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Press Release

# MANUEL STEHLI COME TOO CLOSE

7 November 2023 - 4 February 2024

1690 Art Collection Space, No.1690 Middle Huaihai Rd, Shanghai, China



By invitation of the 1690 Art Collection Space in Shanghai, Galerie Marguo is very pleased to present *Come Too Close*, a solo exhibition of new paintings by the Swiss-Czech artist Manuel Stehli.

Manuel Stehli paints flat compositions of figures, landscapes, and plants in desaturated, dusky tones. Alternating between wide-shots and tightly cropped frames, these subjects seem to linger in an indefinable space with subtle dimensions, reduced to their lowest common denominators of geometric shapes and blocks of pigment. The resulting scenes are meditative, languorous even. Yet upon longer and closer looking, they appear to be charged with understated actions and brewing dynamics, something approaching a molecular dynamism of life itself. This is in part due to the intense material presence of each composition, achieved through layers and layers of thin paint that have been built up over time, sanded down, dissolved, and built up again. There is a distinct tactility to these paintings which belies the apparent frictionless-ness of their imagery. Their reticent aliveness underscored by the exhibition titles often given to the presentations of these works, which tend to always invoke some form of physical movement.

Working serially, atmospherically, Stehli probes and negotiates the threshold of human recognition, identification, and intimacy. How little definition, texture, or form is needed to induce the humanization of these pictorial elements? In earlier works, the artist modeled his compositions on stock images of people engaged in various interactions, drawing attention to the confoundments of what is 'real' and what is 'fake'. For this new suite of paintings, Stehli utilizes architectural rendering softwares to configure his characters in a sort of non-space, before committing them to canvas, where the tensions and dynamics between bodies emerge from and take precedence over the intersecting planes of color that constitute them and their anonymous surroundings.

Mimicking the scale of our human proportions, these moody, muted paintings invite the viewer's interior projections and longings. The founder of 1690 Art Collection Space, Chong Zhou, shares his thoughts on Stehli's works: *'Manuel Stehli's works possess a uniquely captivating spell. The artist's approach to his creations is meticulous, and his brushwork intricate. Devoid of excessive and vivid colors, without explosive visual expressions or visual intensity. In a minimalist composition, the artist seems more like a calm observer, sketching*

*various characters, revealing profound emotional depth through subtle body postures or actions. Just like the silent moments in a mime performance, there's an ambiguous yet seemingly yearning exploration between the characters. Or the solitude and helplessness when alone, these scenes depicted by the artist easily evoke deep emotions and thoughts in me. After all, emotions are always the most universal language for humans. Be it landscapes or still lifes, through the artist's eyes, they might seem mundane or ethereal, yet I perceive the underlying tenderness and delicate emotions in them. A mountain, or a bouquet of flowers, beauty in its purest simplicity. What I admire about Stehli is not only his highly recognizable and personal visual language, but how his art is like a clear, quiet mirror in this current era where the new generation of us increasingly resonates with art that brights forth emotional value. This isn't self-admiration, nor it is delicate fragility. Everything is left unsaid, yet it feels incredibly familiar and comforting.'*

Indeed, the collection of works in this exhibition engage with heightened states of being - like suspense, boredom, desire, or collusion - that sit on the razor's edge, liable at any second to slip into something else. The moment precipitating two strangers meeting at a bar conjures the stomach lurching potential of rejection or acceptance. In *Untitled (Intimate Talk 6)*, 2023, a dark khaki plane is foregrounded by four figures garbed in shades of coral, tightly huddled together, plotting. Their backs are turned to the viewer. The duplicity of the scene is captured in the very language used to describe the action: to conspire, from the Latin *con* (together) *spirare* (to breathe). Collective breathing is an age-old means of co-regulating the nervous system, syncing individual bodies into one rhythmic organism, creating intimacy. Conspiring, however, is almost always done against something, or someone. This is the fate of the viewer of Stehli's paintings, which seem to say, as the exhibition's title suggests: "come close, but no closer". Like the solitary fortresses populating the landscapes on view, which serve to ensconce those within its walls and defend against those outside them, these scenes are both invitations and warnings. Occasionally, though, some territory is crossed and contact is made. Sparks fly through the subtle grazing of hands, through the painter's brush, and our own longing to feel.

#### About the artist

Manuel Stehli (b.1988) was born in Zurich and currently lives and works in Berlin. In 2014 he graduated from Academy of Visual Arts Leipzig.

In his recent work, Manuel Stehli has been focusing on the life-sized depiction of the human figure, both individually and in groups. While the situations presented appear rather concrete at first glance, Stehli's paintings refuse a specific placement in space and time. They don't represent events but rather states, experimental arrangements showing one possibility out of many. There is a peculiar sense of limbo inherent in these paintings: between their blatant presence on the one hand and their muteness on the other, between the intimacy they suggest and the remoteness within which it is sealed. Stehli's works are reticent, they don't reach out to the spectator, but rather act as mere presences, be it as counterparts or placeholders, leaving one to fill the silences themselves.

His recent solo exhibitions include *Come Too Close*, (1690 Art Collection Space, Shanghai, 2023); *oh so slowly*, Schierke Seinecke (Frankfurt, 2023); *in its place*, TAO Art Space (Taipei, 2022); *From a Distance*, Grisebach (Zurich, 2021); *Moving Inland*, Galerie Marguo (Paris, 2021); *jetzt dut*, Schierke Seinecke (Frankfurt, 2021); *Strangers When We Meet*, Lemoyne (Zurich, 2020), *Sober Speech*, Gallery of the Czech Centre Berlin (Berlin, 2020), *Some Kind of Change*, Studio Picknick (Berlin, DE 2019); *Tongue Tied*, WERK (Berlin, 2019); *Wait A Second*, Schierke Seinecke (Frankfurt, 2018); and *Jetzt Aber*, Bistro 21 (Leipzig, 2016).

Manuel Stehli's work is in the permanent collections of the Kunsthalle Recklinghausen and the Collection of the Cultural Foundation of the Free State of Saxony.

#### Press Inquiries

Maud Cartron  
maud@marguo.com  
+33 7 66 14 91 25

#ManuelStehli #ManuelStehliShanghai  
#ManuelStehliComeTooClose  
@galeriemarguo  
marguo.com

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Manuel Stehli  
*Untitled*, 2023  
Oil on canvas  
190 x 240 cm (74 3/4 x 94 1/2in)