

Sex and Power in 'East - West'

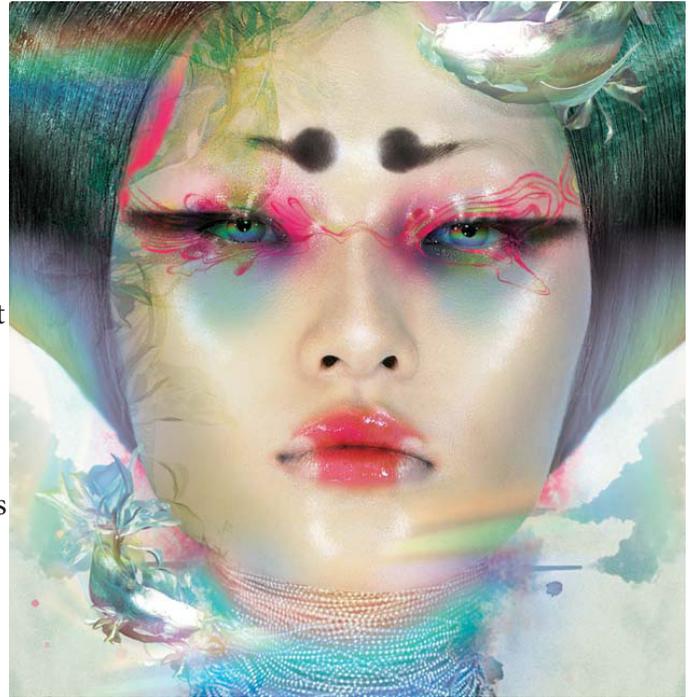
BY DAVID PAGEL

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"East-West," Chen Man's breakout exhibition of photographs and paintings at L.A. Louver, brings together a lot more than two halves of the globe and two media.

Sex and power entwine in the 34-year-old's potent photographs, which evoke all sorts of emotions and go on to show that pleasure and freedom sometimes work at cross purposes while at others intensify each other's strengths.

Intimacy and vulnerability commingle in Man's delicate ink paintings on paper. Often affixed to silk scrolls and hung on the wall in the traditional manner, these wispy pictures of ancient sages, mythological creatures and ordinary folks include snippets of whiplash calligraphy and fluid passages of free-form abstraction.



Chen Man's "Vision: Gold Fish" from 2003. (Chen Man / L.A. Louver)

This trio of techniques shows Man at her best: juggling disparate genres, styles and conventions to bring memory and fantasy into electrifying proximity. The past and the future follow suit, colliding in ways that raise timely questions about the fate of firsthand experience in a world increasingly mediated by ever more accessible technology.

Physical sensation is the currency Man trades in. It's found in abundance in three first-floor galleries, where 32 drop-dead C-prints stop you in your tracks, set your heart racing — if not your blood boiling — and challenge your mind to make sense of it all.

The best ones are both gorgeous and weird, familiar and foreign, tacky and twisted, vulgar and sophisticated. As a group, they play well with one another, never covering the same ground but deftly dancing across various times and places, styles and stories.

Some points of reference for Man's promiscuous, shape-shifting images: tourist postcards, Communist propaganda, mid-century pinups, glam-rock outlandishness, Japanese comic books, Hollywood special effects, video-game vixens, high-end advertisements, soft-core porn, fashion spreads, pop star silliness and sci-fi fantasy, both literary and digital.

Folklore, from oral traditions all over the globe, likewise feeds into Man's wildly stylized hybrids, as does pagan mythology, medieval epics, morality tales, religious parables, Shakespearean dramas and Romantic tragedies, not to mention the slick visuals of corporate reports and Super Bowl commercials.

Upstairs, 15 ink paintings whisper gently, their subtlety all the more emphatic after the pyrotechnics of the spectacle below. Hell and heaven come to mind, as do flesh and spirit. But Man's art is too complex to let visitors settle with such one-dimensional interpretations.

It's easy to see the differences between Man's paintings and photographs. The first are handmade by an individual with old-fashioned materials. The second are high-tech collaborations, single-scene movies endlessly edited and enhanced by means of the latest digital technologies.

It's more interesting to see that both are all about mixing things up, stirring east and west, reality and fantasy, intimacy and distance into a moment so packed with luscious color, exquisite composition and extravagantly theatrical razzle-dazzle that it cannot be simply summed up or translated into a Tweet-able take-away. There's too much to take in on one visit and plenty left over, no matter how crowded the pleasure-fest gets.

L.A. Louver, 45 N. Venice Blvd., (310) 822-4955, through Jan. 24. Closed Sundays and Mondays. www.lalouer.com