

A Search for Belonging: James Jean's *Meadowlark* Exhibition at CICA

Reviewed by: Sharon Engbrecht

Downtown, near Vancouver's Chinatown and cultural hubs, CICA is the perfect gallery to host James Jean's first solo show in Canada. An exhibition that explores the complexities of belonging and multiculturalism, *Meadowlark* will appeal to audiences from all walks of life.

The vibrant colors, seemingly muted in juxtaposition, combined with Jean's expert technical skill and his accumulation of characters and symbols all tell a story at the core of who we are: our ability, and sometimes struggle, to communicate. To be able to share or exchange ideas and information depends on our experience of shared knowledge. Communication depends on languages, but not just written or spoken; language can come to us in the form of an idea that demonstrates the limits of what is written or spoken as it edges near the territory of the unspeakable. This is where art lives and thrives: in the inspiration and ideas that bubble out of an image, a small gesture, or even a symbol revived and renewed when placed in a new or surreal context.

Each work of art, from his preliminary sketches to his color schemes to the different renditions of a single idea, breathes life into the symbols Jean uses to explore what it means to search for belonging. In part, the failure to belong becomes a failure to communicate belonging; and, with each figure, Jean excavates how bodies navigate attachment and connection—fundamental aspects of feeling a part of something through our ability to interface with the world around us.

The radicals that make up part of the written Chinese language, or the references to historical art works from both Western and Eastern traditions, recall the ideogram—a visual metaphor for conceptualizing a *thing* with no particular name. An ideogram, combining the Greek *idea* with *something written*, brings to mind the possibility of the

past continuing into the present as a fleeting moment. The idea of pasts (plural) is something always written as though it *can be* our present, except that we are always the accumulation of the pasts that will always become something different, something new, something that could only ever *have been* an idea in the past until it became a part of who we are in the always-illusory present.

We can see this searching, this kind of nostalgia for belonging, in paintings such as *Scribe* and *Student*. Even their color schemes and the layered, mash-up of both paint and technique speak to the desire to communicate a space between—an always illusive place that tells the story of who we are or might be. Each figure's body-language tells a different story: always slightly askew, never directly facing you, are they uncertain or unaware of their audience? Jean's careful studies demonstrate his attention to space and how the shape and flow of a figure can communicate the slightest emotion or response.

Whether a figure appears ghostly or in the now may depend on something as strategic as an outline placed behind or in front of the finishing wash. In *Bear*, for example, the rabbits' bold outlines bring them to the foreground as the spirit bear recedes as though from a different world; it is only connected through the warm tones of the rabbits' auras anchoring it to their world.

Buried within Jean's paintings is his own story, a story of how he masks some of his brush strokes and not others—each technique is a different language that draws attention to the complex layers of the paintings and mirrors the artist's internal conflict to communicate his own sense of (un)belonging. These highly technical paintings, as they move through episodes of "superflat" but also hesitate on the hyper-realistic, are a visual bricolage of the cultural tidbits that we all gather around us to make us who we are. They mirror the feeling of the in-between, the liminal captured in Jean's technique and movement between media, and the possibility of being remade, of taking on new

shapes and forms, but also being dissatisfied as one thing or another (as only *this* thing).

As we constantly move through the shape and idea of ourselves, of who we might be, we are also shaped by our family, friends, and communities. We take shape through the images and ideas we take into ourselves. At what point do we belong? When do we know when we fit in?

In part, it's the stories we tell about how we come to belong, or not belong. Belonging is an idea—a nostalgia for a never-was that we are told or learn to tell ourselves.

Belonging is a fleeting moment in a smile, in feeling loved, in being a part of something that is greater than the sum of ourselves. But belonging might also be the feeling we get when we finally feel as though we belong within or to ourselves—when we accept ourselves exactly as we are, where are. And, sometimes, the challenge of belonging might be the difficulty of traversing between what we know and all the different worlds that are out there: what is unseen, unimaginable, or especially unspeakable, but possible in how we imagine and see the possibilities around us.