

ArtSeen

Yuh-Shioh Wong: Spirits Gone Astray

by Katie Stone

ATM Gallery

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Yuh-Shioh Wong, "Fireplace" (2004), mixed media, Installation shot.

Yuh-Shioh Wong's first solo exhibition in New York, *Spirits Gone Astray* is a landscape of myriad forms that eloquently displays Wong's multifaceted and prodigious talents as a draftsman, painter, and sculptor.

The exhibition consists of over thirty unique pieces that are united by a shared theme. Wong displays a fantasy world where animals that are extinct live and evolve. Though each situation is distinct and operates as a strong independent work, there is an organic continuity that runs through the groupings akin to the diversity that coexists harmoniously in the natural world. Her strategy feels similar to the different lands described by Marco Polo in Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*: although each purports to be a unique place, they ultimately describe a single land, formed from the convergences of different descriptions and experiences into a portrait of one place.

Wong's works are material explorations of two and three dimensions crafted from a standard stock of Styrofoam, papier-mâché, concrete, and pigment. The underlying link between her different approaches seems to be the sketchy drawings that act as the genesis for even the largest, most rough-hewed sculptures. The work for her recent Hunter MFA explored metamorphosis in small, lithe creatures that transform into a multitude of states within a single form—from aquatic to mammal to plant, for instance. The sinewy lines suggest the evolutionary chains of microbiology, and Wong's influence by, and interest in, science could rightly be connected to her academic training at MIT. Yet formally, the sureness of their mark evokes the fluid touch of Anna Gaskell's hyper-sexualized women, with the strange audacity of Eva Hesse's devouring machines. While substantially different in type, these are women artists who defined a space for themselves through drawings that push the limits of their practice, in part by pushing the limits of what organic means. Wong's lipid works speak to a state of personal absurdity and idiosyncratic investigation that sets the parameters for the rest of her endeavors, many of which are crudely executed and less forcibly bound to realism.

Despite their prominence, finding the drawings can take some effort, as in "Moving Land" (2003), which operates simultaneously as a sculpture, a shelter for press releases, and the gallery book. The drawings are on the inside, which is visible only by literally inserting one's head into a narrow opening, and waiting for one's eyes to adjust to the light. Why? Because in a prior form the drawings were panel paintings, and Wong exploits the principles of reuse and reappearance.

The works on paper are sometimes counterbalanced by sculptural extensions that sit on ledges jutting into space beneath the frame. This third dimension can enhance the experience of a traversable world as in "Mountain with Glasses" (2004), and it can also detract as in "Rose Petal Roofs" (2004). In the latter, a tower of paper cups partially obstructs the painting and text is visible on the quotidian, unaltered object, which brings the work down to a level of haphazard collage. In other instances, Wong's method of recycling is engaging. In "Ice Age" (2003) a pile of jagged Styrofoam and concrete is simply a reconstituted block transformed into a craggy ridge, and in "Untitled" a mirror forms a crystalline reflecting pool for small plastic sprites and a looking glass entry for the viewer into the other world. The cups, by contrast, feel like a hasty solution for creating verticality, and lack the necessity of the other material choices.

It is probably the weight of their rims that gives these utilitarian items such an intense feeling of stasis, for elsewhere Wong's work seems to breathe. While in Skowhegan last summer she began to experiment with pigment, working like a fresco painter directly onto the wet concrete. The tones in the sculptures are airy, and they suggest a locale of dappled sun and the fresh outdoors. There is, nevertheless, an omnipresent tension that comes from the sense that these landscapes locate themselves simultaneously in the wilderness and in a dark urban space. They retain in their architectonic armature traces of city roots, and particular pieces suggest the sense of longing for an unattainable natural world. This is especially true in the works with clouds that always stay just out of reach.

Yuh-Shioh Wong's craft-based method and interest in drawing reflects an active awareness of the contemporary art scene in New York. But her practice is neither slick, nor self-conscious, and warrants more consideration than many of the deliberate kitsch constructions currently in vogue.