

## New Order

Text /Ju Baiyu

Painting is life adorned and imagined.

Struggling with her academic roots of education, Shang Liang transforms strength and beauty in their extremes into a coexistence of uncanniness and playfulness. With an exaggeratedly muscular body and a standard Adonis' face, she creates a superhuman species in an alternate space.

Is it evolution, devolution, or deification? In works from *New Order*, Shang Liang blurs concepts of time and space, rendering them subject to a “fictional” story. The artist invites us in her imagination — religion, legend, myth, and a history devoid of truth may all be encompassed in the exhibition; the new master in this order stands on equal footing with the universe; be it barbarian or civilized, there is no escaping the relativity of time; it may well be the last remaining fruit of humanity's struggle against heaven and earth or, perhaps, a Homo sapiens cohabiting with fairies and beasts at the far end of a multiverse.

In this new order, poverty and wealth cease to exist, nor do class and race hold any meaning; what remains is a discourse of death and immortality. In *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, Yuval Noah Harari recounts an ancient myth: the mighty King Gilgamesh, undefeated in battle, is shaken to the core after witnessing maggots crawling out of the nostrils of his closest friend's corpse days after his death. Horrified, he is determined to overcome death itself. He embarks on a journey to the edge of the world, slaying lions and scorpion-men along the way, breaking through stone giants, and reaching the underworld. There he meets the ferryman Urshanabi and Utnapishtim, survivor of the Babylonian Great Flood. Yet despite his efforts, Gilgamesh fails. There is no war to wage against death. Still, though doomed to die, he returns with a profound wisdom that from the moment the gods created humans, death has been our inevitable fate. But embracing a “defeatist” attitude in no way leads to passivity or despair. To me, encountering the *New Order* is comparable to witnessing Gilgamesh's relentless quest.

A vital force is to be found in the *New Order*: an awareness of death does not entail fear but a defiant form of living, as if immortality is reached even while still alive. Yet the new master of the order also calls to mind Sisyphus, condemned by the gods to endlessly push a boulder uphill only to watch it roll back down, a symbol of humanity's endless, despairing repetition. As Camus has noted, Sisyphus is a hero in an absurd sense, for he defies the gods and scorns death. Only in that scorn is fate transcended. The absurd man knows that he is the master of his life. His fate is his own creation. Sisyphus is like a blind man longing to see, all the while knowing that the darkness of night will never end — yet he continues, forever onward. *New Order* visualizes this world of the absurd man, where human beings stand barehanded in solitude. Governed by none, the new master ascends the mountain of night, each grain of sand a world of his. Such an act of ascent is also one of resistance, filled with defiance and inner richness.

*New Order* is Shang Liang's vision of self-transcendence. Her years of realist training at CAFA proved not a constraint but rather a foundation — one she has responded to with clarity and purpose. Her works retain traces of portraiture, yet they liberate bodies and faces in an otherworldly dimension. The bodies have rid of their ideology-imposed conventional meanings in the real world; the artist then places them within a vast, intricate cultural perspective. These figures, marked by a sense of destiny, may well help us reclaim our own power from our unnamed gods. From here and now, I am my new master.

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