



"The Sunday Dusk," by Xi Zhang, acrylic on canvas.

Courtesy of Plus Gallery

Review: Challenging Locations, Intriguing Shows for ATC/DEN and Alto

MICHAEL PAGLIA | APRIL 25, 2018 | 5:51AM



35

The reality of gentrification is pretty in-your-face in Denver, where artists have really taken it in the chops. The **RiNo neighborhood**, which was the city's premier art district not so long ago, is the best case in point. A partly abandoned industrial area, it was first rediscovered by artists decades ago; then, in a pattern that's become all too familiar, after making RiNo desirable (not only giving it a name, but creating an official arts district), the artists were pushed out by land speculators and developers. To paraphrase Yogi





Berra, RiNo is so crowded, nobody goes there anymore.



But swimming upstream against this trend — or perhaps riding the gentrification wave — is Laura Krudener, who just nine months ago opened a gallery, [ATC/DEN](#), in the area. While the pioneering artists of years ago took over old warehouses or factories, ATC/DEN is located in Link 35, a new, multi-part mixed-use project done not in the developer-driven McModern style that's now so common in RiNo, but instead is a thoughtful, neo-modernist composition by [Humphries Poli Architects](#), a respected Denver firm.

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The gallery is a little hard to find because the entry is not directly off the sidewalk, but rather through one of the building's fenced forecourts. Despite this shortcoming, the garden entrance provides a somewhat grand introduction to the industrial high-style space, which Krudener built out as a large, airy exhibition room. Hosting art shows is only one of the functions of ATC/DEN, which Krudener envisions serving as “a community canvas for RiNo artists, makers and dwellers.” An abstract painter, Krudener laughed when she told me that her idea for ACT/DEN is kind of abstract, too.



"The Flags" (left) and "A Lost Paradise - Purgatory Chapter VIII" (right), by Xi Zhang, both acrylic on canvas. Sara Ford

The current exhibit, one of the first for the space, is *Imagine: Work by Xi Zhang*, a group of large figurative paintings by **Xi Zhang**. A Chinese-American artist who lived in Colorado for a few years, Zhang now teaches at the University of Utah, and he's building a national reputation with his idiosyncratic work. The impressive show at ATC/DEN is being presented in conjunction with Plus Gallery, which represents Zhang, and was co-curated by Krudener and Ivar Zeile.

The paintings in *Imagine* are all from Zhang's "Metallic Leaf Garden" series, which he has been working on for the last few years; they're designed to convey the struggle of the individual as seen through the lens of Zhang's own experience and cultural identity. While Zhang is clearly working his way through a stylistic development and these new pieces are distinctly different from earlier paintings, they're still emphatically expressionistic and over-the-top painterly, covered with innumerable marks done in thick smears of pigment.



Installation view of *Xi Zhang: Imagine* at ATC/DEN

Sara Ford

The subjects are often dark, even when the palette is pale, as in “The Flags,” an acrylic on canvas. It’s a landscape, with the foreground filled with trees carried out in a range of greens and the background filled with pink flowering trees and an orange sky. The flags of the title fly from poles running across the length of the composition. Owing to the luscious colors, “The Flags” is lyrical and light-filled, but there’s a disturbing undercurrent in the subject matter: People are hanging from some of the poles as though they were flags. A similarly disquieting scene is seen in the closely related “The Sunday Dusk,” a wooded scene in which strings crisscrossing the picture are hung with lights, banners, clothes and a couple of old people with canes.

Looking at these Zhangs, I couldn’t help but think that the artist was at least somewhat inspired to translate the history of Western art into his own visual language. For example, “The Flags” and “The Sunday Dusk” both refer to the School of Paris, particularly in terms of color and the impressionistic handling of the subjects. Others, such as “Dung Beetle II,” which depicts a small figure carrying mounds of dung Atlas-style on his back, look more like they are coming out of the Old Master tradition, with Zhang employing generous

amounts of grays, ochres and umbers. These darker works link up with the lighter ones by dint of Zhang's active brushwork.



"The Machine," by Peter Yumi, mixed materials.

Courtesy of Peter Yumi

Another rapidly changing part of town is the Berkeley neighborhood, in northwest Denver. Though many old buildings here have been torn down and replaced by new structures, a lot of historic storefronts are still standing, and that gives Tennyson Street an authentic flavor that can't be replicated by new construction. **Alto Gallery**, which opened in 2016, occupies one of these old buildings, just a couple of doors down from Tennyson on West 41st Avenue. It's part of the **Birdseed Collective**, a nonprofit founded by Denver native and artist Anthony Garcia Sr. to serve the community, in particular young people, through art and supporting local artists.

Alto is currently presenting a solo, *Disappearing Room: Peter Yumi*, which is as different from Zhang's show as Alto is from ATC/DEN. For instance, instead of using strong colors, as Zhang does, Yumi works in black and white. Whereas Zhang piles on the paint, **Peter Yumi** applies his imagery thinly, with inks or toner. Like Zhang, however, Yumi addresses humanity's struggle and striving in his art.

The front space is dominated by “The Machine,” a large construction inspired by Tibetan prayer wheels that Yumi made with artist Dave Seiler. On a substantial steel frame painted black are six rows of six cubes mounted on ready-made swivels. The cubes are covered in black-and-white silkscreen prints, and each side has its own geometric pattern that’s half dominated by black and half by white. Viewers are urged to spin the cubes, then interpret the resulting combination of patterns using a handbook that Yumi made for that purpose.



"Women," #1 through #4, by Peter Yumi, mixed media.

Courtesy of the Artist

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Yumi was prompted to create the piece by the stress of political arguments he had on Facebook with friends he mostly agreed with (including me, apparently, though

I don't remember the discussion). Initially, he intended it to guide his social-media activity, in a sense to pre-determine what he would post, follow and like. But after it was built, he realized that the work had much wider applications and could, for instance, be used to choose lottery numbers or

decide what to have for lunch. He told me that he envisions millions of such pieces around the world being used to free humanity from the need to connect with social media, though I'm almost sure he was kidding.

Denver's voracious development has been eating up studio and art-collective spaces, not to mention the low-cost spots where struggling artists lived. So it's reassuring to see that in the middle of it all, independent galleries such as ATC/DEN and Alto can flourish.

Imagine: Work by Xi Zhang, through June 2, ATC/DEN, 3420 Larimer Street, 303-656-6768, atcden.com.

Disappearing Room: Peter Yumi, through May 19, Alto Gallery, 4345 West 41st Avenue, 720-569-7463, altogallery.com.



Michael Paglia is an art historian and writer whose columns have appeared in *Westword* since 1995; his essays on the visual arts have also been published in national periodicals including *Art News*, *Architecture*, *Art Ltd.*, *Modernism*, *Art & Auction* and *Sculpture Magazine*. He taught art history at the University of Colorado Denver.

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