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Art review: Song Kun at Walter Maciel Gallery

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Paintings with a fuzzy, blissed-out, sun-bleached look have a venerable contemporary history, beginning with Vija Celmins and Gerhard Richter in the 1960s, continuing with Ellen Phelan in the 1980s and then on to Luc Tuymans more recently. Now, among others, add young Beijing painter Song Kun to the accomplished roster.

At Walter Maciel Gallery (<http://www.waltermacielgallery.com>), Song is showing 20 oil paintings made since 2008. All horizontal, all 18 inches high and 24 inches wide, they include a few single-panel works and one triptych; most are diptychs.

Some, like “The Deer City I & II,” show different views of the same subject — in this case a mountainous landscape with a pure white deer that is so sleek, smooth and statuesque that it appears to be, well, a statue. Others shift the view completely from one panel to the next. A mysterious landscape is next to a close-up of a man who has fallen asleep on the bus, or a dark nighttime view of Shanghai abuts an unidentified pagoda in silhouette.

The effect is dreamlike and vaguely ominous. It encourages close scrutiny of disjointed vistas that refuse to coalesce and fully disclose themselves. Song paints in grays, whites and sepia tones, with only hints of lifelike color rising from the surface, like a vision emerging from fog. A sense of unrelieved estrangement separates the artist (and the viewer) from the quotidian world recorded in the pictures.

Song showed a painting series called “It’s My Life “ (2005-06) at the UCLA Hammer Museum two years ago, her American solo debut. Every day for a year she made one small painting as a kind of visual diary of whatever was on her mind, filtered through a variety of traditional Chinese and European painterly motifs. But the Hammer selection felt blasé and apathetic.

The new work doesn’t. Nowhere is it more engaged than in the triptych, where three panels show different views of a rock band playing on a club’s stage, fronted by a young female singer. In the lower left quadrant of each view, illuminated by stage lights that variously blare into your eyes, a uniformed soldier or policeman is seen from behind, intently watching the musical performance.

Song keeps shifting our point of view on the nightclub action, but it’s the official watching the free-spirited woman who seems to be the work’s true subject. Whether a performer merely being checked out by an unexpected fan, a symbol of youthful rebellion under the watchful eye of an authorized representative of government control or perhaps art being metaphorically monitored by shadowy proscriptions, the triptych mesmerizes. The show is Song’s U.S. gallery debut, and it represents a big step forward.

-- Christopher Knight

Walter Maciel Gallery, 2642 S. La Cienega Blvd., Culver City, (310) 839-1840, through Oct. 31. Closed Sundays and Mondays.

Above: "The Deer City." Credit: Walter Maciel Gallery.

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