

# ARTFORUM

SHANGHAI

**Wei Jia**

LEO XU PROJECTS

Shanghai's frigid winter seemed to resonate through the mildly biting spring, as if the haunting memories of the immediate past were unwilling to fade. Or at least that's the feeling one was left with after viewing Wei Jia's solo exhibition "Mildly Biting, Encountering Spring," consisting of nine new paintings from the past three years. The outlook in these imaginary landscapes remains ambivalent, fearful, and anguished.

Wei seems to have taken a step back in order to get a larger view of the world. Rather than evoking the inner world of an individual, as

## REVIEWS



Wei Jia, *Time Flies*,  
2014, acrylic on  
canvas, 59 × 78 1/4".

in his previous work, here the artist projects a broader imaginative slant. The scene is typically rendered in broad and quick brushstrokes; at times, his facile technique even recalls the generic skills that Bob Ross taught on television. Yet Wei is not preoccupied with his quickly executed and unsophisticated brushwork, or with whether it looks old-fashioned or contemporary. Rather, his imagery is dictated by a desire to create an impression of transience, of the passing of time, through the various rhythmic movements made apparent by the use of continuous long brushstrokes across the canvas, and their uniform sense of direction, as in the flow of the enshrouding mist in the valley as four figures look down on it in *Sea Pictures*, 2015. In *Time Flies*, 2014, in which two figures face each other in conversation, the brisk execution of the space they occupy suggests the immanence of time and movement.

When Turner painted his famous shipwreck scenes at the height of the Romantic era, the streaming light he rendered suggested an emanation of God's spirit—hope and salvation for humanity. Wei's angle is undoubtedly more ambivalent. He applies dollops of paint in incongruent color combinations on top of his imagery to make the light source itself seem out of place, artificial. For example, in *Time Elapsed*, 2015, a brushstroke of pink left dripping in an apocalyptic scene is lightly touched over, allowing one to imagine the presence of the moon against the fluid background painted in dark hues and turquoise; in *Light in the Cloud*, 2014, a few thin, bright, crisscrossing brushstrokes at the top interrupt the work's dark, earthy background; the pink and fluorescent yellow in *Sea Pictures* seem to dribble off as they hang in the sky over the distant mountain. These seemingly superficial add-ons of artificial illumination engender a critical space within the images; as viewers' eyes attempt to pierce them, these spaces become opaque and impenetrable, nearly inaccessible to the beholder.

Although the figures inhabiting Wei's landscapes remain hazy and indistinct, the artist is reluctant to fully relinquish the human presence. Yet as he expands his worldview from a focus on the self and its emotions to a macrocosmic perspective on the ephemerality of the world as a whole, his attitude toward his protagonists remains protective. All of the figures in the landscapes face away from the viewer; even in the only two portrait-like works in the exhibition, *All Four One*, 2013, and *Force*, 2014, the faces are obscured. Ingmar Bergman once wrote, "Here, in my solitude, I have the feeling that I contain too much humanity." Wei, on the other hand, has generated an encompassing solitude by creating an enclosed space in which his protagonists are reluctant to face the outside world.

—Fiona He