

GAGOSIAN

BROOKLYN RAIL

Jia Aili: Combustion

Jia Aili builds a bizarre world full of lightning strikes, darkly cartoony characters, and foreboding images of a near-apocalyptic realm.

Graham W. Bell



Jia Aili, Untitled, 2016, Oil on canvas, 39 3/8 x 31 1/2 in. © Jia Aili Studio. Courtesy Gagolian.

Like the tattered cover of a 1980s science fiction novel, thrown into a particle accelerator with the catalogue raisonnés of Neo Rauch and Hans Holbein, Jia Aili's paintings—heady works of oil on canvas with the occasional insertion of glass, ash, powdered pigment, and other materials—are enormous and deep, and full of so many visual layers that it's sometimes hard to see through them both literally and figuratively. Well known in his native China, *Combustion* is Jia's first exhibition to take place in New York City (as well as his first with Gagolian). The 29 works on view give us a heady glimpse into the eerie dreamscape of Jia's work, and provide a visual record of the artist's stylistic growth over the past few years. The paintings have a collective tone of ominous surreality yet are varied in their execution. (Pieces like the absurdist *Snowman* (2018) and abstractly cosmic *Untitled* (2016) could almost be done by two different artists.) The visual narrative provided by the exhibition gives viewers a lot to take in and provides a comprehensive introduction to an artist who is perhaps less known to New York audiences.

At first glance, the disparities in Jia's exhibition might be attributed to varying interests or subject matters or to a knack for constant reinvention. However, taking the exhibition as a whole, one notices a gradually building evolution in Jia's oeuvre. Taking the technological advancements of his home country over the past 50-odd years as his starting point (from early satellites to atom bombs), Jia uses each successive work to present a deft interplay of personal

iconography and a commentary on humanity's growth and change in the face of progress. Jia has steadily introduced more depth and visual intrigue into each work as he builds a bizarre world full of lightning strikes, darkly cartoony characters, and foreboding images of a near-apocalyptic realm.

A number of visual tropes provide a thread to guide us through the oft-disparate compositions. A fanged purple sphere, sharing more similarities with Boo, the frisky ghost adversary of Mario Kart fame, melts into a barely discernible figure in *Blues No. 49* (2018). Found again hovering on the edge of *Sonatine*, the largest work in the show, this sprite comes in contact with a muscled figure more reminiscent of Renaissance masters than Nintendo antagonists, and a tiny, buxom nude dancing across an expanse of purple polyhedrons.



Jia Aili, Sonatine, 2019, Oil on canvas, in 4 parts, 196 7/8 x 394 7/8 in, © Jia Aili Studio. Courtesy Gagosian.

The inclusion of this cartoon phantom alludes to Jia's interest in combining a personal dialogue with larger issues of isolation in the face of the contemporary onslaught of media. Appearing in a number of the canvases, sometimes accompanied by mushroom clouds or abstract shapes and colors, the most telling subject of Jia's practice is that of the figure with a head on fire like a struck match. Like an out-of-focus amalgam of a manipulated Polaroid and the flaming protagonist of the Ghost Rider comic book, this haunting presence acts as an unspeaking narrator to the bizarre and sinister events unfolding in Jia's apocalyptic story. Following this being throughout *Combustion*, we see it traversing astral planes only to embrace a fading skeleton while the very world it inhabits falls apart in chaos. Perhaps this lonely entity is a stand-in for the artist himself, or symbolic of a more generalized idea of the individual in the age of social media and ceaseless communication—a reminder of how alone one can feel even while constantly connected. With his constant references to decay, vague machinery, and figures lost in a desolate realm, the artist asks us to reconsider the world in light of technological advancement and seems to paint a portentous vision of progress gone awry.



Jia Aili, *Hermit from the Planet*, 2015-2016, Oil on canvas, 157 1/2 x 236 1/4 in, © Jia Aili Studio. Photo: Chao Yang. Courtesy Gagosian.

Jia's works made prior to 2018 grapple with issues of space and possess an ominous sense of nostalgic weight, with the scenes reading like faded memories that one can't correctly recall. *Dust* and *Hermit from the Planet* (2015–16), for example, exhibit a strangely claustrophobic rendition of the sky, with darkness and stormy, Turner-esque skies pressing down on the viewer; while works like *Stardust* (2015) employ glass, ash, and other materials to give space vistas a tangible richness. In works from 2018 onward, exemplified by the vividly-striking *Blues No. 49*, Jia's practice takes a turn and introduces a different approach to multidimensionality in the form of distorted color fields and painted planes that intersect, disrupt, and explode into his previously more plausible illusionistic spaces. *The Action of Three Primary Colors* (2018), when compared with earlier works, serves as a potent example of Jia's more recent inclusion of abstract elements. The artist brings his subjects to the immediate foreground, pressing his figures and geometric shapes against the picture plane. The figures and objects from his previous works are joined by a twisting and folding space frozen in time by the painter's brush. It is as if we are witnessing some cosmic event happening in a split second and Jia has had the good fortune of pressing pause at just the right moment. By combining sharp, representational renderings with abstract shapes, Jia is able to disassociate his tableaux from the real world and more aptly illustrate his hazy visions and sense of unease.