

NOORI LEE

Becoming

"Becoming" is the title of a series of watercolours painted by the artist Nori Lee in 2006. They are somewhat small, indeed almost intimate, pictures, usually depicting interiors without people. The familiar subjects from Nori Lee's previous work are all here: chic living spaces filled with magnificent pieces of furniture, leather sofas and armchairs, glass-topped tables and artworks. Flattering and decorous, the kind of living rooms that fill the pages of glossy magazines like "Wallpaper" and "House & Gardens".

But through the watercolour technique these interiors now acquire an ambiguity. They arouse a sense of brittleness. The strongly translucent colour and the blank spaces make the rooms seem transparent. On one side, the facade of a modernistic house ends in nothing. The reflective surfaces of glass tables blend seamlessly with the wallpapers. The painted textiles in the rooms also suggest something guarded. The surfaces of the luxurious fabrics and carpets appear muffled. Even the light from a chandelier emerges as a bleached surface, not as the illuminating centre of a room.

The furnishings in the interiors of Nori Lee's oil painting usually contributed an intense and saturated colouring to the pictures: the gleaming black of a tabletop, the grainy brown of wooden panelling, the opulent violet of a wall fabric, the red of a Persian rug. The watercolours mute the tones. The interiors take the form of fragile arrangements, as blurry, indistinct spatial situations submerging and diffusing the swank of the post-modern Beautiful Living World.

The inherent chromatic qualities of watercolours bring a new perspective to the subject of the interior. The tingling suspense and the rich uncanniness of the oil paintings is replaced in the watercolours by something approaching sorrow, by a sheer sign of loss. The colour palette is reduced, the pictures are built up from a restricted number of tones: from the red of a dully lit room, the grey of reflective smoked glass, the white of a bright bedroom wall. In this watercolour setting, the theme of the series "Becoming" may be read not so much as "fitting" or "attractive" but rather as its opposite, as the equivocal and indefinable increasingly take over the space. In the watercolours, the artist seems to be observing his subjects from a distance, through a consciously veiled gaze.

Again, with the subjects other than interiors — a suburban house surrounded by fir trees, faces from posters for cosmetics, models from fashion magazines — the movement of the colour from light to dark and the intense translucency provoke a lightening, and a fading out. The figures are often ghost-like, pale-green mist and delicate squiggles float around the bodies. The tenderness of the colour manifests a caution towards the subject. The quiet melancholy of the evanescent hangs over these images, even when, occasionally, the colour rears up in a vehement orange or a deep black, and celebrates what the grand gloss of surfaces hides.

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