

# Appearances - Jianjun An's Art Exhibition

When I first heard of this exhibition *Appearances* by Jianjun An, an image intuitively popped into my mind that it would be an exhibition regarding the many facets of appearances that people have in a modern society. However, after I saw the series of paintings at his house and had a thorough discussion with him, I knew right away that this was not going to be an ordinary art exhibition.

Each painting in the exhibition is about the size of a floor mirror, with an individual character painted inside, a passerby one could find anywhere on a busy market street. They are of different skin colours, men and women with different identities, each with a different expression and physical stance, each dressed in different clothes. Some images were captured as the characters were walking and yet, it is impossible to not notice the look in their eyes and their body language, both clear reflections of their inner emotions and thoughts. While all of them carry a mask, how each person reveals his or her own appearance differs greatly. Some throw it to one side, exhibiting a confidence that overrides the need to wear an appearance. Many keep their appearances on hand so that they can wear it as soon as the need arises. One is even depicted selling an appearance. Only the showman wears his appearance for the majority of the time. Curiously enough, if one observes carefully, many of the masks also have eyes drawn in. The characters themselves have no inclination to explain for their actions but what can be seen is An's ability to communicate through his paintings. Viewers can use their own experiences in modern society as a background to interpret the meanings behind these paintings but the conclusion that everyone comes to eventually is unlikely to stray far from the original intent of the artist.

Appearance is a convenient tool that can be used at any moment in time to hide away the identity of a person. In our modern society, these masks of appearances are invisible but nevertheless, they do exist and are constantly being used to alter the appearance of how one appears to others.

According to what An says, the characters he has painted are immigrants from all over the world. They carry cherished memories such as their carefree days in their previous homes or heavy secrets that cannot be told. As soon as they immigrated to Canada, these memories were all suppressed and everyone adopted an appearance that was more or less the same and equal in all manners. With their appearance in place, they worked to complete it, treating each other with respect and courtesy. What is not pointed out is that the arrogance or self-pity that lies behind the appearance has been completely covered, not a hint of it leaking out.

However, An was perceptive enough to capture these powerful thoughts and emotions and effectively express them onto the canvas. Through the emotional and logical contemplation of an artist, what appeared on the canvasses were no longer the same people who had originally inspired him to start this series. Now, they have become an international representation, especially when all twenty-something paintings are brought out together, the strong comparison that exists is almost bizarre. Consequently, An deepened the colours, allowing the overall effect of the painting to soften, thus making the content easier on the eyes. He says it very nonchalantly but we all understand the concept of how what affects one can affect all. As such, the effort that An has put into this series is immeasurable; if anything, the artist within An has already taken up his own appearance!

Man Hung Chan, May 2018  
Art Critic