

Julia Steiner

deep voice – clear sky 净空 – 深声

Exhibition in Beijing: 6.9.–19.10.2014

Opening: Saturday, September 6, 2014, 4–7 pm

Carol Yinghua Lu on the occasion of Julia Steiner's solo exhibition *deep voice – clear sky* 净空 – 深声 at Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing:

Basel-based Swiss artist Julia Steiner might yet to become a familiar name to many of us in the Chinese art world, but she is no stranger to China. She has spent extensive time and energy traveling and working in China, through two artist-residency stays in Galerie Urs Meile in Beijing. What brought her to China in the first place was the fact that when she started out making works on paper and showing her gouache paintings back home in Switzerland, one of the most common responses she received was that many in Europe thought she was influenced by Chinese traditional paintings. It was then that she began reading about Taoism and learning about Taoist thoughts through the works of Laozi and Zhuangzi. As she read more, she made a decision to come to China and to see it for herself.

Composing a painting or an installation through collaging and by responding intuitively, sensually and aesthetically to physical conditions and atmospheric surroundings of a space has been a systematic approach in Steiner's practice. The paper she paints on and the process of making each painting are the connected-links between how she witnesses and experiences a space or a condition and how she articulates such an experience. She drew situations, persons, fragments of situations, sights and scenes. The process of working through a painting is a process of recalling and conveying a personal immersion in a situation, be it darkness or an empty space. As the artist describes it herself, it is as if taking a walk through a painting.

In the early paintings she made around 2005, what emerged as motifs were usually a mixture of things: observations, noise she heard, scenes she witnessed, sentences she heard or read, atmosphere she felt in a space. These were inspirations she would start with and she would then try to find an image for their materialization on paper. It was usually not a clear idea of the actual image, but more of a feeling of what the image was and how it should look like. These images in her work were more imaginary than factual, yet firmly based on the reality as she experienced it. Instead of portraying birds fluttering around in the space, resting on a tree or horses running, literally as they appear, what Julia Steiner sets out to do in her painting is to make apparent the experience as such.

Until now, Steiner always works in black and white. In her paintings, the majority of which are done in large scale, whiteness is almost always more expressive and outstanding than blackness and is nearly inevitably the first thing that catches one's eyes. In a way, Steiner is sculpting space and void in her works, a process motivated by her experience and memory of the reality, her personal reality, to be precise, paths she takes, places she visits, sound she hears and scenes she witnesses. It's both personal and original. She does not take references from theoretical writings or precedents from art histories. I asked Steiner if having being in China a number of times, doing research and making works, had she come to agree with any of the resemblance and connection people back home talked about between her paintings and Chinese paintings. She told me that in fact shortly after arriving in China, she knew that such a generalization about Chinese paintings and the formal comparison between hers and Chinese traditional cultures were just irrelevant.

In the exhibition at Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing during the installation process, Julia Steiner has brought in 3500 kg of wet clay to the gallery space and worked on them for seven days on a wood base, measured at 3.20 m wide and 4.10 m long with a height of 28 cm, built especially to hoist this sculptural being. She also made a painting on the walls of the exhibition space, framing the sculptural work. Like her paintings, the clay work requires the artist to be with it, spending time observing, molding, feeling and making it, taking some distance from it and returning to it. After a two-week breathing period, the artist will cover it with black glossy acrylic paint. This enormous and abstract clay landscape will continue to dry during the time being of the exhibition and will crack, change form and become a living presence in the space. This new direction of working with clay does offer a more corporal feeling, the experience of the density and the energy of the artist's movement in full dimensions and from all angles.