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## Walasse Ting

Nova Southeastern University Art Museum

By Richard Speer ☒



Walasse Ting, *Untitled*, ca. late 1990s, acrylic and Chinese ink on rice paper, 70 × 38".

Until recently, painter, printmaker, and poet Walasse Ting (1928–2010) was often thought of, artistically, as “always the bridesmaid, never the bride,” more a supporting actor than a creative force unto himself. “Parrot Jungle,” his first American museum retrospective, aimed to redress that impression by exploring his uniquely transnational aesthetic, which married East Asian sensibilities with a hedonic, Matissean approach to figuration and still life. Born Ding Xiongquan in Wuxi, China, he fled

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the country's civil war (and Mao Zedong's eventual crackdown on artistic individualism) at age eighteen, teaching himself ancient ink-painting techniques in the more cosmopolitan enclave of British Hong Kong. Exposed to Western modernism, he changed his name to an Anglicized version of his childhood nickname (Huài Lai Shee, or "Wallace"), replacing the final "ce" with "sse" in tribute to Matisse, whom he emulated. In 1953 he moved to Paris and befriended CoBrA artists Pierre Alechinsky and Asger Jorn, making collaborative paintings with them. Six examples were featured in the exhibition, which was nimbly curated by Ariella Wolens.

In New York in 1957, Ting began putting together the influential folio *1¢ Life*, 1964, the project for which he is best remembered today. A compendium of his poems and lithographs edited by friend and collaborator Sam Francis, it includes fifty-seven additional prints by a who's who of Pop artists (Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, and James Rosenquist among them) and second-generation Abstract Expressionists (such as Sam Francis, Joan Mitchell, and Jean-Paul Riopelle). This definitive snapshot of a zeitgeist in transition elevated Ting's profile even as it overshadowed his writing and contributed to a perception of him as a facilitator rather than a soloist. Most collectors at the time quickly dispersed the prints, selling them piecemeal. This exhibition afforded a rare opportunity to view the folio in toto.

The organizing principle around the seventy-one artworks in "Parrot Jungle" was the Miami wildlife park after which the presentation was named—the artist frequented this refuge during the 1970s and '80s when visiting his in-laws. He took hundreds of photographs of its Edenic menagerie of tropical birds and flowers, later referring to the images while painting in his New York studio. The show's centerpiece was *Untitled (Flamingos)*, 1997, a seven-by-thirty-two-foot tableau resplendent in fuchsias, pinks, and lime greens, typical of the sorbet palette that defined his lushly maximalist mature style and flamboyant, bon-vivant persona. A late-1980s snapshot of the artist, one of dozens of pieces of ephemera displayed in cases, shows him in sybaritic mode on West Palm Beach, Florida, a hibiscus blossom tucked behind each ear and a ripe watermelon laid before him.

A generous sampling of his signature female nudes evinced his inspired merging of action painting and figuration. The sitter for *Love Me with Your Heart That I Want*, 1975, wears a long gown with an open bodice as a spray of atomized and flung acrylics spills over the dress like confetti. *Do You Like Moonlight?*, 1977, evokes black-light paintings: The reclining purple nude, her nipples aglow like crimson nebulae, is covered with flecks of fluorescent green shimmering like starlight on her skin. Although the nudity in such works is tame, the exhibition's wall texts took pains to contextualize it within the Sexual Revolution, an era "during which erotic depictions of women were more widespread and often considered a positive celebration of female sexuality across gender divides." The show's catalogue also invited us to ponder whether Ting's male gaze might have been tempered by gender fluidity, citing a 1977 interview in which he mused, "Who knows, maybe those pretty girls are me."

Many works paid homage to Tang dynasty paintings of noblewomen and courtesans standing in columnar trios. Black-and-white gestural paintings, such as *My Memory Is too Much*, 1985, gazed back upon the artist's earlier work, with its strong ties to Chinese calligraphy. Today we can appreciate Ting's deft integration of Asian genres with styles he explored in the West, but during his lifetime he was often ghettoized as an "Oriental" painter. John Canaday, for example, in a 1971 profile of the artist for the *New York Times*, likened him to "an ebullient and perhaps slightly tipsy Zen monk." Diminishing characterizations of this sort followed the artist to his death, obscuring his gifts for painterly sensuality, gonzo chromaticism, and intercultural *mélange*. The retrospective built a compelling case for reframing this synthesis as *sui generis* and historically significant.