

Charged Space

"This buzzing in the air, this somewhat disquieting sound, which is quite specific to the place, comes to mind when I think of Beijing," says in Julia Steiner. "I think it happens when the pigeons, which have these strange little pipes on their tail feathers, quickly change direction in flight." Swiss artist Julia Steiner (born 1982 in Büren zum Hof, Switzerland) has been artist-in-residence since October 2009 at the Galerie Urs Meile Studio in Beijing. To mark the close of her visit, the Galerie Urs Meile is showing *A TENSE TURN*, featuring a selection of the works created by the artist during her sojourn in China.

As part of an intensive exploration of drawing's artistic possibilities, Steiner has been working with gouache on paper. She assembles sheets of paper into very large works, whose strong suggestive power derives from the complicated layering of several visual levels. As a painting technique, gouache makes it possible to differentiate the spectrum of darks and lights, while in the process of drawing, some of the blank, white surfaces of the paper are left exposed. The empty spaces in Steiner's compositions maintain the balance among precisely positioned forms and fragments of forms.

The tension and interaction between upward and downward motion, between the fragile and the tensile, are essential characteristics of the works Steiner made in the cultural context of China. Through the means of drawing, the artist investigates forms and structures of surfaces, employing fragments of found phenomena in her compositions. "Lotus" (gouache on paper, 230 x 304 cm) is inspired by the smooth, taut surfaces of the lotus blossom petal. Concave forms are placed next to the convex; contradictory energies (the upward contrasts with the downward) manifest as motion that pervades the drawing, but which is broken off or accentuated in individual places. "Nachtmarkt"¹ (gouache on paper, 152 x 216 cm) also begins with a sense of tension, which is shown in the surface conditions of materials, physical attitudes, or forms of nature.

Organic forms and fragments are contrasted with abstract elements, so that the drawings fluctuate between the figurative and the abstract. At first glance, the drawings seem to be based on a narrative structure, whose logic, however, cannot ultimately be reasoned out. As soon as the viewer thinks he has discovered the thread of a story and begins to follow it, he realizes that it takes a very surprising turn—much like the birds in the skies of Beijing, whose flight the artist observed. The complex, multiple layers

¹ English translation: Night market

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of the works, supported by the selection of this particular title, allow for a variety of interpretations, challenging the viewer to test and sharpen his powers of perception.

Due to the large size of the works, it is impossible to see them all at once in their entirety, so that the viewer's gaze sweeps across the surface, as he changes his standpoint several times. A drawing titled "Nest" (gouache on paper, ø 151 cm) goes a step further in terms of its concept, since not only does the viewer's gaze have to move, but the viewer himself must also walk around the entire work, which lies on the floor. Through the use of this round format, Steiner alters the usual way of looking at a drawing and, in an analogy to sculpture, introduces the principle of the overall view.

Even before traveling to China, the artist had studied the concept of space in traditional Chinese painting. In theoretical writings, she discovered an intellectual foundation for the conception of her own work. The notion of space is a fundamental principle of Chinese aesthetics; it introduces discontinuity and reversibility into a given system, allowing individual elements to overcome rigid oppositions and one-sided developments. In the fine arts, the creative principle of space suspends the effect of linear perspective and makes mutual interaction possible—the intertwining of man and nature within a single painting, on one hand, and, on the other, the interplay between the viewer and the painting as a whole.²

Steiner also embraces the understanding of space as it is in traditional Chinese aesthetics—not as something vague or non-existent, but rather, as a decidedly active, dynamic element that can be introduced into her drawing. Using space as the polar opposite of overabundant phenomena, Steiner's works create open, illusionary expanses that draw the viewer into their vortex.

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² Francois Cheng, *Fülle und Leere. Die Sprache der chinesischen Malerei*, Berlin 2004, pp. 52ff.

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