

► Glass beads give Shanghai artist a focus on the universe

# GOING ROUND AND ROUND

By Liao Fangzhou

It is not the first time Shanghai artist Shi Zhiying has pictured roundness – one of her works from last year focused on the pearls making up a necklace. But with *I Don't Pretend to Understand the Universe*, her current solo exhibition at the James Cohan Gallery in Shanghai until August 9, Shi deliberately embraces the more abstract.

Yes, the watercolors are unmistakably about glass beads, but the subjects of the oil paintings, could be celestial bodies, physical molecules, or, from a more everyday reading, a cluster of snooker balls waiting to be knocked off the table.

"My intention is to bring out a sense of time and space from something micro, which makes the beads by themselves, in a less concrete form, a better idea," Shi told the Global Times.

The sense of space is clearly there. Early pieces like *Beads 1* and *Beads 2* (pictured lower right) have the power to silence an onlooker. The beads on these canvases, all of them in white, exude a persuasive glow against dark hues or a mixture of black and deep blue that projects an air of mystery. Each painting features two small beads that could be flying together within a vast space.

## Personal enthusiasm

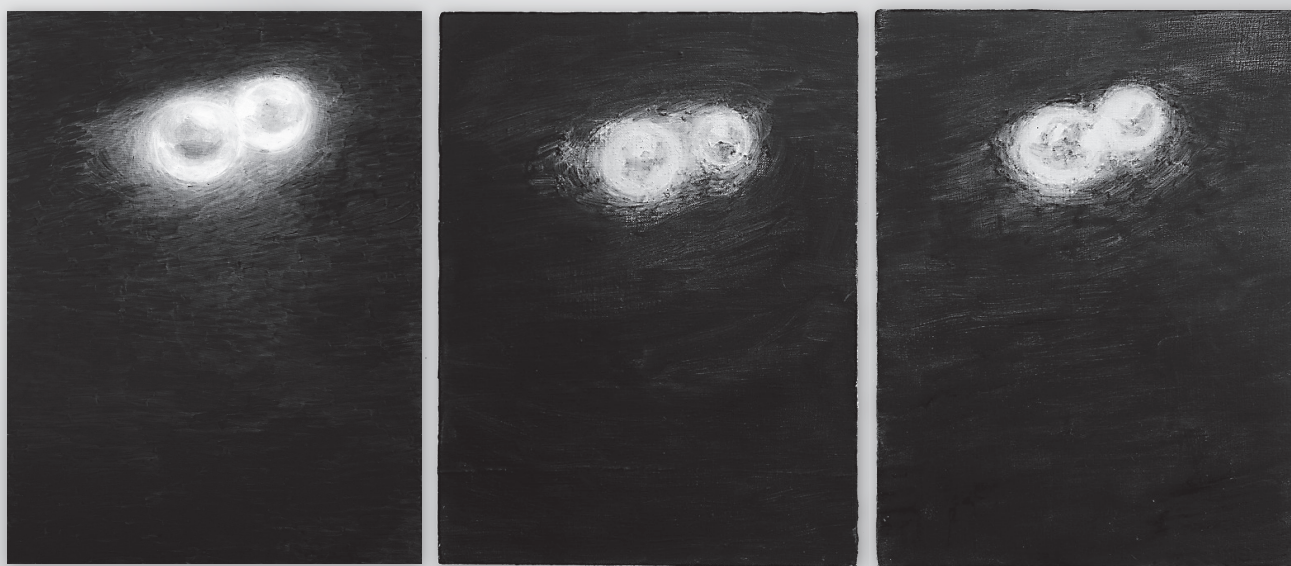
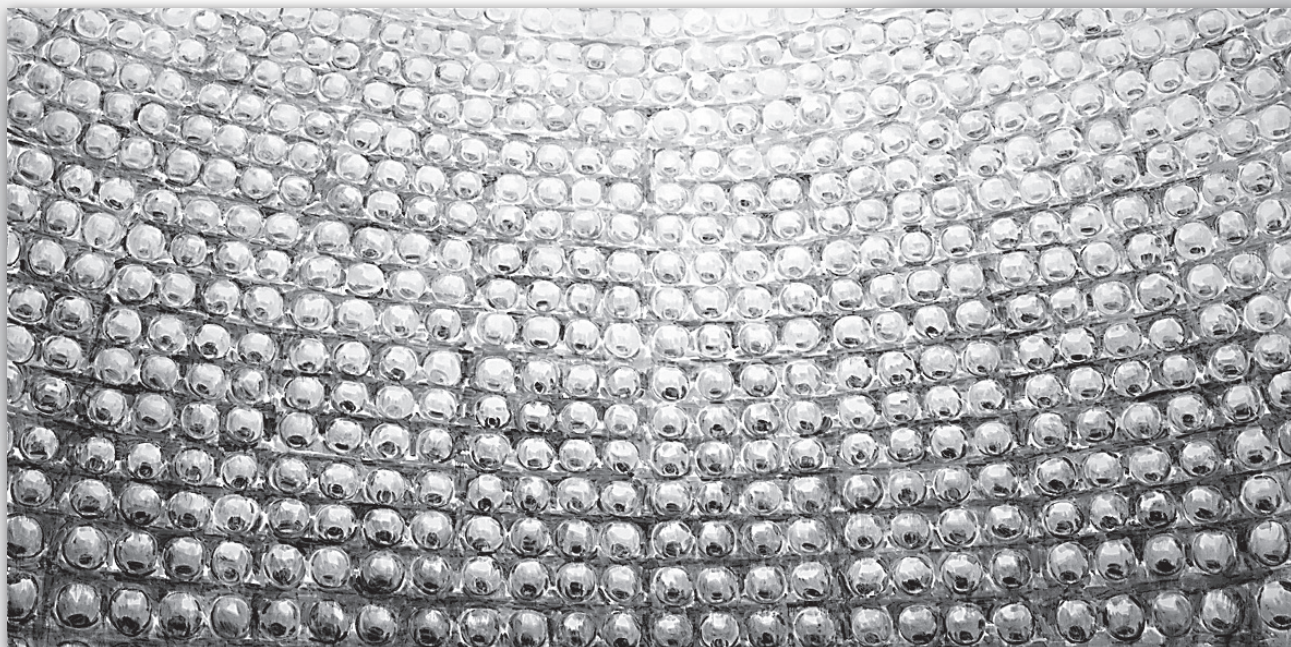
By accentuating the miniscule in the context of a greater universe, Shi's personal enthusiasm for the French master Paul Cezanne or the Song Dynasty (960–1279) painter Fan Kuan is obvious, if not too explicitly so.

Shi said she wasn't trying to make these objects appear dynamic, but there is a feeling that they form trajectories. "I guess it's because painting is a dynamic process itself," Shi said. "Every stroke you make is relative to the next, and every new stroke makes a difference to the previous. It is like continuously forming a web."

A sharp contrast is *Beads 8* (pictured top), in which numerous miniature beads are neatly displayed on rows of shelves filling the canvas.

Shi got the idea from a documentary about a Japanese science laboratory where metal balls were hung in the hope of collecting energy. Regarding this as a sort of Pantheon she painted this piece from screenshots from the documentary – along with her own invention.

The watercolor glass beads are more explicit references to the exhibition's inspirational source, German writer Hermann Hesse's last full-



Works on display at the Shanghai artist Shi Zhiying's new exhibition Photos: Courtesy of James Cohan Gallery Shanghai

length novel *The Glass Bead Game*. The novel is about a futuristic elite school where scholars and leaders are involved in a game with beads that could explain the laws of the universe.

Shi believes the essence of the book is about achieving a oneness for the spiritual and the material world. "Though in the novel that attempt eventually failed, it is a fascinating investigation for artists and writers alike, and what I would like to achieve in my paintings," Shi said.

## Childhood pastimes

Meanwhile her watercolor glass beads, crystal-clear with a touch of light blue or black within them, resting sedately or joining one on a white surface, remind viewers of pleasant childhood pastimes.

The works are shown in an order that replays Shi's creating process – one glass bead on its own, and then in a pair, and three.

She drew all the beads from actual objects she had bought online. "A bead is extremely simple in form, which means if I draw from a photograph or the like, the only discernible difference might be their placement," Shi said. "Therefore, this is an approach to avoid ingrained ways of painting, and push my observation to be fresh and new every time I revisit the motif."

The sense of time, which Shi says is another theme of this exhibition, might be more difficult to grasp. Her argument is that, the continuous process of painting, from the first stroke to the very last, constructs a timeline in itself.

This is an idea embraced by quite a few Chinese artists recently, including Chongqing artist Pan Yun with her meandering layers of tree branches in *Portraits of Trees*.

One might wonder which painting and which exhibition is not about time. Luckily, Shi's timeline is a pleasant one to follow, for its blending of the mysterious and the mundane.

**Date:** Until August 9, 10 am to 6 pm (closed Sundays and Mondays)

**Venue:** James Cohan Gallery Shanghai

**Address:** Bldg 1, Lane 170 Yueyang Road

**Admission:** Free

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