

Review of Bai Mengfan: Almost a Love Story  
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### **City, I'm with you**

by Franziska Lamprecht

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Bai Mengfan painted most of the works for her current show at Space 776 in a small room in Long Island City during the spring and early summer of 2020. She did not leave that room in which she ate and slept and painted for several months. She did not see any people in real life, no sun ray touched her skin. In order to organize who could use the shared kitchen, Mengfan communicated with her roommate via text messaging. All her food was delivered to her doorstep from the virus stricken outside world and upon arrival she thoroughly sanitized each item. Instead of checking the weather she used a phone app that showed how closely infections crowded her zip code as red dots. New Yorkers all around her were dying in clusters. Mengfan's wake and sleep patterns synchronized with the time zone of her hometown in the Shaanxi Province. She watched the sunrise and the sunset over Mt. Everest on a video live feed on the Internet.

"We are in an epoch of simultaneity, we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of near and far, of the side by side, of the dispersed. We are at a moment, I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein," wrote Michel Foucault in "Of other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias, a text Mengfan told me, has influenced her work.

Bai Mengfan's paintings are based on photographs she took in Beijing, Hong Kong, New York City and Xi'an. Devoid of humans or animals, most of the paintings zoom closely in on depersonalized city surfaces, markings on the sandy texture of non-descript walls, crudely painted-over graffiti marks, shadows of lamp posts or electricity poles, yellow traffic-guiding lines stenciled with machines on pavements, Chinese characters drawn with fingers on dirty windows in Xi'an. Two of the characters read: freedom. Then there are scenes of urban cityscapes and semi-public interiors; two stone lions in front of a big old willow tree, a little Pikachu figurine on the dashboard of a Hong Kong taxi cab, globe like ceiling lamps in an indoor playground that look like moons or satellites in Long Island City, pale mist over the Chinese Sea and a distant bridge. Disembodied details of manmade structures. Snapshots. Coincidences. Fleeting fragments. Traces of time. What holds them all together is "Almost a love story."

The title of the show comes from: "Comrades, Almost a Love Story" a 1996 film by Peter Chan. Banned in China for nineteen years, the film tells the tale of two migrant workers from the mainland who find and loose, who befriend and eventually love each other, first in Hong Kong and later in NYC.

The movie is very sweet, and I do not say this, because the movies feature song and its Chinese title is "Tian Mi Mi" (sweet like honey) but because there is a certain toughness in the story's tenderness, that goes hand in hand with the movie's soundtrack and the signature sweetness of Teresa Teng songs. This sweetness is hard to explain. It's neither bitter sweet nor sour sweet. It's something of an almost otherworldly sensation

that makes its uplift felt in spite, or because of everything else that keeps dragging us down.

Released in 1979 “Tian Mi Mi,” was one of Teresa Teng’s greatest hits and during the eighties Teresa Teng was one once the most famous Chinese singer in the world. She grew up in Taiwan and her music was occasionally banned in China for being decadent or pornographic. When the ban was released, she refused to perform in the mainland, yet her influence was greatest there.

In his 2015 New Yorker article “The Melancholy Pop Idol who haunts China” Hua Hsu writes that there was a popular saying in China that said: “During the day, everyone listened to “old Deng” (Deng Xiaoping) because they had to. At night, everyone listened to “little Teng” because they wanted to.” One of those who admired the star and blasted her music over the loudspeakers in Xi’an was Bai Mengfan’s father. Naturally, such heartfelt display of grown up fandom and paternal longings for romance make the children cringe. Mengfan did not like Teresa Teng, until she read a biography of the singer and learned that Teresa Teng had died of an asthma attack in a hotel room in Chiang Mai in Thailand at the age of 42. The celebrity’s lonely death turned her into a relatable human.

How do we make the unattainable relatable? Can the act of falling in love with a celebrity be compared with falling in love with a new city? Why do pop stars like cities have this distancing capacity to carry our most intimate longings and projections? Do we find ourselves attached to songs, like we find ourselves in the streets of cities we have fallen in love with? Or do the two go together? Are we overcome by our city love affairs most easily when we sit alone in the back of a taxi that drives from Mong Kok through Yau Ma Tei to Tsim Sha Tsui at night while the local radio station plays:

“Hong Kong Hong Kong  
I’m with you  
Hong Kong Hong Kong  
I love the beautiful night  
With you by my side.”

Most articles I read in the past month about Hong Kong describe the city as “dying” or more recently as “being dead.” In the Western press “being dead” means that Hong Kong is now like every other Chinese city. I fully understand. The dying of Hong Kong has broken my heart and enraged my anger. And yet, I also know, that no mainland Chinese city, is like any other mainland Chinese city. And, that Hong Kong is not dead.

For me the strongest painting in Bai Mengfen’s show is called “Where is it?” The title, like all titles for this series of paintings, is part of a Teresa Teng song lyric. The answer to the question “Where?” in the song is: “In my dreams.” The location of where Mengfan took the photo is: “Wan Chai, Hong Kong Island, near Central.”

The painting is a square, the viewpoint is from a higher up looking down onto the top of dark, dense tropical tree canopies. In the center is a small opening that enables us to see the part of a road that has a yellow crosswalk zebra pattern painted on. The yellow

lines that cross each other diagonally within a square are bright and glowing, and yet I know, it's almost gone. What the painting makes me realize is that the existence of these yellow lines follows a very different logic than the existence of the foliage of those surrounding trees, which will keep growing rapidly, until this small opening will all be covered up. That is, unless they are being cut back or fall down in a typhoon.

**Franziska Lamprecht** is an artist who started writing as an extension of the long-term process based works, she produces together with her husband Hajoe Moderegger under the name **eteam**. For their work they have received support from Creative Capital and The John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, Art in General, NYSCA, NYFA, Rhizome, CLUI, Taipei Artist Village, Eyebeam, Smack Mellon, Yaddo and the MacDowell Colony, the City College of New York and the Hong Kong Baptist University, among many others. Their first novel "Grabeland" was published with Nightboat Books in February 2020. You can find Franziska's book reviews at: <https://www.full-stop.net/author/franziska-lamprecht/>

**Bai Mengfan** (b.1994, China) received her MFA from the School of Visual Arts in New York, and her BFA in Oil Painting from Sichuan Conservatory of Music, Chengdu, China. Her works have been shown widely in the U.S. and China, including PULSE Art Fair Miami, Boers-Li Gallery, Java Project, Booth Gallery, Plus81 Gallery, Carriage Trade Gallery, SVA Chelsea Gallery, Chengdu Art Academy, White Night Gallery. Mengfan lives and works in New York.