



'Coastal' Service: Ying Li at Lohin Geduld Gallery

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There is this stereotype regarding abstract expressionism where it's forever linked to a type of broodiness, a sense of struggle and (at times) madness. One only has to think of Jackson Pollock or Vincent Van Gogh to conjure up images of the obsessed, troubled soul trying to deal with inner demons. As often as this may be the case, this is not really the rule. Ying Li's "Coastal Paintings" makes the argument that gestural expressionism can be raw, contain an extraordinary amount of energy, be deeply moving but also have a sense of pure excitement in place of doom and darkness.

Li's paintings were done in 'plein air;' she's painting live at the location. The brilliance behind what she's doing is that all of the essence of a landscape is there but is immersed beneath layers, textures and rhythms. At first glance, there is a sense of turbulence and everything almost appears to be too busy, but after viewing for a few moments, I could feel that beneath the surface lies a certain essence of nature. Complex textural elements with thick layers of multi-colored paint meet the rigid ripples of the blues in the water. This is closer to how nature operates than the serene images exhibited by most landscape painters.

Last summer, Li had a month long residency on Fogo Island in Newfoundland. This enabled her to have extensive plein air painting sessions while experiencing life in the small fishing villages where she was staying. Li met the indigenous folks who have lived there for generations. She joined them in fishing expeditions and cites this as a turning point. Li said, "I was full of more questions about the fishing life. I believe that all this became an important part of the driving force of the paintings I did that month. This experience has taken my fascination with coastal painting sites to an entirely new level. This sense multiplied many times over in the month, it has opened up to me a new world that I wish to explore further." Having caught a codfish, then eating it for dinner that night enhanced her awareness of the force of nature.



Her training in calligraphy is key in giving the lines an animated force. Having the calligraphy in her arsenal embellishes the raw intensity and kicks it up a notch. Beneath the multilayered brushstrokes there is a disciplined aesthetic. This sensibility allows for a solid structure to anchor the expressionistic elements.

As readers of this column probably know by now, I am a fan of the realist painters. I've written about the 'hyper-realists,' wherein an image appears to be realist, but upon further inspection, it's pretty abstract. These works are the inverse image of hyper-realism where the abstractions somehow add to a sense of reality. Amiable and unpretentious, Ying Li described the somewhat ironic feelings that she expresses while painting these works. When I asked her what motivated her to apply such textures, brush strokes and choices of color, she gave a one-word answer: "Frustration."

Above, Fogo Harbor, Towards Our Lady of the Snows Church, 2008