

Caroline Wong / *Picnics and Parties*

05.04 – 04.05.2024

*Picnics and Parties*

by Cathrin Mayer

The first time I engaged in conversation with Caroline Wong for the writing of this very text, I encountered her through my laptop screen. Her studio backdrop featured one of her large-scale paintings and it seemed as if the artist joined one of her exclusively female circles. I had been eagerly anticipating this conversation for a while, as I had studied Wong's paintings extensively. I realised that they seemed both very recognisable and simultaneously very distinctive.

The moment of recognition may be attributed to my classical education as an art historian, as my inner eye recalls the classes on French Impressionist painters such as Renoir, Pissarro or Morisot. Wong's large-scale canvases echo the style of these artists by capturing everyday transient moments with dynamic and visually striking compositions, characterised by loose, visible brush-work. As the title already indicates, *Summer/Autumn luncheon (after Tissot)* (2023) takes its inspiration from the painting *Holiday* (1876) by James Tissot, a French Impressionist who went on to live in London, the current home of Wong. However, Wong's work transcends the bourgeois realm of Impressionism by introducing what she describes as "scruffy ornamentalism" into her practice. This term reflects her desire to retain the visual opulence and allure of Asian ornamentation but present it in a messy, haphazard manner, resulting in an excess of colours, patterns, and surfaces. In her book *Ornamentalism* which serves as a great inspiration to Wong, American literary scholar and cultural theorist Anne Anlin Cheng explores the conflation of Ornament with the Orient, and the inevitable association of Asiatic femininity with the decorative and ornamental. This is a thorny, complex issue, but inspired by Cheng, Wong questions whether the decorative and ornamental can be imbued with new significations other than simply connoting passivity, delicacy, and objectification.

*Picnics and Parties* is about the escapist pleasures of consumption and intoxication. It depicts the 'artificial paradise', to quote the Decadent poet Baudelaire, of alcohol, cigarettes, food, and companionship, but also that of clashing patterns, lurid colours, and iridescent hues. The decorative becomes 'drunk', the ornamental detail dissolves into frenetic daubs, and artifice blends decadently with sensuality. Building up layers over several months, Wong works oil paint, oil pastel, and fluorescent pigments with brushes and her hands, combining hazy, fizzy scribbles with more lush, exuberant passages of paint. In our talk, she cites Intimist painter Bonnard as a key influence. He worked slowly and tactilely to 'recover the savour of things' – to relish a singular moment, extracting the magical and sensorial from the banal. Ultimately, in an age of decisiveness and efficiency, Wong opts for a protracted, indulgent process that favours an aesthetic of luxuriance and excess.

Wong's intoxicated, indecorous odalisques are monumental and imposing. Life-size or even larger, their intertwined bodies merge with their chaotic, cluttered surroundings and fill the entire canvas. It's undeniable to me that the women themselves and their interconnectedness propel them into a frenzy. I believe that their lively presence stems from the vitality of the painting's previous stages. At the outset of each piece, Wong follows in the footsteps of her predecessors by engaging models and friends to visit her studio and act out the scenes that will subsequently be depicted in her paintings. This is also why her characters – actual women as opposed to invented ideals – reflect the diverse facets of contemporary femininity in their appearances. This collaborative approach, coupled with Wong's unconventional and almost frenzied painting method, challenges the traditional canon of composition and femininity.

As I conclude my journey through Wong's canvases, I find myself newly invigorated by the substantial dose of authenticity and the effortless self-assurance that her female characters embody.