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Pollack, Barbara. "Abstract by Nature at Sean Kelly Gallery." *Cobo Social*. July 31, 2019.



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COBO SOCIAL
Chinese Abstraction Series
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From a pale blue Southern Song dynasty censer to a fabricated misty landscape captured on video, *Abstract by Nature* brings together stellar works, both old and new, to comment on the way that artists for centuries have captured natural wonders in the most minimal of means. This museum-quality exhibition presents antiquities side-by-side with contemporary works by five artists, Asian and western, offering a new view of abstraction that crosses cultural boundaries.



Installation view of Abstract by Nature at Sean Kelly, New York. June 28 – August 2, 2019. Photography: JSP Art Photography. Courtesy: Sean Kelly, New York.

For example, a priceless 15th century Japanese Tokoname jar is expertly paired with a 2018 painting of broom-like brushstrokes by Korean artist Hyun-Sook Song, the white

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swirl of glaze dripping down the sides of the urn matching the swoosh of white paint against a black-sepia background. Or the crackling surface of *Infinity-Blanched Almond*, 2017-2019, by Chinese artist Su Xiaobai mirrors the patterns of “iron wire-and-golden thread”, a matrix of lines enveloping an incense burner from 1128-1279 CE. These works set up a dialogue between past and present, craftsmanship and creativity, that speaks volumes about the endurance of timelessness in even the most contemporary works of art.

Su Xiaobai lives and works in Shanghai and Dusseldorf and paints using lacquer and layers upon layers of wood, sackcloth, vines and clay, in lieu of oil paint, sanded and shaped into an almost three-dimensional frieze of cracks and lines. Hyun-Sook Song lives in Hamburg and employs tempera on canvas, with each stroke representing a single movement and meditative state. Despite their alleged Asian roots, their work also seems on a continuum with artist Callum Innes from Edinburgh, an internationally renowned abstract painter who here offers several works on canvas in which the application of turpentine leaves faint traces of erased pigments. His 2014 painting, *Resonance*, also bears an affinity to the ancient porcelain on view with streaks of white pigment flowing down from top-to-bottom in a barely controlled fashion.



Su Xiaobai, *Cobalt Blue Charm* 魅藍, 2019. Oil, lacquer, linen and wood, 72 13/16 x 70 1/16 x 5 1/8 in, 184.9 x 178 x 13 cm

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German artist Markus Karstieß works in ceramics and his many glazed works throughout the exhibition are a highlight of the show. Matching the aura and strength of the antiquities on view, his monumental piece, *Nickel-Berg-Wesen (Fetisch)*, 2019, is ablaze with burnt sienna and turquoise blue, erupting like a fire atop a tall steel table. Another work, *Howard Doe*, 2009, is a huge sculptural vase, glazed to appear like burnished bronze with large holes gauged out of its sides, rendering it impossible to hold water. Sprouting from its opening is a clutch of Japanese fantail willow, an apt flower arrangement for such an impressive looking vessel.



Markus Karstieß, *Vernon Doe*, 2010. Gold glazed ceramic, common hazel 24 5/8 x 7 1/2 x 7 1/8 in 62.5 x 19.1 x 18.1 cm

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But the true discovery of this exhibition is Wu Chi-Tsung whose silent videos of barely moving landscapes brings this collection into the 21st century. Wu, who lives and works in Taipei and Berlin, creates these works by submerging natural elements in mist-filled terrariums, filming their stillness with occasional jostling of air and water. In *Still Life 009–Maple, 2018*, the pale red leaves of a tree rustle against what appear-to-be a snowy drift. In *Still Life 011–Tsubaki, 2019*, a flower arrangement emerges from the thick white air, as meditative as a Chinese scroll painting. Yet neither of these evocative works match the sheer scale and accomplishment of *Landscape In the Mist 001, 2012*. Here, it appears that two full-scale trees face each other against a watery background, with puddles and drips emerging at random, a result of playing the footage backward and in slow motion, so as to defy a straight-forward narrative. Sitting in silence in the darkened room in which it was shown, viewers had to slow down to appreciate its subtle beauty, eventually coming in tune with the rhythm of the slight shifts in focus and minimal movements on the screen.

This exhibition is the result of careful planning over many months, selecting artists that speak to each other across international boundaries and works that converse over the course of centuries. Sean Kelly Gallery, who represents Sun Xun and Liu Wei among other Asian artists in its roster, has recently opened a project space in Taipei, a move that will only deepen its connection to the East. But here, the gallery shows its immense sensitivity to cultural conversations, avoiding an easy East-West mishmash in favor of a richer exchange among unique, highly idiosyncratic artists. The result is a ravishing show that demonstrates a savvy approach to introduce new Asian artists to New York audiences with a methodology sure to spark greater curiosity.

Abstract by Nature

Sean Kelly Gallery

June 27 – August 2, 2019