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### Reflected on Air

ZHONG BIAO

MAY 07 - JUN 25

FREY NORRIS CONTEMPORARY &amp; MODERN

*by Laura Cassidy Rogers*

“I am attempting to draw closer to the variable origins of change.” This poignantly open-ended quote by Zhong Biao published on the Frey Norris Contemporary & Modern website lured me into its new SoMa gallery to see his current exhibition, *Reflected on Air*. The exhibition comprises ten acrylic paintings on canvas completed in 2010 and 2011, ranging from compact twenty-two-by-thirty-inch exploratory compositions to awe-inspiring virtual worlds stretching over nine feet high and six feet wide.

Explosions of calligraphic, graffiti-like mark-making on the paintings’ surface complement the deep perspective of spatial voids and vanishing points, coalescing into legible illusions of infinity. Deploying this uniquely abstracted syntax, Biao’s painted narratives bleed from the recognizable past and present into the indeterminate realms of the future. The recognizable elements are decidedly urban and industrial, with a color palette dominated by flesh tones, black, white, and gray, though Biao sustains the verve and vibration of color with well-placed primary red, blue, and yellow accents. While these aesthetic color choices are sophisticated, Biao’s renderings of people and places appear crudely cartoonish. He retains the fine quality of his paintings by maintaining a mysterious distance from his human subjects and hard-lining his urban infrastructures.

Vague silhouettes appear on the horizon of *Times to Come* (2011) and *Walking on Sunshine* (2011). In the former painting, one of the smallest compositions in the exhibition, a dark red figure playfully dances with his arms outstretched and foot en pointe. He faces a more meticulously rendered young boy who kneels or crawls in the foreground. The boy is dressed in sneakers, blue jeans, and a red sweatshirt, yet he is no less mysterious, positioned with his back to viewers. These two figures are aligned along a diagonal vanishing point, like a continuum between present and future time, or like the detached otherworldly shadow of Peter Pan, an alignment fantastically warped by an explosive pocket of black-and-white paint.

In comparison, the silhouette of a man in *Walking on Sunshine* seems less temporally twisted, slipping instead into a world of Freudian psychoanalysis. With a shovel resting on his shoulder, he is perched beside the sun and above a



*Journey*, 2010; acrylic on canvas, 38 x 51 in. Courtesy of the Artist and Frey Norris Contemporary & Modern, San Francisco.



*Home is Where....*, 2011; acrylic on canvas, 79 x 110 in. Courtesy of the Artist and Frey Norris Contemporary & Modern, San Francisco.

faceless woman whose mountainous fleshy thigh occupies the foreground of the painting. Her string-bikini bottoms pulled down to mid-thigh match her candy-colored ankle bracelets, white stiletto heels, and pink toenail polish. Although the power relationship is pronounced and provocative, it is unclear whether the woman is passively domineered (a literal interpretation of *Walking on Sunshine*, her name being Sunshine) or actively aroused (as the colloquial interpretation suggests). In any case, romantic love is absent. Like the young boy in *Times to Come*, the faceless woman is a floating urban subject who exists in the surreal empty space of global industrial dystopia.

Biao paints trains, freeways, skyscrapers, and cars with a similar sophisticated and dystopian opaqueness. A militant black and red locomotive anchors the painted composition titled *Home is Where...* (2011). The train juts forward along a fierce diagonal vanishing point, with smoke or steam spewing from the front and trailing off like the triple-dot punctuation mark in the title; it is a painted ellipsis that inspires an unfinished moving thought or yearning feeling. People are immersed with the heavy machine, and they, too, are in transit, surrounded by pockets of atmospheric graffiti—variable origins of change.

The strength with which Biao's surreal paintings reflect on the real conditions of contemporary life is exemplified by a [photograph](#) published in the April 2011 issue of *Prospect* magazine, a British publication that specializes in politics and current affairs. The photograph documents traffic congestion and accompanies an article written by James

Crabtree, who poses the question: “With studies showing a decline in car use, are we seeing the beginning of the end for the car?”<sup>1</sup>

The composition of the *Prospect* photograph perfectly mirrors the composition of Biao’s painting *Journey* (2010), which depicts traffic from the rear with a ubiquitous procession of sedans, SUVs, taxis, and minivans. However, diverging from photorealism, Biao’s painted pattern of wheels, license plates, and brake lights dissolves into a colorless void. His extraordinary mirage is punctuated by a tiny black square in the distance, one that denotes the process and potential, as well origins, of change. The indeterminate forward momentum of Biao’s paintings in *Reflected on Air* is palpable and apropos of the contemporary moment wherein people are searching for ways to adapt a failed industrial-era model of progress for the complex challenges of the twenty-first century.

REFLECTED ON AIR IS ON VIEW AT [FREY NORRIS CONTEMPORARY & MODERN](#), IN SAN FRANCISCO, THROUGH JUNE 25, 2011.

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NOTES:

1. James Crabtree, “End of the Road,” *Prospect*, April 19, 2011, <http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/2011/04/end-of-the-road/>