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Pearl C. Hsiung

Rita Gonzalez

Mount Saint Helens puckers up its perfectly maquillaged red lips and takes a big toke on a monster joint. The presidential faces of Mount Rushmore have disintegrated, and a hungry mouth has taken over and demands more hot dogs. Los Angeles's iconic City Hall emerges from a red rock terrain alongside a pink crystal shaft. In her dyspeptic and dystopic landscape paintings, Pearl C. Hsiung anthropomorphizes geodes, crystals, deserts, and volcanoes and, by playing up resemblances to phalluses and orifices, pokes fun at our fear and awe of sexuality. A latter-day mannerist or profligate postsurrealist, Hsiung makes paintings and sculptures that are arrangements (or derangements) of fetid natural forms and inorganic objects—the mineral and vegetal are literally accessorized with pearl necklaces, leather belts, and bow ties.

Left // *No Points*, 2005 // enamel on canvas // 96 x 72 in. // courtesy of the artist and Max Wigram Gallery, London //

Rather than static realms of the sublime, Hsiung's landscapes are spewing and churning sites, definitely not ripe for melancholic contemplation. She explores the metaphoric possibilities of these "concentrations of tension and pressure."¹ Her imagery conjures up the work of Odilon Redon and René Magritte, but also invokes popular realms such as the sci-fi televisual landscapes of *Dr. Who* and *Land of the Lost*. Hsiung is inspired by the economy of means by which the "tricks" or special effects of these shows create a sense of the otherworldly. Like a naughty Darwinian, she strives to illustrate the seemingly otherworldly in the earthly—and earthy.

After finishing her undergraduate education at UCLA, Hsiung worked in fashion design until she came to the conclusion that her mixed-media installations and commercial output were not running on parallel tracks. She enrolled at Goldsmiths College in London and shifted her attention to painting, while still thinking of her works as facets of ephemeral installation microclimates. She mentions as pivotal the desolate landscapes of artist Michael Raedecker and "that suicide place he goes to" in his paintings. Hostile climes, such as volcanoes and deserts, provide an antagonistic yet gorgeous backdrop for Hsiung. In *Kablooms* (2005), a cactus wears a red bandanna, resembling a wounded soldier or revolutionary, while desperately wielding a white flag of surrender. Other cacti grip blank (and cheese-holed) placards, making it unclear "whether this is meant to be a gesture of protest, celebration or surrendering."² Hsiung is most interested in the narrative capabilities of landscape but cynically comments on the dogged human incapacity to approach the natural without recourse to the anthropomorphic.

Tidal Wretch, 2005//
cat. no. 43//

Stills from *Let's Blow*

This Joint, 2004//
digital video//1:30
min.//courtesy of the
artist and Max Wigram
Gallery, London//



Classy Night, 2005//
enamel on canvas//72
x 90 in.//courtesy
of the artist and
Max Wigram Gallery,
London//

