

frieze

LI SHURUI AT WHITE SPACE, BEIJING, CHINA

by Iona Whittaker

'The Shelter: All Fears Come from the Unknown Shimmering at the Edge of the World', a display of Li Shurui's painting, was less an exhibition, perhaps, than the event of an art work. A single structure occupied the gallery space, standing in darkness but for a beam of light shining onto it from the facing wall. The structure comprised a giant metal framework supporting a total of 106 of Li's paintings, arranged geometrically, with hexagonal indentations in the lower wall and inward-pointing pyramids and tetrahedrons forming a spiked upper level. The paintings were uniform in tone and content: bluish-grey backgrounds with white and dark circles airbrushed onto them in graduated, concentric grid formations. A red carpet led up to a stage created in the curvature of the wall, where the light hit the centre point forcefully. This, we may deduce from the exhibition's title, was 'The Shelter'. Or perhaps not. 'All Fears Come from the Unknown Shimmering at the Edge of the World' might also be what was visualized here – luminescence on some abstract frontier.

Regardless of the metaphysical levels the installation may have aspired to reach, erected in the gallery was a huge frame hung with paintings and lit by bright light. It represented a new incarnation for Li's light-based practice, which she began in 2005; in her own words, Li 'wanted to paint light'. She was photographed wearing a paint-smudged gas mask strung over bleached blond hair, a brassy stare trained on the lens. Much has been pinned to her practice – including Op Art and abstraction – ideas with which she was unconcerned. The level painted fields combining dark or white orbs and bright colours like the nebulous artificial haze of a dance hall (some works retain shadows of figures and objects) have gradually become more restrained; two 'Skylight' paintings from this year, for example, dispense with a rainbow of colours to concentrate on blue and pinkish tones that occupy the canvas in an equable grid to its edges, creating an image of greater flatness.

What of this new installation, 'The Shelter...'? A real glare has been substituted for that of depicted light; this surely represents something of a renege relative to Li's original impetus to 'paint light'. Whereas the paintings share a predefined goal, this installation was contrastingly open-ended, transposing the visceral experience desired from canvases alone into something much more literal, and therefore suggesting a new boundary lying beyond. Li has also produced successful works in three dimensions, namely 155cm (2009) – a set of white pyramids 155 cm high, their tips darkened with graphite – or A Room Named Elevator (2008), involving an open lift stuck between floors, and fluorescent lights. Although 'The Shelter...' is technically masterful, it is wanting as an attempt to synthesize the different aspects of Li's practice: vision (both physical and metaphorical), painting light and creating installations. The sharp peaks and flat planes came to resemble a house of cards, fragile against the beam of light. Borne of the illuminated brume of earlier works, 'The Shelter...' was initially spectacular, but ultimately insubstantial – a necessary process, perhaps, towards an improved realization in the future.

