



CENTURY

## INTERVIEW WITH FAYE WEI WEI

Cairo Clarke has been invited by Century's curator to guest curate the group exhibition 'The Reinvention of Love' opening in January in the Tap Room. One of the featured artists is Faye Wei Wei...



**CC:** What is your earliest memory of painting?

**FWW:** There was this time when I was really young and I had a red pencil, an orange pencil, a yellow pencil and they were water colour pencils and I remember blending the red into the orange into the yellow to make a sunset. And I remember drawing a red hill because I thought that was really clever because hills aren't red but it was the light that would make it red. So I made two red hills and I remember drawing a little fence on it and thinking "wow making a drawing is so fun". I remember feeling so happy and satisfied and thinking this is really grown up and different from all the other things that I've done. I think with painting I always think about how joyous it feels to create an image, and then when its done the feeling is just so addictive. I have the painting still too, I've kept it forever just stuck on my wall.

**CC:** When I think about your work I like to imagine them like modern day tapestries in the sense that there are composed of different

motifs and symbols that come together into a form of storytelling in a very fluid, poetic way, but also with a lot of space, giving each element room to breathe.

**FWW:** I remember there's a poem called The Cloths of Heaven by William B. Yeats and I love it because, I guess [my paintings] are like tapestries. I like that they are sort of fantasy scenes right? The act of weaving is really beautiful. I guess with painting you do make something really precious and it takes a lot of time, and it may sound floaty but they are your dreams. In terms of scale as well they're a bit like tapestries...

**CC:** The figures in your work are often quite androgynous, which I think allows you to draw your

**own readings of them and subjectivities, how do you personally relate to them?**

**FWW:** Exactly, I think they're all just me in some way. I always say they hold secrets, I can always tell exactly how I was feeling, or certain memories are always imbued in certain canvases. I've watched videos of people making traditional Japanese indigo dyed clothes that are just blue and white and they train for ages to make the weavings. The old man in the video was saying "if you're feeling tense or sad the emotions come through in the weaving" and he can tell who has done which weaving because each person has their own way of doing it. So I think with painting it's sort of the same in that I don't think you can separate me from my work because I am to make something that's very personal and emotional, the human element is really important to me.

**CC: I always notice there's so much poetry lying around in your studio, which I love. What is your relationship with language, painting and poetry?**

**FWW:** I'm fascinated by poetry, words, and rhythm and breathing and that relationship between your breath and words. You can only speak whilst breathing and I also think when you're painting you also have a certain rhythm. So I think it's to do with rhythm and the beating heart. Painting is like a very intimate dance with the surface because you're always dipping in and out, back and forth, like a bird getting water. And so, often when I'm painting in order to keep the flow and concentration, but also to rest I will read poetry.

**CC: As if it's your fuel?**

**FWW:** Yes and I find it triggers things in my head, emotions and you can just pick it up. Poems are so evocative, I think words can create the most beautiful images in your head and that's what I'm always thinking about. I can't say that I'm an expert on poetry but there are certain poems I love to read and revisit.

**CC: I don't think you need to be an expert though. I'm certainly no expert on poetry but I like being able to just pick something up, read it and feel connected to it in that moment.**

**FWW:** I don't even think you have to understand it, Virginia Wolfe wrote something about poetry and she said the reason that poetry excites one to such abandonment is it's ability to touch you without having to check your feelings. You can just read it not really know what it means but it will feel powerful because it triggers the past, a memory. It's really interesting with poetry, the way that movements have changed and developed as do the poets relationship to evoking imagery or evoking the past. Wordsworth wrote a lot about spots of time where he would write poems just about his past and his childhood, but they would also be about his future and his present. It's almost like harvesting the past for new imagery. I think poetry and painting are so similar. I don't really write much but both result in evoking such vivid imagery.

**CC: I would argue that your paintings are like a form of writing, they definitely have their own language and rhythm to them. Also the titles are quite long and poetic, where do they come from?**

**FWW:** They come from things I underline in books, poems, things I write down. That painting is called 'A night she saw flowers of velvet with black hearts and gold eyes' and that relates directly to the symbol of the flower in the left hand corner which is where everything started with all these paintings, they spill outwards. And so I read that in a book and thought that it was such a lovely image that I could see it, and so I just painted it. All you have to rely on is your bag of tricks, your mark making, your rhythm and your sense of space and balance because your sort of wandering

around doing it based on your body. And sometimes with poems and stories if I miss remember, I end up creating my own character or understanding.

**CC: They become your own in a way, creating your own visual language...**

FWW: Exactly, I often paint holy water and bottles in the shape of Mary but they're no longer religious they become layered symbols in the context of my work. I think duality is very important in my work, having opposites. The sun and the moon, snakes and thorns, arrows and flowers – there's always this tension because I think painting is so much about tension, these colours and shapes are all bouncing off each other. I think that's what a lot of painting is about, tension. I think Rothko's paintings are about that human vibration between people. Those colours for me evoke those human emotions so powerfully and when painting really works it can really have a feeling of magic. If you create the right mark, with the right colour, with the right heaviness of line these things can make something that is beyond the canvas.

**CC: Who would you say is your biggest inspiration?**

FWW: I'd say I have a very special relationship with Cy Twombly's work. The symbolism of colour is also extremely important to me, I think red can be very powerful as a colour, I think it's what the eye often picks out as the brightest in my work. To me red is also the most dangerous, and erotic and loving. White is also really important to me.

**CC: Yes can you talk about the white space in your paintings?**

FWW: It's like flooding the spaces in between with white, on the one hand it does come from looking a lot at Cy Twombly. I think he uses white in a way as a point of failure, going back over and easing old things, the past and mistakes etc. I'm also really interested in the dark as well, black or really dark greens. I think green is a really human colour, a lot of the people I paint are green. I used to paint people pink, and it looked too jolly. Green is such an emotional colour and I feel like I can control it really well.

**CC: How important is music in the making of your work, there are all these different elements that come together in your paintings to make this kind of symphony of colour, form, signs and symbols?**

**I feel your work has a real musicality to it.**

FWW: I think musicality is a nice way to put it, I feel very flattered to ever be compared to music or poetry. I think there is definitely a relationship with music and my work, I never paint without music on, Chet Baker, Bob Dylan, anything sad with a human voice. I'll sometimes listen to the same piece of music over and over, but I'm not a music nerd at all.

Again I think it's about memories, music is so potent, such a potent magic. When you play a piece of music it can really take you somewhere, so I guess I've gotten used to listening to things that will take me to a place that I can concentrate. Dancing, music and painting – you wait for a moment in a song and the mark comes. It's quite chilling, it's so overwhelming. It's like thinking about one violin compared to a hundred piece orchestra. The coming together of all those elements is so powerful. Sometimes it happens and sometimes it doesn't, but I'm really interested in painting when it does happen.