



March 6, 2004

Ying Li at the Painting Center, 52 Greene Street (closed February 28th)

To view a film clip of the exhibition [click here](#).

Ying Li's paintings have been profiled (February 2002) and reviewed on these pages (May 2001). The latter was a three person exhibition at the Painting Center that also included Cecily Kahn and Kate Davis. Here Li returns to the Painting Center with a commanding solo show in the large space which more than justifies the gallery's name. As with her work in the past the primary subject matter is paint itself and the secondary subject matter is landscape. The magic is how each relates to and otherwise defines the other.

Take for example *Vermont Deep Fall #2* where you can just make out the separation between land and sky with a hill slanting downwards to the left. The indicators are found in the differences between the whites and grays in upper third of the canvas and the earth tones in the lower portion. But notice how one small patch of blue is included in the upper right corner. This is nothing short of



Ying Li, *Vermont, Deep Fall #2*, 2003, oil on canvas, 23 X 29 in

brilliant for the way it anchors the cooler grayish sky colors and allows them to more fully resonate throughout that portion of the painting. Now look at the land portions and how the large yellow ochre forms in the foreground might be a close-up of the edge of a hill or the tops of trees. Between the foreground and the sky, a sense of mid and distance space is created where the band of black and gray forms angling down to the left might be a road, a river or more trees. Finally there is a subtle



Ying Li, *Installation View*

tangle of paint in the lower left that just suggests undefined foliage. What's actually depicted is not so important because the visual essence of the landscape elements has been captured which is more than enough complete the painting.



Ying Li, *Vermont, Deep Fall #2* (detail)

With regard to approach, this piece presents a mosaic sensibility where the forms are chunked out of paint instead of tiles. That duality of subject matter referenced above is magnificently at work here where the forms are intuitively built out of the act of painting even as they fashion the landscape. Which comes first? It's impossible to say and indeed, is of little consequence, but it does have

[Next Page](#)

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March 6, 2004 / page 2

an interesting effect in defining space. Much like Cézanne (whom we've compared this artist to in the past), Li is able to work space in two ways. A three dimensional depth of space just barely holds its own against a more 'painterly space' which flattens out evenly across the entire picture plane. Your view vacillates between the two which is another key ingredient for creating the magic.

That tricky netherworld of indefinable space leads directly into understanding the content of Li's work. You are left to engage elements of uncertainty; of not knowing exactly what is what or precisely where anything is. In this way the artist sets loose a shifting sense of time and space that is only possible through painting. The beautiful part is that, even though the experience is consistent, how it is expressed varies from painting to painting. Compare for example, *Is There a Rainbow When It Snows* to *Montecastello Sky Series # 4*. The former contains an oblique suggestion of landscape whereas the latter indicates a much stronger reference. But notice how the paint handling and landscape subject matter still intertwine and dance with each other throughout both pieces albeit in differing proportions.



Ying Li, *Installation View*

The paintings in this show are small to small - midsize and it's interesting to see how much Li is able to pack into each one. There is plenty of



Ying Li, *Is There A Rainbow When It Snows*, 2003, oil on canvas, 21 X 25 in



Ying Li, *Montecastello, Sky Series #4*, 2003, oil on canvas, 29 X 24 in

activity, color and texture but after awhile you can't help but wonder how the dynamics might shift if they were twice or even three times their current size. As it is, the pieces work wonderfully as diminutive visual 'jewels' while also engaging the viewer with a gutsy esthetic. If larger, would these paintings evolve from art objects to expansive 'atmospheres' of paint? Probably; but in the end it's not a necessity. Rather, part of their appeal is the desire (and in part the frustration) to see them larger. That tease provides a subtle counterpoint to their jewel-like qualities.

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