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NO PLACE Alison Yip Emily Ludwig Shaffer Quintessa Matranga Galerie L'Inconnue Montreal



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Alison Yip, Emily Ludwig Shaffer, Quintessa Matranga

Galerie L'Inconnue, Montreal

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By JAMES D. CAMPBELL March, 2019

This painting show marked a dovetailing of diverse painting practices by three gifted artists around the idea of “no place”. Alison Yip, Emily Ludwig Shaffer and Quintessa Matranga are now emerging powerfully into the foreground of painting’s present tense.

Interestingly, the show is titled No Place after Sir Thomas More’s ‘Utopia’ (1516), his famous tract outlining a perfect imaginary world set on an island. More invented the word ‘utopia’ from the Greek word ou-topos meaning ‘no place’ or ‘no-where’. The exquisite cunning of this pun - the close Greek word eu-topos means ‘a good place’ – is mirrored in the works curated on the walls of L’Inconnue. Brilliantly curated by Leila Greiche, the exhibition invites speculation on whether it is a meditation on perfection or its alarming opposite? As we shall see, some decidedly dystopian aspects are explored here.

Yip’s strange compositions with their floral protagonists seem to work from a phobic standpoint or Anthophobia as it’s known in the literature. It is also a combination of two Greek words: namely, anthos meaning flowers and phobos meaning an irrational aversion or fear. Apparently, any floral genus or part -- stamen, pistil, what have you -- can trigger this fear.

The title of perhaps Yips’ strongest work in the show is revealing in this regard: maere (Oil on canvas, 2019). It references Swiss-English painter Henry Fuseli’s famous painting The Nightmare (1781) in which a woman lies supine on a bed with a monstrous apelike incubus crouching on her chest. In maere, Yip depicts a Brown-eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia triloba*) with a single stalk encased neatly in a high heeled boot crouching over another supine flower

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being. This whimsical invocation of an evil spirit that torments sleepers might also reference sleep paralysis. This begs the obvious question: does this reference psychoanalytic theories regarding the unconscious and the contents of dreams? (Sigmund Freud reportedly hung a reproduction of Fuseli's painting on the wall of his Vienna flat). Yip's interest in such things makes for consummately well-painted scenes that tantalise the viewer. The flower entities here remind us of the extraterrestrial killing plants of John Wyndham's famous novel and subsequent film adaptation *The Day of the Triffids* (1951). Her dreamscapes are intense, troubling and captivating.



Emily Ludwig Shaffer's paintings induce a similar sort of surreal, thematic haunting. While critics have pointed out that they are eerily reminiscent of the work of Rene Magritte, they are a world removed conceptually. Yes, they wed dazzling technical virtuosity with a decidedly surrealistic sensibility, but her strange apparitions are enigmatic labyrinths that lure the viewer in and do not release us readily from their grasp as they provide new spaces to think and live in. Here again, they relate to the title of the exhibition -- which could bear a question mark, after all -- for there are few utopian signifiers here. They do invoke Magritte's sentiment that "All my work results from a feeling of certainty that we do indeed belong to an enigmatic universe." But their multi-dimensionality and shapeshifting ethos have a sci-fi flavour and startling sense of contemporaneity. As the optic moves fluidly across her surfaces, there is something reminiscent of videogames like *Myst* and *Riven* and others with their Easter eggs and secret levels.

It is perhaps unfair to reference Magritte at all or at least too readily here, as Shaffer's own hit parade is comprised of artists like Louise Bourgeois, Georgia O'Keeffe, Frida Kahlo, Anni Albers, Hilma af Klint as well as contemporary ones like Françoise Grossen, KathleenvPetyarre, Elaine Cameron-Weir, Andrea Zittel, Pippa Garner and Mira Dancy.

Shaffer's ambiguous works reference more than any single source or creative endeavour. She invokes weaving and the woven grid, architecture and the modernist grid, the design of domestic spaces and gardening, to name but a few. Her dark rooms and spaces in paintings like *Patches*(2019) and *Bay Leaf Wrapped Night* (2018) give the imagination space to rest and linger in for a while, and they have a numinous quality, a moody aura, that welcomes rather than alienates.

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Shaffer's paintings, like those of Yip and Matranga, are notable for how well painted they are, and the more emotional they become or rather the more emotions they release in us the longer we spend inside them.

Quintessa Matranga known previously for her remarkable coffin-shaped canvases, offers here small gift box paintings that work as a sort of staggered punctuation for the exhibition as a whole -- and an Ariadnean thread that leads us, in through and out of this labyrinthine haunting.

Her work is plugged into the folklore of the moment we are living now, but also offers a powerful disconnect from its hegemony, such is her radical order of interrogation of painting's present tense, and they catch us up in works that are as enigmatic and compelling as those of Yip and Shaffer.

The gift boxes in paintings like Ruby (2019), are swaddled in darkness, on fire, cast in tarnished silver or weighted with pendulous organic sacs, and seem laden with a high, infectious fever that lights up the dark interstices of the exhibition space like a coruscating aureole. They remind us an earlier work entitled All My Roommates Are Evil But I'm Evil Too (2016) which depicts a gift box extravagantly wrapped in black paper and festooned with bootleg Monster High doll stickers that Matranga and her frequent collaborator Rafael Delacruz picked in Ridgewood, New York.

The evil floral spirits in Yip's works, the dark rooms in Shaffer's and the gift boxes in Matranga's small canvases, all project a world that is itself a potent projection zone. It is one into which the optic and psyche of the unwary viewer readily enters -- and from which it does not emerge easily, quickly or unscathed. WM