

Sarah Lai: "Spotting the light onto a light"

By Arianna Gellini

"I can communicate nothing... there is nothing to communicate... painting can never be communication... [no] trick whatever is going to make the absent message emerge of its own accord... I look for the object and the picture: not for painting or the picture of painting... I want to picture to myself what is going on now..."¹

Spotting the light onto a light is Sarah Lai's new solo exhibition at Gallery EXIT.

The exhibition develops as an accentuation of the everyday, presented in its most allusive way. Seen as a continuation of the artist's recent interest in the little gaps that reside between normality and imaginary, these new works ponder over the mystery of the immediate, the everyday, the mundane through a simple and detached meditation. In an interplay of paintings and videos, stillness and animation synthesize in an encompassing exhibition of subtle estrangement with the familiar/ the everyday.

The everyday as we normally understands it is the most unspectacular, unsensational, unremarkable aspect of human life. It sits in the ordinary, in the mundane signified as a standard and rather unappealing quality of life. In the mundane reality of the everyday, most things which we encounter are valued for their purpose – whether as objects of function, of enjoyment or of empowerment. Seemingly insignificant objects may be distorted by subtle maneuvers, stratagems, and camouflages. They become the pivotal hinges of everyday actions that would then determine our perception of life and society. It is in the un-assuring simplicity of the everyday that institutions are able to project their dogmas and coercively insinuate them onto our subconscious. Objects are above all repositories of this interference and it is then by means of alterations and appropriations that we are able to question society and advance further change. "Changes in our everyday life practices, or their reinventions, are the most crucial aspect in the construction of this new order. It's also the most inspiring context for contemporary art to evolve and obtain new relevance."² Lai's paintings work in this matter. They expose everyday objects, to a process of denaturalization,

¹ Gerhard Richter, Elger D. & Hans U. Obrist (eds), (2009), Gerhard Richter Text, London: Thames & Hudson. p.93

² On the spectacle of the Everyday by Hou Hanru, Artnet Magazine, 8-12-09

which are then “unfunctioned” from any signification and presented emptied from all possible associations. These objects are positioned in a tangential inbetweenness. They formally tend toward an experience of silence conceived as the utter sense of nothingness created by the disappearance of any form of visual contextualization. It is in this interpretation of nothingness that these paintings assume a monumental autonomy. Vaguely appearing on the canvas surface these vacuum objects are then further appropriated and altered in the featured videos. Developing as gestural actions they activate the voided objects in a rather antithetical way. The videos work as the deposit of an alteration where to indulge in projections of personal, private and intimate memories. They present the insinuations of human projections into objects that have lost its ontological significance and it is now ready for further discoveries.

The exhibition title is borrowed from the artist previous work ***Spotting the light onto a light***. This work develops as a combination of painting and video while depicting a simple and unappealing desk lamp. Ghostly and on the verge of disappearing, the banality of the object is rendered into an almost ethereal human silhouette; as if spirited by a twist of human emotions. With an incredible touch of sensibility the humanoid lamp seems captured while lurking into someone else’s private drawer. Hiding in shame. As an ironic inspection of the image form, the paired video sees the artist molding her body into the lamp shape. Seemingly immobile, she aimlessly tries to mimic the visual form of the lamp but failing.

Spotting the light onto a light has to be considered the starting point for this “unfunctioning” exercise that stimulates an experience of the everyday in all its theatrical normality and creativity. The presence of both painting and video serves for this matter, as incubators for an exploration of the spatial reality as it pertains to the everyday object.

From a painterly perspective, the spatial experience of the presented image seems to offer the viewer what Lacan describes as the gaze; that awareness of being an object (an object to be looked at) occurring when confronted with another person/ object; etc. In ***Spotting the light onto a light***, the lamp is the proposed other upon which come into terms with a physical self. Yet the transition doesn’t happen in full totality and what we are left with are the sum of unspecularizable past experiences and future implications that we project into them. With means of brush strokes and color palette, what we see is an impression of an object; a painting of appearances. Resembling the classical portrait scheme, these paintings differentiate from conservative portraits on both an epistemic and formalistic level. Uncanny, almost on the verge of disappearing these objects are detached from their utilitarian identity; they don’t provide any information nor they allude to any meaning. They float in space,

seemingly fading away. It is a quiet impression of something that surround our environment and whose appearances for some reasons catch our eyes yet quickly slipping away from our memory. In a sharp contrast, the video evolves with strong movements, gestures, visual triggers that activate these pictorial impressions into a continuity of movement "capable of thinking the production of the new". This new stands for a new interpretation, a new configuration a new understanding of the object presented. This "newfication" evolves precisely through the movement/ gesture which give rise to automatic responses from both a subconscious and a supra-conscious level, forcing the viewer into thinking. 'It is as if cinema were telling us: with me, with the movement-image, you can't escape the shock which arouses the thinker in you.'³

Among the six remaining set of works three of these evolve as continuations of this multilayered exploration while the reaming three direct their endeavor toward a contingency of portraiture.

Next in the series is the work *Milky yellow cube* and *How to cut butter into a perfect cube*. Conceived as an attempt to create a perfectly square shaped butter, the work develops in both stillness and animation. From a pure formal visual absorption to a more phenomenological gestural activity, painting and video converge into an alteration of a familiar, everyday object and showcasing it as the most malleable of all clay. The ironic, cabaret like, slapstick soundtrack enables a viewing immersion into an augmented performance of imposed alteration. By witnessing the butter deforming its shape and nature under the carefully driven hands of the artist, the spectator can't fail to perceive an underling sense of failure/frustration and dissatisfaction. Perhaps it can be found in the contingency of a total decay or the fact that we cannot fathom the pieces of this puzzle: a chunk of butter, carefully reconfigured and on the merge of melting. Yet we are nevertheless drawn to understand the situation that has given rise to this powerful gesture. The canvas, as the aftermath of the gesture, becomes a site of mediation between the actual object and its projected image. The object has been rendered other. Knowledge has been defeated and it's up to the viewer to figure out what is left of it.

Cyber Colours is a make up removal brand name. It presents itself in the outmost simple of all design. Slightly curved on the side, smoky plastic bottle and a cute little white cap. Filled with an unnatural crystal blue, pink and white liquid this frivolous tiny little object is the focus of the work *Cyber Colours*. Fascinated by the color and intangibility of this liquid commodity,

³ Deleuze, Gilles. Cinema 2: The Time-Image (1985). Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta, London: Athlone, 1989, p. 156

the artist paints the object by charismatic and ethereal brushstrokes. Detached from all the possible references of its original context, this object is casted onto a dissolving background. The brand name has almost faded away; the border of the bottle cap is as well dissolving its substance into the background. This formalistic approach enables a further detachment of the object from its function and its meaning. The makeup removal bottle has lost all its value as sign providing the artist with the freedom to project her personal responses onto it. Cyber, Color and liquid are some of the key words that seem to appear and further invested in the paired video. Drowned in her own imagination, the video develops with a series of liquid movements. The pink painted nail hands vigorously shake the bottle in sensual maneuvers in an attempt to create a rhythmic flow of the blue liquid. The focus is put on the bubbles, the whirls, the spins, the twists of the fluid blue liquid. There is no more reciprocity between the bottle and its form, what is presented is purely an abstraction of the feeling and atmosphere that Cyber Colors provides her with.

The work *Light On/Off* and *Broken Series* situates itself along this line of painting and video juxtaposition. Conceived as a diptych piece, the presented twin lights inhabit two different and opposite context/environment. Looking at light and the impressionist quality of the light aura, the first painting depicts the light tube turned on, silently protruding its shimmering appearance. The other light tube conversely explores the realm of darkness. Hidden within the shelter of obscurity, the light tube introvertly explores the possibilities that could be encountered in this domain.

Any circumstance, contextualization or milieu is left unspoken. There is no extra quality, no extra condition that could provide further identification. What we are left with are two aesthetic visual forms greatly competing one against each other. This great sense of inner tension thou provide as a source of connection between the two light tubes. It seems impossible understanding the one without the other and vice versa. Hence the eye by shifting the focus from one and then the other, initiate a flickering dance of rhythmic movements. This rhythmic fluctuation is then further advanced in the pairing *Broken Series* a compilation of 4 GIF Images. Focusing on the broken affect that the two light tubes create, these files explore this idea of brokenness by means of rhythmical effects. It seems quite natural to consider *Light On/Off* and *Broken Series* as an abstract consideration over the ways in which our mind take into account and come into terms with visual forms.

With the works *Showerhead Portrait*, *Sugar Rock* and *Lines* we proceed into the territory of portraiture. These three set of works approach the theme of portraiture in a rather unusual way. By applying some of the stylistic element necessary for a definition of portrait, namely a centrality of the subject, a rather expressionistic touch and a

specific type of lighting, these paintings present us with a new idea and concept of portrait. With subject matter spanning widely, we see banal and common object being presented with the same aura that define traditional portraiture. It seems the artist apply a "recognition of ordinary dignity or the accidentally miraculous; an engagement with a new kind of anthropology; an immersion in the pleasures of popular culture; or a meditation on what happens, when nothing happens".⁴ It is due to the painterly techniques renditions that Lai applies to the surface, that these paintings become representation of representations. The brushstrokes, the over-layering as well as the subject become of the same importance as the object represented. In this sense, the atmosphere, the mood and impressions even thou not representational as such, become of great importance in the depiction of the gazed other.

Spotting the light onto a light exhibit that we have to look for new ways of processing what it is we see.

⁴ From Documents of Contemporary Art, The Everyday, edited by Stephen Johnstone