



Ying Li *Peregrination*

This catalog was produced
on the occasion of:

Peregrination
Ying Li: Recent Paintings

November 1-30, 2019

Gross McCleaf Gallery
127 South Sixteenth Street
Philadelphia, PA 19102

www.grossmccleaf.com
215.665.8138
Tuesday-Saturday, 10am-5pm

FRONT AND BACK COVER:

Wintry Garden 2018, oil/linen, 24 x 48 in.

Peregrination

Ying Li

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Cherry Blossom 2019, oil/linen, 36 x 36 in.

Glimpses into Our Vulnerable World

Bill Scott

At this point in my life as a painter, Ying Li is one of those artists whose work offers the questions, complexity, and inspiration I yearn to see. She has studios in New York City and at Haverford College, where she is the Phlyssa Koshland Professor of Fine Arts. In practice, however, she is essentially a landscape painter who paints outside. She often makes each painting in multiple sessions over the course of several days, the time between sessions allowing her to contemplate the work—this, I suspect, is what enables her to keep her color so clear. To facilitate carrying her supplies wherever she wants to paint, she keeps her canvases fairly small. For example, the moderately sized, *Cherry Blossoms*, is just thirty-six by thirty-six inches. But despite their intimate scale, her paintings project the presence of much larger works. The titles she assigns to the canvases often identify places where she has painted: Chautauqua, New York, Rome, Telluride, Truro. And while the images are sometimes visually challenging in that they're not recognizable likenesses of those places, they are far more believable than many more representational paintings, because she

uses paint to convey the lushness of leafy trees, the color in a particular place, and the light at a specific time of day.

Li was born in China and lived there until 1983, when she immigrated to the US. This part of her story is utterly different from that of any other painter I have known. Her youth as an artist is well detailed and documented in essays published in earlier exhibition catalogues. When she and I spoke recently, she recalled how in China she was required to study traditional landscape ink-wash paintings that she then thought were unsatisfying. At the time she only wanted to paint expressively with color. She now loves these works, but humorously recalls them being “so thinly painted” that they looked as if they had been “painted with soy sauce.”

For the majority of her time in China, Li was required to paint huge historical works honoring the Communist party. The trajectory of her life took a fairy tale twist one day in 1981 when she was outside painting a landscape of “China’s most



Ballads of the City, Fountain 2017, oil/panel, 10 x10 in.

beautiful mountains—the Yellow Mountains.” A visiting American scholar stopped to watch her work. They spoke and, within a year, they were married. At age thirty-two, Li left China and moved with her husband to New York. It was at this moment when—for the very first time—she saw paintings by Bonnard, Soutine, de Kooning, and other modern western painters. In New York, she also attended Parsons School of Design, where her teachers included painters Leland Bell, John Heliker, and Paul Resika. At that time the social narrative in her work, she says, vanished.

I once asked Li what she does when she reaches an impasse while painting. I was surprised by the

practicality of her response: she simply continues to paint. The one time she did stop working, she said, were the eighteen months following her husband’s unexpected death in 2012. When she finally returned to the studio, as a way to grieve, she began drawing and later painting from the window in his study. More recent work that could be part of that series include “Ballads of the City,” a group of four ten-by-ten-inch canvases, and *Writing in the City #2*, a larger painting with the proportions of a small vertical window. In almost all the landscapes, a tiny area of the ground, the canvas, is visible. Li may leave these few areas untouched as a way of reminding us that we are looking at a painting. This is not the case with her city images, where the



Writing the City #2 2019, oil/linen, 40 x 30 in.



The Empress Voyage #2 2018, oil/canvas, 13½ x 13½ in.



The Oldest Apple Tree in Truro 2017, oil/linen, 12 x 16 in.

ground is completely covered with color and lines. Her thick application of paint makes the works look almost like sculptural bas-reliefs.

Each work is built with layers of oil paint and frequently includes threads of paint squeezed from the tube directly onto the canvas. She has worked this way since her husband's death. Her pictures are composed of lines—lines that are sinuous, articulate, and searching. Beautiful and seductive, these landscapes contain, but only partially conceal, a visceral howl. My understanding

of them fluctuates between seeing them as landscapes, then as abstractions, and finally again as landscapes. If I weren't a painter myself I wonder if, at a glance, her canvases might simply look like chaotic jumbles of paint; a strand of red reads simply as a red line before transforming into a tree in *The Oldest Apple Tree in Truro*. Li's paintings are glimpses into our vulnerable world. What I love most is the time it takes to truly absorb and appreciate their structure and beauty. For me, that is a slow and delightfully rewarding experience.



One does not so much enter into the landscapes of Ying Li as collide with them. Brushed impastos accrete on her canvases like minerals on the walls of a cave. Discerning the scenes can require an act of imagination, but they reward the viewer's efforts with a luscious physicality and surprising palette.

—Franklin Einspruch, *Art in America*



ABOVE:

Wild Orchid #2 2018, oil/linen, 34 x 34 in.

OPPOSITE:

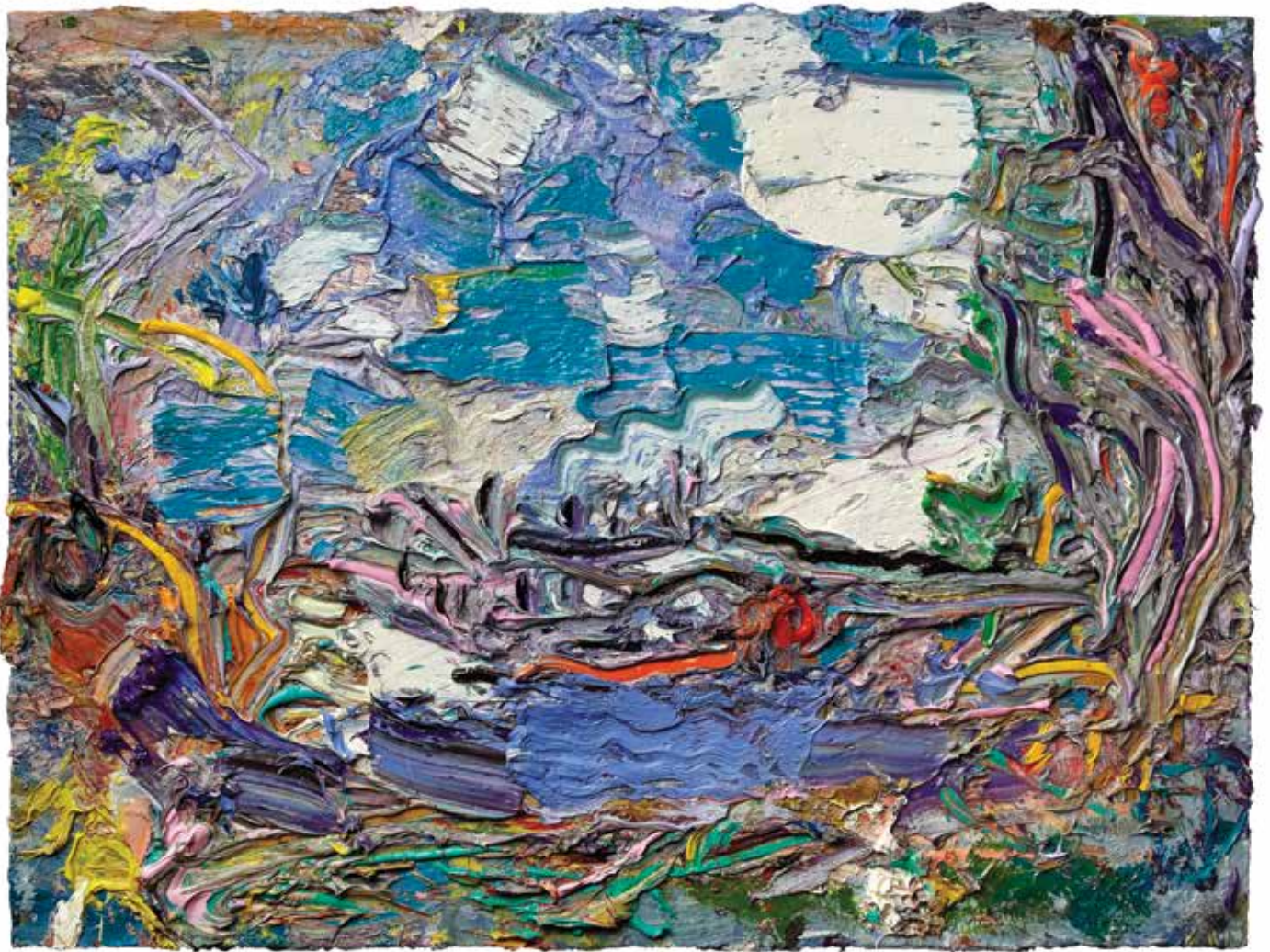
Swirling Scarlet 2017, oil/linen, 12 x 16 in.



LEFT:
Ballads of the City, Pink Snow
 2017, oil/panel, 10 x 10 in.

BELOW:
Ballads of the City, Spring Sprinkle
 2017, oil/panel, 10 x 10 in.





Farewell Lake Chautauqua 2018, oil/canvas, 30 x 40 in.

...Li re-channels the language of Western expressionism—most particularly its constituent gesture, the mark of “authenticity” that has always long signaled a direct relationship to an internal emotional state. Looking closely, we sense her reformulation in the sheer freshness of each of her paintings...In each work she strives for an intensity of expression born of the body and the heart, seeking to capture and reinvent the spirit of faraway places.

—Faye Hirsch, “Ying Li: Geographies”



Far and Near, Homage to Huang Gongwang
2019, oil/linen, 18 x 42½ in.



Through her simultaneous sensitivity to material and motif, Li unites the tradition of perceptual painting with the language of Abstract Expressionism, perhaps better than any painter working today.

—Brett Baker, *Painter's Table abstract*



ABOVE:

Chautauqua Belle #19 2017, oil/linen, 24 x 30 in.

OPPOSITE:

Telluride, Black Bear Pass 2018, oil/linen, 22 x 28 in.

Li's instinct is that the thing seen must be in the paint, and that the paint is, in the vigor of its presence, the thing seen...The vitality of her strokes bring to the surface what she has seen and what she hopes to see. She goes for broke then over the edge achieving a raw, fierce thereness, unplanned as mountain or tree. You won't have to try hard when looking at her work because such is the nature of her imagination and technique, their unity, that Li makes it easy to give yourself to her art.

—William Corbett, "Ying Li, *The Thing Seen*"





ABOVE:

Ballads of the City, Yellow Dragon Over Manhattan

2018, oil/panel, 10 x 10 in.

OPPOSITE:

Wintry Garden

2018, oil/linen, 24 x 48 in.



In a sense, each painting [by Ying Li] risks two kinds of picturesqueness: first, the charm of its bucolic subject, with scenic mountains, lakes, and trees; second, the captivating aspect of a highly sensuous technique. Their consistent pictorial power, however, reflects an urgent sense of purpose rather than self-indulgence or bravado.

—John Goodrich, artcritical.com



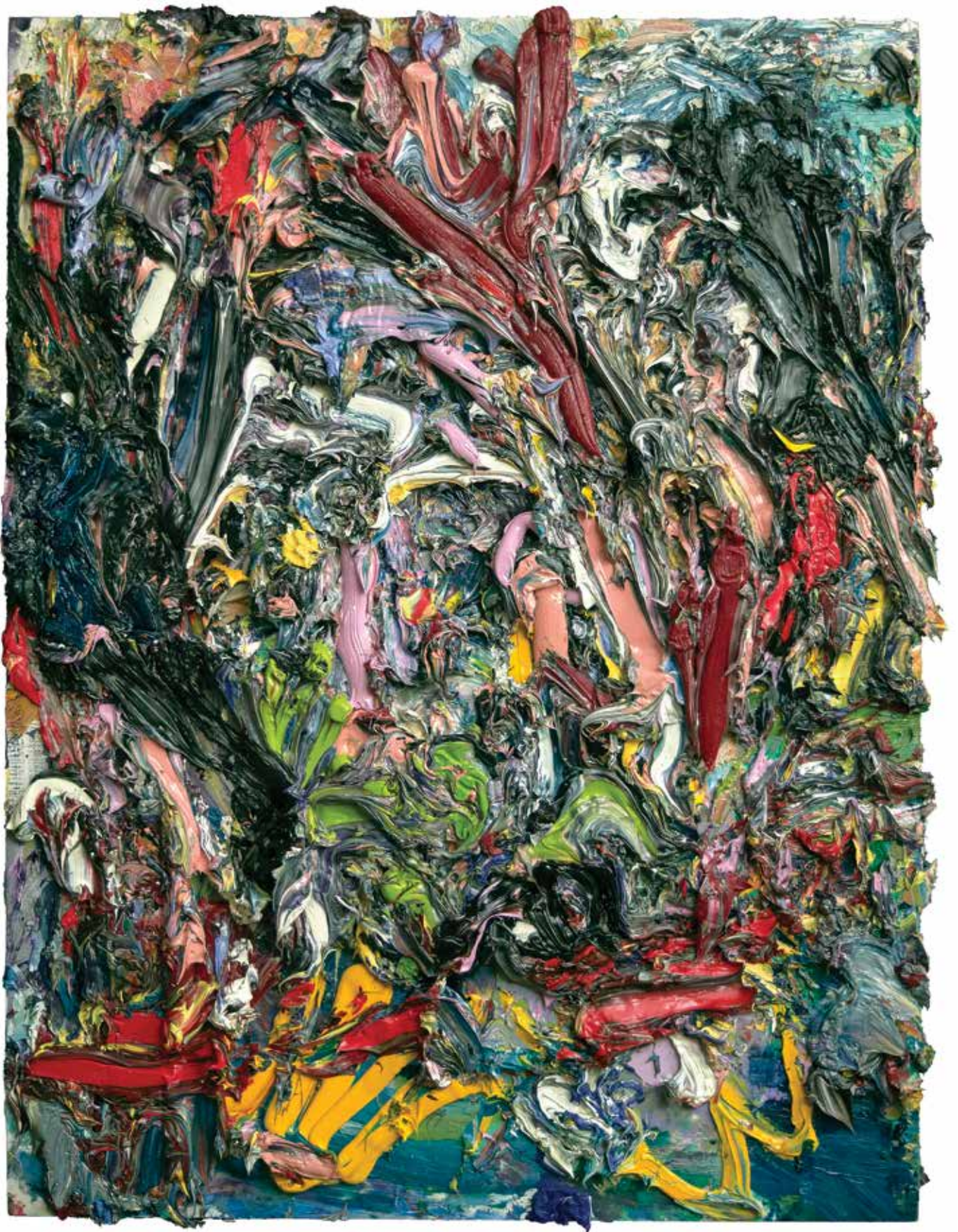
LEFT:

Roma #4 2018, oil/linen, 16 x 16 in.

BELOW:

Roma #1 2018, oil/linen, 16 x 24 in.





Villa Aurelia, the Secret Garden 2018, oil/linen, 24 x 18 in.

Li's drawings and paintings capture something of the immediacy of [Chinese] calligraphy in which decades of preparation come to fruition in succinct and fluid action—the marriage of spontaneity and experience. At times in her painting, a single stroke can simultaneously suggest an observation, a defiant slash, a journey, and a question mark. Collectively her brushstrokes produce a unique rhythm and timbre.

—Andrea Packard, “Ying Li’s ‘Spirit Resonance’”





ABOVE:

Grassy Waters #1 2019, oil/linen, 24 x 30 in.

OPPOSITE:

Telluride, October Sun 2018, oil/linen, 22 x 28 in.



ABOVE:

The Empress Voyage #1 2018, oil/linen, 12½ x 12½ in.

OPPOSITE:

The Secret Garden, Insects and Butterflies 2018, oil/linen, 16 x 16 in.



She has a touch to die for in terms of bravura painthandling and innate good taste. In her best works, she manages to endow brushstroke with the power of metaphor. Different brushes and their tips sometimes converge in a single canvas in a Dionysian orgy of painterliness.

—David Cohen, artcritical.com

Ying Li is the Phlyssa Koshland Professor in Fine Arts at Haverford College, where she has taught since 1997. Born in Beijing, China, Ying Li studied painting at Anhui Teachers University (1974–77) where she taught 1977–83. She immigrated to the United States in 1983 and received an MFA from Parsons School of Design, NY in 1987.

Li's work has been featured in numerous solo and group exhibitions, including internationally at Centro Incontri Umani Ascona (Switzerland), ISA Gallery (Italy), Enterprise Gallery (Ireland) and Museum of Rochefort-en-Terre (France); and in New York City at Lohin Geduld Gallery, Elizabeth Harris Gallery, Tibor de Nagy Gallery, Lori Bookstein Fine Art, The National Academy Museum and The American Academy of Arts and Letters; as well as at Gross McCleaf Gallery (Philadelphia), Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (Philadelphia), Cantor Fitzgerald Gallery at Haverford College (Haverford, PA), James Michener Museum (Doylestown, PA) and Hood Museum at Dartmouth College (New Hampshire).

Her awards include: The Edwin Palmer Memorial Prize for Painting and Henry Ward Ranger Fund Purchase Award, both from The National Academy Museum; Donald Jay Gordon Visiting Artist and Lecturer, Swarthmore College; Artist-in-Residence, Dartmouth College; McMillan Stewart Visiting Critic, Maryland Institute College of Art; Ruth Mayo Distinguished Visiting Artist, The University of Tulsa; and Visiting Artist, American Academy in Rome. She is the recipient of various Residential Fellowships in Switzerland, Spain, Ireland, Canada and France.

Her work has been covered in *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *Art Forum*, *Art in America*, *The New York Sun*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer* and *The Washington Post*.

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—Ying Li

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