

Points Of View

Recent works by Beatrice Casadesus show an intimate relationship with classical Chinese culture.

By Lucy Stringer

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE MUSEUM ANNEX

Beatrice Casadesus used to dream of China. Thirteen years ago while on holiday on a small French island she sat down to look out over the marshy land and began to imagine the fertile plains of China. Although she had never been there, the scenery inspired a poem. On her return to Paris at the end of the summer she found a letter from the minister of foreign affairs inviting her to visit the land she had imagined. "I had always wanted to go to China," she said, "I went the next year." The result of that and subsequent trips was *Orients*, an inaugural exhibition of her work displayed in the Museum Annex in the Prince's Building.

Although many of her works are inspired by the landscapes of Guilin, temple architecture and oriental clothing, Casadesus has a profound and long-standing respect for classical Chinese art. "What interests me in Chinese art is the concept of space . . . emptiness . . . which is treated in a completely different way in occidental art," she explains. To illustrate her point she opens a book of twelfth and thirteenth-century Chinese fan paintings. Frequently in works of this period the center of the fan is left blank, with the figurative elements of nature used as a border. It is this center, according to Casadesus, that generates a sense of emptiness and gives a pervasive feeling of unity and serenity.

"I am not trying to copy these paintings," she says, "I try to find an equivalent of the feeling that this depiction of space produces in me." Casadesus firmly believes that it is the difference between emptiness and what is depicted that makes what is depicted interesting.

The juxtaposition of opposites such as emptiness and fullness, abstraction and reality, are best displayed in the three paintings entitled *Empreintes*. These large black and white bisected circles, reminiscent of the yin-yang symbol, illustrate the artist's desire to achieve balance through opposites.

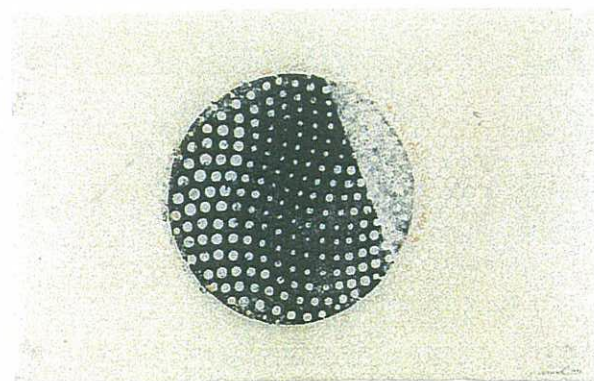
It is however, color, more than anything else that initially strikes the viewer. Casadesus explains that the colors she uses were inspired by the quality of light on the walls of the Buddhist and Shinto temples she visited. Dark purple and gold give a sense of the warmth and penumbra of an incense-filled interior. Silver is used sparingly to suggest light catching the uneven surface of a wall.

To contrast with the richness and strength of these colors, the fabric on which the artist paints tends to be extremely fragile — another play on opposites. Absorbent materials are preferred because they are the most similar to Chinese paper. Generally the paint is applied to the reverse of the canvas and, as it is absorbed, it appears on the other side. The way in which the material absorbs and dilutes the paint fascinates Casadesus. When this technique is used with gold paint,

the material soaks up much of the metallic sheen so that it appears heavy and impossibly tarnished. By painting a base color on canvas and then superimposing a painted layer of gauze, a sense of depth is achieved as light comes from within the canvas, creating an additional plane.

Although China has been Casadesus's main source of inspiration in the last thirteen years, her work cannot be discussed without reference to one of her own countrymen, Seurat. Since 1973 the main device around which her work has evolved is the dot, with its endless variety of forms and meanings.

"To start off with, my paintings were much closer to Seurat's, that is to say more figurative. The dots served as a means of dissolving the figuration. Slowly I abandoned this figuration because the dots themselves became more important. When you build something figurative with dots it becomes abstract and the figure itself becomes unimportant. Now the dots are starting to spread out and it is more a question of how the dots are absorbed by the material that interests me."



Empreintes, 110 x 80 cm

It is these dots which give the surface texture of the painting a vibrating sense of light and shadow which produces on the retina a sense of perspective. This perspective led some viewers of *Orients* to remark that they could distinguish the mountains and rivers of China in Casadesus's work. Others, like myself, were simply overwhelmed by the beauty and fragility of the pieces, which convey an emotion rather than depicting a particular landscape. That emotion, a dreamlike serenity and sense of wonder, has the power to transcend the strictures of traditional form and image.

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EXHIBITION REVIEWS

Beatrice Casadesus at The Museum Annex

Drawing on her travels throughout China and the East, Casadesus has attempted to translate the mysteriousness and visual excitement of her experiences through a variety of delicate prints and paintings in a broad range of rich shimmering colors.

Often using highly textured and often fragile-looking Chinese, Korean, and Japanese paper, Casadesus' principle device throughout is the dot: sometimes in the form of dabs of paint applied with her finger, and sometimes as holes cut in paper. While such simplicity often makes for quite stunning paintings with thousands of marks arranged in some works, the use of this most basic element further serves to conjure a range of references; from the Pointilist

paintings of Signac and Seurat to newspaper and television pictures and the first mark one makes with a pen or brush. In this way her work remains open to the observer providing an ambiguity and mystery which allows for many interpretations.

In *Paysage Chinois*, Casadesus has used highly textured Japanese paper through which has been soaked in gold paint so the color appears bled through the paper. On a larger scale in *Mer De Chine*, this technique of bleeding color is again employed, this time with violet and blue on polyester over which hundreds of tiny gold dots have been arranged.

In each case, the colors are transformed as they soak through the medium, in *Paysage Chinois* emerging as clouds of iridescent color suggesting sunlight through mist or clouds or incense. The use of such colors as gold and silver, as in *Mer De Chine*, recalls religious and ancient relics and underlines the impression of preciousness which pervades much of this work.

The idea of something passed or transmitted through another is strong and persistent throughout this show. At its most obvious it is color transmitted through paper or fabric; we observe the transformation

as it appears in indistinct waves of color—varying in intensity as it is diffused through the fabric or paper.

This idea of transmission is further suggested by the series of works inspired by Japanese 'kakemono.' Here, long strips of paper are arranged concertina-style into notebooks in which half circles have been cut out of the card and folded back, the effect of light through the holes replicates the effect of light falling through the branches of a tree.

While marking a move towards a more reflective phase in her career, at its best, the work succeeds in conjuring a feeling of mysteriousness and magic through its rich and swirling colors. There is a feeling that Casadesus is tapping a deeper, spiritual meaning which lies bound up and hidden in the intricate arrangements of gold and silver.

John Millichap



Left: Beatrice Casadesus, *Mer De Chine*, 1995, 340 x 150 cm. Right: