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Ying Li: Recent Paintings

The Painting Center
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By JOHN GOODRICH



Ying Li **Montecastello Sky Series #2** 2003
oil on canvas, 14 x 17 inches
photos courtesy the author

Painting is as old as, well, the hills around Lascaux or Altamira-and yet painters are still finding ways of challenging our expectations. When we walk into a gallery today, we're liable to be struck by the curiousness of an image and by original ideas about processes and roles of painting. We might even encounter a couple things that seem to have preoccupied those 30,000 year-old cave painters: a delight in the materials of painting and its language of forms.

The current exhibition of work by Ying Li at the Painting Center reminds us why these virtues have endured so long. These eighteen landscapes, with their thick encrustations of oil paint, turgid colors, and lashing strokes, positively exude an

enthusiasm for paint's sheer materiality. (Having visited the artist's studio a number of times over the years, I can attest to the splatters of pigment covering walls, ceiling and floor. By way of disclosure I should also mention my ownership of an earlier Li painting.) Li's furious reworking of shapes and all-over kneading of surfaces suggests something of Pollock's wing-and-a-prayer attack: the self-regenerating, free-fall meditation that hangs all hope on the moment and the complete banishment of PRE-meditation. Indeed, after a few moments with Li's livid hues and violent, contrary strokes, Pollock's sweeping gestures can seem almost MELLOW.

Expressive as it is, though, the vivid paint-handling serves as just a conveyance for other, perhaps more interesting, impulses. Li's eagerness to sling paint belies a subtler, simultaneous purpose that on the surface (no pun intended) may seem strangely at odds with painterly abandon. As a representational painter, she builds complex connections towards elements of nature, and with her solid grasp of pictorial forms she imparts in her best paintings an emphatic sense of size, weight, location, role-that is, PRESENCE-to the elements of her images.

Sounds old-fashioned? Li certainly uses the motifs and material of a traditional artist, but she employs them with rare verve and honesty. If an illustrator communicates a likeness through referencing details (two eyes, a nose, and a mouth make a face), then a painter organizes more primitive sensations to re-create an optical event (a shadowed recess, a projection into light, a declining plane give weight to the impression of a face under a particular illumination.) Li PAINTS the landscape, and does so without any kind of safety net. Her contours form an almost brutal spatial framework for the actions of her color, and within it her hues, jostling forwards and back in space, link in forceful sequences across the canvas. The effect can be felt at its most basic level in a painting like the tiny "Montecastello, Sky Series #2," in which a small hut plays a large and distinct role: its rectangular side (practically a single swipe of vivacious ochre) is pressed to the canvas' lower edge by its dense green roof; above, the 80 percent of the canvas that is sky flows out luxuriantly in a sea of blues ranging from cerulean to traces of ultramarine. The weights of colors provide the timing of these events-the placing, the holding, then the release-so that this one or two square feet of canvas brims with the sensation of vast space.



Ying Li **Montecastello Sky Series #4** 2003
oil on canvas, 30 x 30 inches

Colors and blunt drawing collaborate again to animate the entirely different space of "Riverstroke #2". In this forest scene, furious green-blue scribbles emphatically locate a softly lit plane (a distant field?) behind taut verticals of trees which, as they rise, trap bits of sky against the canvas' upper corners. Once more the audacity of attack startles. There's clearly no preconception of composition; all rests on a visual response and the possibility of making pictorial sense of a hundred sensations.

In the more complex "Vermont, Deep Fall," an irregular, hour-glassed shape of dull cerulean blue, hemmed in by contrasting patches of brown-green and greenish-ochre, stares back from a remote but insistent location in the mid-distance. It doesn't take imagination-only an active engagement in the painting's rhythms-to see that this is a river receding between banks of overlapping walls of foliage. The frontal towering of the foreground tree, the contraction of the banks kneeling at the river's far side, the water lithely slipping in-between, joining near and far: Li's formal arrangements of these loaded events is every bit as vital as her violent brushwork. (Intriguingly, the "realistic" touches-the sky's perforations of a tree's canopy-compete with fantastic ones-the grayish-yellow-green patch somehow residing comfortably in the sky-all of which only shows that the connecting impulse of good painting is not literalism but pictorial coherence.)

One might suspect that for Li the paint-slinging technique is indispensable for a focusing of intention, but for the viewer it's more like a conspicuous raising of the stakes, one that risks uneven results but also makes triumphs like these all the sweeter. Not every painting in the exhibition in fact has the impact of "Vermont, Deep Fall" with its powerful particularizing of forms. At times Li's gestures convey the urge to come to grips with the subject more than they actually illuminate it. But considering that this is a characteristic of a great deal

of expressionist painting (the Neo-expressionists who came to fame in the 80s are especially good at showing more grasping than grasp), this is the occasional shortfall one gladly accepts in view of the intensity and bravery of the work here. And brave it consistently is, pressing the bounds of technique, of motif (with images ranging from immense panoramas to close-ups of water), and fashion (who else would dare paint-sincerely-a waterfall in 2004?)

The impulse of a good artist is always a generous one, and ultimately it's to share a memorable visual event. Ying Li's paintings at the Painting Center offer just such a gift. They are visions of vigorous abandon, and the attendant truths-purely visual ones-that are her hard-bitten prize.

[see David Cohen's review of the same show](#)

JOHN GOODRICH, who was a contributing writer to Review Magazine, paints, exhibits, teaches, and writes about art in New York City. His work can be seen at Lori Bookstein Fine Art through July 29, 2004 in the Zeuxis Association of Still Life Painters' exhibition, Tabletop Arenas.

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