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Absent Friends

Henry Shum *Vortices*

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The typical Annunciation scene heralds the springtime conception of the Messiah; not so in Henry Shum's 2020 rendition. This is something more ambiguous. The Virgin Mother, falling back to the floor, is painted in rusted, muddy ochres; the face of the archangel Gabriel – who is perched on a tree like a bird – is blurred and inscrutable. Around them, patches of cyan and mysterious rhizomic shapes seep into the image.

The 12 paintings in Shum's *Vortices*, his debut solo show at Empty Gallery, contort the conventional genres of portraiture, landscape and religious imagery, upbraiding the fixed traditions that surround them. For example, the two figures in *Woman and Child* (all works 2020) immediately evoke the kind of tropes found in the maternal portraiture of classical *Madonna and Child* paintings, but on the evidence of the title, it is unclear whether the female is even the baby's mother; similarly, the pastoral vista of *Memory of a Landscape*

seems generic until you begin to puzzle over its orientation, the algae puddles at the top of the canvas confusing clouds with water. These subversions are connected to the artist's treatment of oil paint, which he dilutes into thin washes that evoke the lambent, abstracted ink paintings of the postwar New Ink Movement in Hong Kong, in particular the works of Lui Shou-Kwan. Yet even these references to certain influences are deliberately muddled. The giant mythologised creature carrying two figures in *Ancient of Days* (*Descending Elephant Fish*) is ostensibly a reference to similar spiritual imagery from the Qing dynasty, yet it is mounted within a recessed physical archway next to *Annunciation*, making both paintings appear more like sequential images in a faded church fresco. Here, Shum equalises European and Asian art history canons, essentially dismantling the constructed notion of one's importance over the other.

In these canvases, we also see hints at more subconscious terrain. Shum's figures are translucent and embryonic, their presence ambiguous among trees, mountains and lakes. As in a dream, we wonder how we arrived at certain scenes: in *Revolution of Night* we witness one figure holding another around the neck, unclear whether they are escaping danger or whether a crime is being perpetrated. This sense of dream logic is further embedded through architectural elements: two archways in a cloisterlike passage, newly constructed for the show, lead only to dead-end walls, and several of the paintings feature similar archways or brick partitions, complicating the viewer's perception of place in the exhibition. Are we looking into our own psyche, or out into the world? Shum seems to suggest spiritual communion between ourselves and the cosmos in the portallike corridors and in the glowing orbs hidden across multiple canvases, which appear like celestial moons or earthbound eyes. *Ysabelle Cheung*



Revolution of Night, 2020, oil on canvas, 181 × 121 × 6 cm.
Courtesy the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong