



Ying Li: *Floating Black*, 1989-90, oil on canvas, 60 by 46 inches; at Bowery.

Ying Li at Bowery

Chinese-born Li has a decidedly more interesting personal and professional history than many of her American counterparts. In junior high school, during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution of the '60s, Li was forcibly removed from city life and sent to work on a farm in a remote rural area. She started painting as a solitary consolation, as well as a defense against feelings of displacement. Returning to her hometown in Anhui after an accident, she continued painting, studying Western art at Anhui Teachers University and later serving as an instructor there. In

1983 she emigrated to the U.S. In New York, she studied at Parsons School of Design with Leland Bell and Paul Resika.

In Li's latest work the influence of her teachers is still evident, but her strongest debt at this point would seem to be to Abstract Expressionism in its glory days. Her painting *Little Blue* is ostensibly a studio still life; it shows various objects clustered together on an orange table before a gray cement wall. But the picture is painted with such coloristic and gestural fury that it reads as an almost explosively expressionist work, in a manic abstract mode recalling that of de Kooning.

Given her background, there is more than a trace of Eastern influence in Li's paintings. *Little Orchids* comes in ferocious scumblings of orange, green and muddy-brown brushstrokes; over this ground is superimposed, in vivaciously calligraphic fashion, the tan outline of a small vase with a thin branch of flowering maroon orchids. Although executed in miniature scale, this little still life is a powerful tribute both to Li's native culture and her conspicuously Western painterly energy.

Still, the pyrotechnics of Li's brushwork can cause a painting to run faintly amok composition-

ally. A large-scale canvas like *The Pause* features an older man in a maroon sleeveless sweater sitting with a book in his lap and looking up at the artist. His entire being seems a *danse macabre* of nervous, skittery brushstrokes. No less skittery are the vanity table and wooden floor in the left background, while the wall behind them, a massive mess of blues, and what may be an armoire in hot reds are barely discernible for the scumbling.

Li seems to flourish where she is more discreet, as in another, more comprehensible large canvas, *Floating Black*. The objects in the painting—a white vase of white tulips surrounded by other, far less identifiable items before a green-shuttered, blue-paned window—remain anonymous, with the big floating black thing left of center the most anonymous of all. Li here maintains a nicely precarious balance between the articulated and the suggested, between image and imagination; her palette of ice blues, mustards and blacks is, for all its dissonances, the right one. Li is an intensely gifted artist. To fully succeed, she needs only to continue to balance things abstract with things figurative, and expression with portrayal.

—Gerrit Henry