



## *The Garden-Labyrinth and the Unified Self: Olivia Jia, Mirror Stage at Margot Samel*

By Meredith Sellers

The classical Chinese Garden is a walled paradise traversed via curved paths, meandering around a pond or stream, the water symbolizing the flow of energy. Rocks stand in for mountains, and tokens of luck abound in mosaics and carvings. Lush plants are arranged throughout. These gardens are constructed facsimiles of nature, reflecting a fantasy of the natural world rather than preserving its reality. Visitors enter the space, dotted with pavilions, through a series of walled chambers and wide, round entrances known as moon gates. Windows without glass, decorated with elaborate patterns, are cut out of walls: apertures strategically placed to frame carefully selected scenes. Acting as paintings of sorts, these windows provide perfect views into further rooms or, more often, the gardens, provoking a hyper-awareness of the act of looking and cleaving space into moments of voyeuristic pleasure within this fabricated landscape.

In his short story, "The Garden of Forking Paths," Jorge Luis Borges imagines a Chinese garden built as a labyrinth. The garden-labyrinth is revealed to be not a physical space, but rather a conceptual maze, contained inside a book, where time and identity are merely constructs. Philadelphia painter Olivia Jia creates her own version of this labyrinthian puzzle, in books and pages of images within images. Her recent show, *Mirror Stage*, at Margot Samel, continues to explore the idea of image-within-image, as well as her own identity as an American-born child of Chinese immigrants. The works delve into deep questions about identity, belonging, loss, and generational trauma in the shadow of China's Cultural Revolution.

Jia's paintings have always been self-reflexively about the act of looking; she ensconces the idea of the reproduced image firmly within her iconography of book pages sprawling open, folded papers, or the lifted edges of a photograph. She returns repeatedly to the same motifs: moonlight glowing through trees; the natural world as represented by floral blooms or birds; trinkets, such as a vase or a comb; and windows plucked from Chinese gardens, which Jia has traversed in Shanghai and Suzhou when visiting her grandmother. Her imagery is bathed in the silvery color of delicately modulated shades of Payne's gray and blues, giving the feeling of a nocturnal reminiscence or perhaps

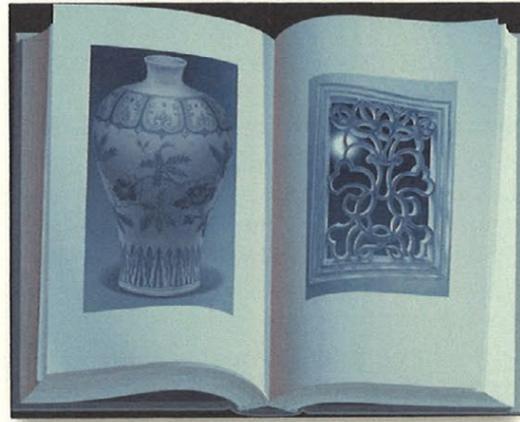
a dream. But it is paintings like *Night reading (Ming vase and moon through a garden window)* that contain the key. The painting shows a fictitious book, open to a page featuring a vase from the Ming dynasty and, on the opposite page, a window that provides a further view into a third space, the night sky with a full moon, within this imagined historical record. The garden window—itsself a metaphor for a painting—supplies a further aperture to another view, literalizing this hall of mirrors.

The objects represented in Jia's paintings have their own embedded meanings, a representation of the artist's search for her bifurcated cultural heritage as the child of Chinese immigrants raised in a Philadelphia suburb. Persistently plumbing the internet for images of a culture that is both familiar and alien, her process mirrors the way Jia herself is both ancestrally at home yet also a tourist walking the paths of the gardens in Suzhou. They meld East and West, where a painting by Peale or Audubon occupies the same visual universe as a centuries-old bronze ritual vessel, perhaps contained within the pages of the same imagined book. Many of the Eastern objects function as placeholders for a past obscured by events of the 20th century, including WWII, the Chinese Civil War, and the Cultural Revolution, during which Jia's family on her father's side lost most of their belongings, creating a deep trauma that still ripples through the generations. Her grandmother spoke frequently and with great bitterness of a vase she had secreted away, the last family heirloom, which, too, was later stolen. This vase, and so many of the other objects that occupy the liminal space of Jia's paintings, give image to what has been erased, a familial heritage lost to time. They expose a yearning, "the impossibility of intimacy with the past," in the artist's words.

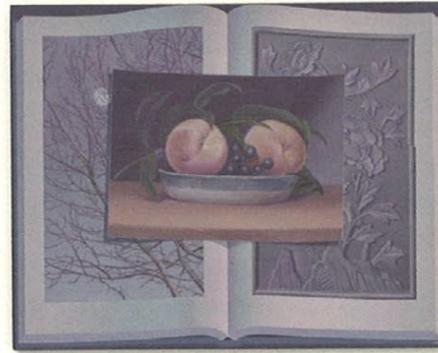
In *Mirror Stage*, Jia is also exploring some new territory. The exhibition shows her expanding her nocturnal palette of grays into a trio of paintings in monochromatic tints. The color, though still muted and tightly controlled, feels as if waking from a dream, as daylight creeps into the room. The three paintings depict artists, or rather, photographs of artists, staging their craft for the camera—not passive receivers of the gaze but performing for it. A Qing dynasty painter leans into his easel, a sanxian player sits, clutching her instrument, and an actress strikes a dramatic contrapposto pose. *Color study (Sheng Jie, actress in red)*

presents perhaps the most compelling case. She is costumed, photographed portraying her character, holding a sword behind her, its blade emerging from under her arm. She does not quite meet the camera's gaze, but shows a canny awareness of it, commanding her presence, bathed in rouge tints. This colored trio of paintings feels like a departure, a reflection of an artist ruminating on the role of the artist in culture, throughout time and place. Do these figures lead out of the labyrinth, into waking life, or further into the depths of the garden?

The term 'mirror stage' is borrowed from Lacan, who theorized that the developmental stage in which an infant recognizes their image in the mirror creates a profound shift in which the ego begins to form. Conversely, this moment simultaneously creates an alien "other" in the reflection, an unknowable version of ourselves. Jia, in the creation of this multitude of windows into other worlds, other histories, other possibilities, is in perpetual search of a unified self.



Olivia Jia, *Night reading (Ming vase and moon through a garden window)*, Oil on panel, 8 x 10" 2025



Olivia Jia, *Night reading (Peale's peaches, moon through the trees, relief carving from a garden doorway)*, Oil on panel, 8 x 10" 2025

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Olivia Jia, *Color study (Sheng Jie, actress in red)*, Oil on panel 8 x 6" 2025