

RON WONG'S FIRST SOLO SHOW AT M50 IS A SHANGHAI SURPRISE

By Sean Dinsmore

Shanghai artist Ron Wong opened her first solo show last weekend at Moganshan Lu's M-Art center. This gifted young artist who grew up in Singapore and got her master degree from Shanghai University College of Fine Arts has delivered a show that features watercolors, sketches and oil paintings and captures a side of Shanghai that is at once familiar and inscrutable - like Shanghai itself.

To the outsider Shanghai is a mad jumble of energy, dialect and some of the most happily neurotic people in the world – all of which make perfect sense to local Shanghainese. But it's with an insider's eye that Ron has lovingly captured local street scenes and simple caricatures. In the series of three subway scenes called Monday, Tuesday and Weekend train we see crowded trains packed full of people who are all caught up in their own little worlds, even as they deal with the overcrowding and stress of their everyday lives. Every character in the hectic scenes plays a part in the human drama – no one is left out. There is a sense of knowing humor in these paintings that can only come from a curious and loving eye.

When I first looked at the Shanghai caricature paintings I thought, 'Oh, I've seen this before' but they held my attention and realized I wasn't in any way bored as I returned for a third perusal of a seemingly innocuous scene of two old neighborhood guys playing Chinese chess. Looking on is a peanut gallery of people you might find any day in Fuxing park, for example, but each face is alive with its own secrets, boredom or joy. These people, unlike many simply ironic or absurd scenes in contemporary Chinese art, have humor, depth and soul.

The set of two large canvases entitled Oldies Love pits four senior citizen would-be Romeos looking across (to the other canvas) at four obviously pleased Shanghai aunties. We don't know these people (possibly Ron Wong does) but again I felt compelled to study them longer, down to the small details of one man's salt and pepper chin stubble, and another's well-worn pork pie hat and neat little hipster moustache. On the other side I was equally curious about the vigorous beauty of an obvious grandmother with short straight hair and her shy stooped over friend in a permed hairdo and a yellow sweater. These are Shanghai people, clearly, and yet they have warm universally human qualities – they could have just as easily been old people in Central Park or the Jardin de Luxembourg.

The second part of the show is a series of landscapes that include some Chinese country scenes as well as a few stark Shanghai cityscapes. Again Ron Wong has captured a certain feeling that one instantly recognizes to be local, with economical use of phone lines and roof tiles. For anyone who has ever looked out of their Shanghai apartment window in winter and wondered if the sun will ever reappear, you will sense time and place instantly. The non-urban landscapes are distinguished by their geometric shapes and swirls, plus the confident use of color and depth. The landscapes play second fiddle to the city scenes, but are in no way to be overlooked, just as the small sketches in the front room of the gallery also hold a few pleasant surprises, again with human faces being the most compelling.

The gallery notes at the entrance explained that these works represent Ron Wong's university years in Shanghai, with simple scenes from her everyday life. For any curious, sensitive person who has lived in this city I would venture to say that her impressions go deep into the heart of it, and touch all you have seen with humor and a loving grace that is not in any way ordinary.

Unfortunately the show will only run for one week, and ends on December 17th, so you may have to refer to www.ronwongart.com if you missed the show. Her works may be available from her Shanghai studio.

The Collection of Ron Wong's Painting's at M-Art center, 50 Moganshan Lu Building 2,