence that Zhao brings to each work in its formal execution. However, more shocking is the contempt embodied by each painting, to be a *painting*.

Zhao's works often operate on a measure of refusal. They, simply put, "would prefer not to." Yet, unlike Bartleby, Zhao does not resign to inaction. In *men & art*, 2024, a large green canvas reads, "I won't create a masterpiece," stating her will as the work itself. The painting, rejecting its own supreme cliché, favors a different ambition. Zhao often associates the medium of painting with celebrity, specifically the musician. In *Dou Wei*, Zhao inscribes what looks like an ancient Chinese proverb. In fact she is appropriating a quote by a has-been Chinese rockstar, Dou Wei, who said, "I try my best to find a way of living that is in line with the heavens and in tune with sense; as long as it's reasonable then it's fine." Zhao sees the responsibility of painting as a vehicle for second chances, that living honestly for oneself exists outside the demands of what is expected from the cultural producer. Nina Simone's portrait serves to echo this sentiment, Simone having been unable to escape the burden of being publicly herself and the misinterpretation of her defiant and vulnerable creative action.

The climax of the exhibition is *summer camp*, 2024, a film created from the artist's trip home to Shanghai between school years. Her father, a practitioner of Chinese medicine, performs Gua sha and wet cupping on Zhao, who is filming fearlessly in first-person. As Zhao is scraped and blood is excised from her body, her father espouses the wisdom of Chinese medicine and its relationship to mindful detachments from bad energy and people.

This show takes its title from a song by Bob Dylan, which was originally interpreted as a song of disdain for the deteriorating relationship with his ex-wife Sara. Dylan, however, had a very different explanation:

That was a song I wanted to make as a painting. A lot of people thought that song, that album "Blood on the Tracks", pertained to me. Because it seemed to at the time. It didn't pertain to me. It was just a concept of putting in images that defy time – yesterday, today, and tomorrow. I wanted to make them all connect in some kind of a strange way... I didn't really think I was giving away too much; I thought that it *seemed* so personal that people would think it was about so-and-so who was close to me. It wasn't. But you can put all these words together and that's where it falls. You can't help where it falls. I didn't feel that one was too personal, but I felt it *seemed* too personal. Which might be the same thing, I don't know. But it never was *painful*. 'Cause usually

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with those kinds of things, if you think you're too close to something, you're giving away too much of your feelings, well, your feelings are going to change a month later and you're going to look back and say, "What did I do that for?"¹

It makes one wonder: who is this show for? Is this a show about Ann Zhao, or is this a show about who we are made to think Ann Zhao is supposed to be? Is this a show of paintings by Ann Zhao, or are these paintings beckoning Ann Zhao from the past into the future? Maybe these paintings have nothing to do with Ann, like Bob Dylan and his "Idiot Wind"; maybe they're just paintings, and maybe Ann will go on to practice Chinese medicine. Something tells me she won't. I think Ann made this show as a song—a song that we're supposed to play on our own.

Ann Zhao (b. 2002) lives and works in Providence, Rhode Island. Recent exhibitions include *Mondrian, Hamburg, DE* (2024); *Theta, New York* (2024); *Derosia, New York* (2023); *Daisy Sanchez's Window, New York* (2022); *Estrella, New York* (2022) and *Maxwell Graham / Essex Street, New York* (2022), which was also curated by the artist. Zhao attends the Rhode Island School of Design and will receive a BFA in 2025.

¹ Flanagan, Bill. *Written in My Soul: Rock's Greatest Songwriters Talk about Creating Their Music*. Contemporary Books, Inc, 1986.