

For their first solo exhibition at Balice Hertling, entitled *A Small Lie*, Zhi Wei introduces a series of textile paintings and imposing sculptural installations. Despite the scale on which the artist's practice often unfolds, their pieces conjure up feelings of vulnerability and childlike innocence. The softness of the chromatic palette, the selection of fabrics to swathe their paintings in and the materials their sculptures are made of all borrow from the aesthetic codes of toys and child-care.

Influenced by an upbringing in close contact with the textile industry, Zhi Wei mobilises in their works a range of fabrics that complete and accompany their painting practice. Each painting features numerous layers of fabric that either conceal the characters or act as a background, like the strata of tinted tulle that generate striking distortions within the pictorial surfaces of their pieces. Although sensitive to the evocative power of figuration, the artist constantly puts it at a distance through the playful veiling or wrapping of the paintings, relegating it to a space with fluctuating levels of opacity. This is the case of the painting *A Small Lie*, a variation of a previous work where an innocent (?) Pinocchio is pictured with a phallic, protruding nose and swaddled to the point of obscuring his entire face. Now barely perceptible, he haunts the composition only to appear to the eye of curious and attentive visitors, referencing with its title both the Italian novel's storyline and the nostalgia for a bygone childhood where the guilt of lying is also enmeshed in the shame of queer desires.

Zhi Wei transports everyday objects within our perspective field while offering them somewhat of an anthropomorphic pictorial framework, since the artist's paintings are imperatively materialised on a two-meter scale. Furthermore, these items are fictionalised and, in Zhi Wei's own words, are "offered a narrative arc" as they extend the boundaries of the subject/object relationship on painting. A toothbrush and a comb, both designed for a prison context and acquired on the internet, are paired up to produce the moving *Big Spoon Small Spoon* painting. These tiny rubber utensils, designed to prevent users from hurting each other and thus rendered practically unusable, are staged in a tender scene that contradicts their original destination: institutions where physical contact and intimacy are forbidden. Objects that become devoid of function populate their work, like that crystal-encrusted cover designed to wrap up a tissue box and infuse it with a dash of elegance – while its task remains to absorb human secretions. Blown up to virtually abstract dimensions, it dwells in the gallery's lower ground floor, a giant and cute character defying its own obsolescence.

In *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*, Kathryn Bond Stockton describes childhood as an essentially queer experience, marked by the strangeness of the heteronormative breeding we all have to comply with. Zhi Wei's whole practice – their interest in costumes, in the veiling/unveiling of the self – is imbued with a pervasive sense of nostalgia for the awareness of a state of difference one cannot yet name.

- Thomas Conchou

*Zhi Wei was born in 1997 in Beijing, China and currently lives and works between Shanghai and Paris.*

*They graduated in 2019 from the Ruskin School of Art at the University of Oxford. Their work has been exhibited recently at G Museum, Nanjing, China; TAG Art Museum, Qingdao, China; Magician Space, Beijing, China; the Hive Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing, China.*