

Jennis Li Cheng Tien ETAC Residency in Albi / Centre d'art Le Lait

Jennis Li Cheng Tien's work can be compared to that of an archaeologist, who explores the land in search of origins. It also resembles that of an artisan, who experiments with the different transformation states of matter, and of an investigator, who draws on documentation, searching for evidence that will attest to a reality specific to his field of inquiry.

Jennis Li Cheng Tien is an artist who transposes her observations and experimentations so as to suggest a personal and poetic vision of the territory, landscape and/or city that she establishes at the heart of her work, and of which she consistently highlights the specificity.

Her plastic propositions and 'translational' work provide us with a way of deciphering the history of mankind in all its singularity.

In Albi, Jennis gathered fragments of silt - residues of the November 2014 floods - in the basements of the Moulins Albigeois (Albi Mills). This soil, which originated from the Rougier de Camarès area, travelled several dozens of kilometres before settling under the Moulins. It already represents a form of 'displaced territory'.

Her interest in this red earth then led her to local architecture, which uses bricks made out of this same soil. Again, we have matter that is displaced to be transformed.

Her attention to thorough documentation then led her to Henry Ser, an architect in Albi.

The work process she engages in is identical: displacements of matter (fragments of silt) and transformations (pictorial treatment and various experimentations).

The act of painting the fragments gives them a precious aspect, like items from an archaeological excavation, shards of pottery or ceramics that have lived a life of their own...

In her search for individual and collective stories, Jennis first met with the writer Brigitte Coppin, an author of books on medieval history who lives in the Tarn region. She then invited residents of the Moulins Albigeois area, who endure the erratic assaults of the River Tarn, to share their stories with her and give her clear glass containers - glasses, dishes, vases... Like metaphors of their homes and personal stories, these containers are gathered together at the Moulins, on a table facing the river.

For the Open Studio she designed at the Mills, Jennis displayed a few of her painted fragments on shelves, like a collection of archaeological treasures. The containers the residents provided are filled with water, into which she delicately drops her fragments. The earth crumbles in the water, which becomes cloudy at first, before the sediment gradually settles.

Only the 'skin' of the paint is left at the surface of the water - an imprint of the transformed matter, the creation of another form of memory. The silt resumes its movement at the bottom of the container, dissolved, shapeless. After becoming solidified by an extraordinary event and made visible for a short while, it once again reverts to its initial shapeless and elusive form.

Further back, on the windowsill overlooking the river, Jennis placed a flat screen that shows a static shot of the red and roaring river. The colour contrast is startling on the days the river reverts to its pale green hue, reminding us of the ever-changing nature of things. The screen sits on a layer of silt, which the artist crumbled and filtered until she obtained a soft, smooth powder, reminiscent of spices or pigments, other noble and precious substances...

Jennis's work process, which is very rational and relational, documented and protean, matters as much as the result that summarises these various aspects. All the different elements produce a metaphoric, poetic and singular proposition, which reflects each studied location. There is nothing automatic about her work, albeit the fact that she always uses some form of natural element (light, water...), and consistently reproduces a plural approach that involves elements of archaeology/handicraft/documentation/art. Each new work is a new beginning. The protean nature of Jennis's artistic productions might at first make her work seem a little hard to comprehend as a whole. But hidden under this apparent disparity of forms is a subtly constructed, delicate, and highly contemporary practice.

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Jennis Li Cheng Tien, preparation of the Open Studio in Moulins Albigeois , Thursday, March 26, 2015, photos Phoebe Meyer