

## MIAO MIAO - A PRE-ARRANGED LIFE

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As an artist, born in China in 1986, Miao Miao's practice addresses the tension between past morphologies of world-making and the accelerated shifts experienced in twenty-first century life. Her conceptual and sensory paintings counterbalance the proliferation of virtual and increasingly AI-generated metascapas that permeate the narratives and media of millennial artists. Instead, she looks to calmly retrieve the "borders of the world" (Georgio Agamben) within the rootedness of her daily existence as an artist in Beijing. Her gaze is fluid and humble. It can alight on the intersection of two urban streets, company housing bathed in the red glow of the sun, a hedge-lined lane lit by a sickle moon, or a deadpan row of gravestones. With her unrelenting eye, Miao Miao perceives skin tones in the remnants of cloth, recognises mutant forms in leftover furniture, and plays games with chemical colour codes. Like poetic puzzles, her paintings are visual parables that draw on distant memories of place while sensing future forms of life. Similar to a medieval Mystery play or a Ming Dynasty tale, they transport us to allegorical fields of human interaction. Colour plays a significant role here, located between the artist's interest in chemical phenomena, and the rich metaphorical and literary attributes conferred onto tone and hue. Through her paintings, she asks us to question what we take for granted in the world around us. If we inhabit a "pre-arranged life" with an inevitable formatting of domesticity, nature, and even death, then perhaps painting can transport us beyond the labyrinth of laws and the forest of words that control our every step. Mirroring the opening lines of Can Xue's novel, in which the "Summer night was full of mystery," Miao Miao's artworks show how agency can be rekindled through an aesthetic of "material reasoning" (Can Xue), an embodied approach to painting, which like a performative logic acts through the soul and the senses.

In the exhibition "A pre-arranged life", Miao Miao contrasts the sobriety of the built environment, its walled homesteads, city junctions, and artificial lights with lush, supernatural glades and dizzy moonlit pathways. People are not to be seen in these paintings. Instead, they are present in the sculptural works, in the paravents that she describes as the "enlarged pages of a book on everyday strangers." Portraying lowly professions such as cleaners and guards, she paints their abstract gestures on one side of the wooden screen, and the tools of their trade on the other. There are sponges, clothes-hangers, leg-like brooms, and mops, which like the palette of "women-work" - a term once used by CCP feminists (Wang Zheng) - identifies the tone of repetitive, subaltern modes of survival. In this sense, her paravents are "textual objects that signify art and solidarities" (Michel de Certeau) evoking a subtle song of resistance against the invisibility of working-class labour.

With "Ankles after work", Miao Miao sculpts the brutal weight placed on that pivotal joint into a fantasy form. A bony growth covered with a black and pink striped sock resembles a joystick, a handle with which to articulate the shape below – an incongruous morphing of a bound foot, a futuristic shoe, and a horse hoof. Reminiscent of queer icon Leigh Bowery's fetishist platform shoes that extended up the human leg, or a "Paßstück" (Adaptive) by Franz West that acts as a playful yet neurotic prosthetic, her sculptures can be read as de-forming ontologies. No longer is it the "informe" (Georges Bataille) that characterises a fascination with formless debased phenomena such as spit or dust, or the Ready-made of Marcel Duchamp with its silent, expatriation of original function. Instead, Miao Miao's de-form transgresses inherited moulds whatever their status with a humorous and diffident practice of tailored taxidermy. For "Swan Velvet Snail Turntable" she takes forest green cloth and together with a yoga ball and a Pilates stool sews and moulds a new shape for human repose, an ergonomic support structure that speculates on developments in future bodily needs. She stitches fragments of colour together, just as she tailors painted surfaces so that they go beyond both function and medium. The result is parabolic movement, a dynamic between painting and sculpture built from layers of pigment and collages of found materials and trapped objects, which like body parts are filtered through the artist's "fleshy eye" (Merleau-Ponty).

In “Two Trees (Big)”, a willowish phantom limb curls itself around the tangled, sinewy branches of a tree. Resembling giant ants, these wiry offshoots speak of a foreboding nature to come, a world transmogrified into fleshy, man-eating botanica. With “Two Trees (Small)”, the bush is so plump and patterned it appears to dance against the backdrop of a building the artist once saw while travelling to Rome. Sensitive to cultural coding, Miao Miao’s house walls are painted in those ubiquitous, municipal shades of dull beige and brick red that can be found on public buildings around the world. Against distinct sections of blue and white pigment, she superimposes diverse shades until they coalesce into a poetic representation of colour. From a wall painted with “yellowish brown sesame paste” to leaves the “colour of pickled cucumbers” (Can Xue), Miao Miao translates the landscape she sees with her naked eyes from an exterior colour system into her own associative and sensory world. Never self-indulgent, she will speak in the next instance of pigment and colour as purely chemical formulae. This conceptual “biotope of perception” (Remy Zaugg) gives her work a powerful contemporary quality in which environmental questions combine with aesthetic and scientific experimentation. It is an “ecology of ideas” (Gregory Bateson) that stimulates an inclusive polymathic condition which flourishes in Miao Miao’s hands and takes her work beyond status painting toward an interrelationship between art and social practices.

With “Travel Destination”, she embarks on a new phase of painting with a level of detail she has not tried out before. “I wanted to make the painting chaotic, complex, but still base it on a scene I saw in my hometown in Henan province,” she explains. The viewer looks onto a clearing between an avenue of burgeoning trees. Microscopic specks of light fly across and illuminate the voluptuous green foliage. Bordering the grassy vale are mounds of black and red earth cast into strange semi-organic shapes by falling shadows. The scene is mesmerising. Miao Miao traps us into this languid *Deja-vu*, this natural honeypot of a landscape. At the centre of the glade stands a small house more like a doll’s home than a human’s. When asked about this visual phantom, she replies that it signifies her childhood, now distant in time and space. The painting is so luminous it emanates solace as if imbued with spectral energy. But Miao Miao is never pathos driven. Her practice does not allow for easy characterisation. With “Travel Destination” we could easily be in a chemical paradise, looking onto the acid green of a synthetic Spring. Her paintings are not realities out there, but situations filtered and remodelled through metabolic mimesis, a “submersion in the bodily underground of the mind” (Michael Taussig), tinted with hallucinogenic pigments that fly out of our habitual orbit. And when they do return to earth they are, in the words of Goethe, “atmospheric colours”, dynamic phenomena influenced by the play of light and shadow on particles in the air.

Asked if digital technology has produced a shift in the understanding of colour, Miao Miao’s answer is precise: however one may perceive colour, ultimately it is translated through the phenomenology of sensory perception, through long periods of observation that run through one’s memory via the organs of the body eventually producing another code. “I think every artist has two colour series: one is the real colour system, the other is the colour the artist uses,” she replies. By joining a paint manufacturing company early on in her career, she had the opportunity to study, observe, research, and eventually teach colour science. “The factory produced industrial pigments, so that was my entry point – learning colours through their practical creation.”

Deep observation is key to Miao Miao’s methodology of artistic practice. With the obsession and skills of an anthropologist, she can locate phenomena in daily life that hold onto certain virtues, to potential qualities beyond their initial function. For example, she picks up on the aesthetics of signboards, and records catchy phrases from advertising or labels. “Every me is borrowed” she inscribes in English and Chinese on a painted stick from 2021. Elsewhere, she borders a drawing with the words “Flesh tint” “Payne’s grey”, and “Titan’s pale green”, quoting the classification of colour according to the paint company, Winsor & Newton. The paravent, or extended book (“Security Guards and Cleaners”, 2025), includes two Chinese characters graphically camouflaged within the painting. They denote the protagonists’ roles but ultimately are so abstracted they become interchangeable. Sometimes the titles of her paintings are the length of a sentence or even two, and should script and scroll be connected, then Miao Miao paints on narrow strips of collaged canvas that hang from the wall and land in a curve on the floor.

“I am lying” these paintings are named, alluding both to her distortion of Chinese traditional scrolls, and the position of the painting as it lies on the floor. Reminiscent of small carpets, mats, blinds, or even towels, these are the domestic objects she deconstructs and reinvents.

Sometimes an ominous sensation of a future world emanates from Miao Miao’s paintings. In “City Night with Waves”, her perspective lands on a junction of built structures seen from the back like a generic view of suburban life. Perched on a grey platform is an advertising board and a sign viewed in reverse. Two red and green neon arrows are poised to blink. In the background, a factory or block of flats provides no indication of activity. There is a stillness to the scene as if it represented a moment of “congealed action”, the coming together of “non-material intentionality.” (Eduardo Viveiros de Castro). Six wave-like shapes suggest informal monuments grown from the charred stumps of trees. The largest is pierced through by a yellow and black stick, the kind that is used by traffic police. With its realism, it could be a scenario from a movie, a classic contextual moment in which to introduce the plot. In another painting, “Home” (2025), a fiery orange sun illuminates the cross-section of a city. Houses, a factory and a church are built from the same tones and thickness as the pavements. The monopoly of home over the soul rebounds in the slabs of marbled crimson, dirty pink, earth brown and grey. There is a reminiscence of De Chirico’s enigmatic architecture which lends her subject a feeling of emptiness and anonymity, but as with “City Night with Waves” the painting is imbued with mystery and anticipation. In “Home (small)” (2025), her eye alights on the most contained of built structures: gravestones in a graveyard. Painted in saturated greys, blues, and shades of yellow, the composition is fractured by an incongruous group of smaller paintings pinned directly onto the canvas. This swatch of turquoise and orange shapes that includes a perfect red heart hangs from the painting like a set of votives, bright offerings of life to the deceased. With this catalogue of memories and emotions, the assemblage not only sets the gravestone apart from its neighbours but distinguishes the artist’s quasi-animist philosophy through which a relived experience is triggered by fragile material extensions placed onto the painting and suggestive of transcendence.

Against today’s flood of scopic regimes, Miao Miao’s paintings are anchors helping us to relearn how to apprehend common things through a process of slow internal translation and corporeal synaesthesia. Mature rather than girly, condensed rather than loose, elegant and transgressive at once, her practice stands apart in an artworld often obsessed with scale and speed. Her stance is both scientific and colloquial. She repaints desk globes with whitewash (“Earth’s Milk”, 2020), or turns them into teaching aids with chromatic gradients, ingeniously highlighting the codification of colour in the ideology of race, but equally the saturations of hue discussed in 18th century Chinese philosophy (Wu Xing). She adds further references including 20th century domestic textile design to recast the aesthetics of popular printmaking and reaches out to the modesty of the “second-hand” with her collages and sculptures made from found textiles and disused objects. Her paintings extend across the sites and structures of daily life producing a contagious feeling of visual euphoria, of being a witness to the scene-by-scene transformation of human, plant and animal life in the twenty-first century. Each painting is a tableau vivant of Miao Miao’s sensitive ecology of colour, form, and ideas. The exhibition stresses the individuality of her artistic position at a moment in time in which our consciousness of the world begs for paintings that commune between the grassroots and the metaphysical. Oscillating between phenomena that might exist or might not, her paintings capture our inner mind.

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REFERENCES (in order of citation)

Quotations from the artist are taken from a conversation between Miao Miao and the author in Beijing on July 17th, 2025.

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Remy Zaugg, "Each work in its locus, or environment with people has its own matrix for perception, its own biotope of perception, its own ecomiche of perception." In "The Art Museum of My Dreams or a Place for the Work and the Human Being." (1998) 2014 Gregory Bateson, "Let me state my beliefs that such matters as the bilateral symmetry of an animal, the patterned arrangement of leaves in a plant, the escalation of an armaments race, the processes of courtship, the nature of play, the grammar of a sentence, the mystery of biological evolution, and the contemporary crises in man's relationship to his (sic) environment, can only be understood in terms of such an ecology of ideas." In "Steps to an Ecology of Mind", 1972

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J. W. Goethe, "Theory of Colours", (1810) 1967

Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, "Artifacts possess an ambiguous ontology: they are objects, but they necessarily indicate a subject, for they are like congealed actions, material embodiments of a non-material intentionality." In *Métaphysiques Cannibales*", 2009