

## **In the Jungle**

### **Foreword**

When writing about Hong Kong art, it is often convenient to define a certain style as mixture of opposites – east and west or modern and traditional. Indeed, my own writings on the artists of the Post-WWII era have focused primarily on these binary oppositions which no doubt represented strong currents and exerted important influences on the artistic and cultural atmosphere. Yet, in a contemporary context, is such perception of Hong Kong art still valid or simply inadequate or out-dated? The present exhibition “Kwok Ying: In the Jungle” might answer this question and offer some new insights into the works of one of the most promising young Hong Kong artists.

At first glance, Kwok Ying’s works are anything but extraordinary. They are plain with simple composition and many without an objective resemblance. One could easily mistake them as wallpaper or graphic design patterns. But a closer look focusing on their patterns and texture would reveal a new set of order that ultimately defines Kwok’s style. Such order can be found in Kwok Ying’s early works which feature mostly recognizable objects. Depicting insect and animal in a realistic manner, the artist creates small groups of narratives according to a specific theme. These groups would then repeat themselves to form a larger narrative. *Fishes Happiness* (1999) is a good example of the combination of this micro and macro pictorial orders. In a similar but subtler approach, *XL, Warm, OO* and *As Light As* (see opposite page) of 2000 also feature such inner and outer orders. Inspired by textile patterns, Kwok meticulously painted each fiber and yarn in order to create an overall image that bears the quality of an abstract work. Small circles or groups of patterns are repeated arbitrarily. The success of this series lies in their ability to manipulate simple forms and patterns which turn into something visually and psychologically enticing and bizarre.

Another significant aspect of Kwok Ying’s work is the inclusion of a frame-like outer edge. As part of the painting surface, these artificial build-ups provide a confined space while serving as relief sculpture of their own. Most of them are modeled after household furniture such as bed, pillow and mattress or food. Kwok’s large-scale cream biscuit sculpture exhibited at the Goethe Institute, for instant, is more conceptual and technical oriented. The piece is enlarged and shaped deliberately in the form of a cream biscuit. The texture and color are also applied according to the popular snack. Yet, by adding to the piece an outer edge similar to a frame, Kwok

insists that the work is a “piece of art” which demands attention.

The making of the artificial frame is unique in Kwok’s work. The artist uses ceramic clay to cover the surface of the canvas and then further build up the edges to form a raised level, serving as a frame. Patterns and drawings are created by carving and scratching of the clay surfaces, either by a palette knife or steel needle. Such approach generates expressive brushwork but it is far more textural and visually substantial than conventional ink and oil brush executions.

The interaction between artificial and organic motifs continues to be found in Kwok Ying’s recent works. The jungle series contains patterns of animal skin. *Ms. Giraffe*, *Leo (Leopard)* and *Mr. Porcupine* feature these animal’s respective skin patterns in an enlarged format. Like her other works, Kwok painstakingly painted every detail and arranged them in a specific order. Instead of inserting small narratives, these new works all have a broader, more connotative intention. Unlike *Fishes Happiness*, there are no realistic portrayals or are there any small groups of recognizable motifs. What the audience sees are patterns and forms suggesting the animals, their behavior and our general perception of them. These patterns are constantly working with and against each other, confusing the viewer with their likeness and unlikeness, familiarity and foreignness, consciousness and sub-consciousness.

The micro and macro orders and the organic and artificial combination of Kwok Ying’s previous works are now better integrated in a harmonious whole, giving rise to new sets of opposites. In her new works, Kwok prefers suggestive power to descriptive function, patterns and senses over form and narratives. It seems that she has perfected the use of commonplace and ordinary things as her main motifs. The exhibiting works and their apparent banality possess the same type of allusive power as Jasper Johns’ famous American flag paintings of the 1950s. But unlike Johns, Kwok Ying and her generation of Hong Kong artists are less effected by outside influences and social and political impact. What they face is a new challenge more personal and diverse than any of their predecessors.

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