

ARTIFICIAL PARADISES

CAROLINE WONG

By Caroline Wong and Kate Reeve-Edwards

Caroline Wong's women are languorous, voluptuous, intoxicated, and excessive. They are saturated in the feminine: feathers, sequins, warm colours, revelling in this costume of campness. We encounter these figures in acts of consumption, centralising the pleasures of smoking, drinking, and eating. Far from historical expectations of restraint and smallness, these women, like titan temptresses, fill up the canvases.

Artifice has long been seen as a feminised art. 'The painted face' once treated with suspicion, the adornments of jewellery and clothing have been associated with deception, female performance and prostitution were formerly inextricably linked. Nature, on the other hand has been considered absolute and honest. Artifice has been cast as nature's antagonist, so the title of this show 'Artificial Paradises' presents an intriguing tension.

Paradise conjures images of nature: a prelapsarian space. Yet the paradises depicted in Wong's work are entirely artificial, yet no less dizzying and delightful. They conjure a Baudelairean drug-infused state of pleasure: something deliciously fleeting. They are artificial too in their celebration of the manmade or synthetic. Wong is seduced by all things shiny and plastic. She herself delights in nocturnal excess, which stems partially from her time roaming Asian cities such as Hong Kong and Bangkok, places she considers Artificial Paradises in their own right. She recalls shopfronts, market stalls, billboards, and bright neon signs all engulfed with a clashing swell of sounds and smells. This has inspired her protagonists' environments. Basking in electric neon lighting, Wong's women are enveloped in a mess of manufactured junk and ephemera: crisp packets, makeup compacts, glittering purses, kitchenware, bottles, books and tarot cards. They don embellished, seductive fabrics: feathered robes, sequined dresses, slippery satin shirts. Instead of rejecting the associations of artifice, they revel in them. Like her women, Wong's canvases are at once beautiful and base, romantic and trashy, championing the cosmetic and chaotic.

These women delight in solitary pleasures. French Modernist writer Colette described solitude as 'a heady wine [or] a bitter tonic' and here, Wong's protagonists are decidedly alone, in states of intoxicated pleasure or gloomy self-absorption. This both continues and subverts Chinese Meirenhua ('images of beautiful women'), idealised images of refined courtesans and concubines in their tastefully decorated boudoirs, waiting dutifully for their lovers' return. The obedience and patience of these traditional figures are mirrored by the meticulously delicate rendering of the images, demanding the utmost restraint of the artist. In comparison, Wong's beautiful women are dishevelled, drunk, dreamy, and disgraced. This heady loss of composure is expressed with the palette: the torrid and near florescent reds and oranges are colours of passion, joy, fever, hedonism and hallucination. The Meirenhua's neat, contained linearity is dissolved with sensual layers of paint and pastel, applied rapturously, Wong indulgently losing herself in the colours and textures of her mediums, absorbing 'the savour of things' à la Bonnard. These buttery daubs which susurrate on the canvas blend with frenetic oil-pastel scribbles, resulting in marks that are simultan-

ously calm and relaxed, hazy and ephemeral. Her application of materials teeter on the threshold between reality and fantasy, self-restraint and loss of control.

Wong prioritises the interiority and agency of her characters. She physically and deliberately centres them within the canvas, allowing them to take up space. Their worlds are extensions of themselves, seeping out into their surroundings, pooling and blurring the random clutter of the home into amalgamated personalised chaos. Her fondness of the domestic recalls the intimism of painters Vuillard and Bonnard, both of whom combined lush impressionist painterliness with the florid decorative surfaces of the home to evoke 'the magic and melancholy of the mundane.' The home has often been regarded within feminist discourse as an oppressive, confining space, and there is a general push for contemporary female artists to extricate themselves from it. But for Wong, the home provides warmth and respite from the outside world and is the place where, liberated from societal rules and expectations, one is free to muse, to ponder, to daydream. Her thoughts are in line with French philosopher Gaston Bachelard who declared the home a place that 'shelters day-dreaming, protects the dreamer, allows one to dream in peace.' It is this oneiric world that Wong wishes to escape into whether creating or looking at the works.

Wong's work celebrates excess. It honours a female pleasure which seeps and swells. It refuses boundary and restraint in all elements. The protagonists occupy much of the canvas, like kaleidoscopic and catatonic Alice's in Wonderland. The mess and pattern of their clothing and surrounding spaces foregrounds the sensory and sensual. The colours are maximalised, hot, heady, and sugary. This sizzling palette is chosen by Wong as another form of feminine resistance. Historically colour has been seen as an afterthought, a 'tarting up' of an artwork. Plato regarded it with disdain, instead accentuating the purity of line and structure. Therefore, line, structure, and composition came to reflect masculine order and reason, colour feminine adornment and emotion. For a delight in colour is personal and carries connotations of emotional or abstract states. By lavishing torrid colours on her canvases Wong is centralising the emotive, the reactionary, and the seductive. The confluence of femininity and excess in Wong's paintings is a raucous rejection of what femininity 'should' be. Her protagonists resolute and guiltless in their relish of momentary pleasure and voluptuous abundance.