

## SHEN CHEN Recent Paintings

Shen Chen's current paintings have seemingly become more reductive, the surfaces monochrome or nearly so although subtly modulated, their tonalities wavered like minimalist paintings from the 1970s. The barely perceptible stripes, in shades of grey, are even more ephemeral than before, as much smoke, fog or mist as they are paint. Trained in Shanghai in Chinese and Western conventions, Shen—who has lived in New York for more than ten years now—takes his cues from both traditional Chinese ink painting on paper and the customary European and American practice of painting with oil and acrylic on canvas, artistic principles that he seamlessly and deftly blends together as part of a tendency toward hybridization, a strategy that becomes increasingly common as once disparate cultures intersect, audiences expand and new global connections are being forged.

Shen's paintings are delicate in appearance but held together by the insistent verticality of the brushstroke, sometimes crossed by an uneven horizontal band of darker or lighter color, like a shadow either at the top, the bottom or both or in a tremulous transversal introduced at different heights to laterally bisect the picture plane. The stripes often become indistinct at the edges, blur into each other and coalesce to form a clouded field, one that hovers, advances and recedes. This mass of inflected grey suggests an indeterminate space that is simultaneously a surface phenomenon and a recession into infinite depth, built up from layers and layers of paint strokes, a repetition that traces the process and becomes the content. The perception of a tonally gradated but otherwise undifferentiated surface is also reversible as the individual strokes and bands eventually separate out and become discernible once again, in a kind of cinematic fade and focus, a loop, folding the element of time and transience into the works.

As abstractions, Shen also offers a materialist reading of his work, as well as a poetics of paint in which the intimacy and primacy of the gesture is supreme, where the physicality of the art is quietly triumphant, coupled with a simple, understated serenity and beauty. On the other hand, Shen's paintings can also effortlessly slip into representation, into the suggestion of landscape paintings, as the horizontal divisions imply a faint horizon line. Some are more demarcated than others and the force of gravity more apparent. In a recent work from 2006, the darkness at the top is balanced by broad bands of color at the bottom, visible through the paneling of whitened brushwork. There is one lovely painting, a diptych from 2005 that is a pale white-grey edged by a dark stripe positioned along the inner edge of each panel. Confronting each other across the divide, they function as a kind of *repoussoir* leading the eye into an enigmatic space that opens up on either side of them, the thin vertical bands essentially a shadowy portal to an undefined realm. These soft grey surfaces also act as a scrim, a curtain obscuring the ambiguous view through the rectangular window of painting. Behind it, somewhere in the distance, beyond the blur, the mist, there might be a classic Chinese landscape. On the other hand, there might simply be a void, the nothingness beyond the veil of illusion that is integral to the belief system of many philosophies and religions, in particular Eastern. In this perceptual vanishing and reconstitution, a cycle of meditation is established for the viewer in which what exists and what does not are inseparable, in which, in koan-like paradox, something and nothing are equivalent, integrated, in a state of grace.

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