

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

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Xinyi Cheng

Press Packet

Saint-Louis, Elodie. "Xinyi Cheng: The Pleasures of Looking." *PLUS Magazine*, no. 10, May 2026, pp. 42–51.

Liu, Jasmine. "Xinyi Cheng's Surreal Paintings Draw Inspiration from 19th-Century Chinese Parables and '90s SNL Sketches." *Art in America*, July 21, 2023.

Moroz, Sarah. "These Sensual Paintings Explore the Complexity of Intimacy." *i-D*, March 29, 2022.

Luquet-Gold, Ingrid. "Xinyi Cheng's Intimate Assault on Reality." *Flash Art* 338, March 23, 2022.

Cheng, Xinyi. "Xinyi Cheng / Interview." *Pinault Collection*, July 7, 2021.

Ballantyne-Way, Duncan, and Xinyi Cheng. "Xinyi Cheng: 'I'm Interested in How Men Deal with Their Masculinity.'" *Exberliner*, June 3, 2021.

Cheng, Xinyi, and Lillian Davies. "Interviews: Xinyi Cheng." *Artforum*, March 5, 2021.

He, Fiona. "Xinyi Cheng." *Artforum* 57, no. 2, October 2018, p. 250.

Yau, John. "Taking Stock of Painting Today." *Hyperallergic*, August 12, 2018.

Smith, Roberta. "Fresh Broad Strokes Of an Incomplete Survey." *The New York Times*, August 3, 2018, pp. C13, C18.

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PLUS

PROFILES

Words
ELODIE SAINT-LOUIS

The Pleasures of Looking





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To observe a painting by artist Xinyi Cheng is to drop into the moment
when the curtain parts. A freeze-frame, an instance of surreal suspension.

In “A Lover’s Discourse,” Roland Barthes writes that “love at first sight requires the very sign of its suddenness... a curtain parts and what had not yet ever been seen is devoured by the eyes... the context is the constellation of elements, harmoniously arranged that encompass the experience of the amorous subject.”

To observe a painting by artist Xinyi Cheng is to drop into the moment when the curtain parts. A freeze-frame, an instance of surreal suspension. We look — hungrily, greedily, curiously — at the figures within, at times inhabiting the gaze love, desire, or intimacy engenders. These figures, many of them nude men, seem to be suspended or are affixed in space so the viewer observes them in peculiar positions. In *Life on a String* (2022), a man watches a bird as it balances on a string in mid-air. We see the man from above, the compressed perspective conveying a sense of claustrophobia and unease. Cheng’s compositions are full of atmospheric, fantastical scenes. Tender ones, too, like *Nude femme* (2022), rendered in a dusty rose and muted turquoise, the gaze of said femme beseeching us to look with care.

Born in Wuhan, Cheng began her artistic studies at Tsinghua University’s Academy of Arts and Design in Beijing. She studied sculpture but always had an eye for painting. The university’s painting department, which emphasized Social Realism, dissatisfied her. Once she graduated, she left sculpture behind and moved on to painting. “I only care about what happens within the canvas, what kind of space I want to create within the frame,” explains Cheng. “With sculpture, it’s really about the three-dimensional space. I understood that’s not really my strength.”

She enrolled at the Maryland Institute of Art, a revelatory period. “I wanted to be a sponge,” says Cheng. “I wanted to say goodbye to everything I did before arriving in Maryland. I quickly realized I was very interested in, and wanted to make paintings of people.” She encountered works by minimalist and abstract painters like Agnes Martin, Frank Stella, and Joseph Albers. Albers greatly influenced Cheng’s practice, particularly his ability to infuse simple forms and shapes with powerful emotions through color. Cheng’s style evolved further when she moved to Amsterdam for a residency at The Rijksakademie. While there, she studied 17th century Dutch and 18th century Flemish painting. This exposure to Old Masters challenged her to think about her craftsmanship.

The artist has always been extremely sensitive to places. “How I organize my life and my studio is really central to my work as well,” says Cheng. Having a space of her own is important, one that nurtures her and allows her to feel at ease. “I realized every time I moved to a new city, the first three months, I couldn’t paint. I don’t know how to make the transition. I always need months to process the information. I always need time to get used to my studio and digest what I’ve seen, experienced, and then I can make something out of it.”

Periods of rest in one’s practice can be terrifying. “I always have this pressure of being productive,” Cheng tells me. “I try to convince myself that being productive doesn’t necessarily mean I make a painting. But it’s very hard. After having a show, finishing a bigger body of work, I need to take a lot of time off.”

There’s a dialogue that occurs between her paintings and the places where she resides. Cheng currently lives in Paris and has been based there for nearly nine years. “I think the art that I see in different places really teaches me a lot about painting,” she remarks. “I like to go to the Musée Picasso and the Musée d’Orsay. I enjoy looking at paintings. When I look at them, I feel like I’m talking to the great masters.”

“There’s something about Paris [where] I feel I am in a fantasy world,” Cheng says, taken by the city’s light, which to her “looks different in every season.” She’s drawn to Parisian nightlife. “There’s a cafe close to my home called Aux Folies. There’s so much energy, and it’s so alive at night. I pass by, and I want to paint [it]. It’s a way for me to connect with the modern painters I admire.”

Cheng’s portraits verge on the abstract; with an astute eye for color, she infuses her compositions with energy and atmosphere, focusing on emotion rather than literal representation. “I’m really a figurative painter, but I don’t want to be limited to reality,” says Cheng. “I want this lingering feeling, a long, extended moment. What I really want to nail down in a painting is how to make the figures alive.” The subjects of her paintings are characters casted from everyday life. “It doesn’t happen all the time that I meet a person I want to paint,” notes Cheng. “Maybe every two years.” She elaborates that selecting her subjects is “Very intuitive,



There's power and bodily intelligence in her oeuvre; it draws us out of the mind and into our bodies, taking us to an emotional register not dissimilar to the terrifying pleasure intimacy arouses.

and I always get attracted by them instantly and know I want to paint them. I've actually met people by chance. Two in cafes in Paris. I approached them, wrote my email on a piece of paper, told them I'm a painter and really want to paint them, and if they're interested, please send me an email. And they did."

I remark that the image of Cheng sliding her email address across the table on a piece of paper across the table recalls the act of asking a stranger on a date. "It's very special, because this is an age of dating apps," reflects Cheng. "Actually meeting someone at a cafe [or] restaurant, and talking to them. Before I get close to them, I really feel the thrill, this excitement. I feel shy, but also like this is something I need to do because I may never see this person again."

Thinking about this method of scouting subjects and her relationship to them, it strikes me how easily we take the act of witnessing another human being for granted. We can pick up our phones and have instant access to millions of human faces.

Cheng likes to develop long relationships with the people she chooses to paint. "My oldest model is my friend Thomas, whom I met in grad school. I started painting him in 2012, more than a decade ago. The more I paint him, the more I feel like I'm painting a self-portrait, because I know his face [and] expressions so well." Since Cheng's models are scattered across the globe, she often asks them to send her photographs to paint from. "Before a painting, I make collages very quickly. I see it like casting. This figure goes with another. There are times that in my head they work very well, but when I do the collages, some people don't really want to be together." These models become the stars of her romances, horrors, and dramas. She sometimes paints their skin tones in unnatural colors: gray lavender, jaundice yellow.

An archive of thousands of images exists on her phone as material to draw ideas from. "I really need the photos to remember them, Cheng explains. "I need something to help me grasp the moment. I do hope that, in the years to come, I can be lucky and keep meeting people that I want to paint."

Literature plays a large role in Cheng's practice. She has made work that references authors Virginia Woolf and Lu Xun. Cheng's most recent exhibition at Matthew Marks Gallery in Los Angeles, "Sing to It", took its title from an Amy Hempel short story of the same name. "I really appreciate her writing," says Cheng. "I feel what she does with her minimal fiction is what I want to do with my painting. I want to have very limited information, not really have a narrative, and I want the characters to be full of emotions, and then it ends [with] the readers feeling emotionally overwhelmed. That's ultimately what I want to do with painting." One is stirred by a sense of displacement.

The colors in Cheng's paintings transmit the core elements of the human experience: fear, passion, lust, confusion, awe, and longing. "When a painting works, I feel it really hits the nerves of the audience," reflects Cheng. "It's a very physical feeling. Even when you walk away from the painting, it still lingers. It's very powerful and doesn't require using your brain all the time. I feel painting has its own intelligence, and I want to explore that." Indeed, there's power and bodily intelligence in her oeuvre; it draws us out of the mind and into our bodies, taking us to an emotional register not dissimilar to the terrifying pleasure intimacy arouses.

"There's so much magic in painting," Cheng says. "I can make one painting, but I cannot really guarantee the next painting is going to be good. I've been painting for a long time, but there's still so much mystery in it. It's always challenging. I have so much respect for this medium."





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Art in America

Xinyi Cheng's Surreal Paintings Draw Inspiration from 19th-Century Chinese Parables and '90s SNL Sketches

By *Jasmine Liu* 七月 21, 2023 10:00am



Xinyi Cheng: *Stijn in the Red Bonnet*, 2020.

The subjects in Xinyi Cheng's figurative paintings exist in blank spaces, uncluttered by details that might supply a reality effect. Despite their sparseness, "I spend a lot of time on my backgrounds," the Paris-based painter said when we spoke on the phone this past February. "It's usually the first thing I need to figure out about a painting."

Liu, Jasmine. "Xinyi Cheng's Surreal Paintings Draw Inspiration from 19th-Century Chinese Parables and '90s SNL Sketches." *Art in America*, July 21, 2023.

In place of sweeping landscapes or fussy interiors are buttery layers of muted monochrome colors. Her favorite hues are “sophisticated grays,” which provoke undefined yet specific feelings and permit a certain struggle with light. These backgrounds contribute tension— which Cheng calls a “guiding principle of creation”—to her paintings. “I search for the sexual nature of desire that holds a painting together and makes you feel immediate to it,” she says. In her encounters with both her own work and that of other artists, she seeks a physical response.

Cheng derives her subject matter from an eclectic range of sources. One painting, *Old Stories Retold* (2022), depicts the bodies of three men trapped in water with disturbingly vacant facial expressions. Recently exhibited in a solo show at Matthew Marks, the work draws on 20th-century Chinese writer Lu Xun’s short story “Forging the Swords.” That haunting and surreal parable concludes with three severed heads bobbing around in boiling water. *Incroyable (En route)*, 2021, portrays three long-faced men staring out at the viewer from a convertible, a sunset blazing behind them. The painting’s



Xinyi Cheng: *Old Stories Retold*, 2022.

Liu, Jasmine. “Xinyi Cheng’s Surreal Paintings Draw Inspiration from 19th-Century Chinese Parables and ‘90s SNL Sketches.” *Art in America*, July 21, 2023.

composition is based on a '90s Saturday Night Live sketch, a silly segment in which Jim Carrey, Will Ferrell, and Chris Kattan nod their heads in sync to the Haddaway song "What Is Love" while driving from one place to the next, crashing a high school prom, a wedding, and bedtime at a senior home along the way. Cheng's painting transfigures the campiness of the music video into a searching portrayal of a midlife journey to recapture something of the past. In *Smoked Turkey Leg* (2021), a shirtless man gnaws at a long, barren bone with primal exasperation and a ferocity reminiscent of Goya's Saturn Devouring His Son.

In our conversation, Cheng emphasized her interest in the inexhaustible questions that paintings can pose, listing examples with simultaneous urgency and reverence. Can she paint the abstract idea of somebody disappearing? How about the specific physical experience of falling through space and getting caught in a net? Can she use unnatural colors to render a face, and make those colors seem utterly natural? "The studio has always been my space for solving the formal issues these questions produce," Cheng says.

Right now, Cheng is focused on creating a new body of work to answer her latest set of questions, which include how to represent a head with feathers and how to create her own composition inspired by Edvard Munch's "Jealousy" series. She is enjoying her new studio in Charonne, where, she says, she finally feels she has enough physical and mental space to work.

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i-D



ART

These sensual paintings explore the complexities of intimacy

Chinese artist Xinyi Cheng tells us about her new show 'Seen Through Others', painting portraits of her boyfriend and why art should be dangerous.

BY SARAH MOROZ | 29.3.22

The Chinese artist Xinyi Cheng telescopes interpersonal connections. Her exhibition *Seen Through Others* — on view at Lafayette Anticipations in Paris (March 23-May 28, 2022) — brings together some 30 works made between 2016 to 2021, featuring figures with inscrutable expressions placed in enigmatic contexts. Her characters wield burning cigarettes, sport elegant mustaches, lollygag in leopard-print boxer shorts, show off errant nipples and dip their fingers into wine glasses. She

Cheng, Xinyi, and Sarah Moroz. "These Sensual Paintings Explore the Complexity of Intimacy." *i-D*, March 29, 2022.

spotlights friction between itchy toes with the same level of interest she applies to lips searching for each other. Yet when she portrays physical closeness, it's never quite clear how much it conveys authentic intimacy. Her paintings' moody lighting and featureless backgrounds are suspended from any particular present tense, ambiguous and bereft of obvious signifiers.

Xinyi studied sculpture in Beijing, then painting in Baltimore, followed by a residency program in Amsterdam before she settled in Paris, where she's been based for four years. Her work has recently been included in group shows at Collection Pinault — alongside Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, Claire Tabouret and Kerry James Marshall — and in Palais de Tokyo's collective exhibition *Anticorps*.

Standing amidst her paintings — namely a naked blonde man capsizing in *Red Kayak*, and two lean white dogs paddling in *Swimmers* — we spoke to Xinyi right before the opening of her new show Paris.

How do you land on which micro moments feel worth extracting and fixating on? Do you recognize a worthwhile moment as it's happening? Or is it about what stays with you?

I always have my iPhone with me, and whenever I have the impulse to take a photo, I always do. Over time, I revisit photos I've taken. From everyday objects or moments, I want something





specific. In the still lifes I've made, every single thing represents so much of the people [the items belong to]. The new direction I want to take is to work more with my imagination than with photographs. I still need photography as a tool to capture things, but I want [to pursue something] more unreal.

The title of the exhibition is reference to Virginia Woolf. Does reading inform your painting?

When I'm painting something, the ideas are small, and I'm looking for the meaning while I'm making it, so sometimes reading helps me to understand what I'm doing, rather than providing inspiration. But I'm a very visual person. I get inspired by encounters, or I look to other paintings to make me want to paint. I always enjoy looking at Otto Dix. I love how he painted details — how he layered paint.

Dix has such a darkness. Would you describe your work as dark?

Yeah, I want something to be disturbing. I think if I can really get very close [to something dark], that's really interesting. I think it's somewhere dangerous. I want to have that challenge.

Why is it dangerous?

Because making a bad painting is a failure. So, there's danger in that.

What is a bad painting? Do you have work that you don't show, or can you always fix your work?

I always want to fix the painting; I will not really throw anything away. I think, at times, I know this painting cannot really be a great painting, but I just want it to be above mediocre.

When I start, I usually think a lot about if this image — this idea — is interesting enough. Going through the process is quite a commitment, and I don't want to give up.

You've lived in several countries. How has place influenced either your aesthetic or your process? Has it evolved as you've changed locations or is painting in a way 'untouched' by where you are?

I'm probably influenced by where I am, but I don't know how to talk about it. I live in Paris and there is really beautiful, beautiful light. And I can go to the Louvre. Visual experiences are really important for me. I can't just breathe in the air without absorbing what's around me.

I read that you saw several exhibitions to think creatively about your own. You mentioned going to the Georgia O'Keeffe show at the Centre Pompidou. What other exhibitions made their mark on your preparation process?

I really loved the Josef and Anni Albers show. It was such a beautiful one: I went there four times. I also went to the Goya exhibition at the Fondation Beyeler in Basel.

How did those visits translate into what you did after?

I don't think it's a direct translation; it puts me in a mindset. I love a painting by Watteau in the 18th century gallery at the Louvre — I love how he painted this white costume. When I made "Midday Troubles", I really went to the Louvre to see how he painted. So that's a direct translation. But sometimes, I just really wanted to see a great painting and just feel elevated.



Cheng, Xinyi, and Sarah Moroz. "These Sensual Paintings Explore the Complexity of Intimacy." *i-D*, March 29, 2022.



You use photography as a work tool. Would you ever consider your photography as an art form unto itself?

I think so. There are photos in my catalog. Did you see those postcards? There are like five randomly inserted postcards. Those are my photography work. I want to develop it... I don't know how, but I keep thinking about it. I only use my iPhone, because it's quick; I don't want to think too much about the technique.

One subject depicted is your boyfriend. Another is a portrait —three versions of the same friend with different facial hair over time. Are the subjects always someone in your circle?

I paint people around me — I need to know the person. Because when I start a painting, that means many hours of me staring: I need to think about this person, I need to relate to this person. That's why I cannot paint celebrities because I don't have a personal entry point to that person's life. For "Incroyable (En Route)", it's about a journey: I painted Thomas over [a period of] ten years.

In terms of naming the paintings, do you always do so after they're completed? Or do you tend to have a name, and then find a visual that goes with it?

Sometimes I have a word in mind very early on, even before I start painting. But there are also times when I cannot find a good title, I have to ship a painting or it's going to a publisher, and I just have to come up with something. So it depends. Ideally, I really want the title to bring a new dimension — but also something that doesn't really explain the painting. I want people to feel it could be a twist on something else.

You've been in Paris for four years and have some French titles; how does the local language influence you?

I don't really speak French well, so I kind of still have my fantasy about Paris. I watch people but I don't really know what [exchanges are about]. Because I don't really know what's going on, their expressions, their body language seem so present and so expressive. I always have to imagine what's going on — I think this gap is what I'm interested in.

It makes you a sharp observer of other communication — that's interesting. In the catalog, you express being worried about repetition but then, at a certain point, embrace that you're just drawn to certain things. Would you say it's getting comfortable with obsession?

I was really afraid of repeating myself and being boring. But I went to Norway last year, and I saw some Edvard Munch paintings. I think I made peace with myself when I saw he kept coming back to the same subject—you even have almost same compositions. I thought *maybe it's okay*, maybe in my lifetime I will also just be interested in very specific things. And every time I make them, I know it's not the same: I want to make something new, and it's still meaningful to me. So I don't want that to be a burden, or stop me from thinking what I want to say.

Right — and this draws on the idea of “seen through others,” the way another's gaze shapes how we act.

Exactly.



Cheng, Xinyi, and Sarah Moroz. “These Sensual Paintings Explore the Complexity of Intimacy.” *i-D*, March 29, 2022.



So do you think that it is mostly a burden, this idea of being seen through others? Or is it validating?

I didn't really think about that in terms of my paintings. But I'm very interested by people. Ultimately, I would love to know what's happening inside their heads, I would love to know about their inner life — but I think I will never be able to reach there. Inner life and public appearance and how these two are manifested and perceived...

Would you say that you're a skeptic about the possibility of connection?

I think there's no way not to be skeptical. Only in a book by Virginia Woolf could we hear monologues from other people's heads. I think there are limits to the accessible parts in everyone's life. But that's okay. I also imagine them and then they become characters.

Would you say you're drawn to youth culture, or does a specific generation characterize your work?

I don't know. I'm curious how I'm going to paint an older person, or how I'm going to paint when I get older. One friend, who is in "Midday Troubles" (2021) has a really ageless face. I'm very drawn to that. I don't see this as a generation though. Like in ten years, we all change so much. It's more that I follow the journey.

Credits

All paintings by Xinyi Cheng

Cheng, Xinyi, and Sarah Moroz. "These Sensual Paintings Explore the Complexity of Intimacy." *i-D*, March 29, 2022.

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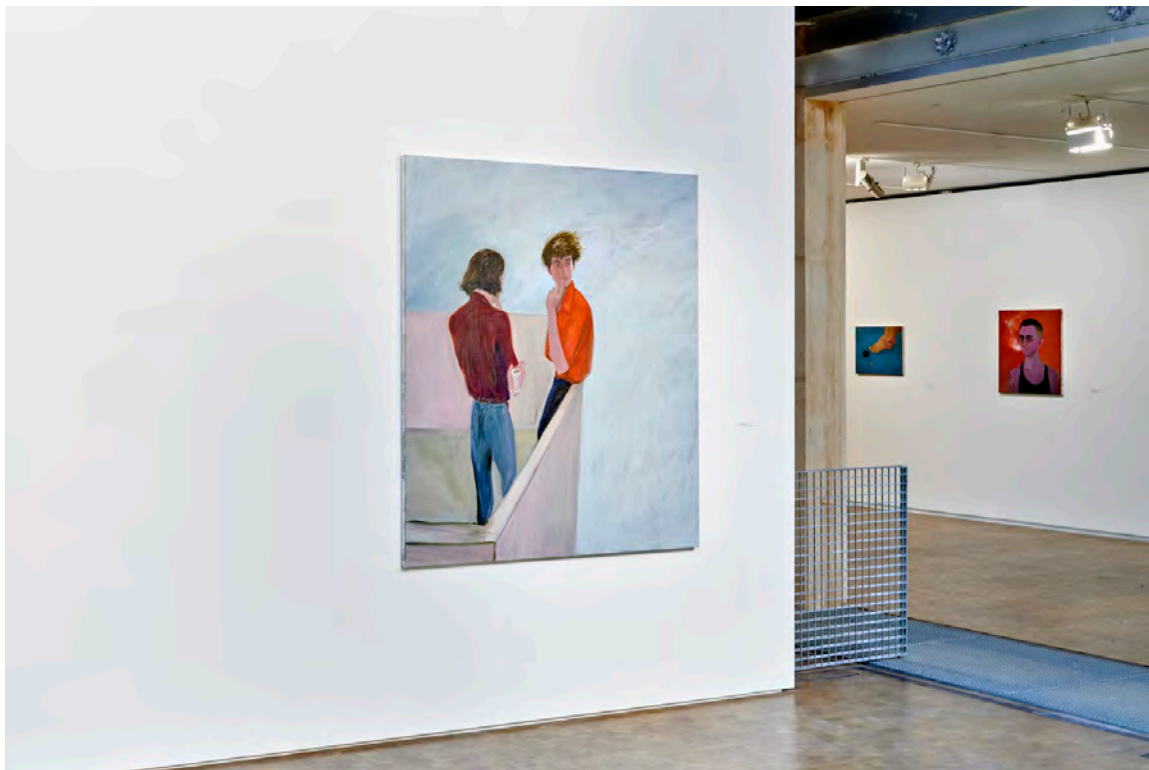
Flash Art

• 338 SPRING 2022, FEATURES

23 March 2022, 9:00 am CET

Xinyi Cheng's Intimate Assault on Reality

by Ingrid Luquet-Gad

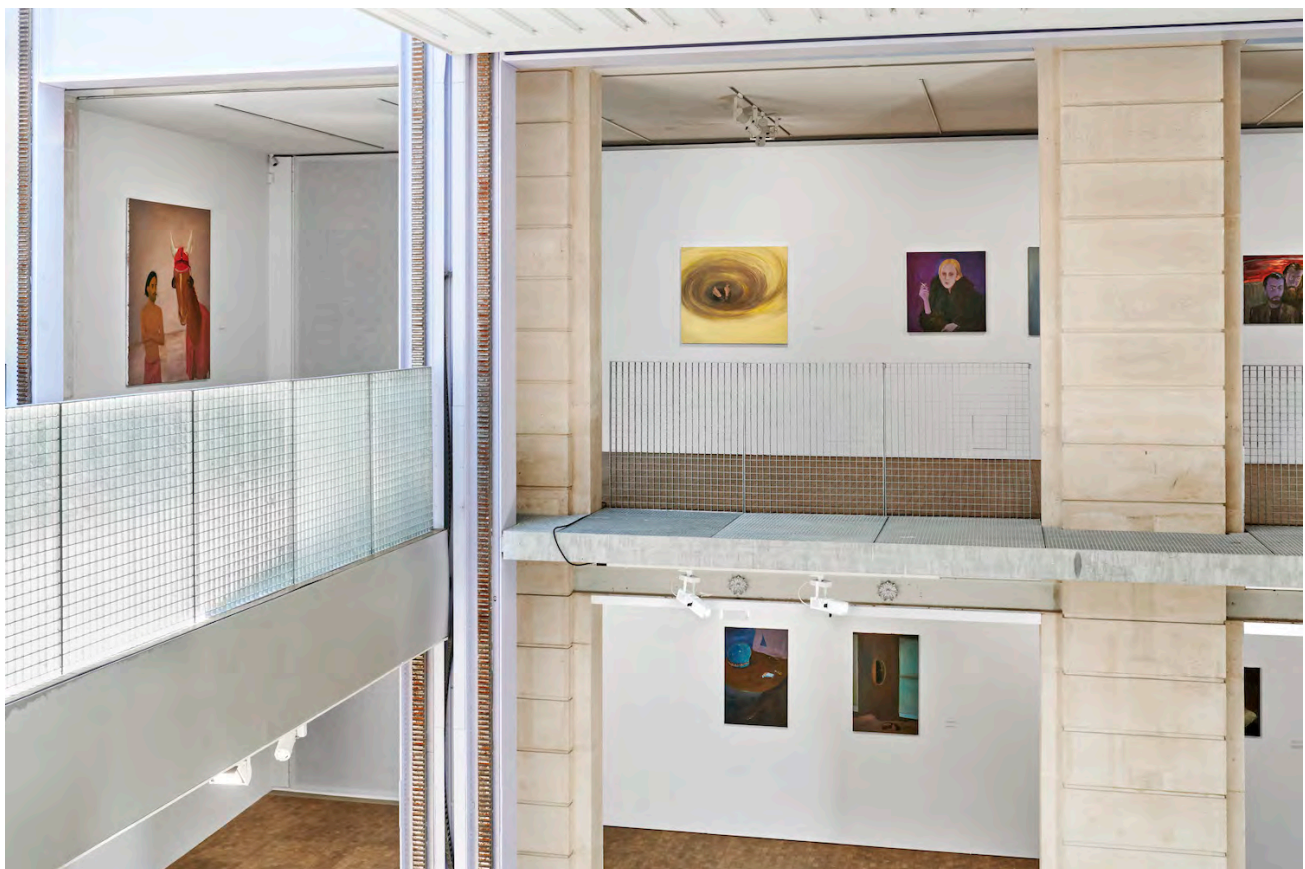


Xinyi Cheng, "Seen through others". Exhibition view at Lafayette Anticipations, Paris, 2022. Photography by Pierre Antoine. Courtesy of Lafayette Anticipations - Fondation Galeries Lafayette, Paris.

From the clutter of urban life, Xinyi Cheng subtracts transient moments of respite. Her subjects, alone or in pairs, mostly male but not only, exist in a fleeting state. They appear absent, turned inward. Their eyes are lowered or glazed over, their eyelids translucent, their pupils oily as the sea. Absorbed in thoughts, sensations, actions, they know better than to look at themselves through the eyes of others. Oblivious to the external gaze, they have given up on appearances. And yet, they display a state of heightened presence, one brought about by a reconfiguration of the senses: for them, touch preempts vision, and relation representation. At the tip of their fingers they hold time suspended. For a split-second, they are alone, or alone together.

By submitting to a wider logic of sensation, they have gained access to a world that is just theirs. Silence sets, while colors damp down. The tones are muted, as if the scene was perceived underwater or through the night shift mode of a phone. Through an intersubjective approach of social rituals and their dissolution, the voyeuristic viewer is confronted with an intimacy that draws them in as much as it excludes them. We glance around, and suddenly, everything inside and outside the frame seems perceived from a distance — now, it all seems mildly absurd. A spell has been lifted, and a primordial weirdness reinstated. But rather than opening up an atemporal imaginary setting, Cheng's paintings suspend existing social norms. Just as weirdness can only appear against the backdrop of an arbitrary normality, her unique sensorial universe is closely nested inside the fabric of the real.

I first encountered Xinyi Cheng's work in 2017 through her solo exhibition in Paris at Galerie Balice Hertling's former Belleville space. The show, titled "The hands of a barber, they give in," took place in the first days of summer, its opening bringing a dense, joyful crowd that included some of the "beautiful and eccentric" characters that the artist likes to paint. The context suited the encounter with the 1989-born Chinese artist's series of fragmented everyday scenes that distillate various minor aects. At the time completing her post-diploma at the Rijksakademie in



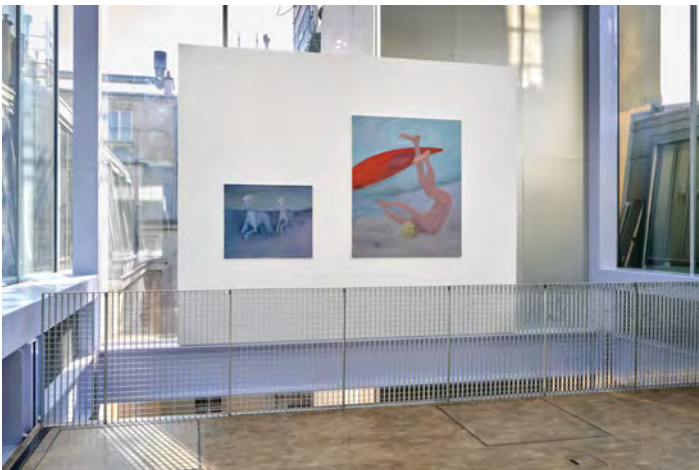
Xinyi Cheng, "Seen through others". Exhibition view at Lafayette Anticipations, Paris, 2022. Photography by Pierre Antoine. Courtesy of Lafayette Anticipations – Fondation Galeries Lafayette, Paris.



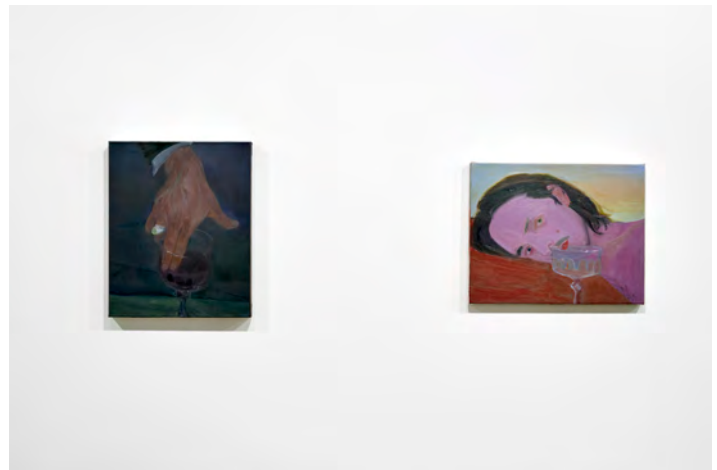
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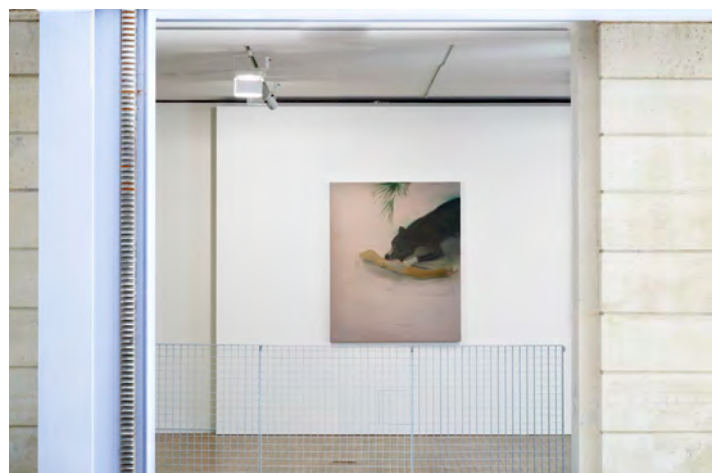
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Amsterdam, she introduced her now characteristic repertoire: here was friendship, longing, lust, thoughtfulness, boredom, curiosity, and all the nuances in between, precisely the ones that usually escape clear-sighted, rational, and unequivocal capture.

In a sense, Cheng's paintings, for this writer, raise anew the painstaking task of description: that forgotten narrative art, lost to reproductions and exhibition views. Sure, oered to prehension and interpretation are the represented gestures: the careful positioning of hands and limbs tracing hieroglyphical figures, or the mundane detail astutely rendered as a secular vanitas — a barber's blade, an incandescent cigarette butt, a translucent liquor glass, or the odd ham-leg, brandished like a club or sliced with sadistic appetite. With her inclusion in the group shows "Antibodies" at Palais de Tokyo in 2020 and "Ouverture" at The Bourse de Commerce – Pinault Collection in 2021, something appeared to be shifting in her motives. At play in the hangings of recent works assembled in new configurations was still the display of an intimacy infused with primal undertones, but the tones seemed to be growing ever murkier, purplish as if suocated, mouths parted with desire but also stifling a silent scream.

This could, however, very well have been a condition of the changing context of the work's reception, translating just as much a translation inside the viewer's own sensorial configuration. In each of Xinyi Cheng's works, the perceiving body is, after all, always put to work; and one could even say that nobody ever looks at the same painting twice, to paraphrase Heraclitus's quote on rivers, time, and the changing subject. But in Xinyi Cheng's own practice, something was also gradually evolving in parallel: "Intimacy and close-ups didn't feel as necessary



Xinyi Cheng, *Monroe*, 2020. Oil on wood. 60 x 45 cm.
Photography by Aurélien Mole. Courtesy of Private Collection.



Xinyi Cheng, *Red Kayak*, 2020. Oil on canvas. 200 x 166.
Photography by Aurélien Mole. Courtesy of Private Collection.



Xinyi Cheng, *White Turtleneck*, 2017. Oil on linen. 125 x 150 cm.
Photography by Gert Jan van Rooij. Courtesy of Bill Cournoyer Collection, New York.

anymore. When something becomes too familiar, it risks becoming a gimmick,” she said when I visited her last spring, referring specifically to her depiction of male experience as well as to her technique of minutely depicting body hair to give volume to a flat surface.

In her atelier in Belleville in Paris, where the artist now lives permanently, earlier works from her student years in Baltimore in the US were also on display. Their surfaces are flatter, their palette brighter, oscillating between neon and pastel: garish pink, citrus yellow, baby blue. To her, colors are a tool used in an ongoing quest, personal and eternal, which she refers to as “a figurative painter’s ongoing fight against reality.” In the corners and above her desk, postcards and cut-outs pasted here and there displayed her erudition of the history of painting: from Picasso to Otto Dix, Fra Angelico to Toulouse-Lautrec. On the table lay Oscar Wilde’s essay “The Critic as Artist,” and we discussed Amy Sillman’s (at the time) newly published book *Faux Pas*, a collection of her writings and drawings on the subject of



Xinyi Cheng, *Where do the noses go?*, 2021. Oil on canvas. 60 x 73 cm. Photography by Aurélien Mole. Courtesy of the artist, Antenna Space, Shanghai; and Balice Hertling, Paris.



Xinyi Cheng, *Parapetto*, 2021. Oil on canvas. 160 x 145 cm. Photography by Aurélien Mole. Private Collection.



Xinyi Cheng, *Stijn in the Red Bonnet*, 2020. Oil on canvas. 115 x 145 cm. Courtesy of the artist, Balice Hertling, Paris; and Antenna Space, Shanghai.



Xinyi Cheng, *Swimmers*, 2021. Oil on canvas. 120 x 100 cm. Photography by Aurélien Mole. Private Collection.

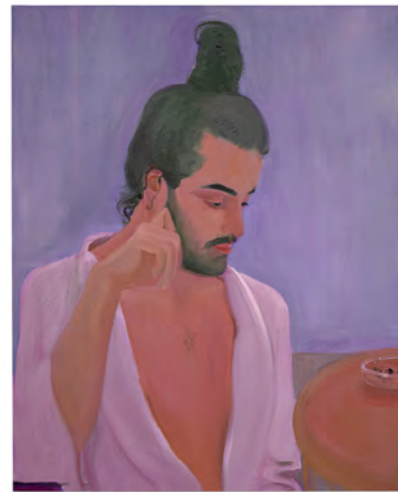
painting and picture-making. She gave me a copy, as she had two of them.

On the walls, Xinyi Cheng had hung some unfinished paintings, as well as some made for her postponed 2020–21 presentation at Hamburger Bahnhof – Museum für Gegenwart in Berlin, “The Horse with Eye Blinders.” She explained how she had lately tended to shift to larger formats, although, working on one painting at a time, she never made a radical change all at once. Fantasies, she said, had started to wear out. Upon arriving in Paris and finding herself alone in an unknown city, bathed in its new light, Cheng asked some of the people she met to pose for her, either in her studio or home, or to be photographed via her phone — photos that she sometimes also displays in her shows. This, she maintained, was never about portraits as such, as they were always already playing a character in her imagination, even when just playing themselves. “But if one stays in one place for a long time it wears out and reality becomes a struggle again,” she added.

Gradually, the larger formats also started to open up onto open spaces. Airy backgrounds, undefined scenery. Balconies overlooking the horizon, figures swimming in the sea. In the depiction of human and nonhuman figures alike, clothing took on a new role: a red bonnet, almost Phrygian, worn by a resting androgynous character (*Stijn in the Red Bonnet*, 2020) or adorned with horns and perched atop a curious horse’s head (*The Horse Wearing a Red Ear Bonnet and Eye Blinders*, 2020). Revealing an interest in how garments are used in social life, the red bonnet’s recurrence also refers to Fra Angelico’s use of the color red — one of her favorite painters — or more broadly, Éric Rohmer’s color scheme as an indication of a certain personality. Other scenes also expanded on her interest in animals, especially dogs (*Swimmer*, 2020; *Long-Distance Swimmer*, 2021), which she describes as “elephant-like or akin to little horses,” swimming side by side in the sea, strange and human in their demeanor.



Xinyi Cheng, *Horseshoe Moustache*, 2020. Oil on canvas, 92 x 73 cm. Courtesy of the artist; Balice Hertling, Paris; and Antenna Space, Shanghai.



Xinyi Cheng, *Darling*, 2017. Oil on linen, 100 x 80 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Balice Hertling, Paris.



Xinyi Cheng, *Jane and Théophile*, 2019. Oil on linen, 100 x 80 cm. Courtesy of the artist; Richard Chang; and Antenna Space, Shanghai.

Water, and paintings about water, appeared in Xinyi Cheng's motives as everyday life shut down: the world started to feel like an island. She recalls watching the Italian movie *Swept Away* (1974), a romantic-political film built around the stranding of a yacht on a deserted island. A man, a capitalist, and a woman, a communist, struggle to survive as they are separated from the others. The plot revolves around their changing power dynamics inside a time-space where social class hierarchies are suspended. Cheng, however, is well aware that her own medium doesn't work narratively; and that its meaning can't simply rely on the translation of allegories: "Painting could carry a lot of ideas, but it works differently from video or installation. It has its own intelligence — you feel moved or shocked — and in museums I always look for a physical feeling. A painting has to transcend information so that its meaning can always keep changing."

In those works, it is above all another weirdness, one just as indescribable, which makes itself felt: less stifling, more universal maybe, or simply condensed to its barest expression. Those scenes set at the seaside unfold like a fable, but one translated less through action than feeling; one "oceanic" in nature, as an active state of connective limitlessness that goes beyond the boundaries of the closed self to refer to a shared paraontological experience of being alive. The term refers to a rich conceptual history, going back to novelist and mystic Romain Rolland's



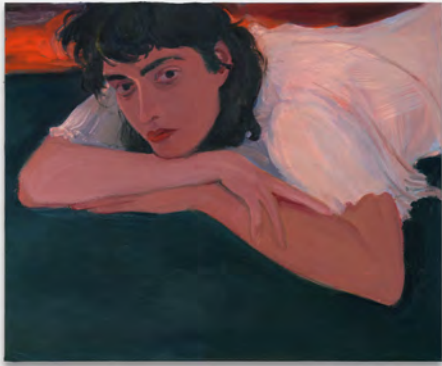
Xinyi Cheng, *Swimmer*, 2020. Oil on canvas. 80 x 100 cm. Courtesy of the artist; Balice Hertling, Paris; and Antenna Space, Shanghai.



Xinyi Cheng, *Pomegranate*, 2017. Oil on linen. 40 x 50 cm. Courtesy of the artist; Balice Hertling, Paris; and Antenna Space, Shanghai.



Xinyi Cheng, *Landline*, 2021. Oil on canvas. 146 x 160 cm. Photography by Aurélien Mole. Private Collection.



Xinyi Cheng, *The Midnight Fire*, 2020. Oil on canvas. 60 x 73 cm. Courtesy of the artist; Balice Hertling, Paris; and Antenna Space, Shanghai.



Xinyi Cheng, *Wishes*, 2021. Oil on canvas. 80 x 71 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Antenna Space, Shanghai.

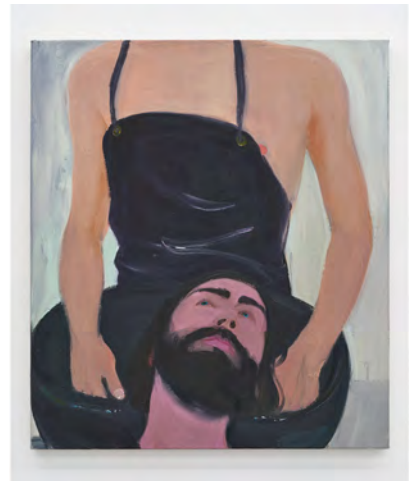
correspondence with Freud, who would elaborate on the concept in his work *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930). Its reception long remained tributary to a psychoanalytical reading, relating both in Jacques Lacan's and Julia Kristeva's analyses to binary (and to a certain extent, gendered) psychic structures — polarities that Cheng's own representational scheme has always carefully transcended.

In a more recent take, Jackie Wang anchors the "oceanic feeling" inside the realms of the creative as well as the social. "The oceanic state, like dream states, resists signification," she asserts. "I would also add that oceanic states animate writers and artists precisely because they are *inexpressible*." Written in 2016 and first published as a Tumblr blogpost titled "Oceanic Feeling and Communist Aest," she explains what she posits as an underlying call for "new modes of relationality." To the scholar, the oceanic "could be considered a revelation: the illumination of an already-existing communalism and the direct experience of our embeddedness in the world."

Lafayette Anticipations – Fondation d’entreprise Galeries Lafayette in Paris now presents Xinyi Cheng’s first major institutional exhibition in France — also the first time they have dedicated this entire venue, inaugurated in 2018, to a painting solo show. With more than thirty works made from 2016 to 2021, “Seen Through Others” leads the viewer through the early nocturnal and interior scenes, gradually building toward the more recent airy outdoor paintings hung in the glazed upper-floor space overlooking the skyline. “I kept them undefined, so as not to singularize the future,” she said as we concluded our chat last year, subtly indicating that she won’t provide any definitive keys or meanings but rather will entrust each visitor and sentient entity with the task of embracing a fleeting feeling — however one might want to name it — as a way to push oneself to a threshold state of consciousness: a point where self and other, ego and outside, collide, collapse, and maybe even become reconfigured, reborn.

Xinyi Cheng’s solo exhibition “Seen Through Others” will be on view at Lafayette Anticipations – Fondation d’entreprise Galeries Lafayette in Paris from March 23 through May 28, 2022.

Ingrid Luquet-Gad is an art critic based in Paris. Her research, developed through essays, catalogue texts, and conferences, explores how new technologies reconfigure the individual and collective structures of the networked self.



Xinyi Cheng, *Julien*, 2017, Oil on linen, 80 x 70 cm.
Courtesy of the artist and Antenna Space, Shanghai.



Xinyi Cheng, *Resolutions*, 2020, Oil on wood, 60 x 40.
Courtesy of the artist, Balice Hertling, Paris, and Antenna Space, Shanghai.



Xinyi Cheng, *Painting of Savva in the Light of a New Dawn*, 2020, Oil on canvas, 73 x 60 cm. Photography by Aurélien Moïe. Private Collection.

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Interview

July 7, 2021

Xinyi Cheng / Interview

"[...] the light is a really important part of my painting [...]. Living in Paris has undoubtedly influenced my practice."

By **Xinyi Cheng**,
Artist



Has your training as a sculptor influenced your painting?

Yes, a great deal. I didn't think so when I was younger but now I really think it has. In a way, I like to imagine that my characters exist in a three-dimensional space, I really want them to have a sense of volume. When I paint, I still think about sculpture, Bernini's sculptures, for example. I want the surface to be very smooth..

I haven't studied [sculpture] all that much, but I went to Rome last year, and I saw works by Bernini in real life for the first time. I was utterly amazed by their beauty, how well they had been made. Of course, I don't think I'm interested in painting the same way, but just that physical contact, the feeling you have when you look at a Bernini sculpture.

“[...] I went to Rome last year, and I saw works by Bernini in real life for the first time. I was utterly amazed by their beauty [...]”

Do you paint your subjects in the same way in Paris as you do in Beijing?

When I was living in Beijing, I was a rather confused or lost art student.

I think I was still looking for my language, as well as my subjects. Now that I'm living in Paris, and have lived elsewhere too, it seems to me that being able to see different works of art has been extremely important. I remember when I lived in New York, I saw a Mike Kelley retrospective and a Robert Gober retrospective. I then lived in Holland, where I saw lots of paintings by Vermeer in person, and others in Paris. I think the art that I see in different places really teaches me a lot about painting. Here, I like to go to the Musée Picasso and the Musée d'Orsay. I enjoy looking at paintings. When I look at them, I have the feeling that I'm talking to the great masters. And of course the light is really special in Paris. I love the sunsets, and the fact that the light looks different in every season. I believe that the light is a really important part of my painting too. Living in Paris has undoubtedly influenced my practice.

Do you paint from photographs? Who are the characters in your paintings?

This is usually how I work: I have a situation in mind, which sometimes comes from my memories, sometimes from my imagination. I ask my friends to pose for me. Then I get to work, I take a lot of photographs, I invite them over and I take many pictures. I usually do a lot of drawings from these photos.

I consider the drawings to be studies. I use them to decide on the composition and the elements I want to include in the painting. So then when it comes to the actual painting stage, I'm (sort of) more focused on other painting issues than on drawing issues. I generally use my own photos because it's easier. The ones I take are much more “pragmatic”. They're not enticing or seductive shots. I like to take lots of pictures even for just one pose, shooting from different angles.

Who is the French master that you most admire? What is the painting that you have seen here in Paris, at a museum or elsewhere, that has made the strongest impression?

When I was a teenager, I saw Monet's *Water Lilies* at the Orangerie. I can remember this very well. In fact, I think that trip made me want to become a painter. Now that I'm an older artist, it's hard for me to connect with what I really liked as a teenager, you know ... but every once in a while when I visit the Musée de l'Orangerie, I still feel that connection.

“When I was a teenager, I saw Monet's *Water Lilies* at the Orangerie. I can remember this very well. In fact, I think that trip made me want to become a painter.”

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EXBERLINER

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Xinyi Cheng: “I’m interested in how men deal with their masculinity”



Wuhan-born painter Xinyi Cheng now lives and works in Paris. Photo: Aurélien Mole

The Wuhan-born painter Xinyi Cheng brings to the Hamburger Bahnhof her striking, vibrantly coloured images of bare-chested men in surreal scenarios full of intimacy and intrigue. Read our interview with Cheng before you catch the final days of her solo show at Hamburger Bahnhof.

Ballantyne-Way, Duncan, and Xinyi Cheng. “Xinyi Cheng: ‘I’m Interested in How Men Deal with Their Masculinity.’” *Exberliner*, June 3, 2021.

You have had a busy year, winning the prestigious Baloise Art Prize and getting the paintings ready for your first institutional show – which of course very few people have had a chance to see. How have you coped?

I felt okay when I went there, and really happy to put up a show in a 600-square-metre space, which was a year's work. But now I am realising that this is almost over, and I started to feel a bit sad.

Has it opened up some doors for you?

Yes a lot, but I feel like showing in Germany is really special – even the quality of gallery exhibitions and the discourse around it, or working with the museum curators who were just so knowledgeable. I like German painters, especially Otto Dix. His paintings are so full of anger, horror and war. It amazes me how he makes these raw emotions so real and overwhelming to the audience.

You live in Paris. How do you like Berlin?

Being in Berlin really opened something up to me and it gave me the illusion of life as being extremely free. I was maybe too scared to enjoy it! Paris, where I've lived for the past five years, is different: it's charming, and crossing the Seine everyday I am reminded about how beautiful the city is.

Anyone lucky enough to see your exhibition would be struck by the neon-like colours, which are bold but deeply sombre too. How did you come by that?

It was after I discovered Josef Albers and his book *Interaction of Colour*, with its different combinations and tonality, which made me want to play around with getting the colour palette to fit certain moods and emotions. But I also think adopting these colours was a way of saying goodbye to my past, which was a very traditional training at a Chinese college.

How so?

I studied sculpture in Beijing, and every day we made clay sculptures from live models. We did that for four years and at the end there was a thesis – then all of a sudden you were supposed to be super creative and make some art!

There are a lot of paintings in the show of bearded men, staring out of the canvas looking glum; others are half-naked and devouring meat. Is this a comment about the crisis in masculinity?

Yes, maybe, though gender is not such a big thing in my work. There is a painting in the show of a two-metre-tall friend who has a weird bowl cut that makes him look like a mushroom. I asked him why he

has such a haircut. He said because he is so tall, he is worried about being intimidating and so wants to make himself look silly. I'm interested in how men deal with their masculinity and how they respond to other people's feelings.

And there is a lot of playfulness – men flexing their muscles but being undermined, even mocked?

Yes, macho beards and poses come up a lot. But I want to have a silly twist to it, like with this painting of a friend flexing his muscles with this ridiculous horseshoe moustache.

You often show figures in intimate and vulnerable scenarios, with lots of people grooming each other, for instance...

I think in cutting hair, and with the scissors, there is always a sense of danger – the barber is holding this weapon that can harm you. You have to completely put your trust in them. When I pass by barber shops, the guys look like macho boys, but they really take care of their beard and hair and are really carefully groomed, which is the opposite of a certain kind of masculinity. I can't really define what that is but it is a very sensual moment to paint.



Xinyi Cheng, *Stijn in the Red Bonnet*, 2020, oil on canvas, 115 x 145 cm, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie, 2021 Gift of the Baloise Group, © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie / Mathias Völzke © Courtesy the artist / Balice Hertling

Ballantyne-Way, Duncan, and Xinyi Cheng. "Xinyi Cheng: 'I'm Interested in How Men Deal with Their Masculinity.'" *Exberliner*, June 3, 2021.

You are known for mainly painting your friends – how did that come about?

Some of them really want to be painted. The bowl cut boy was really excited and wanted to bring all his friends to see the show in Berlin. Some of them like to perform – for instance, I tell them to imagine they're on an island and it's surrounded by the ocean and they're having a cigarette, as a way to get them in the zone. The paintings speak about who they are, because who you are comes out in how you look, and I don't want to make them superficial.

Most of the faces are really inscrutable, one can't make out the expressions. But so much is being conveyed.

Yes. I do like to paint eyes – but painting the mouth determines if someone is happy and sad; it tells too much directly. I don't like that. I like people being absorbed in what they are doing. I look to make the emotions and the mood with the colours and brushstrokes instead of with an expression on their face.

I read somewhere that visiting museums is one of your favourite pastimes.

Absolutely! My old tutor once told me: "When you go to a museum and see a piece of art you really love, remember that feeling, and when you come to back to your studio, try and achieve it." It's a chance to have a conversation with artists from decades and centuries ago, and I feel so privileged to be in Europe and to see so many great painters.

Xinyi Cheng's The Horse with Eye Blinders | through June 6 | Hamburger Bahnhof, Mitte

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ARTFORUM

INTERVIEWS

XINYI CHENG

Xinyi Cheng on painting during the pandemic and communing with the unknown

March 05, 2021



Xinyi Cheng, *Stijn in the Red Bonnet*, 2020, oil on canvas, 45 x 57".

Xinyi Cheng, winner of the 2019 Baloise Art Prize, painted much of what is currently on view at Berlin's Hamburger Bahnhof last spring, during France's first Covid-induced lockdown. Her intimate-yet-detached gaze, previously applied to male figures in ambiguous encounters, is here trained on moments of solitude among men, women, and animals. The Horse with Eye

Blinders—an enigmatic double portrait of a chestnut mare clad in red cap, ear hoods, and blinders and a young man with his arms folded across his bare chest—gives this exhibition its title. Born in Wuhan and raised in Beijing, Cheng is now based in Paris, where we spoke in her Belleville studio. Behind the artist's desk hangs a painting Cheng's mother made to bring good luck: "It's a tree that I can lean on, a bridge and stairs that I can go up," she said. "I bring it everywhere I go."

WHEN I PAINTED *RED KAYAK*, 2020, I was thinking about the one time I went kayaking: a wonderful experience, until I got close to shore and a wave came and flipped the kayak with me in it. I was underwater for what felt like a very long moment—just twenty seconds or so, but I felt a total loss of direction. I felt like this whole year was very suffocating in some ways, and I thought it was a good time to paint this memory. But I didn't want to paint myself; I'd rather use other people as actors or characters to play me.



Xinyi Cheng, *For A Light II*, 2020, oil on canvas, 57 x 63".

Cheng, Xinyi, and Lillian Davies. "Interviews: Xinyi Cheng." *Artforum*, March 5, 2021.

Last year, I had a hard time making the paintings I was used to doing because I wasn't meeting people. Life shrunk to my home, my studio, and my old photos. I reworked some subjects I'd painted before, and I started painting animals. In *Swimmer*, 2020, it's a Saluki dog. They're elegant, with very human faces whose expressions typically look innocent and lost. I wanted to paint this dog swimming in the sea. He seems like he doesn't really have a direction or destination, but he doesn't seem worried, he just kind of floats there. The one in Berlin is swimming alone, but I don't want him alone.

I also started to paint clothes, which enabled me to really focus on shape and color. *For A Light II*, 2020, is the first painting you see in Berlin. There's a male figure and an Asian female figure and both subjects are dressed. The inspiration this time was Dou Wei, a Chinese pop star from the '90s. He was the rock star, and then he quit his bands because he didn't want to repeat the same thing over and over again. His music started to become very experimental and of course a lot less successful as a consequence. There's a photograph of him and his girlfriend at the time sharing a cigarette, and in her hand she has a lighter that she's put behind her back. It's a very interesting photo, full of contact without actually having it, his lit cigarette pressing toward hers, unlit.

The female figure is also a new thing for me. My idea was never really to make my paintings homoerotic. I just didn't want to paint women. I didn't want the figure immediately defined with familiar stereotypes. I thought that if there were two men, then perhaps you don't really know what's happening. You don't assume a certain power dynamic. A picture of a man and a woman, I thought, might open itself up to a different kind of tension.

There's another female figure that I painted twice this year. She's a friend, also an artist, with a beautiful figure right out of a Botticelli painting. We went to the Louvre together three years ago, and we saw the Fra Angelico paintings of angels facing each other, hands crossed over their chests. I asked her, "What does this gesture mean?" She said she didn't know, but put her hands like that. "Oh, it feels really good."

A person's eyes, her red hair, his hands: These give me entry points to a painting. I feel that the image opens up and wants to be painted by me. Sometimes I pray to the painting gods to help me figure it out. A painting has its own agency. Sometimes it wants to be finished, sometimes it doesn't. Even now, painting can be used to depict or communicate with the unknown, or as a kind of prayer for the future.

— As told to Lillian Davies

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ARTFORUM



Xinyi Cheng, *I surrender . . .*, 2018, oil on linen, 55 × 45".

Xinyi Cheng

ANTENNA SPACE 天线空间

"I told him I was a painter who's fascinated by emotions, desires and power dynamics." So writes Xinyi Cheng in recounting her first acquaintance and ensuing friendship with Christiaan, a gay man, upon moving to the Netherlands in 2016. Narrated in a matter-of-fact tone, the story served as the press release of her first solo exhibition in China, "Harnessing the Power of Wind."

Most of the works on view—paintings and a photographic still life—were produced during Cheng's two-year residency at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam. In focusing her attention on the life of a gay European man, Cheng assumed a double risk: Homosexuality remains taboo in China, her home country, while in a Western context her identity as a straight woman could

expose her to accusations of cultural appropriation. Luckily, Cheng's works eschew anything like a reverse exoticization, instead uncovering the subtle yet universal nuances of attraction between any two or more individuals, regardless of sexual orientation. Rife with pictorial tropes of masculinity, her paintings sometimes depict male genitals, backs and torsos, overgrown or undergroomed facial and body hair and long locks, androgynous physiques and delicate garments, while avoiding anything blatantly pornographic. Instead, an erotic charge is communicated through a pensive gaze in *Aperitif*, 2018, a flirtatious leer in *Foulard*, 2017, or the vulnerable stare of *Julien*, 2017, who is about to get his beard coiffed. In other cases, an attraction is evinced through the scenarios in which these men are placed: separated by a bifurcating river in *Song for the Gardener, the Monk and the Poet*, 2017, or united in *Strangers*, 2018, where two men in their underwear are joined by another, dressed in black trousers, under an engulfing umbrella.

Yau, John. "Taking Stock of Painting Today." *Hyperallergic*, August 12, 2018.

Using color to enhance the emotional complexity of her compositions, Cheng has imbued her canvases with the rich and compelling atmosphere of the northern European landscape. Their palette will stir memories in those who have lived in the Netherlands, whose sky is notable for its cold luminescence on short winter days and its dramatic clouds set ablaze on endless summer nights. In *Liebe & Romanze*, 2017, the inherent melodrama of two men facing each other in a landscape saturated in deep hues like those of a Rothko color field seems to reflect the psychological turmoil of the two protagonists, despite the seemingly cool expression of the one who faces us. Similarly, while the Matisse-like silhouettes of the underwater figures in *North Brother Island*, 2017, and *I surrender . . .*, 2018, visualize the loss of balance in one's desires in the presence of sexual attraction; the differentiation in the figures' skin tone from brick to pastel pink, set against a chilling background, articulates the presence of power dynamics in any relationship.

Inverting the stereotypical roles of the white male painter and his exotic female muse, Cheng not only revises expectations of gender dynamics in an artistic context, she asks for them to be reconsidered across the board. In her story, she recounts that when Christiaan's partner Klaas died, Christiaan inherited one of Klaas's former lovers. At the core of her artistic practice, Cheng is less concerned with sexuality than she is with the universality—one might even say, the transferability—of human emotions, desires, and power dynamics.

— Fiona He

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HYPERALLERGIC

Art Reviews Weekend

Taking Stock of Painting Today

It is not every day that you can go to Chelsea and see more than 100 paintings by 46 artists within the space of a few blocks.

by John Yau
August 12, 2018

It is not every day that you can go to Chelsea and see more than 100 paintings by 46 artists within the space of a few blocks, but that is exactly what will happen if you go to the sprawling group show, *Painting: Now and Forever, Part III*, at the multiple exhibition spaces of the Matthew Marks Gallery and Greene Naftali (June 28 – August 17, 2018). Other than stating that the exhibition “includes over forty international artists working in a wide array of styles [proving] the vitality of contemporary painting,” the press release makes no grand statement or claim. The roster of participants is all over the place. There are living and dead artists hailing from a dozen countries, ranging from famous to established to neglected to up-and-coming – a fascinating hodge-podge.



Lois Dodd, "Window, Deserted House" (1979), oil on linen, 52 x 52 inches (© Lois Dodd, courtesy of Matthew Marks Gallery and Greene Naftali)

This is the third presentation of an ongoing survey of painting, organized once every ten years since 1998, when Matthew Marks and Pat Hearn, who died in 2000, first put it on. This exhibition was put together by the staffs of Marks and Greene Naftali, which may explain why no one is listed as curator. It may also explain its lack of a center, which might put off some people, but I didn't mind it a bit.

I saw the entire show twice, first to see what was in it and make a list of what caught my eye, which enabled me to be slightly more purposeful when I went around again. I think a show like this does

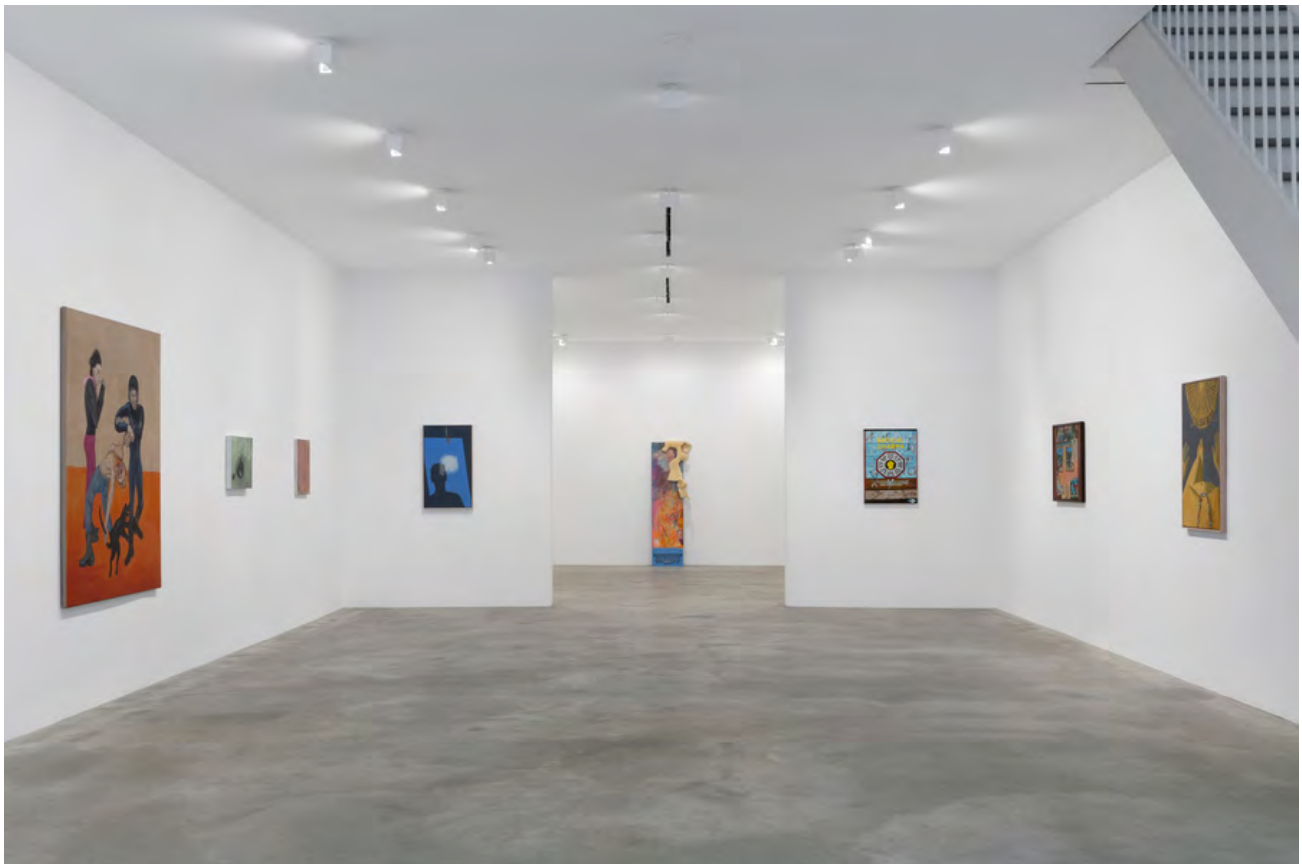
Yau, John. "Taking Stock of Painting Today." *Hyperallergic*, August 12, 2018.

its job if it achieves the following: it makes you want to see more work by some of the artists; it includes the work of an artist you feel is neglected and deserving of more attention; it introduces you to work by someone you did not know of before. Both galleries include some of their own artists, which is to be expected. However, the row of small acrylic stripe paintings by Nayland Blake from the mid-1990s and the two still-lives by Gedi Sibony from 2017-2018 were gratuitous gestures by artists who made their name working in other mediums. They used paint but that was about as far as it went.

The artist who had the most work in the exhibition was Lois Dodd, who is in her early 90s (in a highly belated act of institutional recognition, the first monograph on her work was published only last year). In 1951, shortly after returning from Italy, Dodd began working in the Maine landscape where she was spending the summer. For nearly 70 years now she has been painting the world before her eyes. In the most ordinary circumstances she finds a fresh and engaging view, which she transforms into a painting.

Along with “Window, Deserted House” (1979) and “Night Window – Red Curtain” (1972), there are “Burning House, Night, with Fireman” (2015), and 10 oil paintings done on sheets of aluminum flashing measuring five by seven inches. Done quickly on a smooth, resistant surface, they are of dewdrops on grass, the full moon in a night sky, and a view from a barn window.

Spread out across all three of Marks’s exhibition spaces, these paintings alone are a good enough reason to see the show. Artists know how good Dodd is, even if museum curators are too busy



Painting: Now and Forever, Part III at Matthew Marks Gallery: installation view (image via matthewmarks.com)

Yau, John. “Taking Stock of Painting Today.” *Hyperallergic*, August 12, 2018.



Matsumi Kanemitsu, "Untitled (A)" (1956), acrylic on canvas, 28 x 28 inches (© The Kanemitsu Collection, courtesy of Louis Stern Fine Arts)

looking around for the next hot young artist. Recently, Robert Gober gave Dodd's painting, "View through Elliot's Shack Looking South" (1971), to the Museum of Modern Art, New York, which, if the museum website is correct, is the first painting by this artist to enter the collection.

With MoMA's shortsightedness in mind, I want to call attention to a handful of artists, most of whom are neglected, hardly known, or unknown in New York: Xinyi Cheng, Leidy Churchman, Ed Clark, Luchita Hurtado, Matsumi Kanemitsu, Bhupen Khakar, Suellen Rocca, and Eiichi Shibata. Works by this group alone would constitute an interesting exhibition.

Clark, an African American abstract artist, was born in 1926, a year before Dodd, and, along with Matsumi Kanemitsu (1922 – 1992) is considered part of the second generation of Abstract Expressionists. Clark's "Untitled" (1991) and "TBC (HS #94)" (2005) were painted with a broom, an instrument he began using in the early 1950s while living in Paris. The sensual swaths of creamy, billowing color are erotic and delicate; the slowness of the paint's movement across the surface offers a distinct counterpoint to the speed and fury we associate with Abstract Expressionism.

In 2008, I first saw and reviewed a small selection of Kanemitsu's lithographs and works on paper at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, but I have never seen a painting of his until now. Long before I saw any of his work, I knew the name Kanemitsu from "Personal Poem" by Frank O'Hara, which I first read in 1971. Imagine my delight in coming across an Asian-sounding name in a poem by a New York School poet: "Now when I walk around at lunchtime/I have only two charms in my pocket/an old Roman coin Mike Kanemitsu gave me [...]." I did not learn that Kanemitsu was an

artist until the early 1980s and that it was Jackson Pollock who gave him the nickname “Mike.” Nearly 50 years after reading his name I finally got to see a painting done around the time he was living in New York and knew O’Hara. I was not disappointed.

Kanemitsu, whose biography reads like the script for a movie that Hollywood will never make unless they can get a white actor to play the part, was born in Ogden, Utah, but raised by his grandparents in a suburb outside Hiroshima from 1925 until 1940 (during which time he learned calligraphy and the use of Sumi brush). A dual citizen, he returned to America and was drafted into the US Army, but with the country’s entry into World War II after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, he was arrested and sent to internment camps, where he began drawing with materials given to him by the American Red Cross. Later in the war, he was granted permission to serve as an army nurse in Europe, where he stayed on after the war ended and studied with Fernand Leger in Paris (as did Robert Colescott). Returning to the States, he settled in New York, where he studied with Yasuo Kuniyoshi, at the Art Students League. In 1961, invited by June Wayne to work at the Tamarind print workshop, he moved to Los Angeles, California.

Kanemitsu, who painted in Japanese sumi ink and brushes his entire life, recognized that he had multiple identities – something reflected in his work multiple mediums, which he never tried to unite under a single style. This is why seeing paintings by Kanemitsu in this show was so important to me; they offered a glimpse into a side of him I did not know. “Untitled (A)” (1956) was done the year Kanemitsu was included in a Whitney Annual, and his other painting in the exhibition, “Untitled (C)” (ca. 1969) is from more than a decade later, and after he moved to Los Angeles.

The bulbous blue shape hanging down from the painting’s top edge in “Untitled (A)” anticipates a shape that Paul Feeley began using in 1957 in paintings such as “Kilroy” (1957). If the dates of Kanemitsu’s paintings are any indication, he was at the forefront of artists who rejected both the gestural and strict geometrical aspects of Abstract Expressionism in favor of rounded forms and solid planes of color. His work is right there in the mix with



Luchita Hurtado, “Untitled” (1970), oil on canvas, 32 7/8 x 19 1/8 inches (© Luchita Hurtado, courtesy of Matthew Marks Gallery and Greene Naftali)

Yau, John. “Taking Stock of Painting Today.” *Hyperallergic*, August 12, 2018.

Feeley's classical forms and Nicholas Krushenick's Pop abstractions and yet remains neglected, at best. His absence from an art history that is just getting around to acknowledging its nonwhite artists is telling.

I feel as if I am going back in time in order to arrive at the present. Luchita Hurtado was born in Caracas, Venezuela, in 1920, before Kanemitsu and Clark. Her breakthrough moment happened in 2016, at the age of 95, when she had a solo show of her abstract works from 1940s and '50s at the Park View (since renamed Park View/Paul Soto) in Los Angeles. Two years later, she was one of 30 artists included in the Hammer Museum's biennial exhibition, *Made in LA* 2018, curated by Anne Ellegood.

Hurtado has four paintings in *Painting Now and Forever, Part III*, three from the 1970s and one from the '80s. "Untitled" (1970), is a truncated first-

person view of a woman looking down at her own body and basket near her feet. The woven basket, along with the tubular bead necklace around the woman's neck, suggest that the view of one's body is affected by the culture that one was born into. The directness and immediacy of this painting is complicated by her two other canvases from the 1970s, one of which depicts feathers falling against a backdrop of blue sky. Hurtado, who was married to Wolfgang Paalen and to Lee Mullican, and is the mother of the artist Matt Mullican, is one of the revelations of this exhibition. Clearly, she has been making strong work for many decades. She deserves a serious look at her work, a museum survey show at the very least.

Hurtado's "Untitled" is directly across from two paintings by Xinyi Cheng, the youngest artist in the exhibition. Born in Wuhan, China, in 1989, Cheng studied in China and the US and currently lives in Amsterdam, Netherlands. In "Harnessing the Wind" (2018), we see a cropped view of a male body, focusing on the lower torso and genitals. The body, seeming to fall backward, is flattened into a modernist space and crammed within the painting's confines. Cheng does not explain the circumstances. While the use of a tonal palette might be something she took from Luc Tuymans, the imagery is clearly her own. Cheng is a painter whose work you want to see more of.

This is also true of Leidy Churchman, who has five paintings in the exhibition, spread across two gallery spaces. It is surprising when you discover that the same artist did them all, since they don't



Xinyi Cheng, "Harnessing the Wind" (2018), oil on linen, 19 3/4 x 15 3/4 inches (© Xinyi Cheng, courtesy of Matthew Marks Gallery and Greene Naftali)

look remotely alike. The largest, “Paradise 8 & 9”(2018), is a view of a path lined with trees receding into the background, as seen in an opened magazine whose pages are nearly synonymous with the painting’s surface. Churchman seems highly conscious of, as well as conflicted by, certain pictorial images and tropes, and how they have been used to evoke transcendence.

Although Bhupen Khakhar (1934 – 2003) was the subject of a retrospective, *Bhupen Khakar: You Can't Please All* at the Tate Modern (June 1 – November 16, 2016), and was championed by Howard Hodgkin, he remains virtually unknown in the US. Khakhar, who worked as an accountant until he was in his mid-20s, is largely a self-taught painter who absorbed a lot from Indian folk art and hand-painted advertising signs. An autobiographical artist, he often explored the daily life of being homosexual in postwar India.

“In a Boat” (1984) is a night scene of a boatful of nude and partially clothed men partying and pairing up. In a twist, Khakar depicts a clothed Pablo Picasso, seen in profile, sitting at the stern of the boat, looking at the water, estranged from the others. Directly across from him, on the other side of the boat, sits what could be Picasso’s twin: he too is clothed and not paired up. The famous voyeur is neither looking at his doppelgänger nor at what is going on around him. There is something incredibly smart, wry, assured, tender, and provocative about this work, which is beautifully painted.



Bhupen Khakhar, “In a Boat” (1984), oil on canvas, 67 3/4 x 68 1/8 inches (© Estate of Bhupen Khakhar, courtesy of Shumita and Arani Bose Collection, NY)

What I see connecting the masterful Dodd with all the artists I have cited, as well as with the glorious Suellen Rocca and the outsider artist Eiichi Shibata, is an interest in discovering what paint can do: what qualities of its materiality and color can be brought into play. Rocca's two paintings, which were done in the past few years, show that she has moved past her work of the 1960s, with which she first gained attention, into a domain of the female body transported into a state of luminous ecstasy. As with Hurtado, here is another artist who is long overdue for a serious survey and monograph, which begs the question: if you are not white and male, do you have to be like Khakhar, safe in heaven dead, before such thinking and looking might begin, especially in New York?

There is a lot of terrific work in the show, much of it by artists who have already received heaps of praise. I figured they did not need more. Also, one can play the game of who was left out of this show, as one of my colleagues has done, but I think that is beside the point. With so much in *Painting: Now and Forever, Part III* to see and think about, grouching about who is not in it diminishes those who are.

Painting: Now and Forever, Part III continues at Matthew Marks Gallery (522 & 526 West 22nd Street; 523 West 24th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) and Greene Naftali (508 West 26 Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through August 17.

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 Fax: 212-243-0047

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ROBERTA SMITH | ART REVIEW



NICOLE EISENMAN/ANTON KERN GALLERY

Fresh Broad Strokes Of an Incomplete Survey

A series, initiated in 1998 by two Chelsea art dealers, examines painting's turn toward figuration.

Top, Nicole Eisenman's "Luck Lines" (2018).
Right, Luchita Hurtado's "Untitled," from 1970.

Since 1998, two galleries in Chelsea have treated the New York art world to a rare experience: a large, ongoing survey of contemporary painting, staged every 10 years. A piecemeal array of established, emerging and overlooked artists, it may include a few works from the last

Painting: Now and Forever, Part III
Matthew Marks Gallery
Greene Naftali Gallery

50 years that the organizers find germane, as well as recent works by painters of all ages.

The latest iteration, "Painting: Now and Forever, Part III," is on view in the three New York exhibition spaces of the Matthew



LUCHITA HURTADO/GREENE NAFTALI GALLERY AND MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

Smith, Roberta. "Fresh Broad Strokes Of an Incomplete Survey." *The New York Times*, August 3, 2018, pp. C13, C18.



2018 SAM GILLIAM/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK: DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY



AARON WAX

Marks Gallery and the two of the Greene Naftali Gallery. The good news is that it reflects the resurgence of images and narrative in painting that has been gaining speed since the mid-1990s, creating a renewed equity with abstraction.

The bad news is that too few of the younger painters who helped foment this turn in New York are present. Just as the show downplays abstraction, it also downplays New York, an important center of painting. It seems to have been conceived as a teaching moment, intent on raising consciousness about older artists and artists outside the city. But, if you consider what's here and what's not, you can extract a sense of how polymorphous the medium is now, even if it's not the same as seeing it played out on the walls.

This first iteration of this show originated with the dealers Matthew Marks and Pat Hearn, who had, along with Paul Morris and Tom Healy, pioneered the Chelsea gallery scene in 1994. Mr. Marks was a stalwart of connoisseurship, mixing blue-chip and younger artists. Ms. Hearn was a gamin performance artist turned art dealer with an audacious eye; she started out in the East Village in the early 1980s, before landing in Chelsea.



ALEX ISRAEL/GREENE NAFTALI



GUSTAVO MURILLO

After Ms. Hearn died of cancer at 45 in 2000, Mr. Marks carried on the project with Carol Greene of Greene Naftali. (Ms. Hearn's gallery and the one run by her husband, Colin de Land, who died in 2003, are the subject of "The Conditions of Being Art: Pat Hearn Gallery and American Fine Arts, Co. (1983-2004)," at the Hessel Museum of Art at Bard College, through Dec. 14.)

Clockwise from top left, Sam Gilliam's "Homage to the Square" (2016-17); Leidy Churchman's "Paradise 8 & 9" (2018); Alex Israel's "Self-Portrait (Neon)" (2018); Ed Clark's "TBC (HS #94" (2005), left, and Gedi Sibony's "Title TBC" (2016)



JANA EULER/DÉPENDANCE, BRUSSELS AND GREENE NAFTALI

The sprawl of around 100 paintings by 46 artists from a dozen countries in “Painting: Now and Forever, III” resembles a tasting menu comprising glimpses of unfamiliar artists or works, intriguing juxtapositions and evocations of absent painters. There are energizing juxtapositions such as, at Marks on West 22nd Street, a painting by Jasper Johns, the show’s eminence grise, with two abstractions by Howardena Pindell, in which the shared subjects include fields of white and dots.

Sometimes an artist’s work seems to deepen before your eyes. In the Matthew Marks space on West 24th Street, a 2008 self-portrait by the Photo Realist Robert Bechtle presents him as a kind of norm-core mystic, standing at the center of his darkened studio, like Munch, in a subtly hazy pointillist atmosphere.

A few artists unveil new styles, most notably the 84-year-old American painter Sam Gilliam. He has taken his interest in poured color far from his signature stain paintings, to a relatively geometric format that has its own radiant lushness and recalls his efforts from the early 1960s. In the big Marks space at 522 West 22nd Street, one of his works matches the saturated color of two paintings of sinister toylike figures by Karl Wirsum, 79, on the opposite wall.

Nearby a bright collagelike abstraction by Matt Connors (born 1973), exchanges color notes with “Imperial Nude (Paul Rosano),” a 1970 canvas by Sylvia Sleight (1916-2010). This depicts a young man reclining odalisque-like on a substantial sofa draped in a bright orange textile; it highlights Ms. Sleight’s delicate realism as a precedent for younger painters, including Aliza Nisenbaum and Njideka Akunyili Crosby (neither is here, but both could be). On an adjacent wall, two night scenes in a residential neighborhood by Noah Davis, a Los Angeles artist who died tragically young in 2015, merge reality and fantasy to meditate on black life.

Among the lesser-known artists is Bhupen Khakhar (1934-2003), a painter from India whose style derived from Indian miniatures and whose subject appears

Clockwise from top left, Jana Euler’s “Shape of Painting, Summer Hit 2017” (2018); Lois Dodd’s “Dahlias and Birch Trees” (2004)

to be different kinds and degrees of human intimacy. His “In a Boat,” from 1984, is a nocturnal scene of several scantily clad or naked men (along with Picasso, clothed) on the deck of a craft near a mountainous peninsula that is especially beautiful.

The redoubtable but neglected Lois Dodd (born 1927) contributes two paintings of windows and 10 small delectable oil studies from nature, all reflecting her understated yet spontaneous painterly realism. Also on display are the symbolist paintings of Luchita Hurtado, 97, the Venezuelan-born artist who has lived in California since the 1940s. (She is the widow of the painter Lee Mullican; the artist Matt Mullican is their son.) Her clean-edged images sometimes evoke Georgia O’Keeffe; an untitled work of a naked female body (1970) seen from the point of view of its owner evokes some of Giacometti’s similarly pared-down female figures from his sculpture of the 1930s.

Works by older and younger artists sometimes converse, as with the exchange among Ms. Dodd and Ms. Hurtado’s paintings and the multifarious canvases of Leidy Churchman (born 1979). These all hang in the smaller Marks space at 526 West 22nd Street. Also here are two works by Xinyi Cheng, a Chinese-born, Netherlands-based artist who is the youngest in the show. (She turns 30 next year.) Ms. Cheng contributes the exceptional “Harnessing the Wind,” which shows a cropped, largely pink close-up of a naked man who seems to be tumbling through space, very much at the mercy of the wind.

The installation at Greene Naftali is more of a free-for-all: every painting for itself. But it’s not entirely disorderly. In



LOIS DODD/GREENE NAFTALI GALLERY AND MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

the ground-floor space, Ms. Eisenman's big red hand painting is balanced by two outsize heads. One of them, "Shape of Painting, Summer Hit 2017" (2018) from the German artist Jana Euler (born 1982), is a portrait of the British singer-songwriter Ed Sheeran, whose "Shape of You" was a 2017 summer hit.

The other is "Self-Portrait (Neon)" by the American Alex Israel, also born in 1982. These days it seems de rigueur to find Mr. Israel's work deplorable — at least on Twitter — and some of it is. But his 8-foot-tall trompe l'oeil neon profile is an eye-catching exception — as is its neighbor, a large, packed composition, "Animal Hours," by the British installation artist Helen Marten.

The American Rodney McMillian's "TBD" (2017), a process art painting composed of a lavender bedsheet and thick pours of latex, gives the show an ugly-beautiful moment. And there is one instance of coherent curatorial logic: A small gallery with one seemingly abstract painting per wall, two big ones by Ed Clark and Gedi Sibony, and two small ones by Whitney Claffin and Ei-ichi Shibata, a Japanese outsider artist. The show unravels rather distressingly in Greene Naftali's eighth-floor space, where a glaring problem comes into focus.

For me, the resurrection of images in "Painting" is both a development out of and a rebuke to Conceptual Art. It indicates a renewed faith in the ability of painting to communicate holistically by fusing form, style, process and narrative. The problem is that too many of the younger painters in this exhibition don't seem very interested in inventing their own process or form, which results in images that, while they may be briefly refreshing, are too often painted in familiar, unexciting ways.

Ms. Eisenman is among the painters who manage to bring it all together. Many other exemplars are not included here, among them Kerry James Marshall, Dana Schutz, Chris Ofili, Carroll Dunham and their great precursor, Alice Neel.

The lackluster paintings here suggest that Ms. Greene and Mr. Marks may not visit Lower East Side galleries enough. Tschabalala Self, Louis Fratino and Alex Bradley Cohen, who first emerged there, are among the younger artists who might have spiced things up. Also Nina Chanel Abney, who actually shows in Chelsea.

But who knows. Despite being museum scale, this show is organized with a minimum of what could be called institutional oversight. Just the two galleries' owners and staff. As the show veers from insightful to arbitrary to oblivious, its sheer freedom is part of what makes it interesting. It just needs more company. It's hard to be the only regularly repeating painting survey in New York.



Rodney McMillian's "TBD" (2017)

GUSTAVO MURILLO