



EMI AVORA
ATHENS, GREECE

It's hard to get excited about painting these days, especially when the medium has to stand up to a range of art practices that thrive on pushing the boundaries of concept, perception, and approach. In a recent article for *Modern Painters*, Barry Schwabsky noted, "Painting has been decisively rejected by the bureaucratic structures of art administration in Europe, whereas it still has strong support from the market... I'd advise any young painters who yearn to be in the next Documenta to down their brushes immediately."

With her solo exhibition *The Tiger in the Theatre (From Baroque to Superama)* [Apartment Gallery; November 5—December 19, 2009] and her simultaneous inclusion in *Paint-id*, an exhibition curated by Sotirios Bahtetzis, featuring twenty young Greek painters at the Alex Mylonas Museum, Emi Avora seems to be straddling the two worlds quite nicely. Barely even thirty years old, the London-based Greek artist has already contributed work to an impressive list of solo gallery shows and group exhibitions in public institutions. For a young painter, this is nothing short of remarkable.

Surely that can only mean one thing—Avora shouldn't put her brush down just yet. On view at the Apartment, her trademark large canvases depict lavish baroque interiors built up with light, fluid strokes that create a fantastical world of dreams and nightmares where everything is liquefied. Avora mostly sticks to one color and its myriad shades, adding a sense of depth already created by lines used to build perspective in two-dimensional surfaces. Taking inspiration from real-estate brochures, glossy magazines, and historical architecture, the work stands in flux, neither completely past nor present.

For the most part, magenta and forest green are Avora's colors of choice. The fuchsia canvases are rich and decorative while surfaces dedicated to gory greens and yellows create a sense of decay in opulent settings that appear to be melting. In *Frontal*, 2007, and *Parallel Worlds*, 2007, it is as if Avora travelled underwater to paint images of the doomed Titanic from life in order to

document the process of decay as it happens. Perhaps this is what Van Gogh meant when he expressed the wish for people to see the world as he saw it—nothing is still, nothing is certain—everything moves and decays. Eventually, we all dissolve.

In Avora's canvases, perspectives swallow the viewer up, placing us within the scene itself—if not for a minute. The dramatic, theatrical qualities of these ghostlike, abandoned interiors create sets that cry out for a protagonist to make them real and solid. Of course, this won't happen—just as in dreams, the subconscious never sticks around long enough to make visions tangible, in an exhibition context, no one stays long enough to mould those lines into a palpable form. Such is the pace of life. Suddenly, the present and history become blurry visions whipped up into a Shakespearean tempest where reality becomes illusion.

In Avora's paintings, the image is rendered abstract. As such, the works are glorious celebrations of paint, and the capabilities of the brush. In *Forest*, 2008, for example, the exuberant, extravagant colors invite us to swim in pools of decadence—and the offer is hard to decline. Nevertheless, a signal always tells us when it is time to leave these semi-real worlds. The lavish table in *Dinner*, 2007, illustrates this clearly. One should never accept candy from strange paintings. In Avora's case, however, maybe we should.

—Stephanie Bailey



STILL WATER
ATLANTA

Still Water features works by sixteen artists and focuses on that mundane liquid that makes life possible [Dalton Gallery, Agnes Scott College; October 8—November 22, 2009]. These works put forth the importance of water for our physical survival and spiritual wellbeing. They also remind us of a number of looming dangers: pollution of our water sources as well as the depletion of reservoirs, lakes, and rivers because of population growth and unrestricted land development. The show spreads from inside the gallery to a number of outdoor sites around the Agnes Scott campus.

In Linda Armstrong's *Waterwars*, 2009, hundreds of multicolored toy water pistols, mounted in regimented rows on a wall, are pointed at the viewer. It's funny at first, but the experience turns ominous when water and fun give way to water and death.

Aviva Rahmani's wonderfully inventive eco-cyber *Gulf to Gulf*, 2009, uses the web to produce and reproduce real-time teleconferences seeking to solve environmental problems. The conferences include scientists, environmental experts, and artists, with Rahmani responding to the ideas and strategies expressed by the participants with "performative paintings" made possible by a web tool called WebEx. Ideas and applications brilliantly emerge throughout the teleconferences, and Rahmani's variously subtle cyber-images are more of a subjective accompaniment than a specific commentary.

Katherine Taylor's large oil painting *Marine*, 2009, reveals another dimension of the theme. The work portrays a group of aircraft-carrier warships at sea painted in a manner that evokes the romantic seascapes of J.M.W. Turner and the soft focus of Impressionism. The tension between subject and style generates a grim awareness of state-sponsored instruments of violence and their continuing use.

Refined?, 2009, *Treatment?*, 2009, and *Sanitary?*, 2009, Linda Gass' stitched paintings on quilted silk, respectively feature aerial views of an oil refinery, a sewage treatment plant, and a sanitary landfill. Located on the shore of San Francisco Bay, these sites constitute

ABOVE. LEFT TO RIGHT: Emi Avora, *Forest*, 2008, oil on linen, 155 x 175 cm [courtesy of the artist and Apartment Gallery, Athens]; Aviva Rahmani, *SOS: Gulf to Gulf*, 2009, virtual concert, installation, dimensions variable [courtesy of the artist and The Dalton Gallery, Agnes Scott College, Atlanta]



CHI PENG
ATLANTA

a threat to the local ecosystem. Gass uses greens, blues, and earth tones, along with the quilted silk's three-dimensional quality, to suggest topographical maps. Here, the cool color harmonies and the silk's rich sensuality make these works quite beautiful. Some viewers have, in fact, criticized them as too pretty for their subject matter. More importantly, they require us to reconsider, and ultimately revise, the conventional use of ugliness to depict industrial waste, sewage, and garbage. Might not this strategy paradoxically produce an even greater awareness of their danger?

Outside, Patricia Tinajero presents *Sprouting Water*, 2009, a site-specific alternative water filtration system made of organic and recycled materials. Installed in the gallery's courtyard, this labyrinth of containers and tubing seems about to come to life. Its function calls attention to widespread lack of clean water, which brings disease and death. In Mandy Greer's *Mater, Matrix, Mother and Medium*, 2009, crocheted blue fabric is stretched in magnolia trees, suggesting water. Tom Zarrilli's wryly humorous installation, *A Song for the Dead Gardens*, 2008–2009, consists of gutterspouts, hoses, nozzles, sprinklers, wind chimes, and a tall censer arranged totem-style in accordance with the Southwestern Chaco culture's rituals for invoking rain.

William Nixon's impressive *Salmon Run*, 2008–2009, counts over two hundred life-size ceramic salmon, none identical, heading uphill to spawn. They swim, jump, and dive in a stream of bare dirt strewn with pine needles and autumn leaves beside an asphalt path. Sometimes only a tail or a dorsal fin is visible, furthering the illusion of water. The fish exist symbolically and simultaneously as the species now threatened with extinction by pollution and development and as the wise and spiritually powerful beings respected by Northwestern Native Americans. Nixon's anthropological take on an ecological crisis is both thought-provoking and inspirational.

—Lucas Carpenter

Yes, it helps to understand that the twenty-eight-year-old Chinese artist is referencing a seminal sixteenth-century Chinese text by Wu Cheng'en in his photographic series *The Journey to the West*. But the impact of Chi Peng's work isn't necessarily lessened by entering into his riotously funny, impressive solo show cold, without the labyrinthine cultural context (Kiang Gallery; October 9–December 19, 2009). Immediately graspable, in a way that allows the work to function on myriad levels, is the often humorous, and occasionally disturbing, collision Chi sets up between a traditional China—represented by the ornate gold and red costume and painted face which the artist dons in the series—and a new world of laboratory-sleek kitchens, glass and steel skyscrapers, and *Fight Club* DVDs. Chi's *Journey to the West* is not literal, but virtual, as his alter ego is sucked into a computer screen or imagines himself as a web-spewing Spiderman assailing pedestrians on the streets of Beijing. Despite the riggings of his traditional garb, the West is clearly in his, and in China's, blood.

In Wu Cheng'en's *The Journey to the West*, the West is India, visited by a monk and his monkey helpmate on a fantastical journey to recover Buddhist manuscripts. In Chi's hands, the West is defined by the seductive, inescapable allure of popular culture. Chi inserts himself into his constructed scenarios as Wu Cheng'en's Monkey King hero with that particular stage set-, film still-evocative aura reminiscent of Cindy Sherman and Jeff Wall. But the tone of these works is also deeply indebted, in its physical anarchy and outlandish slapstick humor, to Chinese and Hong Kong action cinema where figures sail through the air in feats of gravity-free acrobatic wonder.

The mood of the pieces ranges from anarchical and ridiculous to thoughtful and critical. In *The Cave of Silken Web (Destination)*, 2007, Chi is endowed with the powers of the Western superhero Spiderman, assailing a group of passersby on a modern city street with tendrils of silk, disabling them into silken cocoons. Here, Chi's Monkey King alter ego references and also utilizes one

singular element of Western pop culture. In other instances, he is devoured by it, sucked à la *Poltergeist* into a computer screen and the new frontiers of Google and Yahoo. In *Five Elements Mountain*, 2007, Chi is trapped like a fly in sticky paper, his body devoured by a fusilli-twisted ladder of skyscrapers whose modernity strangles him: a helpless totem of the past.

A wholesale embrace of a Western-defined modernity is clearly problematic for Chi—it is undeniably encumbered by those heavy garments, for one. His alter ego sails in and out of his scenarios, a dispassionate observer at some moments, a suddenly engaged protagonist or a tiny, mischievous imp in others. Chi seems most confounded when contemplating the vast, historical contradictions of Chinese life. In these works, his image shrinks to Lilliputian size to reflect the enormity of the conundrum. In the photographic frieze *Buddha*, 2007, Chi is a tiny, distant, gnat-sized figure who flies away from a panoply of statues splayed out in the foreground: history is both skyline and graveyard in its mash up of Buddhas, Indian deities, cherubs, and pagodas. In *Uproar in the Heaven-3.3*, 2007, Chi represents himself as a mischievous Puck-like figure seated on the edge of a restaurant table gnawing a cracker. He turns his back to the recently abandoned lavish, impressive, gluttonous banquet meal, in repudiation of such waste and excess. If Western modernity is a threat in other images, Chi directs his critique at traditional shows of wealth and plenty in *Uproar in the Heaven*. Similarly, in *Three Fights against the White Bone Demon-1*, 2007, tradition seems to have failed our hero, who stands, back to us, in the foreground. In the distance, a father, framed in a rustic domestic setting, chides his small son. The intent is ambiguous. Does the primal scene represent Chi's own past—and perhaps the particular lot of growing up gay in China?—or merely one generation taking another to task? Such ambiguities are intriguing rather than frustrating in a show loaded with ambition, scope, and playfulness.

—Felicia Feaster

INSIDE FRONT COVER: Chi Peng, *True and False Monkey King*, 2007, 47.25 x 87.75 inches, ed. 10 [courtesy of the artist and Kiang Gallery, Atlanta] / ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Mandy Greer, *Mater, Matrix, Mother and Medium*, 2009, crocheted fiber installation, dimensions variable [courtesy of the artist and The Dalton Gallery, Agnes Scott College, Atlanta]; Chi Peng, *Three Fights Against the White Bone Demon-3*, 2007, 47.25 x 59.5 inches, ed. 10 [courtesy of the artist and Kiang Gallery, Atlanta]