Bingyi at Erna Hecey Gallery

The exhibition Seamlessly lost, is the first solo of Bingyi in Europe. One of the most ambitious and provocative Chinese painters of her generation, Bingyi is best known for her large-scale conceptual painting projects, which she terms “largescape.” Seamlessly lost is a site-specific composition of an impressive scale: it is a one-piece linen canvas sized 4 x 3.2 m. The painting sprawls over the entire wall of the main space at Erna Hecey. Echoing the ancient cave paintings from Lascaux in southern France, the painting is a timeless and poignant entirety that forms a mysteriously boundless space.

The most radical gesture, however, is expressed through the commercial dissection of the work. The artist allows the audience to purchase the painting according to his/her own design, based on a unit price for 36 x 36 cm. The implication is that as the show nears its completion, the painting will be cut into smaller pieces; and the remains of the overall structure will be left with unknown number of “windows” of different sizes. The conceptual complications that may happen during this process raise vital questions. The first is evidently philosophical whereas the challenge being psychological: what does it mean to cut this piece apart? How do we feel when we are confronted by the violent contrast between the fragility of art and human life and the harshness of a cultural system? The second is critical: what is the relationship between a commercial act and a creative pattern? Is there always an ambivalent exchange between the two? Can both be of the same? Why is it that we accept the notion of art being sold by inches and meters mentally, but when such idea is externalized and exposed in public presence we would feel disconcerted? The third is historical: many foreign collectors stole murals from the Buddhist Caves and temples in northern China and left similar windows on the walls. So often we live with the history of incompleteness. Then the question becomes: why is it difficult to accept the artist's own decision to have the painting “lost” to its audience? What is the meaning for the notion of “eternity” of art and art-making? If life is ephemeral what is the purpose to believe in the illusion of “authentic completeness?” And finally, this project exposes a level of cynicism in the practice of contemporary art: when we are so invested in the “discourse” of art, what about the image itself? Does it still matter? What is the significance of its lifespan? Unlike a classical Chinese handscroll, which demands the viewer to roll the painting, this project animates the audience through three different approaches. One is to encourage them to walk the painting on a grandiose scale, the second is to ask the viewer to read the painting in an intimate fashion, and the third, perhaps the most dangerous one, is to ask the audience to compose their own paintings while making the decision as for how and when to destroy the immense original.

The painting itself, with a dark and aloof power, seems to be estranged from its beginning, not only because of the anonymity of many of its historical allusions, but for an unusually bizarre omnipresence, as if nothing is grounded in Bingyi's worldview. With every character portrayed in a frontal view in tears, the painting gently unveils one person's universe that is melancholic, peculiar and idiosyncratic. Over 300 historical figures, strange creatures, deities and animals are buried in the “largescape,” making references to classic Chinese texts. The painting opens by describing the birth of the world from fire, and unfolds into various natural and human catastrophic events, including earthquake and floods. It soon explodes into a “black hole” of negative space and develops along hairy mountains and snake-skin-like waters. After a magnificently painted dark and swirling ocean-and-mountain scene, the painting epitomizes into a vast emptiness with a crying ribcage floating in the air.

Other work presented in this show consists of a series of wood-block prints of grand scale (88 x 200 cm), forming the Book of Sensation with an ancient appearance. Each print juxtaposes an idiom made up by the artist and a pictorial image hand-made by Bingyi and the renowned printmaker Yang Hongwei. The content of the book explores the problems of sexuality, intimacy and tensions that permeate all human relationships. Bingyi argues that the notion of “sensations” can be both physical and ideological, as she perceives such notion as a direct expression of the various problems and frustration introduced by the debates of modernity. Since Bingyi appeared in her first solo in 2007, she has exhibited worldwide at various museums, galleries and biennials. She has shown at Caixa Forum in Spain, Max Protetch gallery in New York, the White Rabbit museum in Sydney, the Chinese Architecture Biennial in Chongqing and the Gwangju Biennial in Korea. She is going to appear in a solo in Contrasts gallery, Shanghai, on November 22nd, 2009.