



TILTON  
GALLERY

 **BROOKLYN RAIL**  
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS AND CULTURE

# He Sen

*by Robert C. Morgan*

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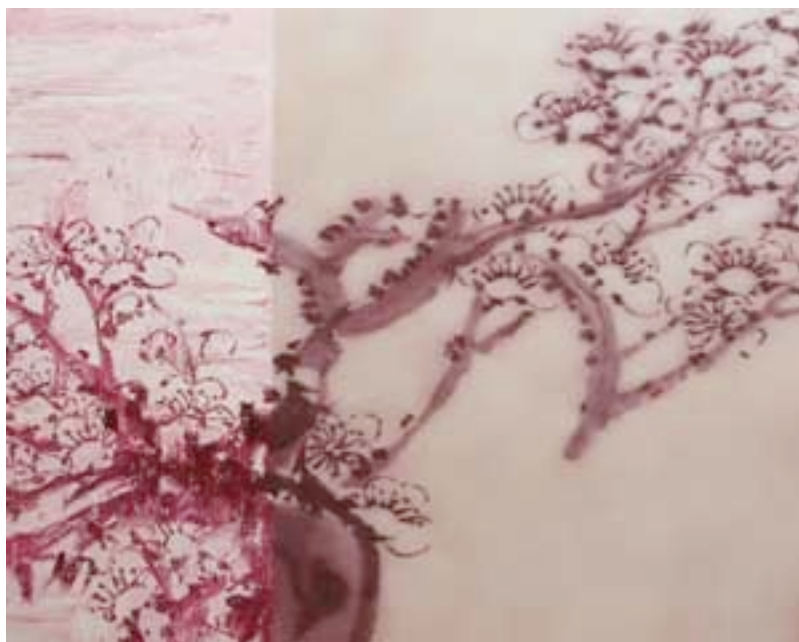
It is not an understatement to say that recent Chinese figurative painting has had an exemplary impact on the way we look at painting today and on the growth of the contemporary Asian art market. It is also a perplexing phenomenon in that over the past decade most biennials do not give serious attention to painting of any kind unless it is shown in a perfunctory way, or unless its content conforms to an ideological agenda of radical politics or “emerging” art. For the most part, Chinese painting has attained its own niche apart from the blue-chip icons of Europe and America.



He Sen, "Smoking Woman with Wine," 2008. Serigraph on canvas. 79 × 63 × 3 in. Edition 11 of 50.

Given its attention in American glossies, one might assume the prices are astronomical, but this is not entirely true. Some painters are in the upper tier of the middle range, but most are clearly not at the top level. None of them come close to the prices of a Johns, a Richter, or a Freud. This does not mean that their paintings are inferior to contemporary Western art (a notion some New York dealers have tried to perpetuate). Given the patent manipulation of the market in recent years, one can no longer say that quality in art is automatically equal to a work's investment value. Works by Zhang Xiaogang, Yue Minjun, or Zhao Nengzhi may stand apart less in terms of

speculation than for their profound level of subject matter and emotional content. These attributes will prove significant in readjusting the price structure of these artists' works over the next decade. As for the quality of some of these paintings—what might be cited as a connoisseurship issue—they are among the most significant works of the past three decades.



He Sen, "Picture Album of Plum Blossoms," 2008. Oil on canvas. 78 × 74 × 98.43 in.

Based on my experience, many younger Chinese are absorbed as much in the history of American and European Modernism as the former generation was absorbed in the Cultural Revolution. These artists—not all of them young, actually—are coming to grips with the meaning of Western developments in terms of their own cultural understanding. Especially in Beijing, artists are trying to formulate what may be called “a dialogue with culture.” This turn of events suggests that the equation between Modernism and culture is not exactly the opposite of Postmodernism and transculture. There is an overlay somewhere between these pairings. I consider He Sen,

who is forty years old, one of these artists. His exhibition of paintings at the Tilton Gallery last month was his first important exhibition in New York. His paintings are essentially about China's emerging entrepreneurial culture as it has affected his generation.

There were two types of painting in his exhibition: the alluring young Chinese women painted in a dark photo-realist style, and appropriations of details from historical Chinese landscape paintings, reinterpreted in oil on canvas in an expressionist style. Although Gerhard Richter has been noted as an influence, He Sen's work is more indebted to the work of David Salle. While these affinities are not hidden, they are more conceptual than they are stylistic. In fact, He Sen is technically a better painter than Salle. There are five relatively large-scale paintings in this group. Each one appears to use the same model, and in four of the five, she is smoking. The paintings are done primarily in black, white, and gray tones with only slight touches of color, either red (as in lipstick or wine), pink (as in stuffed animals), or blue (as in jeans).

Their prevailing photorealism is broken only by the expressionist-style smoke that ascends from the cigarettes. In "Come Together" (2008), the model reclines in bed flanked by two stuffed animals—a pig and a dog—while holding a lit cigarette. In "Pretty Dudu and Pretty Toy" (2008), she's on a reddish couch holding the stuffed dog with her leg pulled up, revealing her underwear. In "Space and Air" (2008), the model, dressed in black lingerie, rests on the floor against a

hassock, gazing into empty space, again holding a cigarette. The trail of smoke dances above her head, suggesting erotic playfulness, reverie, and a seething, displaced passion. “Space and Air” could be viewed as the inheritance of Ingres and Manet, the Odalisque of post-ideological China, the symbol of desire caught in the emptiness of history where the profane has renounced the sacred.

He Sen’s landscape paintings are different—the secular erotic content is absent, emphasizing instead the transformation of nature rendered in brush and ink into large-scale canvases in oil paint. Some of these are hauntingly beautiful, as in the gently bisected, blue-green copy of Zhu Sheng’s “Bamboo and Orchids” (2008), and in the sleeping figures under a plum-blossoming tree, an interpretation of a Xu Wei landscape from the Ming Dynasty, painted in green and violet. The larger point in favor of He Sen is that he clings to his sources through appropriation—not in the way of Western cynicism, but through an intuitive exploration of how traditional images can be embraced through contemporary painting. At the same time, he understands the reality of contemporary desire in China and shows a keen sensitivity to Eros—symbolic, perhaps, but again, not cynical. This, in fact, reveals Eros as a cultural force, as in the writings of Marcuse, a philosopher who understood desire in creative expression as having a transformative potential that surpasses the more direct suggestiveness of advertising or propaganda.