

CULTURE magazine

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CULTURE MAGAZINE

LOOK LEFT - LOOK RIGHT

A solo exhibition of cinematic and scenic portraits of women by veteran Austrian artist Xenia Hausner reveals her views of "East meets West".

Text Tara Lee
Photos Courtesy of Hong Kong Arts Centre



Look Left, Look Right



Bond

TO herald the 160th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Hong Kong and Austria, the Austrian Consulate General Hong Kong and Macau and The Hong Kong Arts Center present Look Left – Look Right, a solo exhibition of paintings by Austrian artist Xenia Hausner at the Pao Galleries throughout the month of June.

Hausner's work focuses on the interactions between and relations of women to one another and to others. Bold and dramatic, her large brightly coloured images are enigmatic and engaging.

Born in 1951, Hausner studied at the Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna and the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts in London, where she learned stage design. For the first fifteen years of her career, she painted theatre and opera sets for spaces, including the Berlin State Theater and Théâtre de la Monnaie in Brussels. In 1992, she began to work exclusively as an independent painter.

After the introduction of her artworks in Berlin in 1996, she was afforded exhibitions in Salzburg and Munich. Four years later, she debuted in New York and was awarded the Ernst Barlach Prize.

Look Left – Look Right

She currently lives in Berlin and Vienna, where she works on paintings, collages and mixed media works that incorporate paint on top of photographs. The upcoming exhibition at the Arts Center will feature pieces inspired by her past travels and journeys in Hong Kong and in greater Asia.

She first visited Asia in the 1970s, when she backpacked through Hong Kong and Indonesia in her early twenties. Since then she has traveled to Beijing, Shanghai and Mumbai. The intense colours unique to her paintings are inspired by the vibrancy she observed in Asia. "It's very typical for me to feel inspired just by walking on the streets," she said. "I look around and I am delighted by the colour and the liveliness." She noted that she finds herself attracted to places with diversity and energy, like New York and Cuba.

She finds such places abundant with inspiration she can absorb. "I soak up the warm rain outside like a sponge, and then I return to the studio and squeeze the sponge." She is especially fond of taking a walk and collecting visages of the city through photography, a crucial medium in her creative process. "I use photographs like a map to find out the composition of the painting."



Blind Date



Im Freien Fall



St Francis



An Education

She said that interconnection between the two art forms is not uncommon. She has observed a strong dialogue developing between photographs and contemporary painting during the past ten years. "We call it Photokunst in Germany. Literally, it means Photo-art. Painting today is always somehow connected to photography, and photography in turn becomes more and more like painting."

Photokunst is an art form that maximizes the digital possibilities of photography, such

as overlay, colour edit and shape distortion. "The new photography doesn't want to depict 'reality' necessarily. They are an art in itself." In addition to using photographs as a guiding line and a creative source, Hausner synthesizes photography and painting in her mixed media works. She paints over large-scale photographs with acrylic or oil paints, which can confuse the viewer. "Sometimes I see people walking up really close to the display or looking at it from the side, trying to figure out whether it is a painting or a photograph. That confusion is exactly the effect I want."

Confusion and mystery is a vital theme in her artistic vision. "I like to leave unsolved question marks, because human relationships are not black and white. You cannot give a precise description."

She gave another reason why she refrains from "giving a manual on how to interpret" her paintings. Hausner prefers to reserve room for subjectivity, especially for portraits. "When you paint humans, every person projects themselves and their own experiences in viewing the painting."

She also admitted she might be projecting herself in the portraits, which are predominantly female. The portraits sometimes derive from a photograph she took, or they may be painted with a live model posing in her studio.

All models are selected by Hausner. The artist herself does not know why she feels compelled to paint certain individuals. "It's not always so logical. It's like falling in love. Sometimes a model I picked would come into the studio and my assistant would ask, 'What's so special about her?' so it's not about objective beauty. I don't pick out my models from a fashion catalog," she said.

While she prefers to take her time planning in the technical areas of creating her artwork,

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Look Left – Look Right



Cabin Crew

such as composition and colour scheme, she takes a more spontaneous approach in choosing her models. "I would go to a gallery opening or see someone at a coffee shop and find a person very interesting. Then I would introduce myself and ask whether I can paint them."

She explained it is the persona as a whole that she finds fascinating. "A neck is not interesting in itself as a body part. It's the entire person the neck is attached to I am interested in."

She expresses her observations of the person and her visions of their relationships and stories through her bold brushwork, imposing composition and intense colours. Viewers often comment that the drama of her techniques combined with the body language of the characters make them seem pensive or lonely, perhaps even anguished.

To this, Hausner admitted there's an ambience of moodiness in a number of her works, but also explained the theme of each work doesn't always revolve around a single emotion. *St. Francis*, for example, references the social issue of consumerism as a driving force of globalization by juxtaposing two girls of different ethnic origin in front of the iconic Coca-Cola graphic.

St. Francis, along with other recent works by Hausner including, *Bond*, *Crew Cabin*, and *Wag the Dog*, will be on exhibit at The Pao Galleries at the Hong Kong Arts Center. 

Look Left - Look Right: Solo Exhibition of Xenia Hausner
Until 29 June 2014
Hong Kong Arts Centre

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