

FAYE WEI WEI

WEB REVIEW BY JACOB CHARLES WILSON
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CHINA



Artwork courtesy of Cob Gallery and the artist

In each of the canvases are androgynous “boys” or “self portraits”—Wei Wei uses these terms interchangeably—that could be drawn from Greek or Roman statues, just as they could be young boys or girls from a Fauvist work. These figures are depicted with tenderness and care; silent, mouth closed, eyes wistfully gazing.

There is no immediacy, only indeterminacy, in Wei Wei’s work, which evokes a sense of surreal theatricality, comparable to Fra Angelico’s 15th-century frescoes at San Marco or Giorgio de Chirico’s warped, metaphysical paintings. They are difficult to classify; to restrict her paintings solely to the categories of still life or portraiture is to deny the multiple, often contradictory, components in the compositions.

Layered over and under the androgynous individuals are various motifs that allude to classical and modern sources: a garland of lilac flowers halo the figure in *From the Centre of the*

Rose; while in *Bitter Water*, two people are shown behind a grey bull’s head, and a third face is tilted on its side—either a woman at rest or a toppled statue. To the right of this, the three characters in *Good Bye* each carry a bunch of flowers; a heavy curtain envelops the trio. The most enigmatic of the paintings is *Yes No*, to the far left of the group: in the top left of the canvas, an anonymous face is surrounded by a pale pink star, in the opposite corner a knight in a suit of armor with its visor down lies holding a blade. Painted on the very top layer of the work is a vivid blue merman; in the bottom corners are scallop shells.

The most significant of these motifs is the sea urchin—depicted in *Bitter Water* as a group of dark, painted lines—which appears across many of Wei Wei’s other works. The urchin holds a personal significance for the artist. Their soft, vivid-orange roe—their sexual organs—are her favorite food; a delicacy eaten raw after cracking open the spiny, sometimes venomous shell.

Talking to Wei Wei, painting is inseparable from the texture and sensuality of food. She compares

brushing turpentine across a layer of fresh oil paint to cigarettes after a large meal—something to cut through the fat. Yellow flowers in *Good Bye* evoke drops of lemon juice; an individual brushstroke may be a fennel seed or a sprig of dill that lightens the heavy palette of browns, olive greens, pallid blues and grays. Each layer of the painting is a sensation on the tongue, an individual note of a palate. As with a recipe, flavors can be brought out only in combination, to be discerned and tasted before, during, and after an ingredient enters the mouth.

Wei Wei's work parallels and reiterates this concept of gender that doesn't assume a given state of things, a single point of origin, or the idea of naturalness, but which is suspended between shifting points of reference. The canvas is to be thought of not as a static image, but as a reactive surface or skin, which first needs to be primed and stretched, and which responds to the lightest touch; to be sensed beyond that domain to which the medium of paint is conventionally restricted—her work doesn't present a resistance to interpretation or a closing down of meaning, but joy in its abundance.