

# MARATHON MAN

By way of introduction, for the uninitiated, the background of Christophe Stibio is paramount in understanding his art as well as his character. From the earliest days of deciding to be an artist, Stibio has been running a marathon, thinking deep into the future, planning and making calculated moves like he makes his paintings. Layer by layer. Line by line. Steady, monumental and tirelessly energetic. Art training began for him in his home city of Bordeaux, France, at the University of Bordeaux III. An inherently rebellious nature and dissatisfaction with the status quo teachings of the European art schools led him to master fluent Mandarin with the sole intention of continuing formal art education in China. This move came naturally to Stibio, as from the outset he was able to distance himself from the romanticised idea of an artist favoured by Eurocentric communities still today. One that is caught in deep-rooted historical and social doctrines. Artists with their feelings and sensitivities. Flirting with this idea and that idea. Being depressed a lot of the time and creating beauty from the turmoil, etc, etc. Stibio rejected these preconceived notions and searched for something less typical but to him more truthful. In 1989 he left Europe and spent the next four years at the National Academy of Fine Arts in Hangzhou, China, with specialist training in calligraphy and traditional Chinese landscape painting. Stibio's art needs to be considered under these pretenses because it is this unique background which underpins his unique art form.

Christophe Stibio is a rare artist who tactically combines the best of Eastern art principles with the best of Western art principles. As an example, during his training, Stibio mastered the techniques of traditional Chinese *guohua* ink wash painting - the multi layering process that makes certain layers appear further forward in a painting whilst other layers appear backward. The effect is an illusion of depth which occurs in the natural world. Today this is a staple technique of Stibio's work. On the other hand, from the Western perspective, Stibio is still an individual. He has never been inhibited by authoritarian governance which restricts artists but instead leans toward Western beliefs that serve the individual, such as the total freedom to express oneself in one's art practice. Since 1999, in Australia, this is where this freedom has flourished. Stibio has spent the last two decades surveying the Australian landscape. Curator Georges Petitjean (AAMU, The Netherlands) commented in 2012:

*"Christophe Stibio is not afraid of the land. He endeavours to plough it mentally. He is determined to go deeper, to explore what is under its skin. His art is the visual and tangible result of profound mental geology of a country which has both physical and spiritual dimensions. "*

To Stibio, what you see is not what you get. As Petitjean suggests in the above passage, the pursuit of capturing the quintessential feeling of a subject is and always will be a lifelong goal of his art. He is focused on uncovering the great mystery of a landscape. To reveal the infinite nuances and details. The untrodden path. Reaching beyond what is simply seen, to something more essential. All possibilities are left open in a Stibio work and he does not intend to give you the answers, only suggestions. From afar, a Stibio painting is almost certainly a striking image. Imaginative, animated and free. Totally void of restriction. Explosive in colour interplay. Red with blue. Blue with orange. One plays off the other, together forming stronger versions of themselves. The same type of complimentary relationships between elements occur in nature. Like the land, it is the infinite details that come together to form a cohesive picture. Searching Stibio's paintings up close

reveals this same phenomenon. It is the endless details and twists that make them monumental works of art. Hidden messages, moments of intrigue and secrets are packed into every avenue of the surface. Every square centimeter of a Stibio canvas is meticulously surveyed, considered and realised. Every square centimeter is a painting in itself.

But the marathon does not end there for Stibio. His practice has increasingly captured a timely conceptual narrative and in this regard, his running pace is increasing. The signature medium of a Stibio work since 2009 is shredded classified documents. This is an art medium he invented. Literally information, on paper, which has been authored, utilised and eliminated before being given a second life with the artist. But shredded classified documents serve far more than simply being visually beautiful elements in the paintings. It's fundamentally about using less, which is a protest against the current system of using more. It is also about "secret information", which is the way decisions with consequences are made in power structures like our own. Like the decisions of governments and corporations with respect to the environment. The physical process of recycling the strips, and the tireless labour of placing them methodically on a canvas also serves as a metaphor. Renewed material echoes the urgent need for the lands renewal. The marathon-like stamina required to lay down the strips echoes the work ahead.

The contemporary responsibility of an artist living at the beginning of the 21st century has shifted from the contemporary responsibility of an artist living in the middle of the 20th century. The focus on land and the rapidly increasing use of the earth's natural resources has been growing. Stibio is dealing with modern politics through the thoughtful decisions he is making and applying to his practice as an artist. And the total process is circular. The strips are recycled. The glue is homemade from a Chinese recipe. Stibio's political stance is therefore shown by his actions and the materials he is using. The title of the show itself, WARNING: SEVERE WEATHER eliminates himself as the protagonist and not so subtly reminds everyone that something bigger is at play. And the conversation continues, as does the marathon where the pace is set to increase. And the message is clear... WARNING!

Jake Taylor  
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