

book review

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Chen Ke, Christoph Noe and Cordelia Steiner, Kehrer Verlag Heidelberg, 2009, ISBN: 978-3-86828-071-5, 147 pages, 85 colour illus.



This timely monograph of young Beijing-based painter Chen Ke is issued by the Ministry of Art (theministryofart.com) to coincide with her 2009 exhibition at the Kunstverein Viernheim, Germany, her second solo show in Europe. Combining four critical essays with full-page, full-colour illustrations of works produced since 2004, the book provides an easily absorbed biographical introduction to the artist. While Chen Ke is young and on the rise, the work itself is accomplished: this book is intended to chart her artistic development and changes in her oeuvre, a remarkable necessity for an artist who graduated only four years ago, indicating not only her tireless experimentation with media and her imaginative powers, but also the rapid pace of development in the Chinese art world.



A dog called X No.1, 2006,
oil on canvas, 50x50 cm

Chen Ke's work combines references to the history of modernism; whether slashed minimal canvases or surrealistic treatments of landscape, pleasingly combined with the cuddly characters of pop culture. Li Xu's essay in the catalogue points to the influence on American and Japanese pop culture imports on young Chinese artists who grew up during the 1980s, and in her mixing of contemporary imagery with painterly skill her work does indeed bear similarities to Japanese neo-nihonga painting. But it's not just cartoons and pop culture that influence Chen Ke's fantastical visions of childhood: European folk tales, Victorian novels and Chinese mythology all have input, giving her a diverse eclecticism described by one critic as intercultural. Memory is a recurrent theme in her work, whether exploration of collective memory, invested in mythology; or a personal, subjective nostalgia for childhood, embodied in uncanny objects and her enigmatic, child-like figures.



The return of the hero (detail), 2006, oil on canvas, 215x215cm

What to do next?, 2008, oil and acrylic and thread on linen, 106x170 cm

Chen Ke's whimsical, lyrical application of paint in thin washes and the subtle use of colour in her most recent works gives these paintings a power that stems from economy and restraint, in tension with the virtuosity of her handling: features clearly influenced by the history of Chinese landscape painting. But she also innovates with the canvas, applying decorative objects and using embroidery, a burgeoning trend amongst contemporary female artists internationally. "As an artist I feel like a craftsman, creating works with my hands", says Chen. It's a paean to technique, skill, and to creating accessible beauty, and, like her work, is completely without cynicism. It reasserts the tactility of the painted surface, which, along with her incorporation of folk and pop cultures, seems to be a striving towards a reassessment of the status of painting, an artistic goal to be reached in the future.

