

East meets West in duo shows opening at 934 and Sean Christopher galleries

Artists and longtime friends Dan Jian and Diana Abells are both drawn to the idea of memory, a concept that shapes everything right down to how each approaches the creative process.

Abells creates digital collages that incorporate collected fragments, including scanned childhood drawings and family photographs, blending them with images she absorbed growing up, culled from TV, film and the internet. Most recently, the works have featured Western landscapes and themes, owing to a fascination with Sergio Leone's "A Fistful of Dollars."

"I'll take a picture from childhood, or an old family photograph, which itself kind of includes a memory of a particular time or scenario," she said. "And then I'll start to expand to include all sorts of source material, too, in that we tend to build memories from the media we're consuming."

Jian, in contrast, works largely in oils, her soft, subtle pieces often rooted in childhood, exhibiting a backwards pull that recently led her to switch from painting on canvas to paper—a nod to the tradition she grew up with in China of drawing on rice paper with ink.

"We're good, long-term friends, and our practices connect, dealing with memory, but we come at it from very different directions," Jian said. "Her motif has a lot to do with Western culture — cowboys and such — and my motif has more to do with my childhood, but also the clash between Western and Eastern pop culture images. ... Reflecting on my own background, there was always this [question] as to whether I was here to adopt Western painting tradition, and at some point I realized my practice was more about searching out that place in between."

The two will explore the push-and-pull in this divide at a pair of duo shows that open at crosstown galleries on Saturday, June 6: "Off to Dream," which takes place at Sean Christopher Gallery in the Short North, and "Remember While Looking" at 934 Gallery in Milo-Grogan. The exhibits also mark the first time each space will open its doors to visitors since the coronavirus-driven shutdowns hit the city in March, though both galleries will offer virtual exhibit tours, as well.

Both shows serve as a continuation of the same theme, Abells said, though there are subtle differences. Since the Sean Christopher show was originally scheduled for April, many of the Jian works featured are painted on canvas, since they were completed prior to her more recent paper explorations, which she said lend her work more immediacy.

Throughout the process of creating the dual exhibits, the two, who met in grad school at Ohio State, remained in regular conversation, engaging in virtual studio visits (Jian recently moved to Texas) as they amassed pieces for the shows. It's a conversation that continues in unexpected ways on the gallery walls, the competing works continuing to draw out new, previously undiscovered dimensions when hung together. "There's a new layer when we have our works side by side," Jian said. "And often we don't get to see that connection until [the exhibit opens]."



A work from "Remember While Looking" by Dan Jian.

– Andy Downing