

## JU TING: ONION SKINS

Karen Smith

At first sight, the juxtapositions of brightly coloured planes spread across the surface of Ju Ting's "paintings" works its magic on the eyes, but it is the combination of hue, form and texture that makes them wholly intriguing, and long after the eyes have turned away from them. As deployed since 2016, the succession of planes, which are laid – or more precisely, draped, as if individual sheets of thick plastic-like film – across the familiar rectangle of a picture frame, produces visual medleys of extraordinary ambience. Layered one on top of another, and, as suggested, read first as simple blocks of flat pigment, they are reminiscent of swatches of fabrics and fragments of found materials of the type designers pin on "mood boards", and from which the alchemical fermentation of inspiration takes shape.

Ju Ting's works are inspired, and inspiring, yet, interestingly, even though the element of mood assumes a central role for viewers looking at the final pieces, it is not the endgame she envisages for these pieces. She is more focused on digging down into art's essential language as a physical act of working with its fundamental materials for what is a literal process of archaeological discovery. The hands-on approach to materials, to what are in essence twentieth-century concerns with formalism, is obviously not new, but it is super interesting in the context that is art in China now. Especially in the context of the generation of millennials who are coming to art in a brand new, twenty-first century. This is an age of new media, post-postinternet, and an attitude towards art that, in China in particular, veers between "product" and the wow factor of spectacle (how else to get the attention artists so desperately need to survive these days?). The current age is also dominated by images, most of which are created for, disseminated through, and viewed on, social media as facilitated by the technology of smart phones etc., especially in China. So, how should artists approach painting, the picture plane, pictorial expression? How to deal with the physical properties of making when the very next instant sees those results peremptorily smoothed by the ubiquitous screen? Ju Ting's works both cater to, and yet refute this phenomenon. They might give the viewer colour, and for the convenience of the smart screen, give it in the manner of a neat sound bite, but beyond that little of their substance and process is, on that scale, revealed. All the more delightful then to stand in front of a piece and to marvel at its daringly simple construct and the magnitude of its effect on the eye, the senses, and our intellectual curiosity

Not to belabor the point, Ju Ting is not exactly a painter. Her art pieces are not paintings in the conventional sense. Convention itself is a concept largely devoid of meaning today, but works of this type, being made of paint and occupying a two-dimensional picture plane, initially seem to align themselves with the act of painting, even if they question, or deconstruct, its processes. Ju Ting's parallel series' *Pearl / +/-* and *Untitled* have a clear feel for the sculptural in both form and texture, and thus, perhaps, equal affinity with bas-reliefs. The reason for this may have a simple origin: Ju Ting began as a print-maker, studying in the print department of the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, and under the tutelage of one of its most interesting artists, the print-maker and painter Tan Ping. Taught well in the academy tradition, Ju Ting was also encouraged (by Tan Ping) to think for herself – Tan Ping has long done just that.

Graduating in 2013, she assumed the role of independent artist at a time in China when art could finally be anything an artist decided it could be. As a student she had gravitated towards painting, but was, from the first, far from committed to conventional expression. She began to experiment with manipulating images and familiar motifs using print-making tools and techniques to carve not copper plates or woodblocks, but instead into a prepared, and hugely thick, layer of paint slathered onto the flat surface of a canvas – which would, for reasons of necessity soon be dispensed with in favour of a wooden board. Working with the skill and precision of an engraver, Ju Ting cut through the paint, lifting up fine strings from the surface, peeling them back to reveal partially what lay beneath, and relaying them on the uncut portion of the paint surface. In this way she arrived at the series of starkly patterned reliefs that are collectively titled *Pearl / +/-* (珍珠 / +/-). As the language evolved, as Ju Ting became more comfortable with what is more readily described as an abstract visual idiom, she realized the way forward was to switch permanently from oil paint to acrylic. The malleable plasticity of its texture, allowed her to cut through many more layers of paint at a time. Thus, the *Untitled* series found form.

In appearance, *Untitled* works retain the richness of oil pigment – on occasion top layers are as

glossy as a well-varnished masterpiece. A fine example is *Untitled 121817*, 2017, which is also an arresting medley of cold tones. Here, bright cool blue, pink and yellow lie beneath a film of deep brown-black that has all the qualities of dark chocolate, not least its bitter-sweet sheen.

Generally speaking, these layerings are achieved by spreading various single tones of acrylic paint across a board -- much larger boards now -- that are laid flat on the floor. The application is often done with a print-making squeegee as a brush or palette knife and then left to dry, just enough, without fully hardening. It is then ready to be peeled off and combined as one among many layers of a new composition. The accumulation of tones that this produces is seductive. They are very much of the age in a way that combines nostalgia (Ju Ting has a liking for pigments that denote the past) with the clarity of contemporary machine-made. These combinations exuded moods, which can be subtle, but also dramatically different, the difference being signaled by the just-so juxtaposition of a major, or minor, tonal key produced by each combination of pigments. A really fine example of this is *Untitled 061316*, 2016, a medley of blue, green, brown; teal, duck egg, seal grey-brown. Entering a different key, *Untitled 110717*, 2017 blends a layer of smoky blue which, like Ju Ting's fondness for acidic yellow is a recurring tone, against a sombre slightly over-done orange, and a souring chlorophyll green, like two-day-old wheatgrass.

Since an encounter with art is often a prompt to the projection of personal experience onto what we "see", it is likely that our own emotional state suffuses a first impression of a work. Given the sensuous charge of dynamic tones in the works, one might wonder if there can be any other first response? And yet, there is. One can't ignore the texture; one of buttercream-meets-silica gel. Acrylic is dense and, when used in this manner, accumulates a substantial weight. As the layers build they seem almost too heavy to bear their own weight. In reference to the multiple layers, Ju Ting titled her first institutional exhibition at OCAT Xi'an "Peeling the Onion". This description is evocative. Outer onion skins are never perfectly whole; they break easily in the peeling. So, too, do Ju Ting's layers in the process of being removed form one surface to another. Running up against such imperfections encouraged her to work with the incidental accidents of process. She learned now to subsume them masterfully into the surface texture as a functioning element of her aesthetic. It allows her to raise the picture plane inches in thickness, whilst retaining a sense of lightness, of light passing through the surfaces, even as each piece accumulates a mass and weight far beyond what they suggest.

The effect is extraordinary. The distressed surface that this introduces into the works is as fascinating as their tonality, especially to those who appreciate the necessity of "distress" in daily life. In many ways, distress has become a keyword of the contemporary age. One might think immediately of psychological distress, of the perennial anxiety of existing and functioning to any degree of meaning in the world today. It is there also in the form of physical distractions that we provide for ourselves to offset the pressure of living in an ever-more stream-lined, high-tech, and will-to-perfection world (which gives rise to the distress we experience as our failure to live up to expectations). It's how we style our lives too. By the 1990s, even couture was drawing on punk's anti-fashion attitudes. With shabby chic interior design strategies par for the course, raw industrial spaces became de rigueur. As the influence of tech media circles expanded across a young post-internet generation of savvy, creatives and innovators, clothing became wholesale casual, anywhere, any time (almost). Garments got ripped, with holes commanding an unlikely premium -- one might say that Ju Ting's art follows in the steps of designers like Rei Kawakubo who reconfigured garment shapes and the human silhouette through deconstructions, using folds and frayed edges.

In tandem, art has become more casual too. Not only in its installations, appropriations and the craft of its execution, but in terms of its embrace of outsider influences and points of display. We are used to having the imperfect elegantly represented in daily life, often through art, and we delight in it for insinuating an edgy challenge to an otherwise increasingly banal and generic global existence. Yet, to anyone who lives their life according to a strict regime of orderliness and perfection in all things, the damage visible in *Untitled* works, the promise of fragility and further disintegration they impart to collectors and curators alike, will be somewhat off-putting. To those who appreciate what the "damage" suggests of the artist's practice and process, however, Ju Ting's art will be intriguing, evocative, and, even, calming. It is challenging to restrain fingers from reaching out to feel those damaged parts; the same chill-thrill as running fingers over scar tissue. As a new departure for a relatively young artist, these constructs represent an exciting exploration of spatial language within the context of art and China today.

Ju Ting was born in Shandong in 1983. She graduated from the print-making department with a BA in 2007, and with a masters in 2013. She lives and works in Beijing

Karen Smith is a British national, resident in China and specialized in the field of contemporary Chinese art. Her main activities are research, writing and curating, but she also works with various international institutions with regard to this field. In mid-2012, she was appointed founding director of OCAT Xi'an, a contemporary art museum that is part of the OCAT Museum Group founded in Shenzhen in 2005. OCAT Xi'an opened in November 2013..