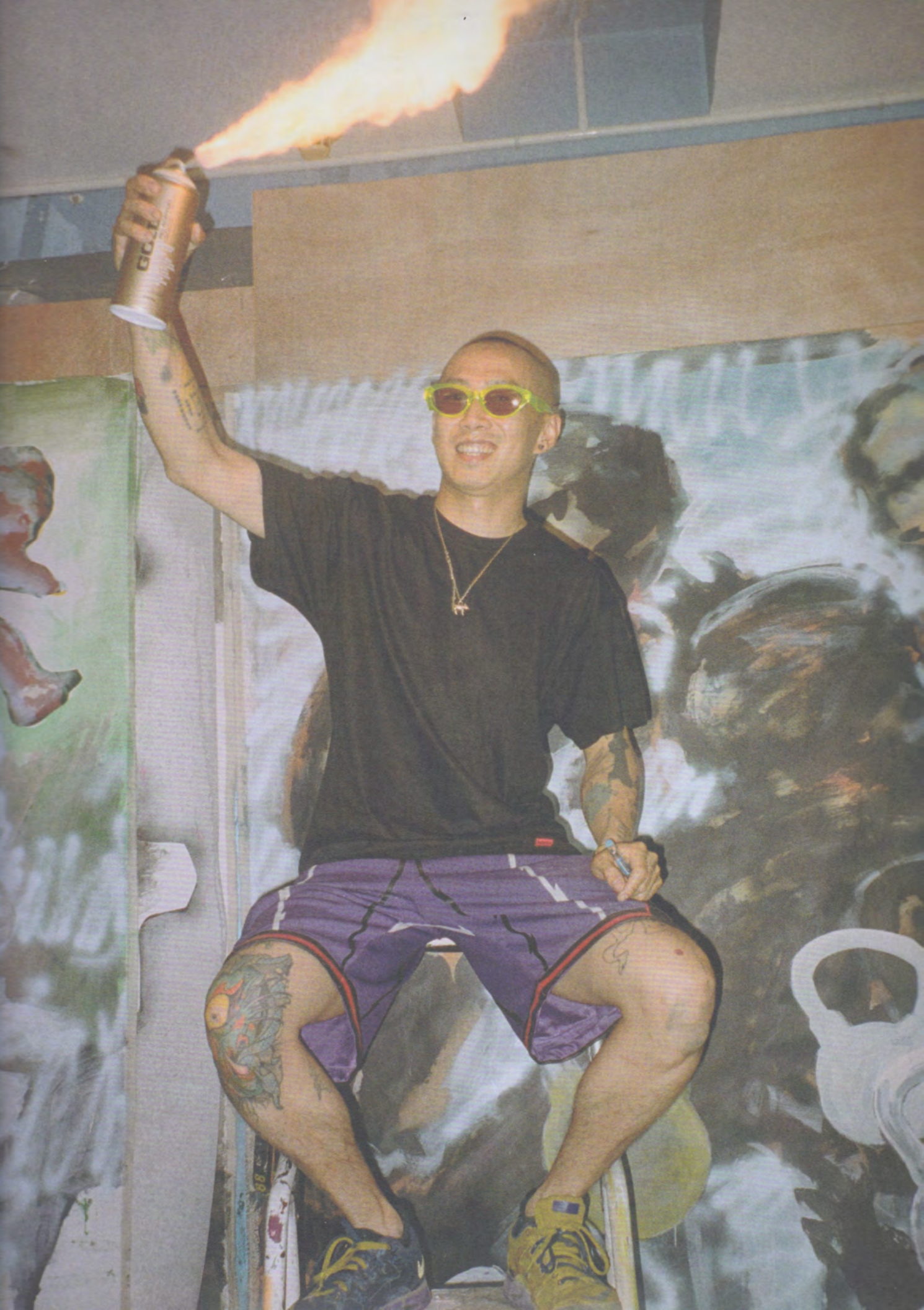
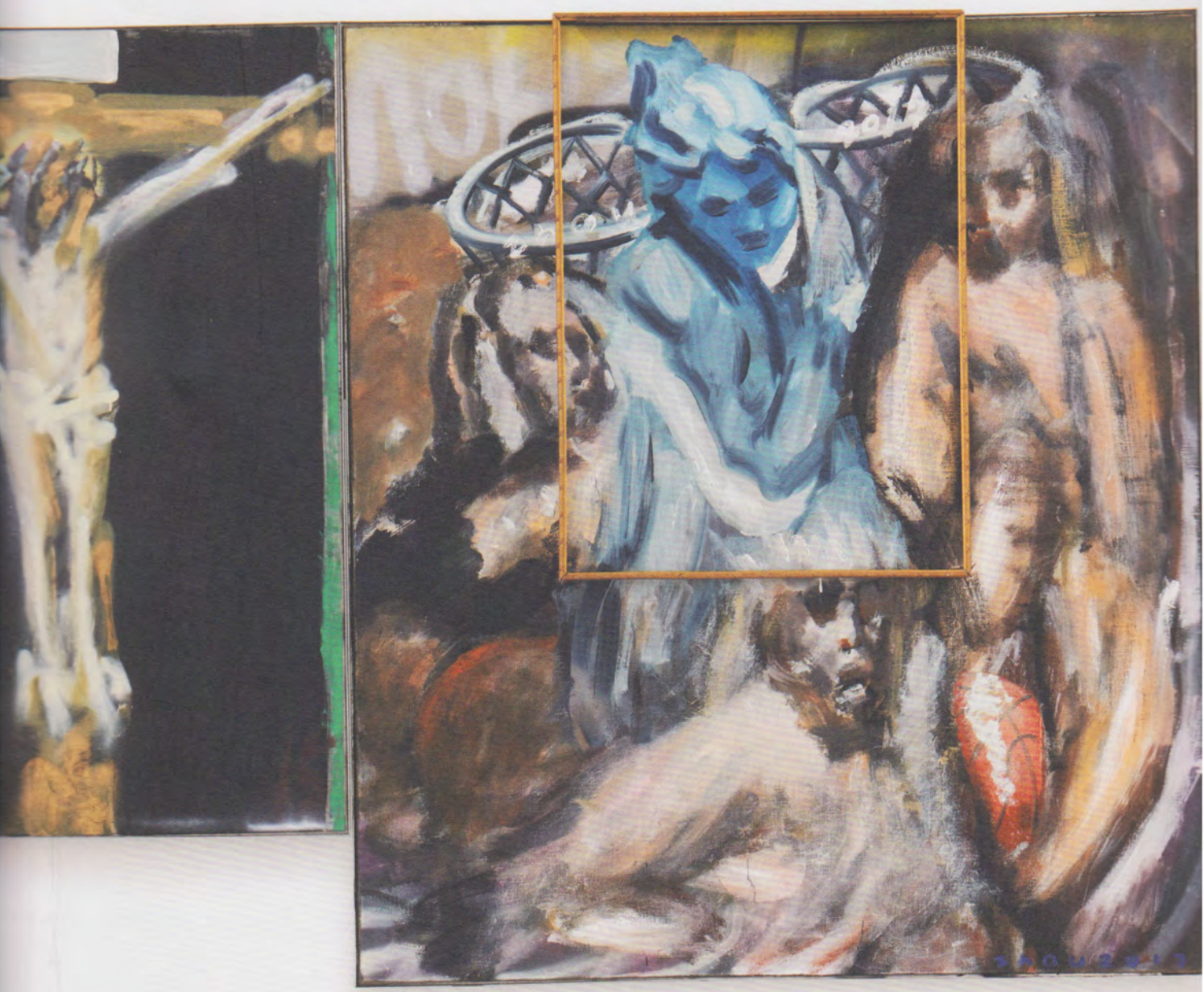
ZHOU YILUN

TEXT BY KIRSTEN CHEN



After traveling to Zhou Yilun's studio in the outskirts of Hangzhou, a city in southern China, we begin our photoshoot. He's a punky, animated character whose tattoos and Raptors shorts make him seem more like a new wave rapper than a classically-trained painter. The artist has an unrestricted approach to both life and art—his figurative paintings contain a bold application of color, a whimsical choice in material, and an undeniably deviant twist on any subject matter. You may spot Jesus or Allen Iverson in his work, but they're remixed beyond recognition, an act that removes all meaning or importance typically ascribed to these icons. It's tempting to label his signature style as defacement, but a strategic usage of chance, assemblage, and contradiction are consistently applied throughout his multifaceted practice.

Zhou Yilun sets out to disrupt the images that make up our quotidian environment—he challenges your aesthetic comfort in his paintings and furniture design, and with his experimental brand R3MP3. By playing with stereotypes in art historical narratives and popular culture, he's an artist who scrutinizes the Western pluralism that appears in other contemporary Chinese art. His creative practice is constructed through destruction, by modifying items and incorporating readymades in a purely illogical way. He calls attention to questioning the socio-cultural role that art plays in our world instead of simply creating another ornamental or instrumental piece of work.



Franchise: When did you start making art? Have you always been an artist?

Zhou Yilun: I've been painting since I was a child, then I continued to study at art school. Whether I'm painting, sculpting, or doing design, I feel like it's art only when it's done very well.

F: You grew up when China was a lot more restricted, and basketball was the first outside influence that you were exposed to. Your work pulls images from Western Classical art and ubiquitous American brands, so what initially attracted you to these Western images?

ZY: Except for my English skills, the other aspects of my life are very Westernized (the music I listen to, the movies I watch, the pictures I see online, the clothes I wear, the coffee or wine I drink). Of course, I've never deliberately distinguished between the East and the West. I'm surrounded by both cultures equally.

F: Why do you paint basketball stars?

ZY: I'm very interested in painting people. When I was learning to paint, I was trained to paint mostly Chinese faces or people from Western Classical art. Now, all of the "stars" on posters are like the religious icons of this era. Basketball stars are the most familiar to me, so that's why I started with them. With today's globalization, painting these icons blurs an artist's personal and geographical identity.

F: The way you paint icons like Jesus or Allen Iverson also removes some of the power that these images hold. Is that your intention?

ZY: I see these images like I see letters of the Alphabet or a group of colors—it's all the same. In my work, they simply function as ornaments or decorations.

F: Let's talk about "bad painting." I've heard critics and collectors describe your work with this label...Your paintings contain an excess of references from art history, mass media, and popular culture that are destroyed beyond recognition, an act that's easily mistaken for an exercise in bad taste. Why do you think people have this reaction?

ZY: But I don't think it's "bad painting." People who feel this way might not understand which paintings are bad paintings.

F: Destruction appears throughout your work. Is this something you plan or does it happen spontaneously?

ZY: When I encounter difficulty and things begin to go badly or when things go too well in my creative process, I will try to destroy this order. It leads to an unpredictable, beautiful and poetic result.

F: For many of your exhibitions, you create installations from "found material" or trash that you encountered on the street. Does your physical location influence the work you're creating?

ZY: I don't really go out of my way to look for something. Instead, I find things randomly, and this is more akin to my creative process. Different locations produce different final pieces.

F: What is the relationship between your painting, furniture design, and your brand R3PM3?

ZY: As an artist, you usually have close ties to galleries, but this comes with constraints created by the market-oriented environment of these institutions. R3PM3 is a side project that allows for more personal and free creation. This practice is a lot more relaxed and casual, and my furniture is part of this.

F: What role does basketball play in your furniture practice?

ZY: First of all, I'm interested in the sphere as a shape. In terms of design, a sphere solves many of the problems that arise when putting things together (how two objects connect) and eliminates the problem of edges protruding in an unexpected way. I chose a basketball because it's my favorite and most familiar sphere.

F: Was there something specific that inspired you to incorporate basketballs?

ZY: I usually use basketballs and tennis balls, one big and one small, in different parts of my art. They're relatively easy to obtain and not easily damaged. There's also the color of the basketball, the black lines on its surface, and the texture of its tiny dots.

F: Your brand R3MP3 prides itself for being meaningless. R3PM3 raises questions about art versus commerce, and plays with the idea that anything can be a brand in the present moment. Why did you decide to manufacture basketballs for your brand?

ZY: In China, it's really convenient to make things with your own logo through Taobao. With a logo, a product becomes more like a complete commodity.

F: You also have somewhat of a punk lifestyle, a general rejection of the life that people expect a successful artist to lead. You and your collective are not exactly "mainstream," does your personal biography play into your work?

ZY: All outliers may become mainstream at some point in history.

Page 159: *Keep Rolling It In*, 2018, courtesy of Nicodim Gallery
Page 160–161: *Nobody Would Pay For Its Real Value*, 2017, courtesy of Nicodim Gallery
Page 162: *Sofa Sculpture with Basketball and Scholar's Rocks*, 2019, courtesy of Beijing Commune
Page 163: *Table with Tattoo Patterns*, 2019, courtesy of Beijing Commune
Page 164, Top: *The Realistic Meaning*, 2018, courtesy of Nicodim Gallery
Page 165: *The Realistic Meaning*, 2018, courtesy of Nicodim Gallery
Page 167: *Dosnoventa*, 2018, courtesy of Nicodim Gallery
Page 168: *Smith*, 2018, courtesy of Nicodim Gallery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