

## Tragedy or Farce – New Masterpieces by Jiny Lan

The Ruhr area in Germany, the port city of Tianjin in Northern China, the world art center of Venice: three places between which there is perhaps no obvious connection, apart from the arts and artist Jiny Lan.

At a meeting in the Ruhr area she invites us to join her to go to her exhibition "Meisterwerke" (masterpieces) in the Ludwiggalerie in Oberhausen. During the journey she mixes everything together in a breathless narrative: the arts and her artistic development, politics and feminism, life in the Ruhr area. In a figure-hugging warrior look, she sits at the wheel of her minibus as if she had sprung from a film by Quentin Tarantino.

The navigation system babbles unnoticed and the bus has to turn around behind a dusty exit in Gelsenkirchen. The painter doesn't care much about it, there are other things that are really worth getting angry about. State censorship, for example. Or Georg Baselitz.

Until she was 25 years old, Jiny Lan lived in China. Since then she has known what it feels like to be subject to a repressive state apparatus. "After studying art, I spent a year working for the newspaper People's Daily, also known as the 'Tongue of the Party'. I could write three books about this short time, two of them would contain only nightmares." Then she moved to the West, fell in love with the Ruhr area and just stayed there: residence in Bochum, studio in the Joseph-Beuys-City Düsseldorf.

After all, Jiny Lan has managed to retain her non-conformism, which she already showed in kindergarten, all the way through her time at People's Daily: "At the age of five, my mother locked me up at home, and I painted the whole floor with chalk." During the Cultural Revolution, a student who was sent to her village as part of the "intellectual youth" discovered and developed her talent. Today he is a professor of painting at Shenyang university.

Jiny Lan refers to herself as a painter, although she also works with performances, installations and video. It is a political statement, her kind of a new feminist historiography, her answer to the German painter Georg Baselitz, who said several times in interviews: women can't paint. As proof of this, he cites an art market in which paintings by men are traded at much higher prices.

For Jiny Lan, who founded China's first feminist artist collective "Bald Girls" in 2012, this art market is an inscrutable madness. Above all, the fact that paintings by men are more popular has to do with the longer history of men in this art form and the times in which women were not allowed to attend art academies. "But I can't change history, I can only show now that I'm a good painter."

In her "Meisterwerke" she shows this with large-format portraits of famous German artists. Already as a child she was able to portray people recognizably. In her first years in the Ruhr area she kept herself afloat as a portrait painter at county fairs and festivals. "Once I have become really famous, many working-class families will share my fortune, having originals from me at home," she says and laughs. Her penchant for warrior-like outfits dates back to her time at the funfairs: "Tarantino made people believe that it can be very dangerous to annoy small Asian women. I've been treated with respect ever since I started wearing these clothes."

Her "masterpieces" are impressive, wild and powerful mixtures of reality and dream images. They are homage and political statement, a game with Chinese and European painting traditions.

And the painter has no fear of contacts: once she portrayed Angela Merkel in the style of a Chinese emperor and Christian Lindner, an opposition leader, acquired the painting for his office. In the current show she lets Georg Baselitz plunge naked down a waterfall.

She contrasts his saying "Women can't paint – that's a fact" with another fact: "Water flows downwards." In another picture, Gerhard Richter's superimposed faces hover over cheering followers waving banknotes.

Less easy to decipher is her portrait of Anselm Kiefer, whom she fuses with a black piece of cloth that hangs in front of the Reichstag. An eagle's beak is painted at the place of his sex. "In the 1960s, Anselm Kiefer was responsible for an important reappraisal of German history. Today he calls it 'rape' when Chinese art collectors exhibit expensively acquired works by him without his permission. I say no, with that he plays down a real rape."

A critical homage is her portrait of the artist whom she probably admires most: Joseph Beuys. On a fissured rope, he is hanging upside down, dangling over statues. "Beuys was always against the authorities and their bureaucracies. But his disciples today appear authoritarian and claim: 'We understand Beuys better than others.' What if his image is destroyed in public, his myth dismantled?"

Two days later, with a USB stick in her hands, Jiny Lan travelled to the next place where the exhibition will continue: the port city of Tianjin in China.

Copies of the paintings from Oberhausen would be printed on plastic sheets, three times the size of the originals, and hung in the exhibition hall of the renowned art academy. After one day, however, the director of the academy decided to take down the paintings because he was not sure whether the motifs would touch sensitive political topics. He wanted to go through censorship first and then return the show with official permission.

From experience with other museums in China, Jiny Lan knows which motifs will not pass through censorship and why: Georg Baselitz for his nudity, Gerhard Richter for his ironic reference to the propaganda of the Cultural Revolution and Joseph Beuys for "perverse eroticism". The painter Jörg Immendorff is an interesting case: At first sight, his portrait appears to be harmless. But it could become a problem due to the outline of the city of Hong Kong on the face of the late artist. Currently, even the very name of the city of Hong Kong is provoking the censorship offices.

Jiny Lan likes to combine past and present, fantasy and reality, public and private figures, western and eastern culture. It is exactly this mixture that makes up the painting "Monkey Goes to Heaven" about Jörg Immendorff: Jiny Lan, who worked in the neighbourhood of Jörg Immendorff's studio in Düsseldorf, had learned at the time that traditional Chinese medicine was being recommended to him when he was in the final stages of his incurable illness. He should travel to Hong Kong, it was said, where China's medical tradition is best preserved. Unfortunately it did not help him, the master painter died a short time later. Life and death, legend and charlatany, faith and superstition – what helps, what doesn't? During the development of the portrait, Jiny Lan also remembered that Jörg Immendorff, as a young man, was said to have been an ardent Maoist.

The exhibition in Venice differs from the Oberhausen show by a special feature: It is not only a joint exhibition with Kevin Clarke and Bernd Reiter, Jiny Lan's works also correspond to Renaissance masters such as Titian and Tintoretto, whose murals adorn the sides and ceiling of the Marcianas Sale Monumentali. This results in a combination of past and present. Jiny Lan brings together old masters and new masters, a special dedication to the anniversary of the library, which has been archiving important artifacts of human history for 550 years. If history actually repeats itself time and again, as Karl Marx said, would it be seen here as tragedy or farce?

The painting "Penck Solution" with the German painter A. R. Penck as the central figure and the head of Tintoretto as his reflection is constantly rotated clockwise by a small motor. Between the birth of Tintoretto and the death of A. R. Penck lies half a millennium. During this time, the definition of good painting has changed dramatically. What has not changed is the idea of what a good painter should look like: an (old) white man, preferably with a beard.

Max Florian Kühlem

(A large part of this text is taken from the article 'Joseph Beuys hängt am rissigen Seil' by the same author, edition: taz - die tageszeitung, 20/21 July 2019, page 13. <https://taz.de/!5609356/>)

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