

Shafei Xia

I Am Still Me

Sep 14 – Nov 12, 2023

Press Release

An antique make-up cabinet is wide open in front of us and showing, reflected in its mirror, an elegant and undressed figure putting mascara on. Wearing only a pearl necklace and two gemmed rings, while a woman standing next to her side is comforting two tiger pups, the main character of this painting is radiating beauty and sureness and is surrounded by her precious-looking belongings: dollhouses, toys, fruits and cakes which cover the counter in front of her and the floor – these objects themselves are then surrounded by tiny naked figures, playing and touching each other, erotic and innocent at once. Nude and undisturbed by our gaze, the centre and focus of this *tableau vivant* is a pig.

There could probably be no better introduction to the world that Bologna based Chinese artist Shafei Xia represents with her art and that is presented with *I Am Still Me* for the first time ever to the Nordic public. A world which is grounded first and foremost on a sense of humour, comicality and playfulness which would be reductive to define as idiosyncratic. It is a realm of the absurd, where animals and humans are interchangeable and where symbology and reality mix so deeply that there is no point in trying to understand where reality and intimate personal narration start, and jokes and the absurd begin. It is like being invited to peek into private

fantasies and dreams, and not any kind of dreams and fantasies, but the dreams of a young Chinese who likes to fantasise about traditional fairy tales and their symbolism, who is funny and witty, sexy and self-ironical. Her main technique itself opens to create an aura of magic around these works: mounted on thick cotton canvas, these drawings are watercolours on extremely thin and beautifully textured sandal paper produced in collaboration with a Bolognese artisanal studio specialised in the restoration of ancient paintings and art.(1) This technique, in pair with her ceramic sculptures, have the peculiar effect of historicising her images, making them look like traditional drawings from another time, and this adds to the fascinating subject matter of her images themselves. Anthropomorphised tigers, pigs, fishes(2) are juxtaposed to doll-looking human beings, smaller scale figures (reminiscent of the differently-sized figures in Ancient Egyptian imaginary) and countless objects. It is a whole new realm, the one that Xia creates, populated by symbols, quotes and witty jokes, using figures of speech and symbols as a language so intimately cryptic and explicitly readable at once that it would give a complete new meaning to Umberto Eco's lines: "*omnis mundi creatura / quasi liber et pictura / nobis est in speculum.*"(3)

It is an allegorical paroxysm, and once one gets accustomed to its peculiarities, to the delicate and awkward ways in which it shows us our own fears and intimate desires, vices and strengths, it is impossible to un-see how this process is happening only through the candid humour and irony Shafei Xia is able to have. It is with unique grace that she helps us see ourselves while

eventually presenting us with herself, naked and honest, in her own jokes and dreams, frailties and pride, just shallowly hidden behind her tigers and pigs, fruits and dolls. And while a good sense of humour makes funny paintings and nothing more, what we find in *I Am Still Me*(4) is more personal and unique than that, it is the precious possibility of sharing and telling a very personal story through humour, as “true humour is to be able to laugh at oneself, which not only is a humorous view of life, it is also a humorous view of humour itself.”(5)

Mattia Lullini

(1) The drawings are realised on sandal paper and then carefully glued and fixed irreversibly on canvas with an extremely delicate process which has no margins of failure.

(2) All meaningful animals in Chinese tradition and constantly recurring throughout all of Shafei Xia’s art.

(3) “*all the creatures of the world / as a book and a picture / are to us a mirror*”. Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, 1980.

(4) An exhibition title reflecting on the fear the artist has of losing her true self in the deeds and demands of a professional artistic career and her recent success as an artist.

(5) “真正的幽默是能反躬自笑的，它不但對於人生是幽默的看法，它對於幽默本身也是幽默的看法。”錢鐘書，

《寫在人生邊上》(1941)。Zhongshu Qian, *Written in the Margins of Life*, 1941. (our translation)

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Shafei Xia (b.1989, ShaoXing) holds an MA in Visual Arts from the Academy of Fine Arts in Bologna (2020) and a BA in Scenography from ChongQing University (2012). She has been exhibited at Tokyo Gendai (2023), LINSEED Projects (Shanghai, 2023 and 2020), Mariane Ibrahim (Chicago, 2023), Keteleer Gallery (Antwerp, 2023), P420 (Bologna, 2022 and 2020), The Fores Project (London, 2022), Tabula Rasa Gallery (London, 2022), Tokonoma (Kassel, 2022), Francesca Antonini Arte Contemporanea (Rome, 2021), Museo Carlo Zauli (Faenza, 2021), and Arte Fiera (Bologna, 2020) among others. Xia lives and works in Bologna, Italy.

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