

All That Glitters—Visual Fool's Gold For Thought in Chen Hui's New Works

Maya Kóvskaya 迈涯

A world-weary poodle—its ears tipped in punk-manqué orange and gathered into bushy ponytails—stands in a garbage dump strewn with brightly colored commodities, perhaps the carcasses of things from our era of shameless consumptive excess. Among the refuse is a Louis Vuitton bag, a vintage perfume atomizer, a toy luxury car, various digital devices, and much more. A man with a pickaxe and a helmet skulks in the background, armed to dig for gold among the cast-off goodies, but the poodle is not interested in scrounging for a share of the loot. It looks put upon—loathing the tiny jester's crown upon its head and yearning for a respite from human foolishness—and stares resignedly at a point in space somewhere around the viewer's kneecaps.

The person holding the poodle's leash is gender ambiguous. With a paunchy body slouched to one side, and a broad, head cocked to the other, he/she is a train-wreck of counter-intuitive visual signals. The corkscrew locks of his/her wig, black as squid ink fusilli, barely cover up the crew cut beneath, and yet these incongruous tresses frame that squat face with a dissonant coquettishness. Trendy yellow eye shadow highlights piggish eyes. Berry-colored lips pout above a non-existent chin. Narrow shoulders bracket a ballooning pear-shaped torso; a sad little frayed feather boa snakes down between the saggy man-breasts, while a loop of gray pearls fetchingly encircles a lopsided breast, and a gelatinous mound of belly fat undulates above diaphanous nether-garments.

The visual effect of all these exaggerated details should be hideous, and yet Chen Hui has taken human imperfections—the sort we all have, like it or not — and brought out their endearing qualities rather than making them into the butt of a cruel visual joke. In an era overloaded with nauseatingly "cute" art, Chen Hui's light touch with the saccharin and cloying aspects of China's nouveau riche-inspired, urban material culture comes as a relief. With a deft hand, and the sober eye of a mask-maker who knows what our masks are meant to hide, she playfully shows our human frailty along with our vanity. In showcasing the risible futility of our attempts to fashion convincing glossy images of ourselves, Chen Hui manages to capture both the attempt and the failure to conceal what she posits as a flawed but real "true nature." She does so, moreover, in a way that eschews both the grotesque melodramatic posturing of the "cute" genre, and the hyped up "tragic drama" of more realist works that seek to illuminate human shortcomings. For Chen Hui, that we are mere plebs, laughably dressed up as celebrities parading around in piles of our own tacky garbage is no tragedy—it's just a fact of life that our contemporary pretenses are hollow and our disguises fail to fool most of the people most of the time, including ourselves, and yet she suggests that there is a poignancy in our constant resort to these devices, in spite of the ineffectual clumsiness of our efforts.

With a series of new works, presented for the first time at her solo exhibition at Galerie Urs Meile, Chen Hui crafts scenes bursting with the silly and the strange, the flawed and the fabulous, the absurd and the banal, the throwaway refuse and that which can be scavenged. In doing so, she manages to reconnect images of hyperbolized popular culture, stylistic overkill and consumptive excess, with the latent humanity and sheer ordinariness of the flawed, imperfect people who populate her paintings.

As a professional make-up artist, teaching her craft for the stage and set at the Communication University of China, Chen Hui is intimately familiar with the ways a surface can be manipulated to present the simulacra of the externalized selves we hope others will see. Through her paintings, and in her own explanations of her work, she posits that no matter how much make-up we cake on, which elaborate costumes we may don, or what kind of shiny trinkets we take up to signal our tastes and values to the world, we can never really escape who we are.

Rather than posing as a critical unmasker, using her paintings to rip the scales from our eyes and show us the ugliness of the contemporary era in all its grotesque glory, instead Chen Hui offers a gentler sort of meditation. She lets us have our fun and poke fun at it too. She seems to understand that even as our masks are false, we need them to negotiate our place in a world dominated by polished veneers and superficial values. By making

the disguises worn by these people in her latest series obvious costumes, she allows us to see both the surface and the subcutaneous at once; to see the ham-fisted attempts to adorn and embellish ourselves, in spite of the scars and the blemishes, the sag and the wrinkles, that we can never really conceal.

The flamboyant wigs, the burlesque adornments, the sagging bellies, the scarred, lined and pitted skin, appear and reappear throughout this series. Yet these flaws and faux fixes are neither the object of the artist's mockery nor her pity. They are simply the testaments to the unvarnished, pedestrian realness that lurks beneath the hyperreal, gleaming surfaces of modern identity in this age of glib commercialism, and the gimcrack gaudy baubles with which we so often define ourselves. By exaggerating the exterior packaging, and squeezing her everyday characters into vaudevillesque glamorous costumes—costumes into which they never quite fit—Chen Hui lightly reminds us that all that glitters is not gold. Nevertheless, if the value of the "fool's gold" of our commodified, cosmeticized, costumed identities is its capacity help us construct the externalized selves we use to interface with the social world, then it is precisely our use of that fool's gold—those fantasies of ourselves alchemized into something sparkling, desirable, and valuable—that offers the richest visual food for thought in these works.