

Luo Mingjun: I walk beside you

In 2018 Luo Mingjun took as the subject matter for an oil painting the magnificent magnolia tree in her garden in Switzerland. Although her view of the tree immediately outside the studio window had accompanied her practice for the last four years, the artist had never considered painting it until now. It was only after she had completed the work that a friend informed Luo Mingjun that the magnolia was a species indigenous to Asia. Touched and amused by this serendipitous link to her own life between China and Europe, but fascinated too by the forms and movements of the tree, she decided to focus on it as the theme of this exhibition, exploring it via a number of paintings in various formats.

Luo Mingjun is known in Switzerland for her highly controlled and precise interpretations of photographs from her childhood and youth in China: family portraits, domestic objects and everyday situations. She regards the autobiographical as a stage on which to project her past and present selves, her tender depictions in oil, watercolour, charcoal or pen and ink a highly personal exploration of things she has seen and experienced. The title of this exhibition, *I walk beside you*, indicates, however, the artist's choice to focus on the immediate present, the continuation of her life and artistic practice today. It also underlines the fact that the magnolia tree began its existence before Luo Mingjun was born and will probably outlive her.

The flowering magnolia is not the first tree to be depicted by the artist. Her initial inspiration was the glimpse of a tree from a train in 2018. Impressed by its apparent age and strength, she made it the subject of a painting, also presented in this exhibition. However, whereas this tree is shown almost in its entirety and from a distance, the views of the magnolia are always partial and close-up. Luo Mingjun's familiarity with the spreading branches, majestic buds and opulent flowers - so near to her studio window that she could reach out and touch them - is transmitted in the large scale of the painted details. We are always reminded, however, that we are looking at a painting: although Luo Mingjun interprets the magnolia from both life and from photographs, there is little detail and she restricts her palette throughout the series to tones of grey. In addition the paintings change with the viewer's movements, the clarity of the depiction from a distance dissolving into brushstrokes the closer one approaches the canvas.

One of the most striking features of the magnolia series is the relationship between the complex forms of the tree and the empty background. The observer inevitably reads the latter as sky, yet it is also significant that traditionally in Asian art only that which is important is depicted. Luo Mingjun focuses on the forms of the individual buds and flowers, indicating the branches more generally. The empty spaces that are inevitably created remain mysterious voids that often have the quality of light, specifically the fading light of evening.

Shown alongside the canvases are two small graphite drawings, their dense abstract surface contrasting with the paintings' realism. At the beginning and end of each day working on the images of the magnolia, the artist added more pencil strokes to the drawings, their slow construction thus mirroring the production of the paintings.

Also included in the exhibition is a group of recent watercolours. In each of these a single jewel-like colour is applied in droplets to form an image such as a tree, a building with steps or drops of green water. The withholding of description through colour, as well as the fact that the pencil contours are not always filled in, requires the viewer to mentally complete the

work. These works are mere impressions of experiences captured in photographs, as though hovering fleetingly on the surface of the paper. In this exhibition, *I walk beside you*, Luo Mingjun demonstrates through both paintings and watercolours her skill in simultaneously exploring her realistic and highly personal subject matter whilst reinventing it as a more abstract proposition in paint.

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