

Faye Wei Wei Is London's Dreamiest Painter

ARTS+CULTURE - FEATURE

Ahead of her London show opening, the artist talks to Antonia Marsh about drawing inspiration from poetry, mythology, classic artists and her collection of trinkets

12th April 2017

Text Antonia Marsh

Confronting cosmic themes of myth, love, and memory, the poetically symbolic elements in young British painter Faye Wei Wei's towering oil paintings hang suspended in a dreamlike ectoplasm. Brides, sphinxes, boxers, knights, snakes, horses and a lioness all cohabit, enacting a vibrant and mystical silent play, as if dancing off the walls upon which they're hung for her show *Anemones and Lovers* opening tonight at Cob Gallery in London. In an enthralling twist, while her canvases exude an indelible sense of femininity that the artist has no issue associating with, her investigation into certain characteristic female and male dichotomies paradoxically expose her concerns with questioning the accepted tropes of each sex.

Combining an almost surreal assemblage of visual cues gleaned from an obsessive collection of art historical sources, Wei Wei emulates a rich plethora of influences in her work. Whether Rembrandt's compositions, the marble floor of a Vermeer, Cezanne's infamous *Plaster Cupid*, David Hockney's idiosyncratic

handling of water or the early Renaissance fresco painter Piero della Francesca's depictions of glinting armour, the artist weaves a tapestry of references together with her own secrets, anxieties and emotions, delicately painted into vibrating arabesques of gemlike colour. Visiting Wei Wei's studio is not unlike entering an Aladdin's cave of shells, flowers, trinkets, souvenirs, books, poems



Artwork by Faye Wei Wei

and torn out pages of images, amassed instinctively and obsessively in an unconscious and effortless example of the developing role of the artist as collector and archivist in a world so bloated with images and content.

I loved exploring the fragments in your studio: the shells, daisies, the Virgin Mary holy water, and other objects you showed me, all your books scattered across the floor that you referred to as the “cloud of books around me.” How vital to your development of a painting are these surroundings? How do you start a painting?

Faye Wei Wei: When I begin with a blank canvas, I like to lay out on the floor all the images and paintings and references that I felt drawn to that morning, then I sit amongst the crowd and begin to draw. Then when I come to attack the picture plane and sort of leap over this cloud of images, my eye will absorb and subconsciously be thinking about certain symbols or feelings. As well as the flat images, the objects you mention are my jewels! I have this plastic Egyptian toy that fills with sand that a kind shopkeeper of an antique shop gave me one day when I was wandering around Brooklyn, having lost my voice, I pointed at it in a glass cabinet and he gifted it to me in a brown paper bag. I think it's my lucky charm! “When I'm painting I get really lost in the process, I become really in a sort of trance and when I step back and see what I've made sometimes it can really surprise me” – Faye Wei Wei

With such a tapestry of symbols and woven stories and narratives that go into each painting, what do you hope the viewer takes from your works... how vital is it that they understand your visual language, or are your paintings open to individual interpretation?

Faye Wei Wei: These symbols and fantasy stories I imbue my work with are so personal to me, so it surprises me, but also makes me so, so happy when people react to them and say they like them. Someone recently said they thought that the boy in, “He Donned His Trousers of Striped Grass” looked like their boyfriend! I love that you can read so much from a painted face, two eyes, a nose and a mouth. When I'm painting I get really lost in the process, I become really in a sort of trance and when I step back and see what I've made sometimes it can really surprise me, it's like all these secrets and hidden longings or sad things come to the surface, but I find them really comforting because I know these figures who are holding my secrets will stay silent for me forever!

Sometimes awash with swathes of brushwork, and others flooded with a single colour, the spaces between the figurative or symbolic elements of your paintings have a presence of their own. After discussing your collection of shells from Japan and why their disparate display interests you, it became clear that these spaces don't feel secondary, they maintain an almost equal importance. What is it about the spaces between the shells, and the spaces between your figures that interests you?

Faye Wei Wei: My drawing tutor in New York would talk about Rothko's paintings being about the emotional vibrations between human beings. She would speak about the importance of the sensuality of painting and the importance of the mark making, how every mark should feel and how you should really mean it when you place them down. When I begin to paint I often start with the figure and the objects around them, then comes the background colour that floods the rest of the spaces, pins down the picture like leaves on the surface of a pond, or like these shells I have from Tokyo, each glazed and placed in its place within their wooden box. It is within this fluid, flush of colour that I really enjoy the paint, pushing it into the canvas, letting the skin react to my touch. Light reacts to the luminosity of oil paint and suddenly I find that all the floating symbols, the snakes, the bleeding lance, the window – they feel as if they are connected, trying to evoke that very human emotional vibration. I guess what I think is, in a way there is a hierarchy in terms of

when you read a picture, people react to the human figure first, and there I hope to pin the viewer's interest with the painting, then I hope they notice the symbols and the relationship between still life and the figure, then there is the negative space that can denote depth or flatness – therein lies the magic for me.

You mentioned the dualities that reappear in your paintings: snakes and thorns, drawn in reverse to one another, the knight in shining armour versus the naked vulnerable boy, the women in wedding dresses versus the lioness or the sphinx... Can you explain these recurring pairings? Where did they originate and what have they come to represent for you?

Faye Wei Wei: The more that I paint, the more these symbols appear into my bag of tricks. Then I just notice pairings in them quite subconsciously. The triangles that indicate the slither skin of the snake, inversely create the piercing thorns of a rose's stem. I have always been drawn to things in pairs, my compositions often end up being heart shaped, two lovers dancing, two boxers fighting, a tulip caressing another tulip, a horse in duet with its rider. I guess it's also to do with the nature of things having an opposite, every flower has a shadow, every moon has a sun. With the knight in shining armour being paired with the vulnerable naked boy, I think of the sea urchin, a black five-point star with spiked black shell, protecting the treasure of its flesh inside. I think eating is one of the highest forms of pleasure, and sea urchins are my favourite taste.

The boxers, the knight, the bride appear more than once in the paintings, almost like characters in a painted play. Is there an underlying narrative to the works in the show? Do these characters tell a story when all together in one space?

Faye Wei Wei: It's been so wonderful to see the paintings come together and hung at the gallery, the figures winking at each other from across the room. I always think the figures know each other, some of them make an appearance in multiple pictures. There isn't any specific narrative I have in mind when painting, but somehow the figures are intertwined. The way we hung the show, there's the room at the back that I wanted to feel more grand and cathedral like, these larger works placed in a four staring at one another, the colours are deeper, richer and the mood is slightly darker. The front room for me feels more light, the palettes are softer, the works in there feel more vulnerable to me.

Your paintings often look at love as a theme, but rather than exalting or celebrating love, they seem to call it into question. In colour, gesture and composition, the paintings may seem romantic in their initial outward appearance, but you mention that there's a darkness there. If, as you say, the boxers symbolise frustration with love, then by the same token what role do the knights and brides play in the paintings? Does this archaic fairy tale still exist, or do your paintings aim to call it into question?

Faye Wei Wei: I think growing up as a girl, you are exposed to a lot of fairy tales and this Disney idea of romance. I am obsessed by these stories but at the same time of course I think they are archaic and quite dark. I remember learning about ancient Roman baths, how people would use this curved blunt scraper to scrape their dead skin and this would be made into a love potion. I wonder if that ever worked.

I also wondered if you could touch on the perceived femininity in your paintings, I remember a story you told me about a male teacher at art school who described them as "pretty pictures"? How do you circumnavigate such assumptions, or do you welcome them?

Faye Wei Wei: I don't hide from these labels, I know the work is decorative and contain a lot of

what is considered, feminine qualities. But I think that is where their strength is, because it is a truth that belongs to me. Gender is performative and the way I express it is not something I am going to feel ashamed of, or try to mask under the guise of “stronger” colours or more “masculine” subject matter. I feel like I’ve tried that, and it doesn’t feel right. Emotions are universal. Love is universal – and for now that’s how I’m going to express my paintings, like a happy pearl in a clam.

Anemones and Lovers will run from 13 – 29 April at Camden’s Cob Gallery