

The Greater Reality

Intuitive paintings by Miao Hui-Xin

Vital energy that emanates from vibrant colors and rhythms first strikes the visitor upon entering the White Lotus gallery, where *The Greater Reality: Intuitive Paintings by Miao Hui-Xin* (b. 1959) is currently on view through Oct. 22.

Miao has worked as a farmer his entire life and still does. He began painting when the Chinese Communist regime was actively encouraging peasant art by sending trained artists to teach classes in rural communities. So-called Chinese peasant painting, a relatively recent genre, emerged in the late 1950s as a government-promoted, nationwide peasant art movement that led to the creation of rural art communes sometimes known as “painting villages” or “peasant artist colonies.”

However, Miao’s work has little to do with this mainstream Chinese peasant art. The two superficially share some traits, to be sure: bright colors (although Miao’s wide-ranging palette also includes sober, muted tones); a strong sense of compositional design; narrative elements; frequent use of a

bird’s eye view; indifference to perspective; and spatial realism (in keeping with Chinese tradition but to a different effect).

Nonetheless, fundamental characteristics of Chinese peasant art are entirely absent from Miao’s paintings, especially the idealization of daily life into prettily happy scenes and the absence of individuality. But themes of everyday life in Miao’s works are intimate and personal rather than collective and ideologically sanctioned. A mainstream peasant artist, after coming up with a design, will paint it again and again, thus mass-producing his or her “originals” for the tourist trade. In contrast, Miao’s work is remarkably varied and keeps evolving.

The American label “outsider art,” though sometimes stretched as a marketing ploy to include all but mainstream art, strictly speaking refers to works by marginal individuals, such as the mentally ill, the institutionalized, recluses, antisocial characters. It was coined in 1972 as an equivalent for the French term *Art Brut* (“Raw Art”) and has been applied to Miao’s work, wrongly. Miao, a well-integrated member of his community, was from the start aware of the peasant art produced around him. He considers himself an artist and has a successful relationship with the art world at large.

Moreover, Miao’s is not an art turned obsessively inward but instead is inspired by and revels in the social world around him — family members, friends, musicians. It is also about emotions such as love and its corollaries (togetherness, tenderness, sadness) as well as exuberance and exultation in life (dancing, making music, feeling the wind, tasting corn).

Folk art, often functional, draws upon a community’s cultural traditions and indigenous crafts for its techniques and motifs. It is thus inherently conservative. Miao, in contrast, has worked out formal solutions of his own. His pictorial representations are highly eccentric. Indeed, if one considers that pur-



Family Compound II, gouache by Miao Hui-Xin

suit of individualism is not in and of itself part of traditional Chinese culture, Miao does appear to possess a rebellious streak. (He was the first in his village to wear jeans.)

Miao’s work is rooted in the artist’s experience of his everyday culture, rather than in that culture’s traditional means of expression. Indeed, along the way, Miao’s painting has evolved into an art that reinvents the journey of prominent modern European painters.

It is astonishing to discover, in this largely self-taught artist, echoes of Matisse in the treatment of color and picture plane (*Fruits*), Picasso (*Upon Departure*, *Seven Sculptures*, *Love, Red, Family*), Chagall (*Mother*, *A Few White Clouds*, *Cellist*), German Expressionism and African art.

Miao combines Chinese and Western perspectives and often playfully distorts both. Gravity sometimes appears defied, people and trees airborne. From *Family Compound I to II*, the complexity of planes has increased from representing a whimsical architecture within the realm of possibility (see Piet Blom’s cube houses in Rotterdam) to depiction of an impossible space in a loosely Escherian sense.

Miao breaks up the surfaces of garments and bodies into angular geometric facets of colors, some of them reminiscent of a Harlequin’s costume. He also breaks them into decorative patterns and patchworks or

into free-form areas of color. As a result, his work suggests a playful three-dimensionality. In *Wind* the characters and their background are all broken into bands of different colors, as if people, land and air shared the same essence which the wind refracts into colors like a prism.



Mother and Daughter, gouache by Miao Hui-Xin

Facial expressions achieve great emotional subtlety despite often exaggerated facial features.

This highly original work touches us emotionally with the humanity, poetry and sincerity of its content as well as with the freshness and energy of its execution. **EW**



Seven Sculptures in front of the Portland Art Museum, gouache by Miao Hui-Xin

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