Hong Lei at Chambers Fine Art

Chinese conceptualist Hong Lei is perhaps best known for his elusive photo-based works that appropriate the iconography of ancient Chinese painting. “Hong Lei’s Narrative: An Alternative Beauty,” the artist’s first solo exhibition in the U.S., beautifully combined photography and installation to create a resonant sensory experience. Born in 1960 in Changzhou, China, Hong began as a painter, heavily influenced by both Baselitz and Kusama. Still living in his home city, the artist has not entirely abandoned his early inclinations, but in his recent work has insightfully fused traditional Chinese motifs with Western aesthetic strategies.

The exhibition, assembled by New York-based curator Shin-Yi Yang, contained approximately 20 works. Like much of Hong’s oeuvre, these works are indebted to the imperial court paintings of the Song dynasty (ca. 960-1279) that seem to bristle with life. Hong’s works are not idyllic; they are cynical allegories born of an ideological tension resulting from his nation’s radically shifting cultural values. In a series of five photographic works, Hong appropriated landscape images from various sources and then painted over the scenes in translucent crimson. Chinese Landscape (Zhuchang Gardens), 1998, uses a photograph of a lush garden and classical Chinese architecture. The image has a washed-out, filtered tonality offset by Hong’s striking—if not disturbing—hand-painted washes of blood-red ink. The skies bear red clouds, and blood seems to flow in a stream and ooze from the house’s walls.

Five wood-box constructions contain tableaux with similar undercurrents. Variously sized, some of the pieces are open, stagelike spaces; others, covered with glass, resemble traditional dioramas. The standout of these is Three Flies of Yanqeng City (2003)—a small, rather regal-looking structure that contains three large, artificial flies with huge red eyes hanging from fishing wire. A photograph of a traditional-looking Chinese landscape serves as backdrop. The flies, despite their immobility, seem to dance playfully like marionettes on a stage. Dangling from the ceiling throughout the gallery space were numerous plastic flies, perhaps a metaphor for sickness festered under the surface of history—a theme that seemed to permeate the entire exhibition. Hong’s works succeed because of their ability to evoke a range of moods, and because of their seductive visual quality—a characteristic that contemporary artists sometimes surrender in favor of sickness and cold conceptualism.

—Derek Conrad Murray

Takashi Murakami at Marianne Boesky

“Business art is the step that comes after Art,” Andy Warhol wrote in 1975. What he meant was that he was abandoning the idea of the artist as alienated creative individual to run his studio as an enterprise turning out a range of products marked by a recognizable visual style and signature. Takashi Murakami has imitated Warhol in calling his studio a “factory”; in this exhibition he might have been seen as paying tribute to the Pop master by hanging sets of images, identical but for color, that evoke Warhol’s “Flowers” in different colors and dimensions or his Campbell’s soup cans. Like the latter, Murakami’s images featured a product logo, in this case the Louis Vuitton monogram.

Hong Lei: Three Flies of Yanqeng City, 2003, mixed mediums, 8 by 10” by 5 inches, at Chambers Fine Art.