

Cai Jin: Return to the Source

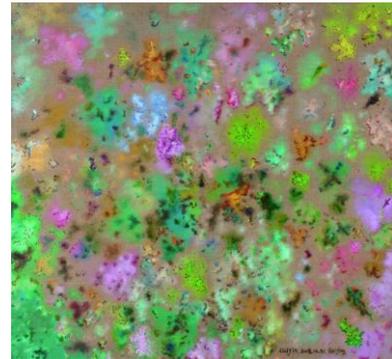
by Jonathan Goodman

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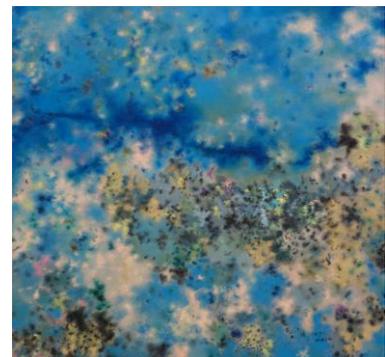
Cai Jin, famous for a 20-year-long obsession with the banana plant, has changed her focus. In her recent show with the Beijing satellite gallery of New York's Chambers Fine Art, she has concentrated on what she calls landscape paintings, which don't present landscapes so much as a kind of floating abstract world reminiscent of the work of the Chilean modernist, Roberto Matta, in their atmospheric effect. Cai Jin, by now one of the leading lights of her artistic generation, has been working on the landscape series since 2008. The paintings both recall and reject the former realism of the banana plants series, which, from the start, contained quite abstract effects. Trained academically in China, Cai Jin also spent ten years (1997-2007) in New York, which may well have broadened her sensibility to abstract painting, by now a global phenomenon rather than a purely Western modernist achievement.

One of the exciting things about the show is its combination of effects, as well as its transformation of the artist's earlier works. Despite the series' title, *Landscape*, the paintings actually look like organically originated abstractions. For example, in the highly lyrical "Landscape No. 17" (2008), neon and luminescent colors—greens, purples, oranges, and pinks—announce their existence in small splotches and pools, punctuated by mostly green spots.

Such lyricism extends from the banana plant series, which also demonstrates a rough but poetic sensibility, in which a certain rawness of presentation is used to support a full range of very impressive painterly effects. Even the choice of the common banana plant inspiring Cai Jin's former work possesses a sturdy energy despite its less than beautiful appearance. As a result, the full-flung poetic beauty of these recent paintings shows that the artist is continuing to advance upon her achievements, deftly alluding to both Western and Chinese sources without succumbing to either tradition.



Cai Jin. "Landscape No. 17," 2008, Oil on canvas, Courtesy of the artist and Chambers Fine Art



Cai Jin. "Landscape No. 20," 2009, Oil on canvas, Courtesy of the artist and Chambers Fine Art

In “Landscape No. 20,” the organic forms occur against a background of brilliant blue. The painted shapes are clearly natural in origin, adding to the viewer’s feeling that s/he is seeing an impression of nature—what we might call its essence—rather than a specifically imagined site or place. “Landscape No. 24” (2009), an elongated ellipse of a painting, contains a series of floating shapes painted onto a blue background. Rendered as cloud-like masses in a broad range of colors, the forms hover gently in mid-air. Cai Jin is at her best when she prefers a roughly improvised arrangement over a meticulously planned composition, and here the forms skate idly by, as if their cumulus shapes were being powered by the wind.



Cai Jin. “Landscape No. 24,” 2009, Oil on canvas, Courtesy of the artist and Chambers Fine Art.

These landscapes, which are largely imaginary, are evidence more of Cai Jin’s intuitive creativity than the depiction of an actual countryside. As a result, the paintings are more conceptually based rather than assuming a figurative orientation. Sometimes her mood is very dark, as in the recent “Landscape No. 37” (2013), in which the background is black and dark gray, with a rich language of white, black, and gray forms superimposed onto the painting’s backdrop.

These paintings are more than highly skilled exercises; they compare and contrast the Western tradition with their own originality. Rather than give way to a set of clichés about cultural hybridity, the best way to describe Cai Jin’s works is to call them independent records of an artist determined to take the next step forward.