



Cultivated Chaos

Xiao-yang Li

24 September – 2 November 2019

Private view: Tuesday 24 September, 6-8pm

Xiao-yang Li's recent paintings carry a host of reference and association. A composite of graphic ability, exuberant colour, and painterly happenstance creates a particular approach to two and sometimes three-dimensional work that is both familiar and unique. Li studied graphic design, film-making and photography in both Beijing & London. Later, in London, when looking at work by Francis Bacon and Frank Auerbach, for instance, she had a change of heart and decided to study painting. A love for late Titian, or Piero Della Francesca, a constant love of Oskar Schlemmer for exactly the opposite and the same reasons represents the perennial painter's pull between the painterly and graphic. Perhaps even more crucially, Li looks to Picabia, for 'the way he keeps changing' his transgressive graphic approach, painted modelling, and ability to influence and shape an anti-directional, formal advance in Modernism.

'It always starts with a gesture' and with the female figure. The relationship between the body, gesture, and geometry seems to arrive from an era where the body is represented by the break down, and then re-configuration of simple forms. "All painting is to stimulate contemplation on relationships between the abstraction and the geometric, the interior and exterior, the built and nature, man and space around him." The geometric form comes with somewhat mannered shape. This shows a young painter who does not desire to represent

the body in nature, so much, but prefers to inhabit a place more like that which exists already but only in painting.

Much of her recent work comes out of, or is influenced by, a ten-week residency at the new Museo Leonora Carrington, in San Luis Potosí, México. There is also always, a nostalgia for the kind of place, which can appear only through the active process of making a painting: nostalgia for the unknown. So metaphorically, the artist not only looks at water and represents it, but is also actually swimming in it.

A skeleton looks over a rather demure young girl in *Night rumours*, 2019. The table across the front is a familiar trope for Xiao-yang Li. A person with a fan drawn in a different manner or style points at the woman. The artist says she starts with a woman, often, because she can get an amorphous, culturally open reference to the psychological state of a woman, perhaps, and the way that a woman is represented, through time, in that place called painting. The man in front, with a pointed hat looks like a figure in any era, from any generation, and yet also from the Velasquez's 'The Triumph of Bacchus' at the Prado. All general, the artist is not worried about sameness, finding that these are not actual people, of course, for they are signs, across time and culture.

Where are we when we look at the fan, phantom, and funny hat in the front? Are we in México, where Li did her residency, are we underground, are the cards symbolic? The funnels, tunnels, arches, windows, and excavations divide and fight through the space—and, as mentioned, the table in front, a kind of compositional structure, reminds of the response to a set theme like 'Conversation', in an O level art exam. Li says the table is symbolic, 'you put all your cards on the table', yet the table is the formal enemy of many painters except Bonnard who manages to curve and slope the surface toward real surface. In this mannered painting, a candlestick perhaps, a figurine perhaps, and a shadow that flickers against a bright pink cloth. The skeleton shuffling or just lightly touching the cards means death only in as much as any amalgam of meaning is able to allow. This is not necessarily death, of course, as such, but something out of Mexican popular culture, early Cezanne, and Heavy Metal. Li does not directly equate image with intention, so whilst the woman might have historically stood for sex, death or both, she is here transported into a world that is awkward, happy and in between.

Never asking or over-interpreting, the artist is aware of a different relation to time, aware of the fact that a painting works first of all, all at once, in complete time, and is not primarily a sum of parts to be unpicked and studied in terms of symbolic association. It has to be more than a checklist of elements. The work did not start, or end with function. Some of the work was exhibited in January in a darkened interior with light directed onto each painting, and still it is however influenced by the direct light and extreme contrast of the Mexican street. It is interesting, though, with such an apparently hit and miss rationale to ask how forms arrive, and why they give way to other forms? How can something appear out of a state of nothingness?

The artist, like the abstract painter who turns around once again to face the painting hopes the work will reveal something surprising, unknown, to the person who has been making it all along. 'Finally, I stand back and look at the paintings.

And I realised I have created such imperfect forms, such clumsy-looking bosoms! In *The Party*, 2019 the off-the-shoulder dress makes a basic shape, arms akimbo, the red wine flows through the bottle to the back in a straight line in the direction of what looks like an Apostle in a Romanesque manuscript playing the guitar. None of it makes much sense, and it should not. Xiao tries to challenge what she can do with both thin and thick paint, with both sense and nonsense, making and using her 'Cultivated Chaos'. An awkward, contrary, attitude rails against the familiar but in trying to struggle and against the iconic XX century image she still knows how it will be and not to be content with the look of a painting alone.

And then there are the ceramics pieces, the solid scenes that have come out of the oven, fired. These stage sets, made almost completely effectively three dimensional in clay, are also illogical, and anti-compositional. Li's marquette's (table pieces) and bon mot ceramics are muses in the way they might work out on the creation of space. Not the equivalent of the three-dimensional notebook, not really about trying something out or trial and error, they are about the ability to bring something tangible and actual out of the creative process. Made to extend space in the same way that an architectural motif loses ground to a rival, dark or light section.

Of course, there is a tendency in the West to simplify the difference between what is perceived as exotic, perhaps even mystical, in Chinese art and the linear Western narrative of an early 'discovery' of illusory space in the Renaissance, and the flattening out and disruption of the surface in the XX century which is in itself a myth. Xiao is adamant that she wants to be seen as a Chinese painter. The relation between XX century Chinese artists and the rest of the world is one of mutual absorption and the pursuit of pretty much the same, even during the Cultural Revolution. 'When I visited the Louvre day after day the Masterpieces there spoke to me in a language that is neither French nor Chinese but which transcended time and place.'¹ The outline in a painting by Sanyu, based in Paris in the 30's, and the of elaborate demonstrably free colour painting by Zao Wou-Ki, exhibited in the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris at the end of last year, shows a mixture of influence and passion produced a hybrid, semi-conscious melding of West and West, East and West, East and East. Li's love of Chinese, European and Mexican painting; Modernism, post-impressionism, and all theatre design comes together to such a point that all similarities, as well as any conflict, is absorbed and thrown down in no particular order.

Text by Sacha Craddock, September 2019

For further information about the show please contact Daria Kirsanova:
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¹ Yun Gee, 1930's.

Image: Xiao-yang Li, *Study on Teotihuacán I*, 2019