

## VALENTIN RILLIET

### 蜀風 - *Mountain Stories*

Nov 01 – Dec 20, 2024

Opening: October 31, 6-8 pm

Rämistrasse 33, Zurich

Galerie Peter Kilchmann Zurich is thrilled to present the first solo exhibition with new works by Swiss painter Valentin Rilliet (b.1996, Geneva, Switzerland, lives and works in Zurich). The artist previously showed his work at the gallery in the group show *Three New Positions* featuring emerging artists in 2023. The exhibition has two titles: The Mandarin title 蜀風 (*Shǔ Fēng*, approximately translated to *Essence of Shǔ*), and the English title *Mountain Stories*. It is Rilliet's inaugural solo exhibition since he was added to the gallery's program.

In his new oil paintings, Rilliet continues to explore the complex exchanges between his Chinese heritage and upbringing within a Western artistic canon. While conceptualizing this new series, Rilliet stayed for six months in an artist residency in Chongqing, China. The Swiss public foundation Pro Helvetia awarded the residency to Rilliet in 2023 and it took place from early March to late August 2024. He finished the paintings after his return to Zurich.

While in Chongqing, Rilliet, occupied a large studio space at 'Organhaus Art Space' where he collected the ideas and impressions for his paintings. The works depict people, sceneries, items, media, and reproductions of site-specific characters, plants, and architectural elements, all existing in real life. Repurposing China's folklore, and socialist propaganda material has been the core of his painting practice. Similar to the artist's earlier works in which he used socialist propaganda pamphlets and cartoons (连环画", Lián Huán Huà), as source materials, Rilliet also drew from historic depictions of early modern and folkloric Chinese sceneries. These impressions make up the rich repository for his compositions. He then reinterpreted them through his contemporary interpretation in an uncanny anachronistic way.

The exhibition's title is primarily a reference to the geographic characteristics of the city and the historic name of Chongqing, which is located in the Province of Sichuan. However, the title in his Mandarin version translates closer to 'tales or anecdotes of the region of Shǔ (Sichuan)'. It was also the dynastic state title of the kingdom of Shu in the 3rd century with a plethora of literary heritage. The particular choice of words in Mandarin is a clue of how much the artist was able to delve into the regional customs and familiarize himself with the region's extensive history. Rilliet considers the new paintings as a chronicle of his journey. Everything the viewer sees depicted in the paintings are elements, or direct derivations, of what the artist saw during his residency. Each painting in the exhibition is a chapter of this chronicle.

Stylistically, Kenyan-British painter Michael Armitage is an obvious inspiration to Rilliet. However, his visual style is also influenced by Russian-born American artist Sanya Kantarovsky, Japanese Nihonga-style painter Kawabata Ryūshi, and, particularly in the landscape sceneries, Peter Doig. With this background, Rilliet skillfully creates his mannerisms in the style of magic realism. This allows him to create paintings with a fresh artistic sovereignty and authenticity that is only possible because of his on-site research and self-reflection during his residency.

In his paintings Rilliet keeps the level of depth intentionally undefined, opening up the space on the canvas so that several different perspectives make the image appear open and unconstrained. The viewer instantly becomes part of the scenery and the depicted environment. An effect that Rilliet has applied expertly in previous paintings.

In his own words, Rilliet is not establishing, defending, or proving a particular viewpoint when depicting abandoned mines, sceneries with burning buildings, and brutalist concrete facades. His motivation and method lie in observing, collecting, and recording. As an artist, he is inherently interested in creating his own narrative, through personal investigation, free from prejudice and preconceived viewpoints. As such, Rilliet sees himself not as an interpreter but rather as a conduit between cultures. Like Rilliet the figures in paintings are explorers and investigators who study their complex relationship to 'belonging' and 'home'.

Parallel to further developing his artistic trajectory, he was strongly interested in connecting with the complex history of modern China - while also reconnecting with traditional Chinese culture. Rilliet grew up in Geneva and was raised by a Chinese mother and a Swiss father. He previously had only visited China as a tourist to visit family. The artist was struck by the individuals that he met in Chongqing. In addition, he had the opportunity to study in-depth for the first time the flowers and trees in their natural habitat that he had included in previous works. To Rilliet it was a gradual process of returning to a distant home.

The large diptych 雾都 *City of Fog (Protagonists)* was a catalyst for the whole series of new paintings in *Mountain Stories*. The figures in the painting are inspired by three people that Rilliet met in Chongqing and observed in their everyday lives. He interpreted them as fantastical figures, near superheroes, that are jumping over the skyline of the Megacity. The figure on the right became one of the artist's first close friends in Chongqing. The figure in the middle is a person belonging to the local underworld who, according to the artist, is very charismatic but also of questionable character. The figure on the left is a porter, a 'bang bang man' as they are called in the local Chongqing dialect. They build an indispensable part of the local economy. The painting is the centerpiece of the exhibition and the creative manifestation of how much Rilliet was able to connect with authentic elements. According to Rilliet's conclusions, not every foreign artist achieves that level of access to the local culture.

*Distant Concerns* was one of the first paintings the artist finished in Chongqing. It contains signature elements from his previous works: figures with open mouths, and seemingly disjointed limbs that create an ambivalence about how many individuals are part of the composition, the perspective view is unclear. It is a transitional work and contains a burning building that the artist saw when the Organhaus' neighboring building lost an apartment to a fire one night.

The small painting *Vessel (after Chen Chieh-Jen 's film "Linchi: Echoes of a Historical Photograph, 2002")* features a male figure that seemingly is treated or potentially maltreated by the surrounding characters. It is unclear which are his hands, and, which are those of his guards.

Other paintings like *Sparkles in the Window (Eling Park)*, *Compound III*, and *Matters of the Wind (嘉陵江 Jia Ling River)* depict architectural elements such as brick walls, doors, concrete structures, or abandoned structures standing in areas overgrown with wild plant life. In China's state-capitalist-driven modernization, entire villages had been built for workers and their families and then quickly abandoned after an area's resources had been exploited. Chinese kites appear as toys in Rilliet's painting but also figuratively as a symbol of modern flight and its wide-reaching consequences on society and conflicts. During World War II the Japanese bombed Chongqing extensively as part of their preparations for the Invasion of Sichuan (which eventually never happened). As a countermeasure, the an international squadron of mostly Western pilots called the 'Flying Tigers' built training grounds in the province and defended the city.

In contrast, the painting *Auburn and Ivory* features scenery inspired by Tang Dynasty reliefs on ancient graves and a group of spectators underneath a starlit sky watching a dinosaur skeleton in a museum or possibly a children's theater. Rilliet applied quartz sand to the skeletal figure to give a tactile quality. The large-scale painting *Sanctuary (天府 Tianfu)* shows pigeons flying out of a smoky mineshaft whose doors had been previously sealed with massive rounded metal swing doors. The artist saw a similar entrance to a mine in an abandoned village North of Chongqing. The figure opening the door wears a fantasy costume, composed of fabric patterns Rilliet saw during his journey. The painting *Poltergeist* is a dreamlike vision containing a folkloristic-dressed figure. It is a phantom appearing to be both a reference to ancient traditions and the hysteria of the modern day.

**Valentin Rilliet** (b.1996, Geneva, Switzerland), lives and works in Zurich. In 2023 he graduated from ZHdK with an MFA in Fine Arts and graduated with a BFA in Fine Arts from The Slade School of Fine Art, University College London, UK, in 2020. In 2023 he has been the awardee of the Yvonne-Lang Chardonnens Stiftung, and Pro Helvetia (artist residency in Chongqing, China). His work has been shown at LINSEED Projects (Shanghai, 2024), Atelier Righini Fries (Zürich, 2024), Espace TOPIC (Geneva, 2024), the Grosse Regionale (Rapperswil, 2023), Galerie Peter Kilchmann (Zürich, 2023), Modern Animals Gallery (Zürich, 2023), Bahay Contemporary (Geneva, 2023), Sonnenstube Offspace (Lugano, 2022). His paintings are included in public and private collections across Switzerland, China, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Among them are the Swiss National Bank, Stadt Zürich, Zürcher Kantonalbank, Sammlung der Schweizer Post, The Leir Foundation, and the Royal Collection of the Crown Prince and Princess of Luxembourg.

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