

Clio Sze To

22.06.2023 — 16.09.2023
9 rue des Cascades, Paris

Clio Sze To was born in 1988 in Paris. Of Franco-Chinese culture, she spent her childhood in Boulogne, or more exactly in the artists' workshops in Pont de Sèvres. She studied Decorative Art and lived in Paris. A few years ago, she moved back into the family flat at Pont de Sèvres. It was there, on the thirteenth floor, in a glazed studio, bathed in light, with a panoramic view, that she produced the pastels on paper and watercolours on silk, in both a portrait and landscape format, that make up the series of works presented at the Galerie Crèvecoeur, which opens on 22 June 2023.

This is her first solo show. All that can be seen are city-views from the Pont de Sèvres, observed from her flat. In close-ups, wide views, or overhead scenes, Clio Sze To has produced what looks like, if we think in terms of personification, a series of obsessive portraits of the same character, seen through American shots, panoramic scenes, side-on and frontal detailed views. What portrait is she drawing up, in fact?

She is drawing up the portrait of an emblematic town of brutalist buildings from the 1970s, able to soak up the population of workers needed for the productive frenzy of the post-war boom and thus welcoming over two thousand homes, all made according to the same model, half of which were council housing, overlooking a parking lot with almost four thousand places. This was all designed so you could live in it "as though in autarky", in the words of one of the architects, thanks to circular arcs, crescents and hexagons.

"I have a home full of windows", sang Anne Sylvestre. In a "tentacular town" as Émile Verhaeren predicted. A town made of concrete, widely referenced in French rap, especially by Booba, its most famous inhabitant. "Welcome to the heart of asphalt". With no apparent commentary, Clio Sze To chooses first of all pastels, even though they're known first and foremost for how they render the effects of matter and the smoothness of complexions and have long been almost exclusively used in portraits, to depict the verticality and crudeness of concrete. A contrast that the architect Le Corbusier, who had his part to play in the story of brutalism put this way: "May such crude concrete reveal genuine sensitivities beneath it". By picking out architectural points like windows, façades, or balconies, where people who don't know they're being watched jut out, she draws up a fragmentary portrait – which is slightly voyeuristic – of a microcosm she's been observing since her childhood, between tedium and fascination. What do we learn from the world when we look at people at home in buildings that compete with the sky? What do we hold onto about our own story? Why do we never talk about apprentice painting?

Crèvecoeur

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Placed on the architectural border between austerity and futurism, such concrete megastructures can also seem worrying. Seeing what's happening in other people's places is entertaining, but also a little off-putting. Clio Sze To's works are very silent. The two selected techniques, pastel on paper, already mentioned for its smoothness, and watercolour on silk, in which the strokes cannot be either totally clear or regular, produce a padded effect, which creates a slight disturbance below apparently calm landscapes. In each painting, there are effects of mistiness that break from radicality, with straight lines and repetitive geometrical shapes, while often odd wisps of smoke provide a feeling of imminent danger. Such foreboding is highlighted by the dizzying changes of scale that our gaze undergoes while passing from a window to the entirety of a building. Presences become ghostlier; door frames more impenetrable. From a neighbourhood doc-fiction, we have moved maybe into science-fiction, as in *Blade Runner*, highlighted by night scenes. Chronologically, these are the most recent paintings made by Clio Sze To, night scenes, from the dark, as described by the artist as the moment when you disappear, when the question of intimate and social time becomes different.

The show draws up the portrait of little imbricated worlds, which the artist has meticulously constructed in a seeming hyperrealism, while concealing clues that, little by little, as we spot them, draw us further and further away from the Pont de Sèvres of 2023.