

## Yang Jiechang: "Artists Continue to Try Hard"

CHAMBERS FINE ART

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Perpetually striving for self-cultivation and sublimation, Taoism-influenced artist Yang Jiechang (SEE AAP 38) bared the fruit of his self-reflections in his US solo debut at Chambers Fine Art. Encompassing a variety of media, from neon to Chinese ink and brush painting, the exhibition evoked Yang's quest through singular acknowledgements of guilt and pride.

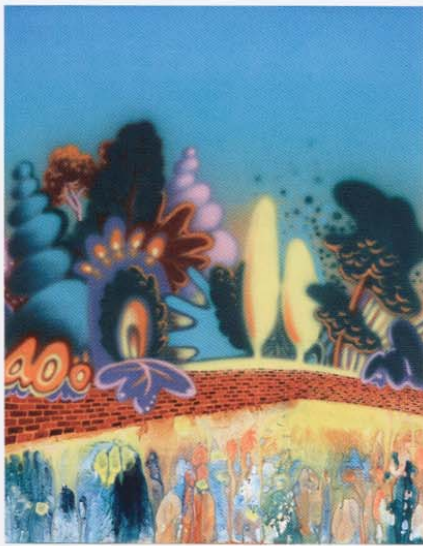
Immediately at the gallery entrance was a wall-mounted mixed media work, *I Often Do Bad Things* (1987-2007). The titular sentence is turned vertically and scrawled in tiny neon script in the bottom left corner of the piece and repeated in Chinese characters written with ink and brush in the center. Appropriately, only the words "bad things" were illuminated after the neon sign was damaged during installation. This glitch made it difficult to concentrate on the beauty of the Chinese characters and their mounting on silk and canvas. Yet the directness of the title and the piece's aesthetically pleasing construction created an incongruity that begged the question—what are these bad things?

Yang himself obliquely weighs in with *Oh, My God!* (2004), a set of two wall-sized paintings on canvas, one with the phrase "Oh, My God" and the other with "Oh Diu" repeated obsessively, and two counterpart video projections. Diu could be taken for the Cantonese word for "fuck" or refer to *dieu*, the French word for god. Upon closer

examination, it becomes apparent that Yang's writing is not painted directly on the canvas but rather over a set of the same words in white, which, in turn, cover up an original set written in black. The laborious process is chronicled in the projections, which show Yang's disembodied hand and wrist methodically twisting across the canvas, elegantly forming the words upside down from his perspective but right-side-up to the viewer. This action is set to a soundtrack of Yang's reading of the two painted phrases, which alternate between a horrified "Oh, my God!" and a frustrated "Oh Diu!" Taken as a whole, the work's penitent aura speaks to a project conceived in the aftermath of an unspecified bad deed.

Yang further exposes himself with a different repetition on an adjacent wall, which features a self-portrait entitled *Artists Continue to Try Hard* (1996-2006) along with the sentence written in neon, *Artists Continue to Try Hard* (2007). With an erect penis nearly the length of his thigh, Yang's portrait assumes a supremely confident posture: he stands with one leg forward and his hands clasped behind his back. To the left of this is the title painted in acrylic and ink on canvas which, similar to the text in *Oh, My God!*, conceals alternating layers of overwritten white-and-black text. Here, Yang's self-flagellation comes to a halt. With no reference to remorse or malfeasance, the work stands in stark contrast to Yang's other displayed pieces, injecting the exhibition with a lightness that, taking his pose into account, gives way to hubris.

Through the oppositional interplay between pride and guilt, Yang successfully conveys his ability to consider his actions. It remains to be seen whether he will ever admit what he did. ■

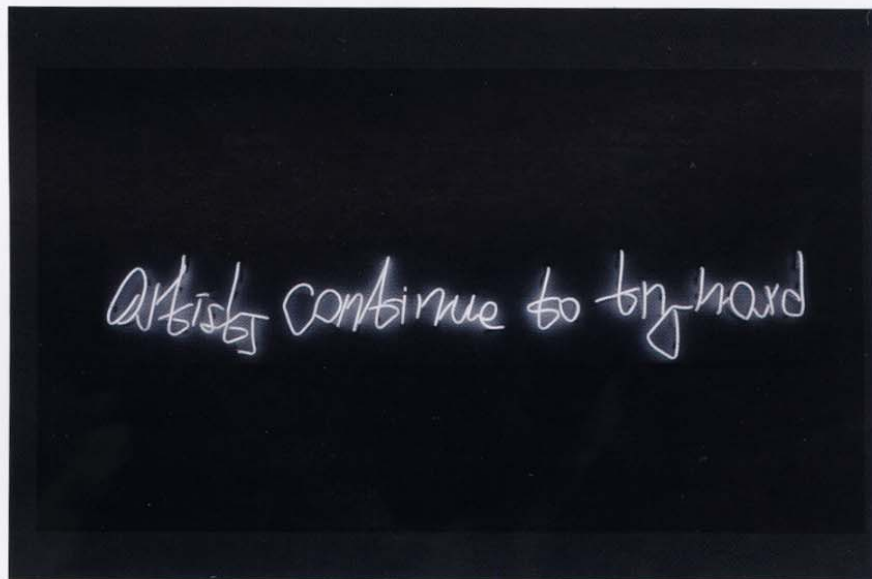


MALA IQBAL — *Happy Forest* (2007) Acrylic on canvas, 28 x 22 in, courtesy PPOW, New York

*One* (2007), *The Promised Land* (2007) and the psychedelic, post-apocalyptic *In Sight of Coconino* (2007)—hint at Iqbal's expanding technical repertoire, incorporating gestural applications of paint reminiscent of various 20th-century abstractionists. A multicolored film of Morris Louis-like pours makes up the reflective surface of the lakes that comprise half of each of these canvases. These abstract passages assert the flatness of the picture plane against the soft-edged mountains or trees above.

The strategy is inverted in the magnificent *Grimm's Sunset* (2007), devoted to the forest—a Romantic favorite. Anchored in a somewhat realistically rendered undergrowth, a thicket of trees is a gorgeous flurry of painted marks: strong verticals and short perpendiculars serve as trunks and branches while a tangle of splatters and dribbles that evoke Jackson Pollock's action painting defines the foliage. The titular sunset, a horizon of vibrant pinks, peaches and yellows peaking through the arboreal tracery, looks more like a fast-approaching forest fire, hinting at the recent natural disasters that devastated parts of California.

This ecological subtext is reinforced by the crisply painted red-brick ruins and swampy pools of *No Firm Ground* (2006) and the weepy trees, washed-out gullies and abandoned structures of *After the Flood* (2006); along with the exhibition's title, these scenes of post-deluge devastation evoke New Orleans after 2005's Hurricane Katrina. In Iqbal's hands, the sense of awe experienced when encountering nature's raw power, the subject of the best Romantic landscapes, evolves into an uncanny dread. Her visionary landscapes serve as premonitions of the inevitable environmental apocalypse resulting from our ongoing abuse of nature. ■



YANG JIECHANG — *Artists Continue to Try Hard* (2007) Neon light mounted on board, 70 x 390 cm, courtesy Chambers Fine Art, New York