



SAY CHEESE
out there in
the art world

Mei Xian Qiu at Kopeikin



My friendship with artist Mei Xian Qiu, a third generation Chinese native of

Java, has provided an opportunity to observe her visual explorations in a variety of media, including painting and sculpture, over a number of years. It's not surprising that she has transferred her unique ideas to photography, for which she is now receiving international recognition.

Mei is currently showing her photographic works at the Kopeikin Gallery in Culver City. Her title for this exhibition, "Qilin," refers to a mythical Chinese creature whose innate hybridism and duality made him a compass to the west and even a fitting metaphor for the artist herself. Mei's situation is remarkably akin to that of sculptor Isamu Noguchi, an artist who also straddled East (Japan) and West. There's little doubt that a heritage of two or more cultures reflects the complexity in her work; a personal synthesis of multi-cultures produce a montage, which contributes to the ever-expanding global monoculture.



Mei Xian Qiu "Nymph of the River Luo (summer panel)"

An understanding of such an artist's bi-cultural experience goes far in deciphering her art, so I recently sat down with her to discuss three specific photographs to discover their cause and effect:

Rene De Loffre:

One of the photographs that fascinated me was your "Nymph of the River Luo (summer panel)"; a benign-appearing work unless you take a close look. Here's a delightfully cute girl holding a large chunk of raw meat as she looks warily off-scene, while a flock of vultures lurk among rocks and trees in the background. Once past the initial double take of the image, the interpretive scenarios become immensely open ended. Strangely more intriguing than ghoulish, one asks how much tongue-in-cheek or satire is in this piece?

Mei Xien Qiu:

Well there is quite a bit of serious humor in the work. If you think you understand the symbolism of the work, then there is better jest somewhere close by. "Summer" is one of a series of 4 panels, a hybrid of "Guernica" and a classic Chinese poem called "The Nymph of the Luo River." "Guernica," a plea for peace, and the "Nymph," a romantic poem about irreconcilable differences, are rife with symbols and notions of universal truths. Caozhi, the poet, suffers for a woman he can never have, and Picasso amply portrays the suffering of the citizens of Guernica from brutality and darkness. In the four panels, there are elements of both works, the Nymph's use of water, doomed romance, ribbons of the deities, magical animals and dreamscapes, and Guernica's references to war, brutality, symbolic animals, and the coming onslaught. In the Summer panel, a young child feeds raw meat to scavengers, but where is the original death that the vultures came for?



Mei Xian Qiu "Nymph of the River Luo (autumn panel)"

R.D.L.: Let's move on to another photograph, your "The Nymph of the River Luo (Autumn panel)" showing a Bacchanalian youth sitting as if he's in a Herculaneum triclinium surrounded by a plethora of fruits, and other detritus full of symbolism which you unify as successfully as the "busy field" paintings of Jerome Witkin and photographs of Joel-Peter Witkin currently showing at the Jack Rutberg Gallery. How do you manage to keep the gestalt going?

M.X.Q.: Gestalt refers to something that is made of many parts and yet is somehow more than or different from the combination of its parts. In the Autumn panel, the various objects, the fallen

Buddha head, the machine guns, the hour glass, prayer books, military uniforms, the bounty of the fruit, and so on, are different components of a whole person, such as the man in the image, or of a society. The panels read like a Chinese scroll painting, denoting separations of time or seasons. There is a cyclical component to them. The death in the Winter panel enables the life in the Summer panel, and the beginning of youth. Youth comes of age in the Fall panel, is tested, and loves in the Spring.



Mei Xian Qiu "Nymph of the River Luo (spring panel)"

R.D.L.: I'm certain there isn't a viewer who isn't struck one way or the other by your straight out seductive photograph "The Nymph of the River Luo (Spring panel)" that shows two woman approaching an embrace. Between the floral patterned dresses blending into the floral surrounding, you've created quite an impressionistic outpouring that engulfs the viewer in a feminine sea of pinks and yellows. Both women ought to be fully dissolved in this sort of environment, yet one female is disengaged from her highly intent partner by looking at the viewer with that same wry expression as the girl holding the meat in your other photograph. One seeming to say, "should I throw it to the vultures so they'll get their reward?" while this seated woman could well be thinking, "do I really want to do this and turn this into passion?" Is this all about being conflicted, fearful of irrevocable commitments?

M.X.Q.: While life is full of conflicted, irrevocable commitments, the Spring panel deals with the conflict, and hence the tension, in stretching a moment to the infinite (and realizing its futility), and the irrevocability of time. The woman's expression, as in the young girl, oscillates, as Friedrich Schlegel puts it, between "enthusiasm and irony." In the Spring (love) panel, the women are presented like a gift. The ribbons (denoting deity and immortality) are earthly and crumpled, not floating in graceful arcs as in the inspired classical paintings of the original Nymph poem. One of the women is facing the viewer, forcing him or her to be part of the interaction. The viewer is part and parcel of the tryst, or the presumption of one. The image is as much about the expectation of the feminine amplified, as about any arcane symbology provided.

R.D.L.: How long will your show be up at the Paul Kopeikin Gallery?

M.X.Q.: The exhibit ends on April 19 so there's still a little time left to see it.

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