

# Art in America

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Ying Li: *Window, Memory of Umbrian Light*, 2003-05, oil on linen, 17¼ by 13¾ inches; at Haverford College.

## HAVERFORD, PENN.

### Ying Li at Haverford College

This large survey at Cantor Fitzgerald Gallery of Ying Li's paintings made mostly during the past three years focused on a group of landscapes as seen from her studio in Umbria, where she teaches in the summers. Located on a high hill overlooking the Tiber valley, the site offers unobstructed views of the changeable effects

that the region is famous for: a dramatic sky with an endless variety of clouds, diurnal luminosities, wheeling birds and, on the level of memory and imagination, traces of Italian painting past. Although Li's florid gesture and color, and her abundant, luxurious oil, register the influence of Abstract Expressionists like de Kooning or earlier modernists like Soutine, there is a kind of efficient communicativeness to her strokes that attests as well to her training in calligraphy, which she studied in her native China before moving to the States 25 years ago.

It is interesting to think about expatriate artists like Li who came from countries that suppressed Western modernism (Li was separated from her family during the Cultural Revolution and placed in an internment camp) but who embraced it, seemingly belatedly, after having visited museums in the West for the first time. This may explain why Li's work, despite its ostensibly conservative values—these are, after all, traditional easel paintings with traditional themes—feels joyously liberated and nearly always fresh.

The emblem of freedom, in this show, was not a landscape, but a Matissean view from within Li's shadowy studio toward a large window at one end (*Window, Memory of Umbrian Light*, 2003-05). The room itself is executed in a reduced palette of grays and blues with touches of brown and violet—strong verticals and horizontals of heavy, viscous, shiny paint. The window—the way out of this murky interior—is a lighter, whitish, smoothly painted patch of turquoise irregularly glowing with apparitional light. This window recurs in a number of works, including an interesting nocturnal version (*Window, No Moon*, 2003-07) in which a sickly olive light—in thick impasto—crawls through the depicted embrasure out onto the painting's actual frame.

Li's more characteristic works, however, are expansive views with great stretches of eventful skies. Sometimes there are groups of them, as in three works from 2005 that seem to track a single storm: first the hills are suffused in mist, making them an indistinct violet; then the scene is obscured by dark, tumultuous strokes, as the storm passes through; and then, triumphantly, a sapphire-colored, incandescent sky emerges, with three or four wide, thick strokes of white in horizontal succession, as if a last few clouds were skittering through the clean-swept air.

The clouds in *Montecastello Sky* (2006) are a dusty-looking yellowish white with dark flecks, whether birds or blowing debris it's hard to tell. At the bottom of the painting is an anchoring blip, a tree composed of just two apostrophic smears of a lighter and darker green—one of those touches in a good landscape that brings it closer. *Roiling Cloud* (2004) builds up strokes of different shapes, in gray, purple, white and, best of all, touches of pink, implying that the cloud's ingredients, along with mist, include a crowd of putti, floating refugees from a Tiepolo painting just waiting to make themselves known.

—Faye Hirsch