

## ANGST AND EROTICA

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In her Hong Kong debut, Shanghai artist Ann New portrays a new generation of urban Chinese women, writes Alonzo Emery

FROM A DISTANCE, the paintings of Shanghai artist Ann New (adapted from her Chinese name Niu An) appear merely to render lithe female forms in soft, fluid lines. On closer inspection, these lines yield to violent brush work, scratched out faces and contortions associated more with hysteria than bliss. This is the bewildering dichotomy New will try to explain during her first Hong Kong talk, on Friday. It's also the theme of her new show, *Angel is Terrified*, which opens next month at Mid-Levels' Chouinard Gallery HK / Sin Sin Fine Art.

In an attempt to capture the agony and ecstasy of modern urban life, New uses themes and subject matter that she says are both sweet and terrifying. "I think young people living in big cities can really relate to this type of conflict," she says. "You see many people on the street, and yet you feel lonely all the time. So, young women try to transform themselves into angels. We use cosmetics and clothes to look perfect, and yet we're still broken in many ways."

In an attempt to capture this take on life (equal parts optimistic and depressing), New painted a series of portraits on pastel backgrounds. She says viewers associate the background hues with makeup, fashion and the trappings of young urban beauties. But in the foreground, she paints unpolished faces, composed of rough brush strokes, representing the sad truth that often lies beneath a carefully manicured façade.

New says she gets the inspiration for such paintings from her immediate surroundings, which enables her to paint honestly and naturally. But viewers shouldn't be fooled by her professed organic approach to creation. New began a classical arts education at the age of five, and early on studied the works of painters such as Jean-Michel Basquiat, Francis Bacon and Francesco Clement. Although she's conscious of these influences, New says her work isn't derivative. Speaking of a large portrait with muscular brush strokes reminiscent of some of Bacon's later portraits, she says: "I think everyone has favorites, and I can't ignore art, of course. But, naturally, some influences come out through my fingers."

Her latest muse comes from literature rather than the visual arts. The poems of German writer Rainer Maria Rilke, who scratched out his lines in a dingy room on the Left Bank of Paris in the early 1900s, inspired the exhibition title *Angel is Terrified*. But unlike Rilke, New is no starving artist. Her large, well-kept apartment-cum-studio, off Shanghai's fashionable Huai Hai Road, is a testament to her eclectic style. It's at once refined and orderly, and yet spontaneous in its choice of colour and quirky furnishings.

New attributes much of her design sensibilities to the time she spent living and studying in Japan. She attended the Musashino Fine Arts Academy in Tokyo, where she focused on interior and industrial design, rather than painting. She later worked in an architectural firm, but soon gave it up. "I knew I could do it," she says. "But I wanted to dedicate myself to things I enjoyed and could control, like painting." In returning to art, New has made a conscious effort to work on the development of her oeuvre, rather than a business. She limits herself to a maximum of two shows a year.

For Angel is Terrified, New is working with fashion and jewelry designer Sin Sin, who started a collaboration with Chouinard Gallery in August. Sin Sin says artists need to focus on developing their work, rather than on profits. "Some artists I've met become like a machine, with commissions everywhere," she says. "I wonder, 'Are they working in a factory here or what?'".

Sin Sin says the art market in Hong Kong is not easy. "Most of the collectors are western expatriates. The Chinese, for various reasons, sometimes only want to buy from the famous artists, the 'brand name'." Nonetheless, she says she's optimistic this will change. "I have confidence in the younger generation. Those in their late 20s and early 30s have been abroad, and they come back wanting to buy and appreciate art," she says.

To meet that demand, Sin Sin says she intends the gallery to be as much about education as sales. "Of course, if we sell pieces, we're happy," she says. "But the reason I opened the gallery was complete passion, complete emotion. If I only thought about business, I would be bored."

New's work will be the first by a Shanghainese and the first by a woman artist to be shown at the new Chouinard / Sin sin gallery. Not unreasonably, much commentary on New's work centers on gender. It's hard to miss the sexual energy emanating from a large painting of a female nude with her genitals highlighted in electric green. In their emphasis on the female form, New's paintings appear to capture the obsessions of an artist viewing the subjects with a massive culine gaze. "I'm an art student, and it was male instructors who taught us how to paint the female body," she says. "So, I started to appreciate the female form through a man's eyes."

New sees the blending of gender roles and sexuality as a natural result of modern urban life. "I myself am not a lesbian, but there's nothing wrong with me trying to understand women and to be close to them," she says. This attempt to be intimate with her subject informs her artistic process, as well. "I don't like to take photos when I'm working, because the process is about intimacy, it's about making love. How can I let people watch or photograph that?"

Author Mian Mian, whose novel Candy was banned by the Chinese government, wrote an essay about New's work, entitled Sweet Hunger. In it, she describes New as a "quintessential Shanghai girl", a type who is characteristically self-absorbed and constantly seeking pleasure. "They are equally attracted to boyish men and fatherly men," she writes. "Men are, indeed, the most important things in their lives."

Although not all this necessarily fits New, given the description of a man-obsessed quintessential Shanghai girl, viewers of her latest show might be left only with a desire to see her bend gender roles yet again, by tackling the male form. But, perhaps, this is too rigid a demand to place on an artist – or fodder for her next exhibition.

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