

Nova Jiang

*Caretaker*

10 January - 8 February 2025

*It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories.*

Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (2016)

‘Caretaker’ is a word with various connotations, perhaps invoking the spirit of a loved one, feelings of good (or ill) health, or those hidden, immense systems and institutions which structure society. Care, we might like to believe, is the cornerstone of society, as well as our own, individual attitudes to the world around us. It certainly should be so. Yet, as the artist Nova Jiang (b. 1985, Dalian, China) highlights, it is the *failure* of care which could be said to characterise humanity. In caring for ourselves, we do not always remember to care for others. In this sense, Jiang’s newest body of work is a reflection on the extent to which our lives are entangled with, or separated from, compassion.

On display are scenes varyingly concerned with structures of power, the construction of history, and the hierarchical anthropocentrism which orders the world we inhabit. For the artist, these have long manifested through surreal and sometimes unsettling depictions of humanity’s relationship with nature: a foundational

example of society’s human-centrism and its destructive consequences. Her work embodies the “tentacular thinking” proposed by the scholar Donna Haraway, who posits the value of an interconnected, multispecies understanding of Earth. Indeed, *Ink* depicts an octopus enclosed in a glass bottle, a container which is symbolic of the imposition of human values onto nonhuman lives; the human exceptionalism which limits our obligations of care to our own, singular species—and moreover, creates a hierarchy of care within it.

This hierarchy within the human species is, in part, a legacy of Enlightenment thought. Jiang interrogates this through her exploration of the Dutch still life, a genre inextricable from racial capitalism. Whilst this is a medium often thought of as devoid of narrative, it is in fact heavily implicated in the economy of enslavement. Jiang’s paintings reflect on the difficult juxtaposition of the pleasure afforded by the still life with its violent past. She posits art as both an imperfect but necessary medium in elucidating the very present nature of this past. For example, *Cartographer* reimagines the globe as a skull; a poignant symbol of the way racial capitalism renders our planet uninhabitable for life. The two maps which sit at its base are drawn using the Mercator projection, a sixteenth century map projection which has been criticised for enlarging Europe and North America at the expense of countries near the equator. This is an image deeply concerned with the tangled history of the genre it

inhabits, as well as individual prejudices forged by the prevalence of the often unacknowledged, erased colonial past.

Much of Jiang's practice stems from this necessary task: bearing witness to the atrocities which have shaped not only our past, but continue to inform our present. As we approach fifteen months of genocide against Palestinians by Israel (and enabled by the US government), the importance of reckoning with settler colonialism's deplorable consequences is imperative. Works such as *Horror* and *Cure* (a painting made in solidarity with the Palestinian people, and whose sale will raise funds for humanitarian aid in Gaza) represent the act of bearing witness in its most literal sense. This is an act of seeing the world in a new light, and realising one's own complicity in the perpetuation of oppression. Art, in this sense, becomes one of many necessary tools of resistance; a way in which to shape our *worldview*, and the way we approach the other beings whom we occupy Earth alongside. Returning to Haraway, the importance of collective reckoning is emphasised: "our task is to make trouble, to stir up potent responses to devastating events, as well as to settle troubled waters and rebuild quiet places." Settling troubled waters and rebuilding quiet places... in other words, *caretaking*.

*Text by Ella Slater*