



BRIDGES – ART FROM CHINA BETWEEN EAST AND WEST

Xinglai Yang
Li Xia
He Yuan
Qin Feng

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Bridges – Art from China between east and west is the eighth event in the exhibition series „clariant art stories“. With this longer-term commitment in the form of a changing selection of art works on the 8th and 9th floor of the corporate center in Pratteln, Clariant wishes to stimulate a positive discourse on modern art.

Bridges – Art from China between east and west

In an exhibition of works by Chinese artists, Xinglai Yang's image of a tree branch and Qin Feng's large-format painting *Composition Desire Scenery* serve to some extent as the delineating lines of a field that announces its own arrival to the viewers with a surprising degree of diversity. Xinglai Yang's studied ink painting and calligraphy under renowned Chinese artist Guan Shanyue while also pursuing an education in the humanities (philosophy and art history); the branching of the wood in his work is reminiscent of Chinese calligraphy, in some ways through their decisive clarity, in other ways through the pregnancy of their transcendent potential abstraction. These multivalent characters, considered to be tied to a higher visual expressiveness, also appear to permeate the visual content latently in *Composition Desire Scenery*. Clearly here the figurations are less oriented on the development of a concrete object than in the articulation of their own power, which is intensified by the interplay between oversized format and powerful strokes of paint. While calligraphic work thus encompasses a visual potential, it is characteristic of ink painting that it views its subjects — especially mountains — most notably in terms of their invisible store of power. The landscapes they depict thus to some extent become imaginary views. These backgrounds also pertain to these two images because at the material level they involve the use of ink. Qin Feng, counted among the Chinese avant garde, articulates through his painting a contemporary aesthetic that he describes as a „post modern ink style“ for reinterpreting „familiar concepts“ [<http://www.christies.com/features/artist-interview-qin-feng-4004-3.aspx>].

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Having undergone advanced training during stays in Germany (starting in 1996) and the USA (starting in 1999), he is interested in the relationships and reflections at play between western Modernity and traditional Chinese ink painting.

At the same time, none of the images presented in this exhibition represent the continuation of hackneyed traditional forms. In background of works by Xinglai Yang, for example, imaginary rivers reflect forces that lends the figurations a sense of distant liveliness. Beyond this, Li Xia's notably square images possess an enigmatic sense of borders and thresholds expressed through the juxtaposition of small-structured shapes. They thus give the works a taut intensity to the extent that the mobilization of the image space collides with the density of the image format. Density, proximity and transitions are further conveyed through the visual themes – *Happy Sisters 4*, *Partners for Life* and *Gatekeeper* – themselves. By contrast, the works of artist He Yuan, born in Harbin, China, appear to be interested in tracing the expansiveness of the mountains and the deep structures of passing time.

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Xinglai Yang
Winterpflaume
2014
Chinese ink and mineral paint on rice paper
88 x 69 cm



Set in a portrait format, this image depicts a bifurcation of thin branches that stand out against the muted green tones of the background. Yet the observing eye does not come to rest on that background, which appears to be spherical. It instead focuses on the complex play of the branches, which in certain spots have produced white blossoms. Even so, the targeted impact of the branches and sprigs appears to be mitigated by the dropdrop. There is a certain unfocused impression evident at certain spots in the wood, the product of that green backing. The attention of the artist is thus not solely directed at the detail work in the foreground that first draws the eye, but rather on the background. Applying its gentle tonal gradations in a mysterious way, it suggests a certain animation, positioning itself in juxtaposition to the liveliness of nature as embodied in the blossoms. Last but not least, the lines articulated through the branching and the use of Chinese ink techniques could hint at the artist's interest in calligraphy.

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Xinglai Yang
Herbsthimmel
2014
Chinese ink and mineral paint on rice paper
69 x 68 cm



A flock of birds has come together in formation in the air. The background is defined through a striking gradation: the grayish blue in the lower section slowly transitions into orange, which in turn is prominent in the upper area of the image before ceding again to darker hues at the upper edge. The background has a decisive share in the image's expressive tone. On the one hand it is a section of background that addresses us frontally as viewers. On the other hand, it loses its frontal orientation when it is viewed against the context of the bird flock. It then gains a liveliness and, through its color transitions, inserts a certain movement into the image that appears to set the field of vision swaying. In this way it expresses the flight of the birds.

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Xinglai Yang
 Ruhiger Teich
 2014
 Chinese ink and mineral paint on rice paper
 69 x 68 cm



Three fish, at first glance apparently swimming in a circular pattern, can be recognised at the center of this image. Upon further review, however, it becomes clear that two of them are counteracting any such motion insofar as they are facing each other. The bluish green background represents water, and suggests in its ambient impact a depth that allows the viewer to forget that this is actually a two-dimensional piece of canvas. There is nothing beyond the artist's signature along the lower left edge of the image to detract from this experience. The fish also do not awaken the impression that they are objects painted on canvas. To all appearances they have found their proper play in the hazy brightness of the water. The seemingly natural association between the animals and the water subtly reinforces the image's impression of depth.

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Xinglai Yang
Reisen
2011
Chinese ink and mineral paint
on rice paper
135 x 69 cm



The landscape format painting shows a boat with two occupants, moving toward the left edge of the image. The gray of the water dissolves into the upper limits of the image field, giving way to an orange cast to the sky before reappearing at the upper edge of the image. The horizontals accentuated by the travel direction of the boat are given a certain distance by the framing of the sky, which perhaps suggests that the boat itself has come from a distant place.

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Li Xia
Gatekeeper
1991
Mixed media
60 x 60 cm



Li Xia's painting *Gatekeeper*, created using a melange of techniques, depicts a puzzling figure whose body is comprised of a multitude of curving surfaces that flow into one another and form a larger whole. The being, whose hands are stretching upwards and whose face appears to be covered with a mask, appears to be attempting to watch or bar access to another room that the viewer can espy behind him. The covered space, which can only be seen in fragmented glimpses, is nevertheless presented in a light purple. The complexity of the image rests on the one hand in the sentry or regulating function of the figure — further confirmed by the title of the image — presenting a threshold situation, allowing the image to suggest the presence of other spaces or levels. At the same time, any such reading is thwarted by the nature of the image itself, because the figure and the surrounding spaces are created from the same geometric shapes that, from a structural and spatial point of view, are not really all that differentiated. The transition appears much more to be articulated through the square framing. The impression arises that the observing eye is being guided perpetually along the geometric shapes of the figure and space. As such, the moving eye is linked with the mobilized image area.

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Li Xia
Partners for Life
1991
Mixed media
60 x 60 cm



In Partners for Life the observer beholds two oddly deformed figures whose communion is expressed with a kiss. Yet one must ask: Where is this floor upon which the figures are standing? What kind of spatial situation does this square canvas really suggest? The image of a sun can be spied in the background of the image, yet at the same time it grounds the area around the pair of lovers through a wealth of small red surfaces and patterns that appear to take on the form of fish toward the right edge of the picture. The motif of the fish appears in the center of the painting as well in a form suggestive of a vase or a fountain. Encounters next to the fountain have long been interpreted as auguring a future marriage, at least as far back as the Bible. This type of iconographic interpretation is supported through the dynamic energy of the image's space and the motif of the fish, which its part suggests a flowing, analogous to the fathomless streams of love and life itself. Last but not least, the square format ensures that the two figures are framed in striking closeness.

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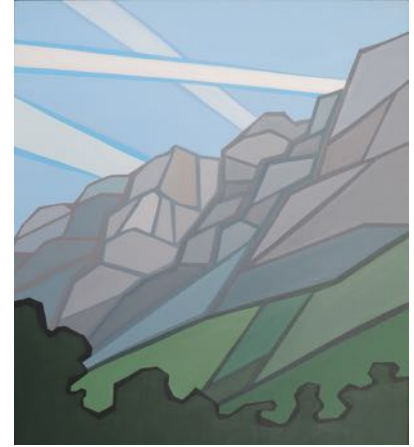
Li Xia
Happy Sisters 4
1990
Mixed media
60 x 60 cm



Geometric shapes — circular and semi-circles, ovals, rectangles and squares as well as other amorphous shapes — crystallize into the figures of sisters, reinforced by the title of the piece. The capacity to differentiate between foreground and background is fully sapped here. Within the boundaries established here, both layers of the image are captured as one larger whole. The predominantly mild hues set a benign mood and further enhance the events or message of the image, namely the connection between the sisters. The square format also brings the two figures into close proximity. The density created in this way is counteracted however through the light color tones and the disruptive structuring of the geometric shapes.

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He Yuan
 Berglandschaft (Klöntal)
 2014
 Acrylic on canvas
 60 x 70 cm



The portrait-format picture shows a mountainous stretch rising up from light green planes, a stretch that itself is broken down into numerous sub-surfaces; below both of these areas a dark green layer stretches from edge to edge. While the latter area is likely intended to represent a forest, the light green areas on the cliff refer to a meadow that sits before the mountains. The upper part of the image is framed by a light blue sky marked with white streaks. Through this small-format painting, He Yuan visualizes a stunning slice of nature. Clearly this is a constructed, pieced-together landscape composed of geometric shards. The image thus plays with our perception of nature for the way in which it offers multiple possibilities of viewing: does an impression form from the sum of the individual parts, or is perception based on the intensity of a single view? Last but not least, the artist uses this to create a tension in the fact that his section of nature could potentially be anywhere and is almost anonymous, and yet is identified in the title as a section of the Klön Valley in the Canton of Glarus.

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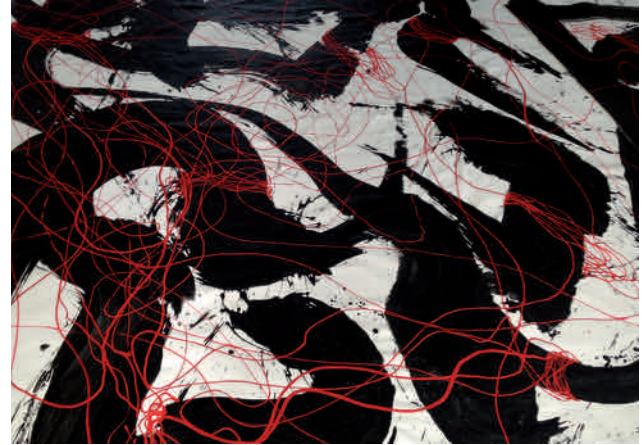
He Yuan
 Jahreszeiten
 2014
 Acrylic on canvas
 4 x 30 x 90 cm



Jahreszeiten (Seasons) is composed of four extended rectangular canvases in the portrait orientation. This arrangement suggests the traditional image system of the polyptychons; a set of multiple related illustrations that were most frequently used as the altar image in the Middle Ages and the early modern age. Each of He Yuan's illustrations depicts one season: spring, summer, autumn and winter. The viewer is subjected to two competing urges. One encourages the attempt to discern the commonalities and differences in the images. The second, however, draws the gaze to the question of the internal relationship at the heart of passing time — the seasons — and how it is manifested. The first viewpoint can be satisfied completely within the image. The second, however, questions the logic of time that flows but always returns, never losing itself. One important characteristic within the images is He Yuan's choice to cast the individual pictures, starting with spring and working to winter, in progressively darker tones. This provides the illustrations with a sense of inner cohesiveness when they mobilize the observing eye, sending it wandering across its spaces and then recalling it back to the start.

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Qin Feng
Composition Desire Scenery 5
2015
Acrylic and ink on canvas
250 x 210 cm



Composition Desire Scenery first lets the very dimensions of its format take on a certain importance, because the oversized canvas addresses the viewer's body more than the eye. Black acrylic paint and ink are spread in broad strokes across the canvas. The image space manifests itself into power relationships whose intensity is less grounded in the possibilities of producing something concrete than an alien-seeming order that is nevertheless evident and expresses itself clearly. This, combined with the striking format, heightens the impact of its message. Further reinforcement emerges through the fact that the black strokes themselves appear oversized in relationship to the base media. Another important point for the painting is its reference to the tradition of Chinese ink painting, which in turn is related to calligraphy through the use of black ink. The subject of these paintings is frequently mountains that turn in such images into imaginary views. While calligraphic work tends to articulate some visually expressive content as the product of letters and sentences, in ink painting it is notable that the designs are less interested in a tangible object than in the invisible store of power. The latter appears to be the case in this painting as well. In his painting, Qin Feng articulates a certain contemporary aesthetic that he describes as a „post-modern ink style“ to reinterpret „familiar concepts“ [<http://www.christies.com/features/artist-interview-qin-feng-4004-3.aspx>].

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