

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

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## THEGUIDE.ART



Photography Ye Rin Mok

### ● Julien Nguyen

By Gianna Samms

Making use of a vernacular that ranges from Renaissance painting to science fiction, Julien Nguyen's meticulous paintings simultaneously reference history while looking into the future. Here, the lines between fantasy and reality are blurred: the Los Angeles-based artist paints real-life friends and lovers, but places them in alien settings and infuses their bodies with otherworldly qualities.

Nguyen's latest show at Matthew Marks Gallery, "Pictures of the Floating World," brings together a group of paintings made during the past two years. While many were begun before the pandemic,

Samms, Gianna, and Julien Nguyen. "Julien Nguyen." *TheGuide.Art*, June 27, 2021.

lockdown brought about a new dimension to the 30-year-old's practice. Afforded more time and space to experiment under quarantine, the contemplation and isolation that characterizes Nguyen's work seems to have intensified. The show's title, which references the hedonistic and isolated Edo-period Japan, is reflected in the uneasy atmosphere of the paintings, whose characters seem to dematerialize against strange and uncertain backdrops. By making use of both art historical and digital motifs, the young artist dwells in a zone of indistinction, where past, present, and future spill into one another.

On occasion of his new show, we spoke about finding inspiration in social media, the relationship between desire and reverence, and the speculative possibilities in the future.

GIANNA SAMMS: I'm curious how this body of work came together. Some of the works were made before COVID, and some after.

JULIEN NGUYEN: I began working on the show in 2019. Originally, it was supposed to be earlier, but it was pushed back because of the pandemic. As horrible as the pandemic was, I think the work benefited from more time. The chaos of the world made me look at certain aspects of the work in different ways. My practice has always been very quiet, contemplative, and isolated, and the pandemic exacerbated those qualities.

SAMMS: Did you find it more difficult to work during this time?

NGUYEN: There were moments where it was more difficult. I spend a lot of time and enjoy working from home. While my routine wasn't greatly impacted, it was difficult not having those moments to go out into the world which made it very hard to work at times. But it also gave me more conviction. Allowing myself to wait and see how things gestate really demonstrated the critical importance of time itself in the production of painting. It gave me the ability to see how far I could push certain material or technical concerns rather than closing off possibilities before they could go further.

SAMMS: There's some extra time and space to experiment.

NGUYEN: Yes. What happens with oil painting when it's given more time? I think so much of artmaking is part of that. You think about painters of the past and how much time was given to certain things. And in a strange way, a pandemic is kind of a situation from the future and also a disaster scenario from the past. And while this is a tenuous connection that I'm making, I felt I was working in an even more pre-modern mode than before.

SAMMS: I'm curious as to how you navigate the tension between the art historical and the digital references in your work—whether they're in conflict, or if it's a synthesis.

NGUYEN: It's more of a synthesis than a conflict. There are always a lot of different art historical

touch points in my work, but I think particularly so in this body of work. "Pictures of the Floating World," of course, references the Edo period in Japan. While I was working, I was reading a lot of ancient Chinese literature and looking at a lot of Western and Asian art. I'm also inspired by the painting of the Renaissance which was an attempt to build a world through the ruins of the past that they could see. So I think that the digital serves mainly as a tool for comparison. When I look at all the things from the past that influenced me, I wonder what would have happened if those things were in contact with one another at the same moment they were being produced. What sort of picture would that create? Going back to certain old tools, but with a much more expansive vision, is an attempt to do that. I'm not working in the same structures as artists of the past. I'm working along much more individualistic and personal lines. But I think there is something there that is similar.

SAMMS: I'm thinking of your work, *The Temptation of Christ* (2020), which strongly references the Duccio painting of the same name: the flatness of the picture plane and the composition of the exaggerated figures against the dark mass of the mountain. I'm curious if you see these specific references as an appropriation of art history or more complicatedly in conversation with the lineage.

NGUYEN: It's more complicated and personal than appropriation. I think it's an attempt to put myself in the shoes of the artist who made it or the person who would see the work when it was first created. I'm always trying to figure out why exactly I'm making the work as I make it. But the pull feels stronger than an attempt at analysis. It has to do with embodying something or seeing if certain devotional impulses can still be felt today, even though the structures that those sensations are experienced in are totally scrambled.

SAMMS: I notice a strong sense of sensuality and



Julien Nguyen, *Resolute in Privation*, 2021. Oil on panel, 40 x 30 inches. © Julien Nguyen, courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery.



Julien Nguyen, *Woman in a Lab Coat*, 2021. Oil on panel, 35½ x 47¼ inches. © Julien Nguyen, courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery.

temptation, and also all of these religious motifs, and I was wondering if you could speak to how they inform each other.

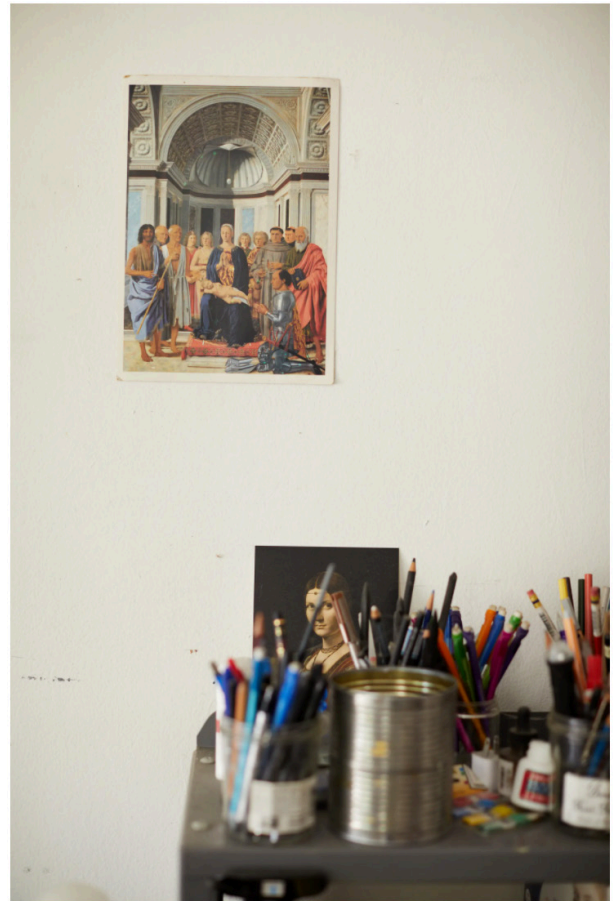
NGUYEN: Desire and reverence are very closely linked in my mind. There's also fear and desire. The tension between fear and awe and the sublime—that something that is beautiful can be both frightening and attracting—links to a certain idea of ancient experience.

SAMMS: What about sci-fi interests you?

NGUYEN: A lot of it attracts me because of how beautiful and wild it gets. You're imagining the future, but it's also a form of alternate history, written in the future tense. It seems like things are not closed off there. One can use it to pervert certain things that are given today and imagine them in a totally new configuration. And I think that's what's so wonderful about certain historical sources. It's not that the past is something to be worshipped or returned to, but with so much information and human experience, there's an ability to imagine possibilities that exist outside of how things actually progressed. That's very important for me, going both into the past or into the future.

SAMMS: What role does the internet play in your practice, personally and in finding inspiration?

NGUYEN: The internet was really my first exposure to art and history. My first contact with serious drawing and painting came through looking at sci-fi video game characters as a kid and thinking, "Oh, that's amazing. This just looks so cool." But in trying to learn how to draw those things, I was led to more classical techniques of drawing and painting. So the internet has been a very useful tool that provoked a lot of wonder in me as a child. But it's also a very scrambled and frenetic tool and trying to make sense out of the images and experiences and thoughts that I encounter has always been very important for me.



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SAMMS: I'm reminded of the Matthew Marks site which has a banner with different videos and media. Is there a source where you find the things that you reference, or are they things that you create yourself?

NGUYEN: There's a lot of things that I put together myself and a lot of stuff I'm reading. There's a multiplicity of tools at one's disposal on the internet that you can get sucked into the whole universe in a very special way. I'm also very conscious that it's a kind of mirror of reality and not necessarily reality itself. Where those two things bleed into one another is very fascinating to me.

SAMMS: Right, you can find the same figurations of bodies across art history and the digital—the same gestures and poses of classical statues appear on personal social media.

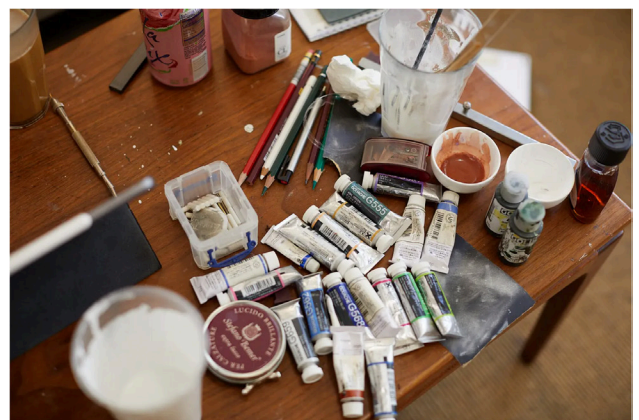
NGUYEN: Exactly. I think there's a very poetic structure to the whole thing, and what I put into that sphere when I'm posting takes on a different quality. It's both a form of writing and speech. It's fragmentary. One of the things that I put on the website is a poem by the 8th century Chinese poet Du Fu. I was reading his poetry while working on the show, and the fact that something written in the 800s in a completely different societal structure could cut across hundreds of years was so wonderful and astonishing to me. You could feel a human heart trying to make sense of a world in flux across such vast distances. I think that goes back to the question of whether it's appropriation or something more complicated. That feeling of transmitting, not simply information, but something larger across distances of time is very important for me.

SAMMS: Pivoting to process, how do you begin a painting? Is it with an idea or a sitter?

NGUYEN: It's a bit of both. Sometimes, I would like to paint a friend of mine, someone I know or have come across. For the more religious or devotional



Julien Nguyen, *Jake*, 2019. Oil on panel, 24 x 18 inches. © Julien Nguyen, courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery.



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paintings, I'll think, what about this person and my experience of them would fit into the historical subjects that I've been thinking about? Someone's personality, profile, or the way they carry themselves might remind me of something, and I'll attempt to fuse those things together. With the more direct portraits, there's something I would like to immediately capture about them, and it becomes a very traditional painter and model situation of working from life.

SAMMS: Do you mainly paint friends, lovers, and people that you know, or have you ever painted strangers?

NGUYEN: One of the paintings in the show, *Untitled Torso Study* (2020), is a painting with a stranger. It's a painting of a boy from the front, mostly focused on his musculature. When I was working on that painting, it was very much a figural study in the tradition of academic painting of the past: a way to practice modeling the human form in oil paint. But I mostly paint people that I know or have at least come in contact with. I think it makes the work more real. There's a physical, emotional draw that wouldn't exist if my references were completely from elsewhere.

SAMMS: When I visited the show with a friend, we picked up on a level of suffering to your figures. We were thinking of Egon Schiele's elongated bodies and wondering about the inner state of your figures and the ambiguous emotional positions they occupy.

NGUYEN: I think there's definitely that tension in there. It's important to me that these are bodies in a state of transformation, whether that's a sort of suffering or ecstasy. It relates to the religious character of certain ideas that I'm working with, and the fact that it's a tradition in flux. And the body, for me, communicates that physically and gesturally. I think I may be drawn to certain figures because they express that strange tension of representation.



Julien Nguyen, *Rivers and Mountains*, 2021. Oil on panel, 35½ × 47¼ inches. © Julien Nguyen, courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery.



Julien Nguyen, *The Courtier*, 2021. Oil on panel, 24 x 24 inches. © Julien Nguyen, courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery.

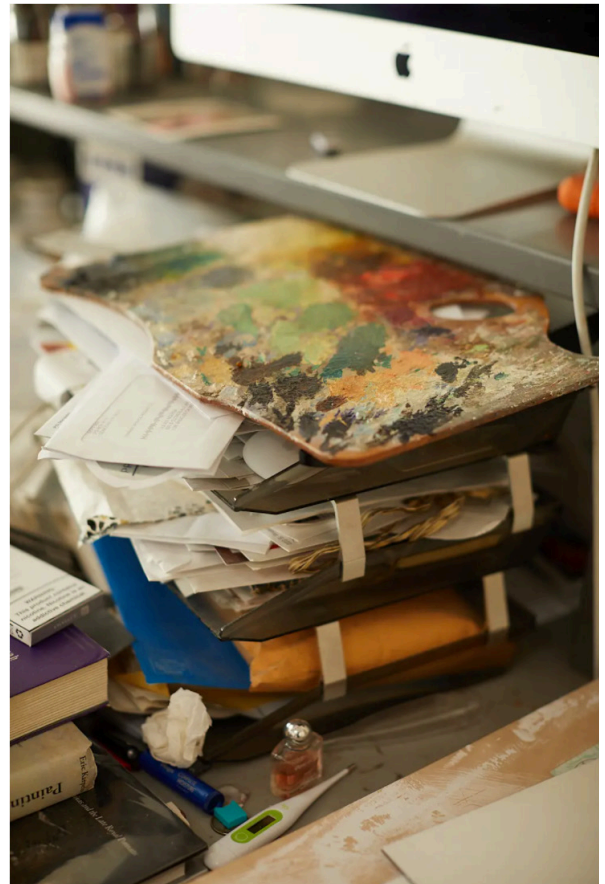
Egon Schiele was working in turn of the century Vienna, when everything was coming under question: whether these images were relevant to the production of art, whether the figure should even be in the image. And I think the specific stylizations that I use are an attempt to ask myself and the viewer, where does the figure fit in? Where does the body fit in?

SAMMS: Speaking to that question of the figure, I'm curious which elements of the body you choose to render more fully and what you allow to dematerialize.

NGUYEN: Sometimes it's a question of what I have the time to do and what draws me immediately. Sometimes it's whether it should be known as a specific character or if it's a more allegorical figure. But that's something that perplexes me too. I look at a lot of my paintings and as happy as I am with the show, I tend to think of some things as horribly unfinished or wish I had more time to work. But a little while after a work has left my studio, I view those parts which aren't as clearly rendered as important as the things that come into a high degree of focus.

SAMMS: What do you take away from the experience of painting? Do you think about what you want your viewer to take away?

NGUYEN: People have said interesting things about looking at the pictures, that they're not necessarily welcoming paintings. In many ways you could describe them as beautiful in a more prosaic sense of the term. The surfaces are rich and the forms are very built up in a fastidious manner. But at the same time, there's a desire to push technique to its limit where it becomes challenging. There's an attempt at a provocation that comes from a place of stillness and composure rather than aggression. So I'm very much thinking about an imaginary viewer. A lot of the figures address themselves to the viewer in a



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purposefully ambiguous way. I want them to reach the level of their own sentience or agency, to give them enough so they can exist on their own as objects, but also as something more than just an object.

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*"Pictures of the Floating World"* is on view at Matthew Marks Gallery, 523 West 24th Street, through August 13, 2021.



Photography Ye Rin Mok