







STILLS FROM *YOU CAN'T ARGUE WITH A FISH*, 2010



PEARL C. HSIUNG

A recent early-career survey of Pearl C. Hsiung's work at the Vincent Price Art Museum at East Los Angeles College confirms that hers is a leading and original voice among L.A. painters. A tour through the galleries of assembled works provided evidence of an impressive and committed practice consisting of bold large-scale canvases, elaborate small studies, and complementary painterly performance videos. The space Hsiung opens up between representation and abstraction is remarkably funny, sly, and imaginative. Her paintings deal in mastery, carefully utilizing a variety of applications, moving swiftly among different modes of signification. The intensely colorful works' visual aggressiveness agitates against the banality of tasteful images that dominate postminimalist contemporary art. Still, Hsiung's compositions play among many of painting's big issues, recalling European fauvism and surrealism, Chinese landscape painting, American abstraction, and International image culture. The graphic qualities of her images complicate notions of genre and fields of production. A hard line brings to mind certain twentieth-century modes of painting such as early Kelly or early Stella, while at the same time raising possibilities of comic books or advertising: a splattered, misty background simultaneously signals high-end expressionism and street art produced from a can. These polarities of high and low, mass culture and counterculture, bring together a vibrant world of images, marshaled by Hsiung's technical acuity and presented without any anxiety about the contaminations that ensue when fine art is made crass, or popular art hobnobs with elite forms, or advanced art finds itself the butt of a juvenile joke. Hsiung enables these contaminations without sacrificing any commitment to skill or to beauty. All this amounts to an arresting body of work that, despite its recycling of so much history, feels strikingly original.

Hsiung's subject matter typically raises questions about the nature of nature. Hers are landscapes that are always on the verge of becoming portraits, as sublime volcanoes and waterfalls teem with body parts and human orifices. The semianthropomorphic moves question the idea of an *a priori* environment that lives without us. The moment we perceive the wild world is the moment our bodies become the context for understanding the terms of life. Scenes of steam bursting, fluids overflowing, and holes gaping contain enormous sexual energy and suggest scatological impulses. Grotesque visual references conjure a Bakhtinian idea of a carnivalesque body, one that is not contained by rational individual consciousness but is instead characterized by various bodily openings to the world and messy, pleasurable physical processes that function in relation to other bodies. While the classical body can argue about the moment when human life begins, for example, the grotesque body is embedded in a soup of life that never really starts or stops. While the classical body imagines nature as out there in some cordoned-off national park, the grotesque body knows too well that we are swimming in it.

The paintings appear to be having a good deal of fun in that philosophical space while Hsiung's video works tend to isolate these concerns around her own body. She plays the artist, painting landscapes with peanut butter or cookies in her mouth or wearing a comic mustache as she flies above the Pacific Ocean. These projects bring her ideas into an order of social space, beyond the pictorial plane. Hsiung's project for this exhibition, a sited painting environment, is an opportunity for the artist to further explore the real experience of two-dimensional space and the psychic processes that mediate between social life, nature, and constructed images.

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