

New Year Rot!

Gaffa Gallery courtesy of Yen Staedler Female Art Awards
(18-29 August 2016)

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Louise Zhang's New Year Rot! is a horror show. It can't be promised that it is a particularly scary one, but with the artist's amorphous figures, the flames and all that slime, the elements are definitely there. While these components could be utilised for easy scares, the artist instead partners them with candy colours, flowers and glitter; but never let the veneers fool you, the menace is always playing a part.

New Year Rot! is an exercise in conflating iconography. The artist draws on images or icons that have been utilised throughout storytelling in the West and Mainland China, revealing both the richness of these modes of storytelling while also promoting a new way of seeing and articulating horror. Throughout Zhang's work in this exhibition the visual languages of filmic body-horror, nianhua (年画) the new year posters popular in China and Diyu (地獄) the realm of purgatory known in Chinese mythology have all been mined to create her new idea of horror.

A key example of Zhang's iconographic conflation is found in Somewhere that you think is good but it's actually evil and then you die, 2016. This painting is a continuation of the artist's painting practices where abstracted and blobby forms are depicted as clusters in high-key tones on a surface decorated using beads, sparkle and clumps of resin. The blob is amorphous and ambiguous, it could be cute and harmless like a baby or it could be hiding something much more sinister. The blob is a product of the body-horror genre where the recognisable acts against usual function to garner an abject uncomfortableness. The blob has functioned for Zhang as a central metaphor attracting and repulsing her viewer. In Somewhere that you think is good... the artist has layered her usual blobs amongst representations informed by the symbols and meanings of ancient Chinese charms. The most defined symbol in this work is the peach. Dotted throughout the painting, the peach as a symbol for longevity and justice provides the painting with yet another paradox. The attractive element of the blob is that it is a mis/unshaped entity ready to be moulded. The fear is that forming this blob could lead it to act against intentions. With the inclusion of the symbolic peaches in the painting the artist incorporates the idea of longevity as an additional consequence to be considered when approaching the ambiguous and amorphous blobby form. Ultimately, Somewhere that you think is good... is not just an exercise in attracting and repulsing the viewer, but also one asking us to acknowledge that there are long-term consequences to a meddling spirit.

A game for audiences viewing New Year Rot! is to try and spot the peach. It is an easy one because in this exhibition they are everywhere, but nowhere is it bigger or more central

than it is in *Juicy Juicy Fuzz*, 2016. Zhang's sculptural practice is often an instance where the artist restyles her blobby painterly forms into physical ones. *Juicy Juicy Fuzz* differs from that style as the form appears to be more in-between a blobby state and looking like a peach. As a symbolically loaded image, the peach inevitably reoccurs in popular culture in Mainland China. For this exhibition there is hardly a piece of material more aesthetically influential than the *nianhua*, which are woodblock prints commonly used in households during New Year celebrations. These posters tend to employ vibrant colours and display optimistic scenes to act as signs of good will saying goodbye to the past and hello to the future. A great portion of these prints depict pudgy babies in states of absolute glee as they recline on giant flowers, ride carp or cuddle that enduring symbol of longevity the peach. The *nianhua* style is an apt one for the artist to draw from not only because of the vibrant colours or the healthy slather of kitsch they indulge, but also because like the blob these posters can't just be taken a face-value. In the 1940s the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) began appropriating the *nianhua* poster to include the ideological standpoint being pushed by the CCP. Both Zhang's work and the CCP's *nianhua* poster indulge the ambiguous and the perceived undefiled figures (the blob for Zhang and the pudgy babies for the CCP) as a seduction to their works that have potentially ulterior undertones.

Despite a hunger for horror stories the artist would be hard pressed to actually find any to draw from in the cinema of Mainland China. As a genre marred by censorship laws discouraging the use of supernatural content, to look for horror Zhang has had to look much further back to the folklores of *Diyu*, otherwise known as Chinese Hell. *Diyu* is not constructed from any single religion, but rather an amalgamation of Taoism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Chinese folk beliefs. It is a maze-like realm where souls are taken through various courts of torture to atone for their earthly sins.

Shaped like a cartoon cloud on fire *We're all gonna burn in hell for a little bit* is a sculptural painting that reflects these tales. This painting is an object where wood cut shapes have been layered to act as both form and surface for the paint. The cloud and flame shapes that define this sculptural painting have again been informed by ancient Chinese symbols as well as *Diyu* imagery. With the heavens and good luck implied by the the clouds and the flames acting as a motif in images of destruction and torture, *We're all gonna burn in hell for a little* straddles these opposing realms to represent them as an amalgamation. Heaven and hell: there is not one without the other. In this work the title unambiguously links it to hell, but it is one that is merely temporal. In conflating heaven and hell, doom and serenity this work creates narrative stakes because the work could potentially land in either. Horror relies on the unexpected, and for Zhang that is manipulated by situating the extremes of torture and heavenly safety as equal potentials.

In Louise Zhang's *New Year Rot!* there is the potential for anything; an image could be a symbol for goodwill and happiness, but just beyond the surface there is equally the potential that it is all just a ploy to twist and manipulate. This exhibition indulges codified

visual languages to present horror as a disruption of codes and symbols. For Zhang the suspense is leveraged in the question: do you put faith in in the delightful or trust what you don't know?

August, 2016