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REVIEWS

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Szelit Cheung and Olga Grotova

written by Brady Ng

*Door to Door* / The Shophouse / Hong Kong / Jul 15– Aug 13, 2023 /

Doors open memories. Portals from our past are linked to significant locations or major milestones – the entrance to our childhood home or the gate leading into a campus where we embarked on intellectual explorations, for instance. When we think about important moments that we've experienced, those journeys can be traced through doors too, each entryway a marker for consequential junctures in our lives.

For its summer show, Tai Hang's The Shophouse organised a four-week artist residency and open studio programme that led up to a month-long exhibition, *Door to Door*. The two artists involved were Hong Kong painter Szelit Cheung and London-based Russian artist Olga Grotova, who created new artworks that drew from The Shophouse's architectural heritage and, more broadly, the city in which the gallery is situated.

*Door I* by Szelit Cheung, 59.5 x 42.7cm, 2023. Courtesy the artist and The Shophouse.

In Cheung's section of the presentation, *Door I* (all works 2023) showed four rotating panels opening up to let beams of natural light into a muted blue space, the rays dancing between saffron yellow and orange peel. *Door II* features two archways, with more light flooding into a mossy green space, bathing the viewer in what feels like an abnormally bright, shiny hour. Another rotating panel is set into *Door III*, this time seemingly with a mirror on its surface, reflecting shades of ochre, mustard and umber.

The architectural interplay continues through *Door IV* and *Door V*, with the same two doorways balanced in frame, wide open in the former and cracked in the latter, controlling the brilliance in the viewer's visual coverage. *Door VI* is different, in that a glass panel, again rotatable, separates the external light source from the green walls facing the viewer; while *Door VII* is a close-up of a door barely nudged open, with just enough light pouring in so that our eyes don't strain.

These pocket universes are a continuation of Cheung's practice of using architectural elements to tease out tension. The painter places viewers in a dark void, with the only sign of time's passage present in the way light spills forth from a space beyond our own. The moments captured in Cheung's work are ones of illumination—not only in the sense that we're finally able to see the dark space we're in, but also in realising that there's something out there, and it's up to us to walk through the door and enter the unknown.

Grotova's personal artworks were a foil to Cheung's seemingly abstract paintings. For her half of *Door to Door*, she drew from her established practice of using pigments, soil and superimposed images.

*Mine and Mother* by Olga Grotova, 90.5 x 80cm, 2023. Courtesy the artist and The Shophouse.

Earth tones dominated the works she created during the residency, each a hazy fantasy. Morose titles like *Weeping Roots*, *Ashes and Constellations*, *A Lake Garden* and *Stone Tears* point at a lingering melancholy. Grotova's practice often mines her own family's place in the Soviet Union and, subsequently, the Russian Federation. Gardens are a common reference point, and the artist transported soil from a family garden to Hong Kong to use in the creation of the artworks at The Shophouse.

Whereas Cheung's oils place viewers in defined moments, there wasn't the same certainty in Grotova's photograms and cyanotypes, introducing a much stronger sense of ambiguity in the way her work can be navigated. Both artists responded to their environment during the residency that led up to *Door to Door* – the architectural elements in Cheung's canvases were lifted from The Shophouse itself, including its ground floor entrance, stairway, windows and more, while Grotova used materials such as dried flowers sourced locally to cast images onto her photograms, while imbuing a more personal slant to the works.

When art is mounted in a storied space, there's a risk of the gallery's character overshadowing the works. But in *Door to Door*, Cheung and Grotova's creations worked in tandem with the context of The Shophouse, a pre-war tong lau that has been restored to house exhibitions. Each set of artworks told its own tale, meshing with the art space's physicality and location, and giving The Shophouse a fresh conceptual extension in the process.

After *Door to Door* opened in Hong Kong, Cheung and Grotova travelled to London for the second half of the programme – another four-week residency followed by a show that opens at Schoeni Projects in October, living up to the project's name by completing their journey.

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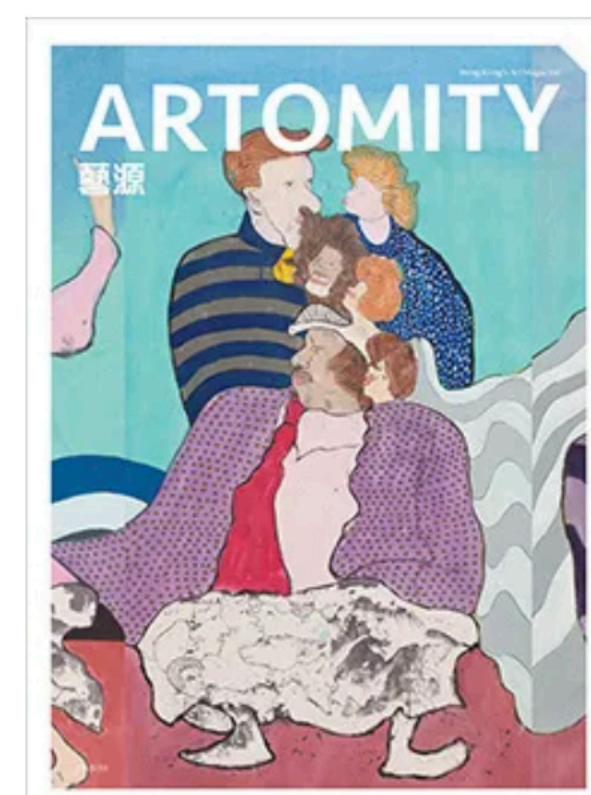
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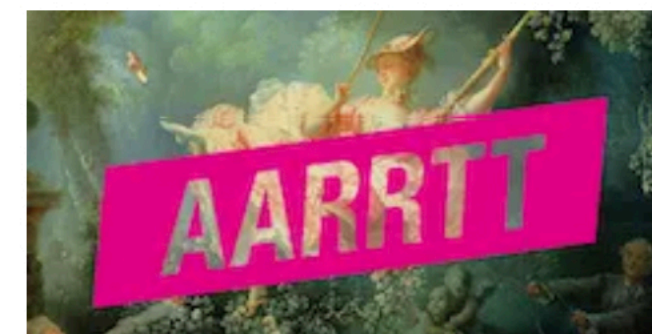
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Family having cake and coffee, overlooking a misty Victoria Harbour, from Rooftop Garden, M+, West Kowloon, Hong Kong, 12 February 2023.

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