

A Song To The Vitality Of Beauty

By Yang Lian



Netherlands-born, Berlin-based painter and sculptor Fré Ilgen makes His sculptures are touched by both stillness and movement and

art that speaks to the power of sculptural organization and materials. reveal something of the responsiveness of art to the human dynamic.

Fré Ilgen understands in great depth how aesthetic transformations progress in both sculpture and painting. His sculptures and paintings should be seen as consciously composed aesthetic wholes permeated with an awareness of structure and organization, sketched out on the shapeless void of nothingness.

My acquaintance with Fré Ilgen's work had its source in my essay, *The Classical: An Intellectual Pursuit*, in which I discussed the work of the Chinese painter Xu Longsen. Xu's immense ink-wash landscapes, over 20 meters long and several meters high, render all other traditional ink-wash painting technique sterile, but he reins in his work before it strays into simple abstraction: As the novel concept he utilizes and reinvents a whole set of techniques to make a contemporary art, yet it remains susceptible to critique via the aesthetics of classical landscape painting. Here, figurative-abstract, technique-concept, and diachronic-synchronic are intrinsically linked to generate a structure. These horizon-like dashes, by subsuming time, implement the classical as a type of profundity that is capable of verification through the language of art.

Fré Ilgen's work is entirely different from Xu Longsen's. To enter Ilgen's Berlin studio is to enter a Baroque church at dusk: the shifting light from the windows touches many-colored marble, finely sculpted tab-



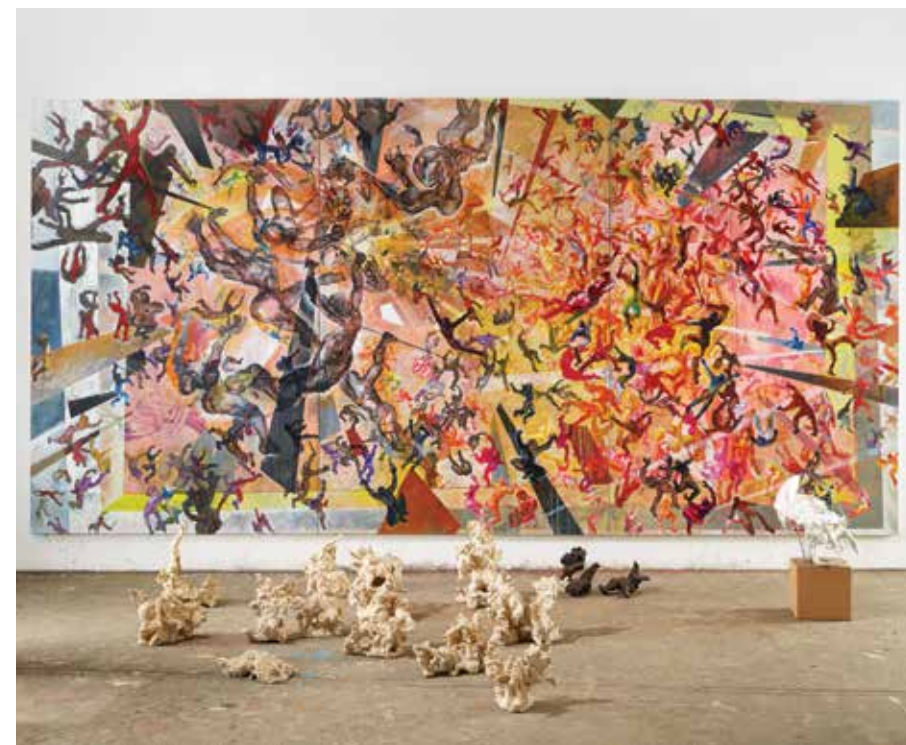
Fré Ilgen, *Great Fantasy and Fugue*, painting, 2010, oil on canvas, 200 x 300 cm. Photograph: Matthias Kolb, Berlin.

ernacles, glittering gold candlesticks, and portraits from long ago, while plainchant drifts through the space. "Like in the Baroque, I like to explore relationships in, and the dialogue between, two- and three-dimensional artworks. Through a strong and complex visual presence I attempt to offer many layers to discover," says Fré Ilgen.

As I look at his *Great Fantasy and Fugue* (2010), my eye is at first entirely

engaged by the hallucinatory turbulence of color—the greens, yellows, blues, blacks, whites, pinks, ochres, and oranges that hit the viewer in the face like a tsunami engulfing every line, careening off in every direction. Is this riot of color a landscape? Some nighttime forest pounded by a storm out on the Dutch polders? Wait a minute, though—as my eye gradually adapts, once past these explosive waves of color, somehow, from the depths of (my? his?) vision as if from the seabed, human forms at first unnoticed rise slowly to the surface. Who is the woman on the left, her eyes downcast? Who is the man her finger directs us to? His Christ-like figure, submersed in russet brown, seems encrusted in a bloody froth. A little above him, a hand can be seen pushing something aside with classically beautiful fingers. A figure sitting sideways has had its turned head changed into a yellow-white gout of flame. But the flame shoots out in one direction, and over it, as it surveys the scene from high above, another figure stretches out his left hand, consoling suffering humanity.

Perhaps what Fré Ilgen has painted is the passion and resurrection of Christ set amidst all the tumult of human life. But that other face at the very top, why does it so resemble a statue of the Buddha? This group of figures suddenly reveals a structure and a connotation in what I had taken for a random disorder of line. This makes the painting's surface rather like that of the oil paintings of da Vinci, Rembrandt, or Rubens—who Fré Ilgen loves—overlaid as they are by the minuscule punctuation of the craquelure left by time, and this leads us to redouble our efforts in order to search out the essential meaning implicit in the work. Only at this point did my eye suddenly become aware of the series of



Above: Fré Ilgen, *Peace and Noise*, painting (triptych), 2013, oil, acrylic, and conté crayon on canvas, 300 x 600 cm. Photograph: Matthias Kolb, Berlin. Fré Ilgen, *Battlefield of Eros and Thanatos*, terracotta group, 2012-2013, each max approx. 40 x 30 x 25 cm. Previous pages: Fré Ilgen, *Vertigo*, suspended sculpture, 2010-2012, stainless steel, industrial paint on permanent site on top of each other, approx. 9 x 4 x 3 meters. Bank Kreissparkasse Herzogtum Lauenburg, SparkassenCenter, Geesthacht, Germany. Photograph: Matthias Kolb, Berlin.

slanting rectangles set so obviously across the surface of the painting: they are directly and explicitly revealed, and so in the highest degree, they remain hidden. They do not attract the eye (perhaps they even subtly repel it) and so they demand eventual 'discovery.' Revealing the world's structure is the aim of all intellectual inquiry: here, though, we ourselves must proclaim it.

Fré Ilgen, who was born in 1956, has had numerous international exhibitions and has realized numerous monumental and site-specific sculptures. *Your Long Journey* (5 x 7 x 40 meters) (2007-2008), which is on permanent display at the Heungkuk Life Insurance building in the center of Seoul, Korea, is his largest. He is represented by Sundaram Tagore Gallery in New York, Hong Kong, and Singapore. In Germany, he works with Beck & Eggeling International Fine Art.

"I am not interested in the ego of the individual, but I am interested in the position of the individual in the complex flux of reality," says Ilgen. "This motivates me to study in my work a synthesis of European artistic form-language with Asian concepts of nothingness, and has spurred my interest in European Baroque, Asian temples, paintings, and sculptures."

Ilgen understands in great depth how aesthetic transformations progress in both sculpture and painting. His sculptures and paintings should be seen as consciously composed aesthetic wholes, permeated with an awareness of structure and organization. The sight of these steel plates, seemingly about to scream or to sing in sweet harmony, makes us attend more closely to the spatial dynamic as they embrace. And in each piece of clay or terracotta, as in the shaped formal text of the painting *Peace and Noise* (2013) or the convulsions that extend the fingers of the infernal demons in *Helter Skelter* (2011), there exists a formal dance of stillness and movement, in which all mortal things



Fré Ilgen. Photograph: Danny Croucher, Berlin, 2011.



Fré Ilgen, *Gloria*, sculpture, 2013, stainless steel, paper clay, acrylic paint, 135 x 135 x 75 cm. Fré Ilgen, *Battle of Evermore - Changes*, work on paper, 2013, watercolor, white gouache, 220 x 113 cm. Photograph: Matthias Kolb, Berlin.

are transformed, yet nothing is changed.

The materials in Ilgen's sculptures—heavy as they are, and usually constructed on an immense scale, with their whirling lines penetrating light, and suspended forms—make us forget their weight and instead take pleasure in this graceful, supple, and responsive art. At the touch of the sculptor's hand, the form of the sculpture is sketched out on the shapeless void of nothingness. As in a painting, where the surface may be all surging mayhem while the depths are steady and firm, Ilgen's syntax says: art is used to illumine deep reality, and is not the mere ornamental play of the surreal. Decoding it is like listening closely to music: as the melodies extend yet do not vanish, internal memory endlessly grows deeper until, finally, space enfolds time, time flows within space. The space

is alive, three dimensional, self-sufficient, and presents itself as poetry.

Such a sense of depth, enfolding in time, becomes physical in the complex swirling motions shaped in sculptures such as *Ob, How It Sbricks!* (2012) and *Nothing Changes, Everything Changes* (2011) or in the mobile *Misty Mountain Hop* (2011), and even in site-specific works such as the huge sculptures *Your Long Journey* and *Vertigo* (2010-2012). It is very interesting to view the sculptures and paintings in an immediate combination, where they fuse into one whole of motions, as in the group of terracotta sculptures with the large triptych *Peace and Noise* (2013), the combination of the semi-figurative sculpture *Gloria* (2013) with two smaller sculptures and a larger work on paper, the small sculpture *So It Goes* (2013) with large works on paper, or the painting *Immigrant Song* (2012) with



Fré Ilgen, **Nothing Changes, Everything Changes**, sculpture, 2011, stainless steel, industrial paint, 209 x 174 x 141 cm. Photograph: Matthias Kolb, Berlin.

the copper sculpture *Sweet Melody* (2012).

Fré Ilgen says, "... having noticed that humans tend to be more interested in looking longer at artworks that are purposely made imperfect, and much less at industrially made artifacts, I have realized the importance of the artwork made by the artist's own hands. Like in the Baroque, or in much of Asian culture, I look for offering the struggle of life in depth, combining and juxtaposing the beautiful with the more negative of life"

This quotation brings me to understand that depth is the word that links Xu Longsen and Fré Ilgen with Chinese and European artistic thought. The points of commonality are these: First, possession of a tradition: neither Xu Longsen's ink-wash landscapes nor Fré Ilgen's Baroque can be the stuff of idle gossip, because both demand rigorous study, in order that technique might penetrate deeply into tradition. Second, each of these artists has brought a unique concept into being. The reproduction of classical works is a long way from enough; judgment of an artistic masterpiece must begin from its inimitable completeness, ancient or modern, Eastern or Western. So, in essence, these are both conceptual artists, and both create out of a conscious awareness of their own technique and their own skills. Third, and the rarest of all, is the awareness aestheticians have of the hardship involved. The modern transformation of traditional Chinese culture is founded on Qu Yuan's 2,300-year-old *Questions to Heaven*, an eternal questioning, a continual challenging of the limits of one's own heart. Similarly, what great artist, East or West, does not put their own questions to heaven? Questioning is a type of energy that crosses every kind of frontier, whether classical or contemporary, East or West, or time or space, and integrates us within the concentric circles of thought, mutual understanding and mutual inspiration.

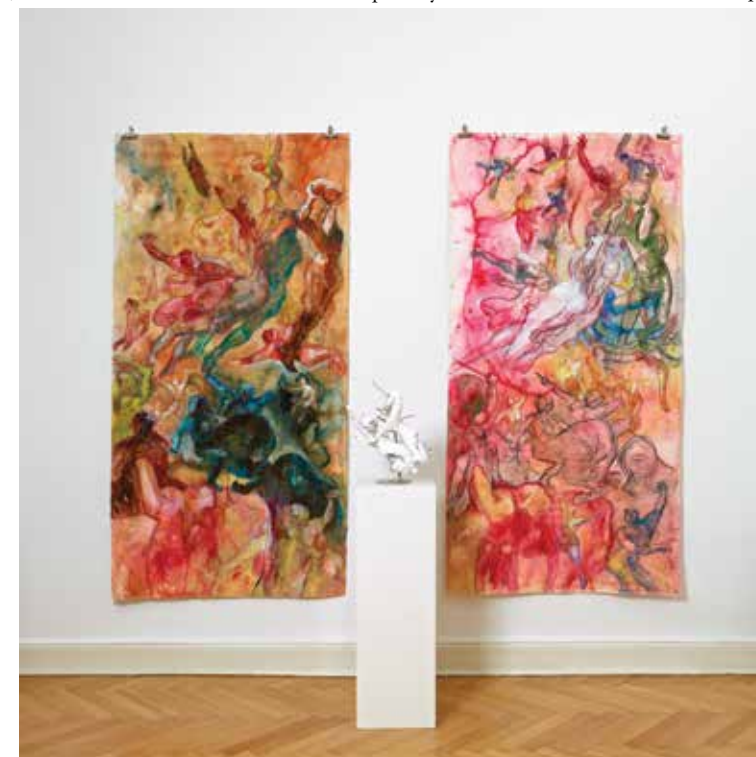
"In general, we may conclude that all artistic developments of the late-19th century, through the 20th century, until today have had their merit, but that we should afford to acknowledge this has run its course and it is time to re-think what art means to the human being," says Fré Ilgen. "As such, we need to allow ourselves a new, open mind and, for



Fré Ilgen, **Immigrant Song**, painting, 2012, conté crayon, acrylic, and oil on canvas, 200 x 300 cm. Fré Ilgen, **Sweet Melody**, sculpture, 2012, red copper, industrial paint, 66 x 112 x 67 cm. Photograph: Matthias Kolb, Berlin.

instance, reconsider mutual values in artistic expression that work by themselves and are acknowledged by a broad audience, regardless of time and local culture, while still building on the time of creation as well as on specific culture, in other words which are 'contemporary classic.'"

Fré Ilgen's contemporary classic echoes my own title *The Classical: An Intellectual Pursuit*. Here, the diachronic intersects with the contemporary and the synchronic identifies with the classical: this is no contradiction, but a precise and total complementarity. At this moment,



Fré Ilgen, **So It Goes**, sculpture, 2013, stainless steel, aluminum, cellulose clay, 43 x 35 x 28.5 cm. Fré Ilgen, **Battle of Evermore - Changes**, works on paper, 2013, watercolor, white gouache, each 220 x 113 cm. Photograph: Matthias Kolb, Berlin.

for example, when the globalization of profit is exposing the uncontrollable greed and the utter cynicism of the human race, this deep reality of Fré Ilgen's is exciting those of us who are starting from the impossible, stimulating us to reaffirm the intellectual value of the classical masterpieces in response to the modern crisis of spirituality. I, too, put a horizon line of dashes between contemporary and classical. Awe-inspiring, continually present, it is an endless verdict on history. The extreme vitality of it is what is called beauty. Δ

Yang Lian is one of China's foremost contemporary poets and associated with the Misty Poets and also with the Searching for Roots school. He was born in 1955 in Bern, Switzerland, but raised in Beijing.