

Art in America



\$10 OCTOBER 2013 100 YEARS COVER BY CHRISTOPHER WOOL



Cai Jin: *Landscape No. 54*, 2012, oil on canvas, 78¾ by 98½ inches; at Chambers.

Seated on one of the wrought-iron stools Biscotti designed for the occasion, I found that reading the catalogue while listening to the original recordings allowed “The Side Room” to gain momentum. Comparing the inmates’ dreams with those of the Secession board members reveals marked differences in personal circumstances. The Italians’ dreams betray a striking violence, whereas those of the Viennese can be relatively carefree in mood. While the prisoners dream of having killed somebody, or of meeting a drug-addicted ex from years ago, the Viennese wander around their beautiful city, or find themselves at art-award ceremonies or on holiday in Italy. With this stark contrast, Biscotti’s installation gathers both relevance and political impact. Compared with the piece in Venice, it might even be the stronger of the two.

—Karin Bellmann

BEIJING CAI JIN Chambers

Those who knew Cai Jin’s work from New York (where she lived from 1997 to 2007) no doubt would have done a double take on entering her recent Beijing exhibition. The flowering *meirenjiao* plant—which had been the almost exclusive focus of her paintings since 1991, with more than 400 portrayals of it to her credit—had all but disappeared. (*Meirenjiao* is Chinese for the canna genus. The depictions in her work, however, have long been referred to as banana plants, which are closely related to the canna genus.) Often startlingly bold, brash, even corrosive, her gritty *meirenjiao* would never be mistaken for ornamental flora. Instead, they suggest fleurs du mal—surreal and decadent things, blooms for Baudelaire or Huysmans, their paint thickly applied to form bas-reliefs of stalks, furrowed leaves and carefully etched veins. Usually

depicted in shades of red—ranging from sweet pinks to alizarin crimson to the color of dried blood, and flecked with white and other, cooler colors—Cai Jin’s flowers are fierce and sexual but also vulnerable, wounded. They can be ungainly, even ugly, but also wildly beautiful and voluptuous.

Since the artist returned to Beijing, however, there has been a shift. The landscape-type settings that were obscured by the *meirenjiao* in earlier works are now her primary subject, with the flowers appearing only as floating fragments. Indeed, all the works in this show, called “Return to the Source,” are titled with the word “landscape” and a number. Arguably the best work in the show, and one of the largest (at around 80 by 100 inches), is *Landscape No. 54* (2012). This immersive panorama consists of a luminous pink field strewn with clumps of paint that suggest seeds, buds and leaves. The whole evokes a *meirenjiao* that has been detonated, its remnants in free fall.

Generally, however, the highlights of the exhibition are the more chromatically subdued and abstract paintings. Offering impressionistic, tactile surfaces that draw in the eye and beg to be touched, these canvases include lushly painted gray, black and white pieces that feature raised calligraphic-like squiggles and evoke a kind of encrypted text.

One of the strengths of the current work is its emphasis on a sumptuous materiality. Another is its dependence on process, on a kind of intuitive search for the painting, both in its execution and in its viewing. Still another is the tension, the push-pull, that ensues as the imagery wavers between the abstract and the representational, between comprising a richly modulated painted surface and suggesting more natural landscapes, whether microcosmic or macrocosmic. Rather than a return, it seems a new beginning. This is by far Cai Jin’s most sophisticated and elegantly executed body of work to date.

—Lilly Wei