

September 27, 2022

PRADA PRESENTS “LAKE TAI”, A PROJECT BY MICHAEL WANG, AT PRADA RONG ZHAI IN SHANGHAI FROM 10 NOVEMBER 2022 TO 8 JANUARY 2023

Prada presents “Lake Tai”, a project by Michael Wang, with the support of Fondazione Prada. It will be on view from 10 November 2022 to 8 January 2023 at Prada Rong Zhai, a 1918 historic residence in Shanghai restored by Prada and reopened in October 2017.

In his practice Michael Wang (1981, USA) uses systems that operate on a global scale as media for art: climate change, species distribution, resource allocation and the global economy. For this project, he creates a series of works that look at the natural and cultural heritage of the Lake Tai region and engage the history of Chinese landscape arts. “Lake Tai” also addresses pressing issues related to ecology, sustainability, and environmental recovery by involving the local student community.

The Lake Tai region is home to many of China’s most celebrated historic gardens. It is a spiritual center for Chinese landscape traditions that celebrate the harmonious relationship between humans and the natural world. This connection has been dramatically changed in recent times, as revealed by global phenomena like climate change, mass extinction, and the extraction of natural resources at an unprecedented scale. The Lake Tai area is a testament to this radical transformation. From the late 1990s, algal blooms turned the lake’s transparent waters green, but intensive remediation efforts have largely cleared the waters in the past few years.

Lake Tai is connected to Shanghai and the sea by Suzhou Creek, a river that passes through the city’s centre and forms one of China’s most vital water routes. The history of this waterway is linked to the personal destiny of the former owner of Rong Zhai, the successful entrepreneur, Mr. Rong Zongjing. Born in Wuxi, on the shores of Lake Tai, he established factories and mills along Suzhou Creek. Rong Zongjing, with his brother, Rong Desheng, also created the Mei Yuan Garden in Wuxi, overlooking Lake Tai and still considered one of the most famous sites in this area. Prada Rong Zhai’s decoration, particularly the large figured panels on the Sun Room windows, partly inspired Michael Wang to develop this project. They preserve the memory of a distant past as they depict legendary episodes in the life of this businessman, including scenes of Lake Tai and Suzhou Creek.

In his exhibition, Michael Wang presents a series of sculptures and installations on the first floor and in the external garden of Prada Rong Zhai. Reimagining the classical traditions of the “scholar’s rock” and the erudite arrangement of flowers, they stem from the massive reclamation efforts that have changed the lake and river in recent years. The goal is to address the fundamental reorganization of the human and the natural in an era of massive environmental disturbance and large-scale natural restoration projects.

This exhibition, and particularly the *Taihu (Stones)* series, benefits from research in collaboration with students from Tongji University in Shanghai. They have supported Michael Wang in site exploration, material collection, testing, and fabrication. Their collaboration focused on experimentation with new sustainable materials created from organic and industrial wastes. In the *Taihu (Stones)* sculptures, Wang uses waste algae, cellulose and chitin drawn from the region's waterways as raw materials. 3D scanning and milling technology make it possible to shape these biogenic materials into complex forms.

The exhibition also features *Taihu (Crab)*, a fishing boat filled with facsimiles of the hairy crab, the lake's most famous natural product, here made from algae filtered from its waters. A collection of small-scale works forms the series *Artifacts (Yixing clay)* and *Artifacts (Jade)* which draw inspiration from the objects of human culture originating from the region. The sculptures in the *Suzhou Creek (Piles)* series evoke the construction techniques of both the ancient settlements and modern warehouses along Suzhou Creek. They consist of salvaged rebar and recycled concrete, rescued from the demolition of industrial buildings, but take the form of the fir tree trunks used, traditionally, in land reclamation and flood control. At one time, this rot-resistant wood allowed for the construction of entire villages.

The *Shanghai Swamp* installation recreates in Prada's Rong Zhai garden a fragment of the swamp ecosystem that extended into the Shanghai area before the city's development. A shallow pool supports, among other wetland species, *Phragmites australis*, a wild grass that dominated the marshes that stretched from Shanghai to Lake Tai.

About Michael Wang

Michael Wang (1981, Olney, Maryland, USA) lives and works in New York. He received his BA in Social Anthropology and Visual & Environmental Studies from Harvard University in 2003 an MA in Performance Studies from New York University in 2004, and an M.Arch from Princeton University in 2008. His works include "Carbon Copies", an exhibition linking the production of artworks to the release of greenhouse gases; "Extinct in the Wild", a project that engages species that no longer exist in nature but persist under human care, also presented at Fondazione Prada in Milan in 2017; "World Trade", a series tracing the trade in steel from the World Trade Center following the attacks of September 11, 2001; and *Rivals*, a series that connects the readymade to systems of corporate finance.

Wang's large-scale work *10,000 li, 100 billion kilowatt-hours* was shown at the 13th Shanghai Biennale in 2021. His work *Extinct in New York* was the subject of a solo exhibition at LMCC's Arts Center at Governors Island, New York, USA (curated by Swiss Institute, 2019). Wang's work was included in Manifesta 12 in Palermo, Italy (2018) and the XX Bienal de Arquitectura y Urbanismo in Valparaíso, Chile (2017). In 2017, he was a recipient of the Joan Mitchell Foundation Painters & Sculptors Grant. Wang's critical writings have appeared in *Artforum*, *Art in America*, *Texte zur Kunst*, *Mousse*, and *Cabinet*. He has taught at Columbia University's Graduate School of Architecture,

Preservation and Planning, Harvard's Graduate School of Design, and
Yale's School of Architecture.

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