

ARTFORUM



Ping Zheng, *Luminous Night*, 2020, oil stick on paper, 25 3/4 × 19 3/4".

Ping Zheng

KRISTEN LORELLO

For “Reflection,” Ping Zheng’s intimate exhibition of fourteen oil-stick-on-paper paintings at Kristen Lorello, the artist created dreamlike, supersaturated pictures of nature. Zheng, who was raised in China and is now based in Brooklyn, made all the works in 2020, our pandemic year. The pieces in this show were based on observation and memory, combining the different stages of day and night the artist tracked from the rooftop of her studio building in New York with images of waterfalls, lakes, and expanses of night sky she recalled from childhood. An extraterrestrial incandescence suffused many of these playfully stylized landscapes—perhaps we can attribute this fluorescence to the glow of the city? Yet Zheng’s favorite coloristic pairings here—green with tangerine, saffron, and gold—created a vibratory optical effect that transports the viewer away from urban grit and on a phantasmagorical journey across astral planes.

These modestly sized works seemed to radiate from within. Paintings such as *Morning Sun*, one of the most purely abstract pieces here, exemplify Zheng's skillful use of heavy oil stick to achieve a nearly weightless, meditative luminosity. At the center of an upside-down isosceles triangle rimmed with gold sits the titular orb, its heart a blazing orange mist encircled by rings of celadon, white, and dirty apricot. In the background is an Impressionistic field studded with small jewellike streaks of lavender and cyan. This setting is odd, ghostly—like a feverish afterimage of a scorching day. In *Reflection* and *Luminous Night*, Zheng renders the powerful light of the moon on rippling bodies of water via painterly passages of color. Her art shows an appreciation for the otherworldly abstractions of Swedish mystic Hilma af Klint and the tortured visionary landscapes of Forrest Bess. Zheng's pictures, however, are earthier, more insouciant, and more humorous—while they unequivocally embrace the cosmic, they also invoke the sensual.

Indeed, many of the paintings in this show had a distinctly voluptuous, libidinal quality. They also owed a debt to female artists who melded abstraction with figuration, such as Georgia O'Keeffe to the central-core explorations of second-wave feminists, as well as to the colorful exuberance of Brazilian painter and cultural anthropologist Tarsila do Amaral, who borrowed voraciously from various artistic traditions. Zheng's *Shiny Night*, for example, depicts a star-studded sky lit up by the aurora borealis. Here, the ethereal beauty of this much-mythologized event becomes eroticized by the soft, undulating mountain at the center of the composition. The green path that bisects this gigantic mound is decidedly vulvar—the delicate curve of the purple valley in the foreground could even be read as exposed flesh. Other paintings seemed to respond to this yearning for freedom and connection that the pandemic has taken away from us. In *The Heat of Summer*, the season's warmth manifests itself as a force that gently bends time and space. The composition, similar to that of *Shiny Night*, brings to mind the perspective from a car window on a road trip, but filmed through a fish-eye lens. A curved horizon line curls upward and is speckled like a slice of starry night, or a plastic dashboard. Before us, a golden peak rises up from the middle of the picture, bordered by pale stripes, a curly halo of forest, and cartoonish orange peaks in the distance. This scene makes sense, but only through the aching hazy logic of desire, instantiating a state of anticipation we've all become much too familiar with.

— Wendy Vogel