

The Disappearing Cultures of Rural China: Paintings by Jo Sherwood

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The small rural mountain villages that Jo Sherwood paints are not only isolated from the rest of the world, they're soon to become extinct. Hence the two-edged sword of globalization: the world may be smaller but it's also more homogenized.

Hers is a catch-it-while-you-can esthetic, one that brims with nostalgia before the fact. This explains her exuberant take on people going about their daily chores, conducting their daily rituals.

It's a compelling vision because it's so concrete, so possible, and, unfortunately, so nostalgic. Sherwood's pictorial time is slow like molasses. Here, happiness accrues. With no rush hour traffic, no frenetic multi-tasking, no need for courses on time management, there is time to watch the seasons change, time to raise children, time to nurture the family unit.

Her paintings are assured and poised because there's no advertising-, no cultural-, no economic-driven reason to change, no fashions to follow, no fads with which to keep up. No Joneses with whom to compete. Caught in the middle of doing their daily tasks, walking like kings and queens, princes and princesses, with upright carriages through time, you get the sense that these people are the happiest people on earth for the simple reason that there is no reason for them to think otherwise.

Sherwood's style is both monumental and transparent. It's monumental for three reasons. First, she crops her figures, which in turn lends each composition a sense of mass and stability. Second, she virtually eliminates pictorial space. In images like *Langde Child*, in which a young girl is dressed for a ceremony, the figures are so in-your-face that it's like having a nose-to-nose conversation with the sitters. Third, she composes the paintings on vigorous, geometric axes. Whether it's the jutting diagonal formed by the heads of the three men in *Lusheng Pipes*, the crucifixion right angle of *Anticipation*, or the cannily composed islets of *Early Morning Rise*, the work exudes a sense of structure and balance, a sense of sculptural and emotional gravity. Nothing's going to topple these figures.

The style is purposefully transparent because Sherwood's doesn't draw attention to herself. The work is lush because the subjects are lush. End of story. It's the subjects that speak, not Sherwood. She's the vehicle, they're the destination. Animate and inanimate objects fuse; figure and ground meld the one into the other. The result is a sense of harmony and stasis, imperturbable through time.

She so embeds her style in the subject of the work that you might as well be looking out a window at what's unfolding before you. The girl in *Rice Pipes* resembles the two bundles she carries on two ends of the pole strung over her shoulder. The two women in *After the Market* who sit on and talk look like both the basket in front of them as well as the stairs on which they sit. The three men in *Lusheng Pipes* look like the pipes on which they play.

She wants to show the simple majesty and proud bearing of these people. She catches them in mid-stride, mid-sentence, mid-note. The paintings represent a tear in the fabric of the tapestry of unchanging time. You look at them with awe and wonder as well as with a sense of sadness, knowing full well that, as much as you want to think these Garden of Eden scenes will crop up with the open sesame of unmitigated wonder, that they will exist forever, the reality, alas, is otherwise.

Having said that, what a consolation to know that these scenes have been captured, not with a ten-megapixel digital camera and then photo-shopped into effects that belie their original and majestic cause, but with something so marvelously old-fashioned as a paintbrush and medium. Imagine that, the more things change, the more they remain the same.