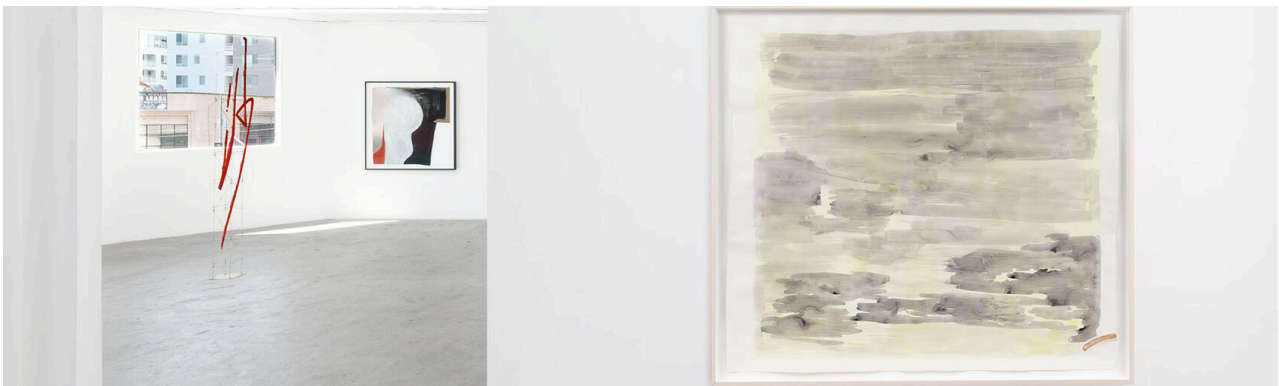


FRIEZE

‘A Vista’ Cracks Through Art World Illusions

At Bel Ami, Los Angeles, a show pairing Covey Gong and Monique Mouton questions networks of value in commercial galleries

Claudia Ross | 20 August 2024



Two-person exhibitions walk a fine line. If the paired artists are overly similar contemporaries, the show begins to feel like a boxing match. If one is lesser-known and the other a lauded historical figure, the exhibition can read like a cringey sales pitch.

Enter Covey Gong and Monique Mouton, whose works appear side by side in ‘a vista’ at Bel Ami in Los Angeles’s Chinatown. They are not a natural pairing. Gong crafts insular, architectural sculptures, while Mouton’s abstract watercolours are gestural and poetic, their faded colours dissolving into ripped sheets of collaged paper. The exhibition’s occasionally random feel is a byproduct of its unusual curatorial strategy: friendship. A year ago, the two New York-based artists embarked on a creative conversation, one that has yielded the playful admixture of new and recent works on view. This is the ‘secret third thing’ that can happen in two-person shows: ‘a vista’ is an unexpected collaboration that reveals the shared conceptual interests of two aesthetically divergent artists.

What unites Gong and Mouton is their awareness of the literal and figurative structures that undergird today’s commercial art world – ones that each artist slyly subverts. The monetary and art-historical values ascribed to works of contemporary art are often informed by aesthetic signifiers such as material, staging, scale or technical prowess. In Gong’s *TRD-RDDL01-HP* (2024), wires suspend clear rods from the ceiling, forming a fragmented, kite-like shape. At first glance, they look like refined, smooth glass, but closer examination reveals that they are made of plastic, and the wires supporting them are light and thin, the kind one can find at a children’s craft store.



Exhibition view; photograph: Paul Salvesson

An adjacent wall features Mouton's *Afternoon* (2018), a painting composed of greyish stripes of washed-out watercolour. Mouton's deliberately unrefined strokes contrast with the painting's ornate frame: its thick rim is a bright gold – a gesture that feels ironic and self-conscious in this context. Gong and Mouton's material deceptions function as signposts, suggesting each artist's sceptical orientation toward the networks of value that enshrine artworks in commercial gallery spaces.

Intentional, technical imprecision exacerbated by cheap or insufficient supplies proliferates throughout 'a vista'. In *Wing* (2022–24) and *Aquariid* (2024), Mouton pairs rounded swathes of paint with layers of pale pastel that barely cover the works' paper supports. The abstractions suggest larger, planetary forms – possibly mid-collision – but feel incomplete, as though hampered by the small scale of the gallery or a rushed production timeline.

In Gong's work, these questions take on a welcome political bent. *TRD-RDDL02-BLD* (2024) features cut felt suspended across a frail armature. Its red, swooping fabric forms a calligraphic rendering of the Chinese character for Sha, from Changsha, a city in Hunan – the province where both the artist and Chairman Mao Zedong were born. The work is a near-exact copy of one of the characters that adorns Hunan's Changsha Railway Station, a gigantic structure rebuilt in 1977, a year after Mao's death. In Gong's version, however, the lettering is removed from its monumental, Maoist architecture. Staticky shreds of felt hover off the gold-painted structure, each strip fastened in place with simple staples. Far from Hunan, the work feels surprisingly emotional, a slipshod tribute to China's complex past tamped down by material constraints.

Gong and Mouton examine the small gestures that form a gallery's enticing and alienating stage. These carefully curated spaces reward refinement, an idea that Gong and Mouton allude to but subtly disavow. It is the little, intentional failures – a hanging thread from one of Gong's sculptures, the rips in Mouton's collages – that crack through the art world's illusions. And maybe that's how the light gets in.

'a vista' is on view at *Bel Ami*, Los Angeles until 12 October 2024