

OSCAR YI HOU

Selected Press

Interview

Oscar yi Hou and Russell Tovey on Kinks, Cranes, and Cowboys

By **Ernesto Macias**

Photographed by **Ernesto Macias**

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“First white boy I’ve painted in a long time,” says Oscar yi Hou, the New York-based British artist, as he and Russell Tovey, the actor and host of the **podcast** *Talk Art*, walk through yi Hou’s new exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum, *East of Sun, West of Moon*. The 24-year-old painter is talking about a tender portrait of his boyfriend included in the exhibition, yi Hou’s first ever solo museum show, which came to fruition after the illustrious painter won the **UOVO** Prize, earning him a \$25,000 unrestricted grant, a 50×50 ft mural on the company’s Bushwick facility, and this exhibition. In the portrait, a handsome white boy wears a cowboy hat and a soft pink shirt, half-buttoned up, his sleeves rolled and his arms crossed, conjuring the burly men of the mythical American West. The idea is a recurring one in yi Hou’s work, which often finds reference and inspiration in the schism between the artist’s Chinese

which often finds reference and inspiration in the schism between the artist's Chinese heritage and the American dream, two subjects that came up frequently that morning at the museum, as he and Tovey surveyed the show and reminisced about how they first crossed paths. *East of Sun, West of Moon* features 11 original portraits by yi Hou of lovers, friends and himself, drawing from the works of Martin Wong, the prolific Chinese-American painter who lived in the Lower East Side and eventually died of complications from AIDS in 1999. "Martin Wong was the OG Gaysian Cowboy," yi Hou remarked, as he and Tovey, who appears on the new season of *American Horror Story: NYC*, talked about leather kinks, making a living as an artist, and fucking twinkles to death (on television).

TOVEY: Well, we're in the Brooklyn Museum, and this is your solo exhibition, *East of Sun, West of Moon*. What does it feel like to have an institutional show in the United States of America, which has always been a destination for you? Since we've met, the American dream has always been something you've been attached to.

YI HOU: Yeah. It feels really good.

TOVEY: Imagine if you were like, "It's shit. It's awful."

YI HOU: Everyone always asks me how it feels and it's like, still happening. So I really never know how to answer. I'm always just like, "Yeah, it's great. It feels good." I was working on this show for so long that it just feels like a relief that I actually did it and I finished it. I'm sure in like a few months, I'll have a—

TOVEY: Meltdown.

YI HOU: Yeah, a meltdown.

TOVEY: How did it come about?

YI HOU: Eugenie [Tsai] is the Senior Curator of Contemporary Art. She saw my show at James Fuentes last year and, out of the blue, nominated me for the **UOVO** prize. So then I had to write a proposal. It's like a 30-page proposal. It's basically a thesis. And then I sent it in and I got it, and I was like, "Shit." And I found out while I was in Miami last year for Art Basel. So that was the cherry on top.

TOVEY: What is UOVO?

YI HOU: They're an art storage and logistics company. It was like a \$25K cash grant, plus the show. And I also did a mural for them.

TOVEY: So they sponsored this show?

YI HOU: They did the mural.

TOVEY: The image you chose for that is connected to both of us, because that work came about because of a show that I curated at Margate, which was based on Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*. It was called *Breakfast Under The Tree* and it was about group figuration. And you made that painting, which is actually the painting we're looking at as we walk into the exhibition. I placed that work with Joe Mantello, who I'm working with now on *American Horror Story* with. That painting might not have existed if that exhibition hadn't existed.



“Birds of a feather flock together, aka: A New Family Portrait, 2020.”

YI HOU: No, you’re damn right. Because that was during the first lockdown. I was trapped in Liverpool and I was just painting. And then I made that work for the show. And I wouldn’t have otherwise, because that was specifically a group figuration show, so that’s why I made this with three figures. Then I rolled it up and sent it off. I couldn’t actually go to the show because I was already in New York, and I couldn’t really travel because of COVID.

TOVEY: But I met your brother and your parents.

YI HOU: My entire family, yeah. They were just obsessed with you.

TOVEY: And we all had photographs in front of it in Margate-

YI HOU: And I wasn’t there.

TOVEY: You weren’t there.

YI HOU: It was pretty funny. I didn’t actually see this piece for a long, long time. I was like, “Where’s my baby gone?” I forgot the size of it and the scale. Only when I saw it during install for the show a few months ago did I realize how big it is and how big the faces are. I kind of forgot.

TOVEY: And this has become a really important work for you.

YI HOU: Yes.

TOVEY: Is it because of how successful it feels for you compositionally? Or the themes within it?

YI HOU: I think because it's a triple portrait. There's more figures. I spent so long on this. I spent like, two months on it. And I feel like it really speaks to the ethos of my practice: figuration, queer figuration, kind of like the real relationship to other people, as well as all the symbols. I feel like I established the symbolic language clearly here. So it's like a cornerstone piece.

TOVEY: It has all of your trademarks.

YI HOU: Yeah.

TOVEY: Why is the border so important to your work? We see a lot of it as we go around.

YI HOU: It frames the painting as a painting, as in, it's not meant to be objective reality. It's a depiction of my relationship to this other person. Straight off the bat, it exposes the conceit of the painting, which is that it's a painting; it's not factual. And it also allows me to incorporate this different visual language, using a lot more black and exposing the canvas and incorporating all these symbols. In a way, for me, it's like a buffer between the viewer and the subjects, like a plexiglass barrier, kind of the way a Polaroid has the white border. It makes it very clear. "Oh, this is an image." This isn't a direct, transparent portal to the person depicted. There's a sort of opacity there.

TOVEY: Since meeting you, I see the symbol of the crane very differently. When I see the crane now, I think of you. Because you appear in this painting, but in some spaces, the crane appears instead. The crane can be you. Your work is very coded. Everyone will see Chinese calligraphy or the cursive writing, which is indecipherable at times. And other times, when you spend time with it, you can get it. It's up to us to work out. Is that something that you knew from the start?

YI HOU: I was always concerned with questions of transparency, opacity, and legibility, trying to avoid the easy and quick consumption of our work, especially with Instagram and stuff. By encoding all these symbols, snippets of information, and biographical information, it's a way to try and force the viewer to actually read the work, like reading a book rather than a sentence.

TOVEY: It's not a tweet.

YI HOU: It's not a tweet.

TOVEY: Well again, it's symbols that appear a lot. It's the cowboy hat, the sheriff badge. When I think of you in the American dream, it's the old school, '80s, or what we're shown, the Marlboro Man, you know, what Richard Prince did, *Brokeback Mountain*, a time of American history and imagery that we've been fed constantly. You're always mining.

YI HOU: Yeah. Do you have the *Cowboy Crane* painting?

TOVEY: Yeah.

YI HOU: Russell's an expert on my work.

TOVEY: Well, how did we meet?

YI HOU: We were introduced just around COVID. It was Doron [Langberg], right? He bought a painting of mine a while ago now, and introduced me to you or you to me?

TOVEY: Yeah. You were stuck in Liverpool. Doron said, "Look at the work," and as soon as I saw it I was like, "This is fucking brilliant." And then I was like, "Do you want me to help you place some of these in good places?"

YI HOU: You placed a lot of my works. I remember a few months prior to that, some guy, a director of this gallery, was trying to buy some of my works. I think I was a junior in college at the time and he low-balled me. He wanted to buy two works at a steep discount after I'd already given him a discount. So that completely fucked me up and that really caused me to—

TOVEY: You didn't sell them to him though?

YI HOU: No, thank God. But that really caused me to undervalue my works. And then Doron bought work, someone else bought work, you bought work and started placing them, and I really was like, "Oh, I can actually have a career out of this."

TOVEY: It's the biggest privilege ever. Because that's what *Talk Art* is about, my podcast. We give a platform to a lot of emerging artists. A lot of artists have been overlooked or they haven't been recognized yet, and people discover their work through the podcast and then stuff happens. And I'm not expecting any credit for it at all. It just feels really lovely to be a conduit and a facilitator to talent, so people can see it.

YI HOU: I did an interview with *Talk Art* a few years ago now and it was one of the best interviews I've ever done.

TOVEY: Was it?

YI HOU: Just because you guys researched a lot. I've done a lot of interviews where people just ask you stuff they can literally just Google. You and Rob [Diamant] actually researched everything and got me to expand on questions that I'd already answered, which is great.

TOVEY: We've got a *Talk Art* book, too. Oscar's in there. This is a plug. The best interview he's ever done, there you go.

YI HOU: It's on the record.

TOVEY: We're going to use that quote for the front cover. "Best interview he ever did."



YI HOU: Are you going to Miami?

TOVEY: Maybe. Trying to.

YI HOU: I'll be there. I'm staying at a gay hotel.

TOVEY: Of course, you are. With your boyfriend or...

YI HOU: No, with Amanda. You know Amanda?

TOVEY: Yeah, yeah.

YI HOU: Yeah, yeah, yeah. So, this is literally all I've been working on for the past year. I wrote a long, thorough proposal. I was thinking like a curator. I wanted it all to be kind of curatorially cohesive. And you have to work. And you have to think of the works in context with each other. And that's been good and beneficial, but at the same time, kind of limiting, because I kind of want to experiment more, or just make some kind of stupid fuck-off paintings.

TOVEY: I've always thought a tondo-shaped canvas would really suit you. I've always worked you through a circular.

YI HOU: I've been thinking about that. You know that Lucian Freud painting, where he just stitched two canvases together and it's like a weird L, R shape?

TOVEY: I've not seen that one.

YI HOU: I'm looking back at his work a lot and trying to get back to first principles. I want to just focus on innovating again.

TOVEY: In some ways, someone would look at you now and think, "He's got a solo at the Brooklyn, he's got a solo at James Fuentes." There's a big demand for your work. Is money something you still have to consider at this stage?

YI HOU: Not as much as I did in the past. But placing these works with institutions takes a long time.

TOVEY: And they're discounted, as well, if they go to institutions.

YI HOU: Yeah. So I didn't get paid for the past year. I was actually running out. But then I got an advance from James, so it's fine.

TOVEY: What's it like working with James?

YI HOU: He's great. I feel like we share the same values. I fuck with him.



"Cooleism, aka: Leather Daddy's Highbinder Odalisque, 2022."

TOVEY: So, can I ask you about the cowboy things? Well, I know about them, but I want people to understand where it comes from.

YI HOU: Yes. Martin Wong.

TOVEY: The OG. So, who is Martin Wong and why do you feel so connected to him?

YI HOU: Martin Wong was the OG Gaysian Cowboy. And he was actually in San Francisco and New York in the '80s, his work is so expansive in what it deals with. He does a lot of figuration. He does a lot of work with language and symbols. He incorporated ASL depictions. So he was interested in language. He also did a lot of homoerotic, figurative pieces. When I first stumbled upon him a few years ago, I was doing all those themes already. And then I found his work and I was like, "Holy shit, he did this kind of stuff already." But his work's a bit different.

TOVEY: Did that make you think, "Fuck, someone's done this," or did it—

YI HOU: Quite the opposite. It was like, "Oh, I'm actually in a lineage of artists, of those who come before me." Even though I literally didn't know of him, we just kind of converged toward the same themes.

TOVEY: And the cowboy hat. That appeared before you knew Martin Wong's work?

YI HOU: Well, that first came from when I had just watched *Brokeback Mountain*. It's part of my second year of college.

TOVEY: Lovely film.

YI HOU: I was interested in the homoerotic nature of it. When I saw Martin Wong and this picture of him wearing the cowboy hat and this like, crucifix necklace or whatever, I also realized the racialized aspect, or I guess the absence of race within the idea of the cowboy.

TOVEY: I was aware of Martin Wong's work peripherally. I knew David Wojnarowicz's work better. But then seeing Wong's through your eyes, and his influence on you, made me go back and look at his work more. And in the last year-and-a-half to two years, it feels like Martin Wong has had a bit of a renaissance, which is incredible. These artists, especially artists who died of AIDS, they've been overlooked for so many years. It feels like enough time has passed that now we can look at their work and reinsert them into the canon and realize they were always there.

YI HOU: Exactly. And the painting that you have, you got from the Rome Show, right?

TOVEY: Yours. Yes.

YI HOU: That's like, a reference to Martin Wong.



“Cowboy Kato Coolie, aka: Bruce’s Bitch.”

TOVEY: Of course.

YI HOU: I think on the top, in the painting, it says, “I am you. You are too.” Which is a reference to Martin Wong. So that painting was kind of trying to be in communion with Martin Wong.

TOVEY: Do you keep a diary? Why is text so important to you? Martin Wong wrote a lot. It was coded. He’s of a generation where, probably, you couldn’t talk about being queer too much.

YI HOU: I mean, it’s hugely important. It’s just another manifestation of my practice.

TOVEY: Have you got work placed anywhere in the UK?

YI HOU: Only work that you’ve placed with some British people because of the ones you have.

TOVEY: Are you an American boy now?

YI HOU: I’m a New Yorker, first and foremost.

TOVEY: I find it interesting. When we spoke before, you said you are British Chinese. But you come to the States and you are now Asian-American.

YI HOU: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

TOVEY: I meet a lot of people-of-color and they come here and they say they’re African-American now, even though they’re British.

YI HOU: Yeah. I mean, it's a political identity. Even Asian-American, it's something you have to identify with. Like, Asia's fucking huge. Not everyone who comes from Asia to America wants to be Asian-American. Maybe they're still Asian. It's a political identity. It's not really part of the one that I fit into, besides bringing up the British diaspora. So yeah, "Asian-American" just makes sense.

TOVEY: I want to ask about the muse for you. When we first met, you were with someone and they appeared in your work. Your friends appear in your work a lot. Your boyfriend now appears in this painting here.



Left: "All American Boyfriend, aka: Gwei Lou, Leng Zai," 2022. Right: "Old Gloried Hole, aka: Ends of Empire," 2022.

YI HOU: First white boy I've painted in a long time.

TOVEY: You were talking about Lucian Freud, who made his career out of muses. Why is the muse important?

YI HOU: It's kind of—I would feel uncomfortable painting a stranger. I don't have any kind of relationship to them. What kind of mandate do I have to represent and depict this person? And Freud, I love his work. He was kind of a weirdo and he had, I think, a strained relationship to many of his muses. For me, depicting another person is also a kind of ethical task, representing someone else. How do you do it ethically? When it's with a stranger, there's far more to consider. It just feels more familiar when you paint someone you know, I think.

TOVEY: When I walked in, it made me think of **Jordan Casteel**, who's the opposite. She photographs people she sees or who interest her and paints them. I saw her work at the New Museum, then I walked into this show in the Brooklyn Museum, and I got the same sort of vibe of being presented with faces. But they felt like they were really important to you.

YI HOU: Yeah. And there's aspects of the relationship I share with the sitters encoded within all the paintings, through either language or symbols.

TOVEY: Do you want people to know them eventually? You're not going to die, but if you suddenly died, would you—

YI HOU: I will die eventually.

TOVEY: Well, of course. You're not going to live forever, fine. Would you want people to be able to know everything eventually, or do you want these things to be a mysterious part of your legacy?

YI HOU: I don't keep it a secret completely. I guess I'm kind of indifferent to that. All the historians can do that when I'm dead. But I just don't like to overexpose the subjects.

TOVEY: All right.

YI HOU: So, you play a leather daddy in your new show.

TOVEY: I do. I'm obsessed with leather, secretly. There's a shame with it, but the shame is an aphrodisiac, so it adds to it. You've really embraced this kind of leather chap, muscle man vibe.

YI HOU: Yeah. I was interested in leather and, I guess, BDSM as a culture, because there's more subversive forms of queerness. In the last episode, you just fucked a twink to death.

TOVEY: Yeah, basic stuff.

YI HOU: Yeah.

TOVEY: Oh my god. I stopped filming halfway through. It's this actor and he's got his ass up and I'm fucking him, and then we're doing coke, but it's like this glucose powder, loads of it. Then we're all kissing each other and I went, "What the fuck are we doing? What is this job?" And there's a crew there and we all just kind of stood around, a camera operator and the boom operator, and I'm just like, "This is so fucking weird, guys. Can we just acknowledge that?" And everyone was like, "Uh-uh." And I was like. "Okay. Let's carry on. Get back into it." It was like doing a porno. We were all completely naked with little pouches. This young actor had an anal dam. So if he's bent over, you don't see the hole. You have the sticker that goes over it. But I'm like, I can still see. It's such a weird job.

YI HOU: You have a weird job.

TOVEY: Fucking weird job.

YI HOU: How's the show been?

TOVEY: It's been brilliant. It's been one of my favorite jobs I've done and everyone got on so well. I loved the character and he is so complicated and trying to navigate that. This work, again, feels kind of '80s. I think of Freddie Mercury. I'm fascinated with that period in history. I'm closer to it. I was born in '81. You were born in '98, or something stupid.

YI HOU: That's true, yeah.

TOVEY: That's stupid.

YI HOU: Absolutely silly. Bonkers.

TOVEY: Silly.

YI HOU: I'm 24, and my experience with queerness and gay culture is a lot different from the way it was in the '80s.

TOVEY: Have you seen Sunil Gupta's photographs, the *Christopher Street* photographs?

YI HOU: Not in person, but I've seen them online. I love his work.



TOVEY: Amazing. So this one's [top left, "Cooleisnt, aka: Gold Mountain Cruiser (The Minsehsaft's after-hours trade, 2022)] got corn hanging out of his mouth.

YI HOU: Yeah. I wanted it to be—

TOVEY: Corn-fed farm boys.

YI HOU: I want him to be like, trade. I wanted to kind of perform this ideal. He's wearing Timbs.

TOVEY: And he's got quite a pronounced bulge as well.

YI HOU: Yeah, he does.

YI HOU: I mean, that's just the way his body is. It's bulging.

TOVEY: So, I've got a mustache at the minute.

YI HOU: You do, yeah.

TOVEY: We were laughing about it, and I've had it for six months. I'm very proud of myself. I've never grown one before and it's been a huge success. People who have watched the show have really fetishized my stache. Oscar, you said to me today that when you grew a mustache, it changed your life.

YI HOU: It did. Back when I was on dating apps and Grindr and stuff, I got a lot more attention from men when I grew my mustache.

TOVEY: At the beginning, **Ryan Murphy** was like, "He's not having a mustache, we're not going to do that." And I sent him pictures and then he went, "You can have the mustache."

YI HOU: I mean, you kill it in the role. You're perfect for it. The mustache is icing on top.

TOVEY: It just also makes him different from everybody else I've played. It really defines that period of history, that guy. Look at Burt Reynolds and Tom Selleck. You could have had this really clone-y, very queer facial hair, which on the scene just defined gayness, but the really alpha, straight actors were walking around with it.

YI HOU: The first time I saw you on TV was the *Dr. Who* episode.

TOVEY: Oh God, yeah.

YI HOU: And then there's *Looking*, which is one of my favorite shows ever. I've actually seen it three times.

TOVEY: Have you?

YI HOU: I think it's great. But in *Looking*, you're playing a very kind of queer role and now you're playing a really queer role in a very different way. How would you compare *Looking* and *American Horror Story*? I also noticed that your character's called Patrick in *American Horror Story*.

TOVEY: And the person I was in love with, Jonathan Groff, was playing Patrick [in *Looking*].

YI HOU: Maybe Patrick's a gay name.

TOVEY: Do you think it is?

YI HOU: Pattie, Pattie.

TOVEY: I think they wanted me to be Irish in this. So Patrick is a very Irish name.

YI HOU: Do you have Irish roots?

TOVEY: In the UK, I don't know of anybody ever saying "You're Irish." But here, people are like, "You've got a really Irish face. You have Irish features." What does that mean? Is it because I'm pasty, or what?

YI HOU: You are ginger, though.

TOVEY: I was born ginger.

YI HOU: Really?

TOVEY: It's a little-known fact.

YI HOU: And you're Irish?

TOVEY: Yeah.

YI HOU: I love the Irish.

DOCUMENT

Above The Fold

Oscar yi Hou and Louis Fratino are at the vanguard of queer figurative painting



Text by **Morgan Becker**

Photography by **Alexander Cody Nguyen**

Posted **August 25, 2021**

The artists muse on Picasso, identity and Brooklyn nightlife

Oscar yi Hou and Louis Fratino sketch one another over the latter's kitchen table, as sun came through the window for the first time that afternoon. They chat like old friends or a married couple—reminiscing, instructing one another to sit still, and to look up, and to look down. Louis leans forward, and Oscar back. Oscar starts his drawing four times over, while Louis smudges charcoal and chalk over the same sheet of paper he began with.

The pair met a few years ago in 2018. Yi Hou was studying visual arts at Columbia, after relocating from his family home in Liverpool, UK; at the time, he thought he might try for a mathematics major. Yi Hou is incredibly precise—it's a quality that shows quite plainly in his work, if not in his affable, good-natured personality. His figurative oil paintings are meticulously rendered and richly colored—the product of an extensive palette, which he

mixes as he goes. The youngest son of Cantonese immigrants, yi Hou reckons with the complexity of his Chinese-British-American-queer identity. The full-frontal nature of his portraiture is laden with cross-cultural iconography—sheriff's stars, Chinese knots, prayer beads, cranes, star signs—and self-authored poetry, which he often renders deliberately unreadable. Yi Hou's work is a testament to untranslatability: a privileging of narrative convergence over subjective simplification.

Fratino was born near Annapolis and moved to New York after a 2016 Fulbright Fellowship in Berlin. His work, like yi Hou's, is largely figurative, taking full advantage of all the depth oil paint has to offer. A feature by Interview well-situates the artist's approach: "Think neo-Cubism meets neo-Fauvism meets such radical American painting pioneers as Georgia O'Keeffe and Marsden Hartley." Fratino's characters are sloping and lithe and oftentimes nude, with arresting, oversized eyes and hands. His work gestures toward spontaneity, mastering the essential qualities of the human body. It betrays a penchant for sweetness and the quotidien—Fratino challenges the notion that queer art should depict only the public, the social, or the sexual, sometimes delivering resolutely domestic and naturalistic scenes. An earlier show at Sikkema Jenkins featured a still life of a sink full of dirty dishes, a handful of post-meal table paintings, and a loving depiction of the artist's own backyard garden.

The twenty-something friends are still at the onset of presumably long and impactful careers; they remain self-effacing, and thankful to the artists who made history before them. In this conversation for Document, yi Hou and Fratino speak about queer cinema, New York night life, and cultural responsibility.

Yi Hou's first solo show in New York City will take place at James Fuentes Gallery, from August 26 to September 26. Fratino will show at Galerie Neu in Berlin this April.

“What I'm doing with my work is giving testament.”

Morgan Becker: Tell me about how you met.

Louis Fratino: Can I try to pull up the email Oscar wrote? Okay, I haven't read this since he sent it to me...

‘Dear Lou, my name is Oscar yi Hou. I just finished my freshman year at Columbia University. I’m reaching out to you—through email—to ask whether you have a need for an assistant to help you make or prepare your works over the summer. And, if that’s the case, I’m proposing that I can fulfill that role for you.

As a queer man myself, your work is particularly gripping, and I find your paintings very important.’ This is actually much sweeter than I remember! ‘As an aspiring artist myself, and a visual arts major, I believe I would find learning from you through this position I am proposing hugely beneficial for my own artistic practice. Of course, the benefit to you would be *equally* as valuable.’ A little presumptuous! [laughs].

Morgan: How was Oscar as an assistant?

Louis: He was good. Some things he was better at than other things.

Oscar yi Hou: Like what?

Louis: You were really good at recommending tofu schmear for bagels! I had never had tofu schmear before. He cleaned my brushes beautifully. The one thing he wasn’t good at was when he sent all of the catalogs to different places. They had drawings in them for the people they were supposed to go to, and they all went to the wrong people.

Oscar: You never said anything about that!

Louis: Because I didn’t want you to feel bad about it. I was like, ‘I think *I’m* gonna do the FedEx from now on.’

Oscar: That was actually the first time I’d used FedEx. I remember that it was a really hot day, and I’d walked all the way. I called you and I was like, ‘How do I drop this off?’

Louis: It was all good. Some people were like, ‘Why does this say *For Ellen?*’ I didn’t want you to feel bad for no reason.

Morgan: Would either of you say you’ve been influenced by the other’s painting style?

Oscar: Not by your style, but your drawing practice inspired me to have a drawing practice. I was just focused on painting.

Louis: Your relationship to what you write has been inspiring for me. When I was younger, I would write a lot more. And then, I guess I was like, ‘Oh, that would just be something different, like if you were a poet or something.’ You incorporate [imagery with text] so seamlessly, and it’s really fruitful for your work. I want to start doing that.



Louis Frattino, sketched by Oscar Yi Hou during their conversation.

Oscar: You should. I mean, there’s always been text in your work. Those table paintings?

Louis: I’ve been tentative about it. In that big painting I was working—the one with me walking over the Williamsburg Bridge—there was all this text hidden in the graffiti on the bottom. I’ve been more self-conscious of what I write as opposed to how I draw.

Oscar: [Looking around] You have a lot of books.

Louis: Yeah, I love to *read* poetry. I don’t know if we’ve talked that much about poetry yet. Well, you’ve sent me stuff you’ve written, which was really nice.

Oscar: Thank you. You’re probably one of the few people who’ve actually read the poems, because you can’t really read them in my work.

Morgan: Do you exchange literature, then? What about film?

Oscar: Yeah. [Louis] loves Italian gay shit.

Louis: I do love Italian gay shit. You love Chinese gay shit. *Happy Together* was one we talked about a lot, which is such a beautiful movie.

Oscar: There's Yukio Mishima's *Confessions of a Mask*. A lot of gay photography.

Louis: I think both of us like to generate imagery by looking at gay photography. There is more gay figurative photography maybe than there is gay figurative painting, which might be why.

Oscar: Even in terms of the archive, there's probably more gay photos than paintings. You can hide a photo.

Louis: That's true, it can be a little bit more clandestine. And when you think about the gay figurative work that *is* made, like Charles Demuth's watercolors—those are small. Not like, the big oil paintings he's more known for.

I think that's a way our work is interpreted—it's a type of work that hasn't been made very much, where it's in full color, in oil paint, referencing parts of history that haven't been referenced yet in a queer or gay context.

Oscar: We talk about that a lot—being queer figurative artists, and the whole discourse that surrounds that.

Louis: Yeah, it's a complicated one. No need to *not* be out in your work. But since it's also such a commodified thing, it can be kind of fraught, I guess.

Oscar: Your most recent show at Sikkema is very at home, very domestic. A lot of people have this vision of you just painting men fucking men. Your work is so much more expansive than that.

Louis: I was thinking too about who benefits from what kind of signifiers in queer figurative work. There is power in seeing men fucking each other. That's still actually not the norm in painting, or in anything. But there is also a flip side to that.

You sent me an essay about the performance of an identity, which is kind of another prison in some way—it's like, *This is the content that belongs to you, as this kind of person*. I've been thinking about that a lot in recent work. The natural world is also *our* content. That extends to all minority groups. There's this idea of the default man—the heterosexual, white man, and he belongs in certain environments. Gay men belong in the club, in bed together, and that's it.



Morgan: Oscar—as a Chinese gay artist, is there an even narrower lens of acceptable subjects for you?

Oscar: For a show I curated, QUEER OUT T/HERE at Tong Art Advisory, some of the artists were both Chinese and queer. Martin Wong, Tseng Kwong-Chi—those people do exist. Right now, there are overarching discourses that kind of constrict [artists with minority identities]. There are a lot of expectations placed onto you to produce work in a particular way, whereas I think minority identities open you up, really.

Louis: It's something that I don't have to confront in my work at all—this other layer of an identity, or way that my identity could be consumed. How do you feel like they intersect in your work?

Oscar: Right now especially, in the wake of a lot of anti-Asian sentiment, I'm very proud to be Chinese, proud to be Yellow.

For this piece I did, *birds of a feather flock together, aka: A New Family Portrait*, [the first half of the title] alludes to the way people critique Asians for sticking together. Cathy Park Hong recently released a text called *Minor Feelings*. It's a really good exploration of Asian American consciousness. She talks about this thing where you see too many Asians in a room, as an Asian person. There's a voice in the back of your head saying, 'I don't stand out.'

Being Asian, being a guy, the process of racialization is one of gendering. When you're racialized as being Yellow, you're feminized. With women, it's being docile, submissive. With men, it's being effeminate, celestial, bottom, gay. Whenever I think about Asian American politics, a lot of it has to do with gender and sexuality. I never look at these two things as separate.

Louis: And I guess painting's duty is to represent a lived experience, or a felt experience, that would always be at odds with those things—because they're constructs, and because they cannot be true about people. It's a lot to feel responsible for in your work, I would imagine.

Oscar: The fraughtness of being Asian in America—there's a lot that comes with it. As an artist, as a cultural worker, I want to do my part to help change that, or try and update it in some way. But I also want to be free, and do what I want. It's a similar thing with queerness. What I'm doing with my work is giving testament. You are doing this as well—just giving testament to our respective lives, the people we encounter.

Louis: Have you seen *Alice Neel: People Come First* at the Met yet?

Oscar: Yes!

Louis: That show really made me want to draw from life more. It forces you to encounter the subject in a different way. I was so impressed by those paintings, because you imagine

Alice saying to the sitter, ‘Make eye contact with me,’ how intense that is, and how rarely are we in that position in day-to-day life.

I feel like there’s something I’m not comfortable with in my work—the near anonymity of the figures almost presents an idea about what a default person would be in my mind. Like, ‘If it’s not someone specific, why are they racialized in that way? Why do they look like you?’ I feel like it comes from the fact that they are intended to illustrate a certain experience. But more than that, they’re about someone being able to have a relationship with them. Something about Alice Neel’s work—the fact that those people have such power as individuals, that’s not even part of the conversation for her.

Oscar: The figures you’re painting, they look like you. When I see them, they’re not really anonymous. They’re just a part of yourself that you’re putting into the world.

Louis: Yeah, I think I wonder about that, too. Does the world need images of me? Is that the best way to get someone to empathize with something?

Oscar: Every human being has put their life into the work that they create. That’s why I really like your work. It’s very honest. You’re painting your life.

Louis: But don’t you feel like that’s a bit of an eye roll, when you sense in someone’s work that it’s about having themselves be known? When people ask, ‘Oh, is that you?’ I’m like, ‘You really missed the point.’

Oscar: There’s always a danger of erring into solipsism when you’re painting your own world. But also, that’s all we ever do when we paint. If we paint someone else, we’re just painting ourselves in our relationship to that person.

I would say that what we’re doing is ‘minor art.’ Minor in the sense that, you know, we’re both queer. It’s not minority art, but art from people who are *rendered* minority. For example, women: Although they’re a majority, they’re considered a minority because of their lack of representation and power. A lot of minor art is about just giving testament to having survived and living a minor personhood.

Morgan: What’s the difference between normalizing and complicating notions of minor personhood? How do you assert your intentions one way or the other?



Oscar yi Hou, sketched by Louis Fratino during their conversation.

Louis: Well, it's funny... I feel like that's such a contemporary issue within painting: the intention of the artist. It's like the Dana Schutz thing. What was her intention? Or with Picasso, representing a woman. What were his intentions? It's not something I have an answer for, but it's a curious question. What role does the intention of an artist have in an artwork? Does an artwork have a responsibility to say it all? Or is the artist's intention negligible, and it's actually just about the experience a viewer has with it?

Oscar: I feel like back in the day, artists could really do whatever they wanted, and then art historians and critics would then impose a particular meaning onto it. Whereas now, there's an increasing need for artists to understand the consequences of what they're doing.

Louis: But don't you feel like this discussion around the artist's intention is also a way out for an artist who makes a mistake? And it's kind of like—it doesn't absolve you of the things you did, because your intentions were good. This kind of intangible thing that doesn't exist within the object.

Oscar: There are always opportunities for artists to outline their intentions. In artist statements, and things.

Louis: Right. And then in their *artwork*, to be clear about it. I think it goes back to this conversation I was having earlier, on whether an artwork can be an immoral or moral thing. Is there 'goodness' to an artwork? I kind of feel like there isn't. There can be an inherent beauty. And there can be power. But I don't know that there is an inherent goodness.

Oscar: Do you know of any 'bad' artists?

Louis: Well, Caravaggio murdered someone. Does it mean that his work is bad art?

Oscar: The big Picasso question.

Louis: Yeah, Picasso, it's rougher than I realized. I was reading an essay in front of a group of his etchings. I didn't realize the domino effect of his violence within his family. Jacqueline killed herself, Marie Thérèse. I think all of them didn't survive except Françoise Gilot, who still lives in the Upper West Side.

Oscar: Nowadays, I figure Picasso couldn't exist.

Louis: Well, I don't know about that. There are a lot of nasty guys making a lot of expensive art.

Morgan: Do you think that queer art is overwhelmingly masculine?

Louis: I think that relates to the illegitimizing way society talks about lesbian relationships. The value is placed so much on being a man, that the reneging of masculinity is more of a shock to normative society.. I've read that somewhere—people are almost like, 'Oh, let [women] do their thing.' Gay relationships, at least historically, were a harder pill for America to swallow—because of that deliberate feminization.

I'm not saying in any way that makes it easier for lesbians. If anything, it makes it harder. There's a different kind of celebration of gay male figurative work. It's probably related to the way identity within queerness relates to gender. People are still giving men more power.

Oscar: Yeah, even in gay spaces. Gay men are the worst [laughs].



Morgan: How do you two interact with the gay social scene in New York?

Oscar: I like Mood Ring.

Louis: Oh my god, I have such a horrible story about that place. In 2018, I was like, 'I'm having my birthday at Mood Ring, everyone come and dance.' I invited all these people.

It was the birthday of the people that *founded* Mood Ring. All my friends arrived and they were like, 'This is so bumpin, what the fuck?' I was like, 'This is someone *else's* birthday party.' The people that *owned* the bar. It was so embarrassing. I'm horrified at the prospect of having to attend a social function I'm not one hundred percent sure I'm invited to. That was like, the ultimate version of that.

Morgan: Oscar, didn't you also have a birthday party at Mood Ring?

Oscar: Yeah. I was so drunk. Everyone was there, it was really fun. I tried to go into Mood Ring, but I was too drunk so I went back out. I sat down a couple blocks down. I found these AirPods.

Louis: And they were yours.

Oscar: From then on, they were mine. If you give a gift to New York—have I talked to you about this? It's kind of like the umbrella economy. If you lose an umbrella, you'll find one.

Louis: Oh yeah, it actually happened to me at the Guggenheim once. I had just bought an umbrella from Muji. It was raining. I checked it, I went back, and they just handed me some random umbrella. I was like, 'Oh, sorry, that's not my umbrella.' And the woman was like, 'An umbrella's an umbrella.' Like, fuck, that was like thirty-five dollars! Now I had one that said *Purdue University*.

Oscar: Only buy umbrellas from the deli, because you're gonna lose them. But if you give a gift to New York, it'll give one to you back. If you leave an offering, like a cupcake on the street for the rats to enjoy—

Louis: You'll get a ratty cupcake one night. I think that's true of New York. I think you have to project a certain kind of romance onto it for it to treat you well. That's the case for anything you love. You've got to project a little bit. Which is maybe kind of nihilistic, but true. And fine.



Morgan: What are the qualities of a scene you might want to paint? Do you recognize them as you live them, or in hindsight?

Oscar: Sometimes from life, like when a person is posing in a particular way. But also from photos.

Louis: And sometimes it's those things coming together. I'll see a photo of a body in a certain light, and it's just so beautiful. And then I'll remember something that happened to me that was so beautiful. The two of those will come together in a painting.

Oscar: You know what I'm doing right now? A table painting.

Morgan: It's based on that Alice Neel.

Oscar: It's the one of the gay couple. One has a button undone, his hairy chest. A bowl of fruit on the table.

Louis: I've copied Alice Neel paintings also. [When] my brother had a baby, I wanted to paint her. Alice Neel paints them so well, because there's something so unsentimental about her representations of *anyone*—but I think there aren't so many unsentimental images of babies out there.

I copied the Alice Neel but said it was my niece. Because it was for me, you know? It wasn't from a photo of her or anything, or from an experience I had very directly. But that's a way that I interact with art history in my own lived experience.

Oscar: You're using art history as a vehicle for your own life.

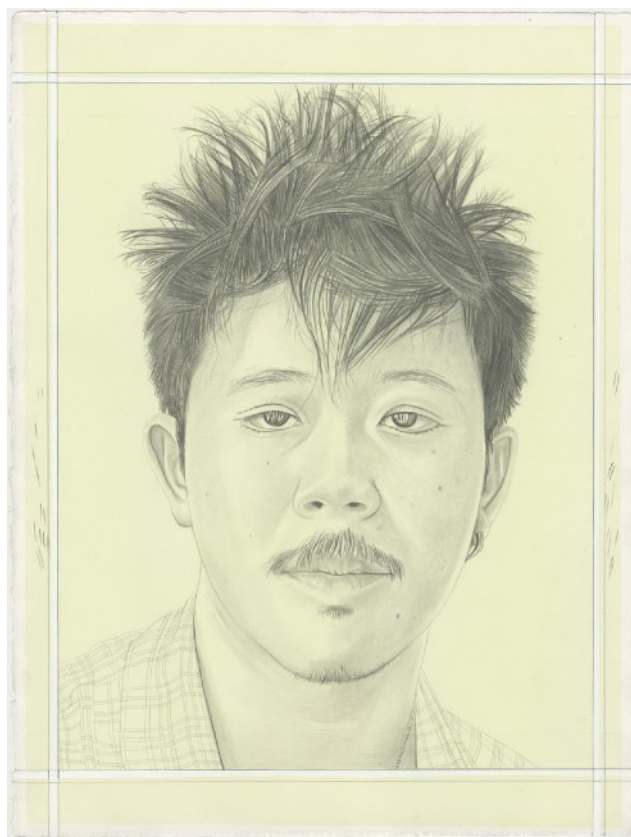
Louis: We're associative thinkers, and because we're visual thinkers, seeing something kind of alters the way you see that thing for the rest of your life—if it's powerful.

Oscar: Martin Wong, his bricks. Every time I'm in New York...

Louis: Exactly, and how magic is that? Now you have a Martin Wong version of New York living with you. I think that's also why I'm attracted to painting the everyday. It's sort of a way of transforming the everyday. If you project something, you'll get it back. Like projecting beauty onto doing the dishes, or walking down the sidewalk, then it becomes that for you.

Art | In Conversation

Oscar yi Hou with Andrew Woolbright



Portrait of Oscar yi Hou. Pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

To understand Oscar yi Hou's practice, you have to see it through its rhythm of language—the edges that are formed by words, and the way that they are able to perpetuate the invisible but real architectures of alterity. Oscar's portraiture is a language engine—producing a textual and metaphysical hum throughout. It is almost inaudible, but it's there. It's what produces the urgency in his portraiture. The years of bad language from others have never left him—the years of words that reify and aim to sort and categorize ultimately inscribe subjects as remote and peripheral support. The bad language and its memory were needed for the good language to come out—the languages that Oscar forms of intention and attention, of relationality and recovery. The flattening sign and signifier that have operated against marginalized communities, has now taught the artist the methods needed to

make sigils—to cache and encode meaning, to form and unform legibility through cascades of metaphysics and indecipherability. The artist captures what hovers between two people sitting in a room—one drawing the other while talking. Where the “representationalism,” a word coined by the artist, has aimed to flatten and overdetermine the artist’s experience, yi Hou has inverted it to recognize, dimensionalize, and develop.

It doesn’t take a tremendous amount of psychoanalysis to see why Oscar takes on the portrait. His is a lifetime of being portraitized through words—as patriarchal normativity proves incapable of understanding his Asian identity through the colonial project, or his sexuality within a heteronormative culture. He is never unaware of this portrait that has been assigned to him by the majoritarian cult—the overlay of assumptions and expectations that peripheralize his experience. He knows too well the ways that questions are formed to deliver alienating subtexts—intended to keep the margins from feeling comfortable within. The way questions formed with “are you...” have the ability to freeze you in place, like “where are you from? Where are you *really* from?” So his portraiture takes all of those moments and situates bodies somewhere between anatomy and calligraphy, where each body is able to produce its own text. He externalizes the object of his own trauma of identity outwards, transforming it into a relational generosity, something that is workable from both ends. When a friend comes to the studio for their portrait, Oscar’s questions are different from the ones he’s asked and expected to answer. In the studio, he’s able to use language in the ways he’s needed it for himself. The model hears “you know what you’re doing. Do what makes you feel comfortable. I trust you” or “is it ok if I include this in the painting? What do you think?” He trusts and asks the questions that he hasn’t been asked. He takes on the cipher, becomes the placeholder, visualizes how relational it all is. Each question that has been formed against him has made a careful young artist, interested in the responsibility of depicting others.

Gombrich's obsession with the schema became Oscar's. You see it in a certain kind of precision, in both language and in the way he paints his subjects. It is a precision only accessible by those who have experienced marginalization—the tightrope of expectation and the pressure on how to represent one's self that it produces. This precision necessitates slowness, that is both an argument for itself and a critique of speed and abbreviation. Nothing is errant. It isn't nervous, but it is aware of its own responsibility, and all that it is pressing up against. It's weight. The weight of responsibility someone feels to do right by others, and themselves. It's the process of correcting a stutter, the stutter produced from being in a hostile culture. It's taking the stutter and making it a glitch by shaping the schema with others. The painter and the sitter build it together, forming a space of disidentification. Without romanticizing it, it takes a certain amount of heartbreak to make a portrait. You have to experience alienation to form the intensity of care that great observational painting requires. In Oscar's portraiture, the experience is encrypted, withheld, intimate, kept private between the artist and the subject. It is elusive when it needs to be, inviting when it needs to be. It is a language of survival that Oscar has developed to mine and understand his own labor, and reflect the visage of the spectator back at them through mirrors. It holds an account, while finding moments of ceremony for communities and people that need it—deserve it. To coincide with his show *East of Sun, West of Moon* at the Brooklyn Museum, I sat down with Oscar on the *Rail's* "New Social Environment" to explore some of these subjects. Below is an edited version of that conversation



Installation view: Oscar yi Hou: *East of sun, west of moon*, Brooklyn Museum, 2023. Courtesy the Brooklyn Museum.

Andrew Woolbright (Rail): I was interested in Simon Wu's contribution to your book and how it relates to your work. He said the closest phrase to "I love you" in Burmese is "I chip you" or "I chip off a piece of you" or "I keep a piece of you." And I think that that really gets to something you are doing within your practice. There's this really dynamic vocabulary of portraiture mixed with languaging, and together it becomes an almost sculptural language of keeping and belonging. It's something that I see in your work, this love that is expressed by chipping something from someone, and it comes across most clearly for me in your drawings. I'm wondering how you think about that relationship between your drawing and your painting?

Oscar yi Hou: To chip away a piece from someone is an interesting way of thinking about love—it's material. I certainly do work with these "chips" or "fragments" that my people shed in my vicinity, when I'm with them. And I suppose these fragments become talismanic. However, chipping-off to me feels subtractive, whereas I tend to think about love as being more additive, or multiplicative.

Writing is drawing, drawing is writing, writing is inscription—which is etching, which is manual, which is hand-work. It's all fundamental to my practice. Generally, every painting begins with the drawing, with preparatory sketches and stuff like that; but also, the way I paint kind of feels like drawing. I use long skinny brushes, which means my mark-making is similar to how I might draw, with a focus on line and mark. To this end I don't really differentiate between painting and drawing. For example, *Entitled (Him who licks the sky)* (2020), is putatively a drawing on paper, but I used a pen-brush to make it. Is ink not a form of paint? So where do we draw the line? Literally and figuratively speaking.

Rail: Going into that. You know, we love talking about relationality here at the *Rail*, and I know a dear friend of the *Rail* Tomas Vu was someone you worked with at Columbia. I'm wondering what your experience was like working with him and how that has influenced your practice.

Yi Hou: It was awesome. I took a class called "Drawing Into Print" with him. I want to say it was sophomore year, but college is all kind of a blur, and especially with COVID, I lost half of that whole experience. With Tomas, in that class, I learned some of the fundamentals of printmaking, a practice I hadn't really done before. Monoprinting fascinated me the most. My text-based practice originated with monoprints. I would write spontaneous prose

in ink, and run the plate through the roller a couple times. Each successive print would degrade in clarity, eventually tending towards the spectral and illegible. During that time I also watched *Brokeback Mountain* for the first time, so I also produced a series of prose-infused cowboy themed monoprints, cowboys doing very gay things to each other. In that class I had to work pretty quickly and iteratively, and as such, I was able to work through a lot of ideas in a highly generative way. So I thank Tomas for that class—it was very formative! I also used that class to get out of the drawing requirement at Columbia, thank god. In that class I was technically “drawing”—but I was using a paint brush. To produce prints. Drawing is painting, painting is drawing. Printmaking is somewhere within or eccentric to that matrix.



Oscar yi Hou, *Coolieisms, aka: Sly Son Goku turns 23*, 2021. Oil on canvas, 30 x 24 inches. Courtesy the Brooklyn Museum.

Rail: Yeah, it comes across in your paintings—this wonderful relationship between real, dimensionalized structure that comes from you keeping the pigments separate. But then this motif of logograms, symbols, and language that you bring into it. They sometimes feel like stickers on the paintings. Or maybe it's a more metaphysical gesture. How long have you been doing that in your practice? Or what's the connection for you, that interest of fusing language and portraiture the way that you do?

Yi Hou: Sometimes the symbolic world is diegetic to the subject's world—shadows may be cast between them for example. Other times it's non-diegetic, and they exist more metaphysically. I've always been interested in signifiers and significations. Anyone who is rendered minor has access to these subcultural languages and signifying practices, these codes of the margins. For me, I guess it was growing up as part of the Chinese diaspora. What objects or signs signified “the East” or “the Other” for example, growing up and working in my family's Chinese restaurant. It was in this diasporic context, as someone who can't read or write Chinese, that I became fascinated with language as a whole. Chinese became this intimately familiar yet completely foreign universe, more icon than logos.

Besides an aesthetic interest in language, I've always written too. Before I wrote poems I wrote a lot of song lyrics! I also love writing essays, which I thank college for. Reading, texts, and literature are also foundational to my practice, which I think is apparent in the essays I wrote for the book. It's natural that all these things are coextensive with art-making.

Rail: I love that. I mean, I think a lot of people have made the association with your work that it is a type of portraiture that is reminiscent of Alice Neel, but I also think of artists like John Graham, who was very influential to the Abstract Expressionists, specifically Jackson Pollock. He represented this early moment of not knowing where to go with mimesis and the figure—

wanting to keep together a portrait, but also feeling a need to challenge and break any sense of illusionism. I think it was an early moment within representational painting where it felt like it ran out of gas and had to set out to remind us that there's all this metaphysical excess at the border, these thoughts and ideas and inscriptions that are happening. But for you, it feels like there's an urgency to the way you are disrupting mimetic cohesion. Beyond this ability that you have to communicate empathy or your sincere attempt at understanding your subjects, you're also involved in this very complex thing that you've termed representationalism—this cultural expectation and limitation that you are critiquing and very aware of and its double bind you have to consider as a portrait painter. Can you talk about this concept of representationalism?

Yi Hou: In the essays I wrote for my book, I use the term “representationalism” to describe, essentially, the political recuperation and defanging of identity politics by liberal multiculturalism to serve capitalist ends. It's corporate DEI. It's an ideology which seeks to represent, and often deputize, minoritarian subjects within larger structures of power. It sort of speaks to the perfectibility of liberalism as it is embedded within racial capitalism. My context is obviously the art world, but we live in such an all-consuming world of appearances that it's something we see in all spheres. In the art world, it's the conversion of the image, or the representation, of the Other into commodity. Such commodities are of course often tied to transfers of extreme wealth or financial speculation. But beyond their exchange-value, these commodities are also flattened into moral fetishes, within the rubric of liberal multiculturalism—elites are able to buy and trade these images to purchase moral alibi, for example. The use-value of such commodities is simply the sign, or token, of “diversity.” The aesthetic value is of less importance, despite aesthetics being the whole conceit of art. In brief, the market compels minor artists to produce works which are legible *as minor*, yet palatable and tasty enough to be eaten by this machine.

Of course, under the rubric of diversity, there is a lot of restorative work being done, and important historical redress. Many people have fought for this moment. But it's a complicated issue, especially in the hype of identity-based figuration, which I myself have materially benefited from. I know that some eschew the figure entirely. But I think the figure still has so much more to say. It's not the sole ingredient of personhood, of course, but it's the most sensuous. As Darby English has said, "the figure is a sign of life."

Rail: The figure, yes. And I've always felt as a painter, that part of the reason painting continues to be relevant is that it is capable of layering critique in this complicated way. It's able to cultivate desire, but then when you bring someone in—I think what your work does so well is it really conditions a second guessing of it, you're going like, wait am I implicated in this process—is that reification thing happening? Or is it the awareness of that reification being possible? Is that enough? And searching for the answers through painting of how to avoid being flattened really works. Painting still argues for itself because of its ability to lure, but then it's the subjectivity of the painter that disrupts it. I think this work channels those questions in a really interesting way. I'm wondering, going off of that, how you approach your subjects, your models, and what the process is—how much is observation versus photography? And how much are they involved in their depiction?

Yi Hou: I work mainly from drawings and photographs I take in the studio. In terms of how much they're involved in the works' makings, it really depends—sometimes the subjects want to be told how to pose, other times they know what to do. For example, in *Une rosace entre me, toi, and l'autre, aka: l'éventail of l'orient (Mont-réal-est)* (2022), the subject, Chris, is someone who very profoundly understands her own beauty and glamor, and she knows how to posture her own body. With her, she just sat down, and that was all we needed—that was that.

There's often a continued involvement in their depiction. My own philosophy towards representing the Other is that I'm representing the relationship that I share with them. I embed and encode this relationship in a variety of ways. I guess, going back to what you said about "chipping away," there's pieces of information that I learned just from conversation. For example, Chris's favorite flower is a rose. So that's why she's holding a bouquet of roses. The letters that descend on the floor spell the French word, R-O-S-A-C-E, which is rose-themed. Chris is based in Montréal, so there are bilingual references in the work and in the title. Her favorite number is three, which is why on the bottom left there's a three inscribed on the floor. So there's a logic to the symbols, and a signification to most of them. These fragments, or maybe excesses, of a person end up becoming recorded and encrypted within the piece in a way that is only legible to the subject and I.



Oscar yi Hou, *Une rosace entre me, toi, and l'autre, aka: l'éventail of l'orient (Mont-réal-est)*, 2022. Oil, ink on canvas, 64 x 46 inches. Courtesy the Brooklyn Museum.

Rail: What I like about these paintings is that they're also communicating through images. I get a sense that you're sharing the same oxygen as these people, you're breathing the same air, you're aware of the way they're sitting and you're sitting, and there's an endurance to that, the way that you're depicting them that then, yes, gets brought into the studio through photography, but at least the initial step seems to very much be sharing a physical space. And like you said, that means that they are involved in their depiction. Going back to the numerology and the logos, would you go so far as to refer to it as a type of "sigil-ing"? Are they sigils? Like, what is the language that you're creating, employing, like some of your favorite things, or their things? This shuffling together of your interests and theirs—I mean, it's kind of like a heraldry of a person and the relationship you have with them then. Or is it? I guess what I'm asking—Do you invite the language of magic? Would you go so far as to consider it as a form of magic like that sigil-ing, and is there a significant difference to you between that embedding or that encoding? A sigil is a process of binding—of charging a type of abstraction with meaning before losing the meaning of the thing in the process. It's a purposeful forgetting of its meaning as an attempt to store something transcendent in it. I mean, the language of encryption feels parallel to a type of sympathetic magic, I feel like these words get very close to each other. But I wonder if that's too romantic?

Yi Hou: I think the language the paintings create is a sense of mutualism, but also complexity, encryption. The signs—the objects, symbols, the language fragments—are a form of mutually encrypted code, protected through a cipher. And the cipher is the You-I relationship that I share with the subject. I'm interested in opacity, and honoring opacity, in the way that Édouard Glissant wrote a lot about. "Diversity" in the real sense of multiplicity,

unknowability, of being-with. Creating opacity through symbology also, I hope, invites the viewer to spend more time with the work, to slow down its consumption. The work hopefully invites work on the part of the viewer, maybe not necessarily in the sense of to look is to labor, but work in the physics-sense, which is the exchange of energy via force done upon something. In any case, the act of decoding, or reading the work, hopefully creates more of a dialogical relationship between the viewer, the artwork, and the artist, rather than more of a one-way didactic one.

Magic is a really interesting kind of metaphor to use. Magic. I mean, what is magic? Is it the otherworldly? The transformation of fantasy into reality? Or just the illusion of it? I don't really believe in magic. Sure, I think a lot of things in my life might be magical, and I think that life is magic in a way, but I think I've always approached life with a more earthbound logic.

To this end, I suppose they're sigils in the sense that they communicate something from beyond, but very infrequently is it something suprahuman. They often tend to be quite indexical and matter of fact. I think encryption and opacity engenders an air of mystery which bestows the illusion of magic. But I'm very human-centric. I think the metaphysicality of humanness is magical, but also very *human*, very mundane. It is what it is.

Rail: I like the more digital language you apply to it—the caching and encryption and inscribing, encoding, but that also feels close to, you know, early definitions of magic through the *magi*, the Persian magoth and the binding of the metaphysical world and the deciphering of unknowability through dreams, of trying to transfer something that can't be transferred, through images, which I think this idea of portraiture really engages in on some level.

Yi Hou: I think a lot about Trinh T. Minh-ha's work, especially in her text *Woman, Native, Other*. She explains how the language of Taoism and Zen are complex and opaque, but are able to transmit much more profundity than more conventionally clear prose. Koans, for example, are stories and riddles rife with paradox, and yet it's through this complexity that the reader is taken along for the ride so to speak and comes to their own conclusions and answers. She contrasts this with the authoritarianism of the "clear" prose of rhetoric which often seeks to persuade through command, through more normative conventions of ordered language, cause-effect. The authoritarianism lies in the fact that it seeks to produce and persuade people of a single answer, by delineating a straight, clear, overly illuminated path. However, it's only through meandering through the darkness and bramble of a Koan does one come closer to enlightenment. There's much more of a multiplicity of interpretation, which is the kind of hermeneutic I prefer when it comes to art. But of course, there's always a balance, this tension between mystery and clarity, opacity and transparency. You just always gotta be honest with it.

Rail: I really enjoy thinking about these paintings through the valence of the koan. The winding riddle or the derive that allows for new paths to be formed in its illegibility.

I like this idea of taking this very materially grounded form and really trying to understand the imminence of someone and translate that but then you're also engaging in like that same pleasure that you get from looking at the Ripley Scroll. That moment where you get a sense that the signs are becoming symbols that we can't access. The Koan invites the person along for a ride but it also forms deep memory, a memory of shared experience. There's a map, but then there's something beyond me that shifts it into that eidetic

space where you will remember the subjects you've painted as a viewer. I feel like, like you said, that magical language isn't conventionally pedagogical, but it is something that forms a permanence in our memory, like, those abstract languages really make us remember these portraits in a way. That's the skin of them, the point of transference. I really liked the quote you included from Roland Barthes—"Language is a skin: I rub my language against the other. It is as if I had words instead of fingers, or fingers at the tip of my words. My language trembles with desire." I wanted to talk about how you become the cipher and explore that. Can you talk about that ciphering and that stuttering that you're interested in through language?

Yi Hou: I really love that quote, which is from *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*. I think it really speaks to the immanence of yearning, this feeling of grasping, when we *do* language. Trying to convert the immaterial—especially something as crazy as human desire—into these legible signs always feels a little Sisyphean. I'm interested in this kind of friction, between two semiotic systems. Between two cultures, to give one example, or between language and the body, to give another. Language being the fingertip through which we touch the Other, the unknowable. Drawing is a similar type of proboscis. Literally I suppose, as you mark-make at the interface, at the surface of paper or canvas. It's so physical, it's in your hands as you etch and inscribe yourself into the world. Something that doesn't exist yet. The next stroke, the next word, it doesn't exist until you write it. That tension of poiesis, it's so ripe with possibility.

Rail: But I like the way you describe it, that ability to evoke, it's something that doesn't exist yet. But like language it's a thing that can perform or evoke something into being. I was reminded of a lecture by Jan Verwoert when looking at your show, where he talks about the importance of ceremony within art, that the artist functions as the storyteller of a community, shares an oral history that then community can gather around. And art is an

important act of ceremony, which is an opportunity for the community to come together and remember the stories of ancestors and ghosts, but also, it is planning for the future, it's a temporal shifting that language can create. And I think that your work has some relationship to ceremony.

Yi Hou: Yeah. My paintings take a long time to make. The larger ones generally take between one to two months, sometimes more. So I don't actually produce that many works in a year. I am generally pretty precious and intentional with what I paint, though I've been trying to soften that approach recently. But they do just take a while. With *Ends of Empire*, for example, it's seven feet tall. And writing all the small lettering with a paintbrush takes time. I used pure oil pigment from a cadmium red paint stick, which takes weeks to dry. So your wrist can't really rest against the canvas or it gets smudged. It's a very labor intensive way to write, but I like it as a form of ceremony, ritual, the way such labor is embedded in the work—at least for now, I feel that it has to be my hand making these marks, not outsourced to an assistant. It feels special to have this kind of toil that gets buried within the work. But I guess ceremony takes time, and I have deadlines and demands and liabilities, but I do want to keep making it this way as much as I can.

Rail: And also, a quick moment, I mean, another tightrope within that work is just the use of cadmium red, which is such a difficult color that doesn't want to mix with anything else without making ugly browns. I really, just from a painter's standpoint, appreciate the way you did the shadows and know how difficult that is with that color. Things have to be kept very separate when using that color and you have to paint around it.

Yi Hou: Yeah, it's very stubborn. It's toxic, carcinogenic, it doesn't dry, it sticks to your skin. But it's a beautiful color. There's nothing like it. And there are cultural significations to red too, in Chinese visual culture for example.



Rail: I'm interested in what role fetish and leather play within the work. But I also am wondering if I'm correct in seeing it as your kind of critique of this, this language you use of deputizing that goes back to representationalism, like the idea that when minoritarian subjects within a dominant culture, when they're allowed to express themselves, you're expected to express yourself in a way that reifies that liberal humanism like you said, or justifies it. You're deputized and expected to reinforce it, while flattening your own experience in the process. I interpreted the cowboy hat as possibly a layer of critique of identity fetish, but how are you thinking of it?

Yi Hou: Many cultures around the world have a heroic knight type figure, often functioning as nationalistic avatar—in America, it's the cowboy. Even though the actual job of a cowboy is pretty humble, as a mythic figure he has been sublimated through American culture—and it's interesting because the United States is a relatively new country—sublimated into the founding myths of America, in whom all these myths and fictions that America likes to tell itself congeal. I also think about the cowboy in relation to the American cult of masculinity, especially how it dovetails with American expansionism. If we look at Roosevelt for example, and how he fused the rhetoric of American-frontiersman manhood with US imperialism. Myths of racial purity and whiteness also congeal with the mythic cowboy, even though historically speaking cowboys were actually racially diverse.

So I think about all these things in relation to the history of Chinese people in America, and I guess Asians at large, in this country. Chinese people have been in America since 1820, and thousands of Chinese laborers helped construct the first transcontinental railroad. I've talked about this a lot before—how they were treated incredibly poorly, and how they have been largely left out of popular memory, despite being vital to the construction of a foundational piece of American infrastructure that enabled westward expansion. Then there was the rise of anti-Chinese rhetoric, violence, and legislation in the later decades of the nineteenth century, which is, in many ways, coextensive with the rise of anti-Asian rhetoric today.

So the figure of the cowboy is a very vexed one, and in my own work I approach him with José Esteban Muñoz's writings on disidentification. As Muñoz writes about it, the minoritarian operates within the hegemonic sphere, recircuiting and remixing the semiotics. In queer contexts, this is

often enacted through performance. So by having East Asian figures perform and dress-up as the cowboy, it exposes the artifice, the myth, of such a figure—it points out the contradictions of such myth, by having subjects who are historically precluded from inhabiting America’s nationalistic myths, “perform” these myths.



Oscar yi Hou, *Coolieisms aka Gold Mountain Cruiser The Mineshafts after hours trade*, 2022. Courtesy the Brooklyn Museum.

Rail: Yeah, that's interesting. Incorporating disidentification—neither an acceptance of hegemony or becoming its reactionary—Basquiat possessing the figure of Superman. Can you talk about *Cowboy Kato Coolie, aka: Bruce's Bitch*, (2021)?

Yi Hou: This piece is based off the character Kato, that Bruce Lee played in the TV show *The Green Hornet* from the sixties. Bruce plays the martial artist valet of the protagonist, *The Green Hornet*. The character of Kato is really interesting in the history of “yellow” iconicity because Bruce Lee specifically chose to perform the character of Kato in a way to destabilise conventional racialised semiotics—the relationship between Asian masculinity, subordinacy, submissiveness, for example. The painting thinks about this also in relation to leather, kink, and queer cultural depictions of hypermasculinity, of artists like Tom of Finland for example. Such depictions of hypermasculinity are interesting—it's about masculine desire, sure, but also I find it to be a form of drag, excessive male drag. It's this kind of excessive queer performance of masculinity that I feel destabilises the integrity of heteromascularity, though it's also not without its problems of course. There is also the connection between race and masculinity too, specifically the feminization of yellow men, how East Asian men are precluded from conventional masculinity. That's something that was a part of anti-Chinese rhetoric in the turn of the twentieth century too. There's this fascinating historical document, published in 1902 by the American Federation of Labor, titled “Meat Vs Rice: American Manhood Against Asiatic Coolieism, which Shall Survive?” It's one of the inspirations behind my body of work called “Coolieisms.”

Rail: Could we talk more about this idea of labor and use value and exchange value, especially with the “Coolieisms” series? Can you talk about how you feel your labor is being used, and what part feels like labor to you? And this is a really important subject within your work, and I'd love to hear your thoughts on it.

Yi Hou: In the painting *Coolieisms, AKA: Leather Daddy Highbinder Odalisque*, (2022) the figure has the Chinese character for labor tattooed on his left forearm. I mentioned before the history of Chinese people in America, and alluded to the relationship between labor and racial capitalism. The labor of people of color is so deeply embedded within the foundations of America, but we intentionally forget. It becomes commodity fetishised in a way—we forget all the social relations which precondition our current existence, or America's existence as a global superpower.

I think I've just always been interested in racialized labor. Working in the family restaurant back in Liverpool for example—an immigrant first-gen Chinese restaurant is a very archetypal kind of ethnicized labor. And it was such a family affair too—my mother was front of house, my father was the chef, my auntie and cousin worked as kitchen helpers, and my brother and I worked as servers. It's interesting to think about. Food is often the interface people have with other cultures. We served food that differed so hugely from the staff meals we would eat, or the food we'd eat at home. Not that I care whether either is more “authentic” than the other. But I was always fascinated to witness.



Rail: And this self portrait you did is important. I remember seeing it at your James Fuentes show, and it felt like its heart in many ways. You're using yourself as the cipher, this body of disguise and performance of languagability, or this languaging, that you're working through. Because the other thing we haven't brought up is the quote you had from your book, "...perhaps language will always be something that the queer child either fails

or masters,” this fixation and imposition of pressure on how you articulate, how you use language, how you perform, in these these cultures and not knowing at every step, what you're revealing, or what you're giving away, or what secret is being let out and what's staying encoded in you, I feel like *Cowboy Kato Coolie, aka: Bruce's Bitch* is traversing a lot of those valences that you have to manage and navigate.

Yi Hou: Yeah. I think any minoritarian subject has a complicated relationship to mastery. How well a colonized subject, or an immigrant, any minorised subject, can “master” the major, or hegemonic language, for example. My parents gave me an English name so that I'd be able to fit more easily into Western society. This of course relates to queerness as well. When I was younger, the kind of homophobia I experienced—I remember people commenting on how I sounded gay. Then my voice broke, and it sounds different now, but I always think, what was lost? When I “mastered” language? I was able to navigate the world in a far safer way than a lot of my peers, especially growing up in Liverpool, but I always feel a sense of loss. In the book I describe it as shedding feathers.

Rail: I really appreciate how you handle those complications within your practice. And I just think that—and also would like to know more about this, this feeling of mastery, because I feel like you're rephrasing Alice Neel to some degree, also possibly Juanita McNeely, Cézanne, maybe Philip Pearlstein, it's a language you're rephrasing that communicates empathy. And I really appreciate that, but I wonder how it feels when you paint yourself, how that differs from when you're painting others? And also, do you think of rephrasing versus, say, quoting?

Yi Hou: I tend to paint my eyebrows and mustache as thicker than they actually are, for sure! Which I think is just vanity. A little projection. But yes, I've painted myself a lot—I'm not very precious with it. I'm tired by my own visage. It's more of an image than a face, if that makes sense. But it's a lot easier because there's less of a procedure of care needed. You can abuse your own image. That's why I use my own likeness as a vague reference for the "Coolieisms" series—they aren't portraits of others, so I can manhandle the figures a little more.

I think I actually quote more than I rephrase. My practice is pretty citational—I reference a lot. Cultural artifacts, other artists, books, etc. You know, in the book there's a whole cento of just quotes. I was giving a talk for Troy Montes-Michie's class at Princeton a while back, and afterward he commented on how my practice actually functions a lot like collage, which makes sense to me. As an artist I try to be as embedded in the world as possible, and the world is obviously relational, discursive.

Rail: Can we go back to the beginning for a moment? Your drawings for me feel like such a different language. And maybe that's just to some degree what a lot of drawings do within a practice, but it feels like it really reveals... I mean, I love your drawings of writing and how indecipherable the language becomes. And the shapes they take. They become talismans. But also the way you did this figure in the drawing, I just feel like, it's way more about a haunting—the language of drawing allows you to be very, very soft, in just having this glowing body, and not have to deal with structure. And I'm wondering how you feel about the drawings. They feel more spectral.

Yi Hou: My poem-pictures on paper are a lot more... personal. I write a lot of poetry about love and heartbreak, which I maybe should try and do a little less of, and maybe be more expansive, I don't know. But that's just where I'm at. But I think that's why the works often feel like palimpsests, or traces, residues. I prefer to have these exist as indecipherable kind of plaques.

Rail: That sense of heartbreak comes across in a way that I don't see necessarily in the paintings and maybe even this spectrality or this haunting or this sense of depth that seems very pathos-laden. The paintings feel like they have—and this isn't a bad thing, but I feel like they're obligated to do so many things. Like you're really trying to structure a sense of self, you're trying to hold an account, you're trying to critique, you're trying to encode, whereas these feel just like registers of how you really feel about these people.

Yi Hou: In a way, there's more freedom—when I'm painting other people, there's a lot more care involved.

Rail: And how are you navigating it specifically within your practice? How do you feel like that connects to the sense of labor that has been put on you and your painting or do you feel that? Do you feel the license to communicate an emotional life and interiority? Or do you feel like that expectation of labor has been placed on you? How much of that obligation do you feel in the studio?



Oscar yi Hou, *Girl with the Dragon Tattoo, aka Bushwick Bleeding Hearts Club*, 2022. Courtesy the Brooklyn Museum.

Yi Hou: I think a lot of minoritarian artists experience this pressure—it speaks to the ideology of representationalism. This is something Rey Chow wrote about in her text *The Protestant Ethic*—she describes it as “coercive mimeticism,” or the ways in which minor artists are coerced to “confess” their minority-ness in a palatable, legible way, one that often conforms to the liberal desire for cultural productions of racial trauma.

You know, in many ways my work is accessible—I make my work with an audience in mind, especially with my show at the Brooklyn Museum, and I try to be a socially embedded artist. To be honest, I’m a very New York-focused artist. This city is my home. I have to be strongly convinced to do solo shows in other cities, simply because it takes so long for me to produce these bodies of work, and the idea that most of my friends or my people in New York won’t see the fruits of my labor, at least in-person, is depressing.

The show is legible on first view as identity-based figuration, but hopefully the show also complicates, deepens, and invites further thought. The figure is a great point of entry into much larger ideas. This is why I’m so interested in opacity—leaving things unknowable, especially as it relates to marginality. To prevent, or at least slow down, its consumption, in a way that honors the unknowability of the Other. Glissant writes about how we need not let opacity be about separation or apartheid, or antagonism, but it should be about celebration, being-with, honor—he writes that the right to opacity should “be a lamp watching over our poetics.” Opacity is not a point of closure, but rather, a point of expansion, of multiplicity, of ripeness.

I’m not interested in antagonizing viewers. I want everyone to see and interpret my work. It’s interesting. I’m thinking about the painting *All American Boyfriend* (2022). That painting, at base, is about desire, relation, love. In a very profoundly personal way. But it is also about whiteness within America’s racial matrix, especially when thrown into the mix of queer interracial desire, libido. It was the first painting I had done of a white person in a long time. In the painting, the figure is ensconced by a mirror, a fictional mirror I constructed—which my hands are holding up. I was interested in the gaze, specularity, the audience, and interpellating the subject of the painting as the mythic audience, as the American avatar of the cowboy.

Rail: One thing that I appreciate is that your language of painting, and your language of drawing as well, really cultivates a painterly desire. I really enjoy looking at these. I enjoy being around them. But none of them are ever as simple as just a desire relationship. They are not letting anyone off the hook. And I think that's needed. And also it's not antagonizing, like you said. It's just holding the mirror up. And that's an important part of all this.

Yi Hou: Yeah—it's aesthetics. At base, with paint, with art, I'm interested in aesthetics, beauty, desire, all these sensual, sumptuous, earthly things. And the way that all this can expand beyond itself, and invite the viewer into itself. As a point of entry into conceptual thought, ideas, politics.

Contributor

Andrew Paul Woolbright

Andrew Paul Woolbright is an artist, gallerist, and Editor-at-Large at the Brooklyn Rail, living and working in Brooklyn, NY. Woolbright is an MFA graduate from the Rhode Island School of Design in painting and is the director of the Lower East Side Gallery Below Grand. He currently teaches at Pratt and School of Visual Arts in New York.

The New York Times

Art Gallery Shows to See Right Now

Martine Syms's "Loot Sweets" at Bridget Donahue; and Oscar yi Hou's "A sky-licker relation" at James Fuentes.

Oscar yi Hou

Through Sept. 26. James Fuentes, 55 Delancey Street, Manhattan, (212) 577-1201
jamesfuentes.com.



Oscar yi Hou's "Self-portrait (21); or to steal oneself with a certain blue music, 2019." Oscar yi Hou and James Fuentes; Jason Mandella

What sings out on encountering the paintings in Oscar yi Hou's show "A sky-licker relation" is the artist's clarity of vision amid the splash of oil paints, intricate motifs and spindly strokes that characterize each work.

See how harshly the colors are clashing. Or how the artist's strokes mimic what might be the end results of painting with dry-erase marker pens on a hard surface. But these portraits are oil on canvas, and yi Hou is celebrating with great tenderness what it means to share space, memories, and to be seen in a contemporary, fast-paced, queer world.

Yet elements of several worlds collide in yi Hou's work here, including graffiti-style signs from the streets of New York, where he moved to from England in 2017 to study at Columbia, and iconography following the tradition of Chinese calligraphy. Birds are also ubiquitous in his paintings; his given name in Chinese refers to a bird cry. And the show's title is borrowed from the Martinican writer Aimé Césaire's poem "Cahier d'un retour au pays natal" ("Return to My Native Land").

Despite the myriad layers of symbols and meanings, yi Hou sustains a clear visual language while manipulating some realistic scenarios, making reality and fantasy present at the same time. Perhaps the best example is in "Self-portrait (21); or to steal oneself with a certain blue music, 2019," in which the artist is seated with his hand on his chin. Reality: the blue shirt, the gold chain on his neck, the teapot and glass cups next to copies of the books "Cruising Utopia" and "Woman, Native, Other," the plants, the fashionable belt drooping between his thighs. Fantasy: numbers placed at different spots in the picture, the birds with glowing red eyes, the halo around his head, flowers and seeds that, alongside beads, punctuate the room. All of these in a 62-by-44 frame. This is a painter who has many things to say, and is able to say them all at once.

YINKA ELUJOBA

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ARTS AND LETTERS

Out West, the Gay Cowboy Roams Free

The frontier has long been a symbol of American masculinity. Now a rising generation of artists are creating a new queer mythology.

By Evan Moffitt

Published Sept. 5, 2023



Oscar yi Hou's "Coolieisms, a.k.a.: The Fugitive (John Chinaman)" (2023). Photo: Evan Sheldon. Courtesy of the artist, 12.26, Dallas, Los Angeles, and James Fuentes, New York, Los Angeles

Stills from the film were on display this summer in “[The Range](#),” an exhibition at 12.26 Gallery in Dallas that likewise explored cowboy iconography. There, they hung near paintings by [Oscar yi Hou](#), 24, a British-born, New York-based artist whose works are replete with clichéd signifiers of Asian and American identity, including cowboy hats and details from the Japanese anime series “Dragon Ball Z.” His solo exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum, which closes later this month, includes a self-portrait of the artist as a muscled, pickax-wielding miner, his pose modeled on a 1970s flyer for the Manhattan gay bar the Mineshaft, referencing both cruising culture and those same railway workers. Another buff Chinese laborer appears in a [black leather bondage mask and cowboy hat](#) in “Coolieisms, a.k.a.: Leather Daddy’s Highbinder Odalisque” (2022) — the series’ title riffing on a slur for immigrants from Asia — holding his long braid like a whip.

The work is “about the American cult of masculinity and rugged individualism ... conquering the ‘uncivilized West’ — and how this gender ideology dovetails with American expansionism,” says yi Hou. The raw sexual power of his subjects refutes stereotypes of Asian masculinity while offering a fantasy about how the Chinese men who literally built the West might have explored their own desires. In challenging the outdated image of the cowboy as a white, cisgender macho man, clearing the land in the name of racial purity, they suggest that America’s national mythology can be made to speak for everyone in it — that the West is more expansive after all.

[excerpted]

GAYLETTER



PAINTINGS BY OSCAR YI HOU | PORTRAITS BY BY ABI BENITEZ

OSCAR YI HOU

TEXT BY TYLER AKERS

A show of new paintings by Oscar yi Hou is on view at the Brooklyn Museum for nearly a year through mid-September of 2023. *East of the Sun, West of the Moon*, the exhibition's title, refers to a poem by the artist that riffs on the feeling of in-betweenness and the innumerable stereotypes of East Asian people in Western cultural imagination. In yi Hou's brushy, expressive portraits, the artist costumes himself and friends as a spectrum of characters — from Bruce Lee's role of Kato on the 1960s television show *The Green Hornet* and anime *Dragon Ball's* Son Goku to Old Hollywood "geisha-girls" and Spaghetti Western cowboys. He then builds painterly frameworks around his figures, centering them against a spare architectural scene. The compositions, reminiscent of symbolic quincunxes and coronas around saints, are then embellished with an intersectional mix of floating icons and symbols (including references to Japanese and Chinese artworks from the Brooklyn Museum's collection.) These marginalia feature creatures like butterflies and cranes, sometimes swooping to overlap Chinese calligraphy or graffiti tags, motifs like Internet symbols and Taoist taijitu, stars from flags or sheriff's badges. The illuminations contextualize their sitters as much as they obfuscate them, pointing to the rich complexity of the painter's relationship with each subject and the ways in which constructed, long-standing identities may be adopted and rebuffed.

The show developed from a detailed 3000-word proposal yi Hou wrote, gathering many of his ideas from previous exhibitions and emphasizing the importance of pairing text with image, a central touchstone in understanding the re-appropriation at play in his work. He uses the terms "yellow iconicity" and "coolieisms," reclamations of slurs, to describe racist and anti-Asian representation in popular media. By helping write many of his own accompanying texts panels for the show, yi Hou is able to anticipate his audience, to contextualize, educate, and critique. In artworks that incorporate various forms of both Chinese and English text called "poem-pictures," a wall panel at the museum explains, "Referencing and adapting the Chinese aesthetic tradition known as the Three Perfections, yi Hou's practice combines painting, calligraphy, and poetry."

In one of his self-portraits, *Coolieisms, aka: Gold Mountain Cruiser (The Mineshaft's after-hours trade)*, yi Hou becomes a muscled miner, complete with a large pickaxe and hard helmet — a reference to artist and illustrator REX's image of a man emblazoned on shirts and flyers of the Mineshaft club, a seedy, members-only hangout for kinky leather daddies and the sexually eccentric in New York's meatpacking district. In another portrait, *Coolieisms, aka: Leather Daddy's Highbinder, Odalisque*, a beefy subject wears a leather fetish mask, hat, and chaps while brandishing a thickly-bound whip made of hair instead of leather, a traditional braid worn by Chinese male immigrants that became a symbol of feminine inferiority in bigoted 19th-century discourse. By staging these kinds of paintings, yi Hou empowers his performers and himself, presenting a twist on persistent racial and gender expectations. These artworks and his others, along with his personal brand of integrated didactics, use the lure of nostalgia and the embarrassment of assumption to lay bare ingrained cultural prejudices, while somehow maintaining the inherent beauty of portraiture.

Interview with Oscar Yi Hou

August 30, 2021



Cowgirl of Connecticut, aka: Today, All Fruits Ripen, 2021, Oils on canvas, 30 1/8 x 24 1/8 inches

Interview by Kate Wong

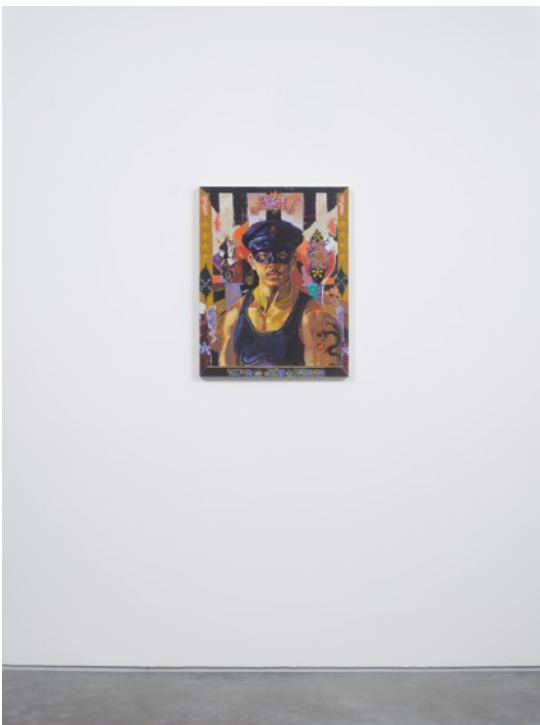
Ahead of his solo exhibition at James Fuentes Gallery in New York, I had the opportunity to speak with Liverpool-born, New York-based artist, Oscar Yi Hou. Follow along as we discuss his work, the complexities of representation and identity politics, the difference between UK and American racial politics, and his favourite foods to cook.

KW: Your exhibition is called, *A sky-licker relation*. Where does the title come from?

OYH: The phrase 'sky-licker' comes from Aimé Césaire's book-length poem, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (1939). I first came across it when I read Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*. My name in Chinese refers to an idiom or *chengyu* involving a bird cry, which is why I use birds as self-signifiers throughout my practice. A lot of my poetry involves flight or birds – there's a promise of freedom and boundlessness.

Tell me about the new paintings for the show. Where did they begin and where do they land?

I tried to stay thematically cohesive with this body of work, even as it spans over a year of my life. And so I guess it began fourteen months ago, which is when I first started working towards the exhibition. At the time I was still a student, and I was trapped during lockdown in Liverpool, painting in a tiny room in my childhood home. I wasn't sure if I'd be able to return to New York to complete my degree. My life is very different now. This show has spanned much grief in my life, but also such joy and communion. I guess that's where it lands – anew.



Cowboy Kato Coolie, aka: Bruce's Bitch, 2021, Oils on canvas, 28 1/8 x 22 inches

What role does symbolism play in your work?

At times in my work symbols signify people, like with astrological signs, zodiac signs, or tattoos. I signify myself as a bird throughout my work. I like polysemic symbols. I like using the star symbol because it can signify America when you render it in one context, but it also signifies

socialism if you render it another. To give another example, I often dot my works with beads arranged circularly, which come from the Buddhist prayer hand bracelets I would often wear as a kid when I went to China. My parents would also often bring them home as souvenirs. They smelled of sandalwood and I'd wear them to school. I saw them as cute accessories, but they also became a symbol of my diasporic-ness. In my recent show at T293 in Rome I made a painting, *Sphincter, aka Two-Pines*, that referenced the potentially sphincteral nature of an elasticized beaded bracelet. It's not to say that I like to decorate my paintings with assholes, but rather, to draw attention to the hidden, multiplicity of meanings a symbol can have. You can give symbols additional meanings by placing them in new contexts and relations. Symbols all dog-whistle differently.

I'd love to speak for a moment about one of the self-portraits in the exhibition, *Cowboy Kato Coolie, aka: Bruce's Bitch*, where you are wearing a burglar's mask and policeman's hat, meeting/confronting the viewer's gaze straight on. There is definitely a kind of kinky vibe, but can you tell me what else is going on?

Here I'm dressed as Kato, played by Bruce Lee in the show *The Green Hornet* that aired in the 60s. Kato was the Green Hornet's valet and crime-fighting partner. The Green Hornet, of course, was played by a white American man. This piece diverges thematically from the rest of the works in the show. I was interested in what I call yellow iconicity, especially constructions of masculinity within the visual culture of East Asian people. I was looking at 20th century figures like the martial artists Jackie Chan or Bruce Lee, but also more historical figures like the feminized Chinese coolie labourer of the 19th century. I like Kato because of the latent leather Tom of Finland homoeroticism within his costume.

Most of my pieces are titled in a diptych format, using 'aka' to divide the title into two. With this piece however, I wanted to use 'aka' to draw attention to the fungibility of yellow faces within the West, or the way that people think we all look the same. 'Also known as' then might denote the uncanny ability for yellow folks to successfully disguise ourselves as other yellow folks since apparently no one can fucking tell us apart anyway! Tseng Kwong-Chi is an artist who did mobilised this incredibly well, especially with his 'Moral Majority' series.

When did you move to New York and has living in the city altered your understanding of diasporic identity?

I moved to New York back in 2017 to begin my undergraduate degree. New York is such a wonderful, diverse, multi-ethnic city. American racial politics are also a lot different than British or European racial politics. I think that being in a city of diasporas, like New York, has certainly solidified my own diasporic identity. Being interpellated as 'Asian American' rather than 'British Born Chinese' led me to read and study much more about Asian American history and global Chinese movement, which led me in turn to focus much more on issues of diaspora and ethnic-ness within my practice. I also think that in New York, with such class disparity, the old and new relationships between labour and Chinese-ness are more salient. You have elderly Chinese folks picking cans off the street a few blocks down from wealthy international students from Beijing donning Canada Goose. And the recent rise of hate crimes against Asian folks has also reaffirmed what I already felt.

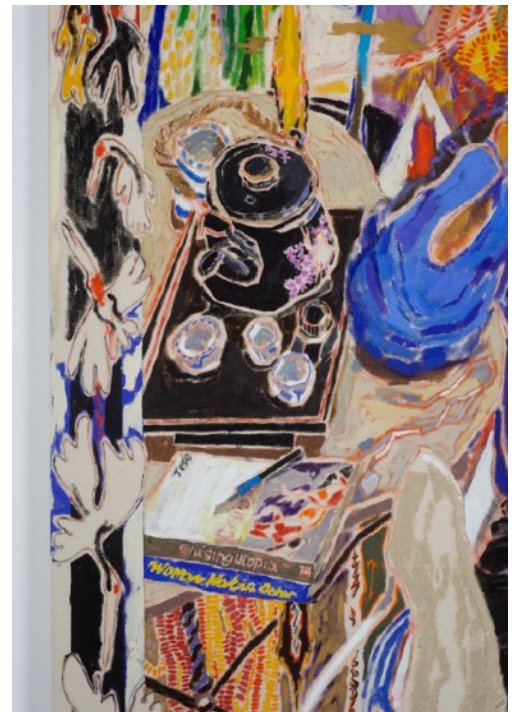
Does the rich history of painting in New York influence your practice?

Yes. Living in New York is awesome. I saw the Alice Neel show at the Met Museum this year. One of the works in my show is compositionally based off of a piece I saw at that exhibition. Her work is interesting in the context of what I discussed prior – ethnography, representation, etc.



Self-portrait (21); or to steal oneself with a certain blue music, 2019, Oils on canvas, 52 x 42 3/4 inches

Detail



Do you feel that movement, and more specifically your own relocation to New York or travel to China, impacts on the formal qualities of your work? Let's say in terms of composition or perspective.

There's always things gained and things lost in a move. My grandfather passed back in the Fall of 2018, and so I went back to China for several days to attend the funeral and to support my father. It was the first time I had been to China since I was a kid. When you're little you can get by with limited Chinese because you're just fucking around, eating and playing video games. I didn't need to speak any Chinese to play with my cousins, say. We'd just play *Kirby* on our GameBoys. Going back as an adult reminded me of how foreign I was to China, and how foreign yet familiar China is to me. I also bought a few art books when I was there, which I studied and incorporated into my practice.

The borders and frames of my paintings express a kind of mediated relation between me and the subject. But between the viewer and the subject, it expresses a kind of ornate plexiglass barrier instead. This feeling of thinking you might get to really know something, grasp something, before quickly realising you will never, is how I felt.



*Self-v Far Eastersiders, aka:
Cowgirl Mama A.B & Son
Wukong, 2021, Oils on
canvas, 61 x 49 3/8 inches*

What have you been thinking about, reading and doing while preparing for the exhibition?

I was thinking a lot about representation. I think representation as politics has been defanged and co-opted for liberal ends. After all, visibility can be a trap, and it can be easily commodified. The art market nowadays is both a symptom and producer of such representationalist ideology. It's worrying for sure, and lots of my peers feel the same way. It amounts to tokenism, and the commodification of one's minority-ness. But we also owe our livelihoods to the market, and to the market finally liking our artwork, so it's an ambivalent relationship.

My work is figurative and representational, and therefore requires that I think a lot about the ethics of representing others. In *Can the Subaltern Speak*, Indian scholar, Gayatri Spivak, details the dual meaning of 'represent' – *to re-present*, as in to make visible; and to represent, as in *to speak-for*, in the way a politician speaks for their constituency. These two meanings often overlap in deleterious ways. Does this mean an artist should not represent others? Only themselves? Cultural theorist, Rey Chow, outlines this crisis of representation in her text "The Protestant Ethnic & The Spirit of Capitalism", and she subsequently criticises the excess of self-referentiality in the wake of representation's ethical crisis. How can we avoid solipsism, and still have empathy for others, whilst avoiding the bad ethics of representation? How do we avoid bad ethnography?

I was in a bit of a rut because I wasn't really ready to give up representation all together. I like painting other people. So Trinh T. Minh-Ha was formative to my thinking. Rather than to 'speak about', famously she opts to 'speak near'. This got me thinking about the *being-with* of existence, and how my life is so dependent on others. So for this body of work, rather than painting a singular other person, or a single subjectivity, I've instead tried to paint the relation I share with others, an intersubjectivity. Both symbolically and literally. There are a few contemporary texts

that talk *being-with* in the context of queer studies and communism, but I was mainly really drawn to Édouard Glissant. He writes about Relation, but he also writes about hybridity, language, and opacity, all themes which I try and study through my practice.

What do you hope people will take away from your new show?

I hope people will get what I'm about. It's my first solo in-person show in New York, so hoping folks will catch my vibe.

Do you cook, and if so, what are some of your favourite dishes to make?

I cook every day. I mainly make Cantonese dishes. My favourite is steamed whole fish with ginger and scallions, or maybe white cut chicken with ginger scallion sauce!

Oscar Yi Hou's exhibition, *A sky-licker relation* is on at James Fuentes Gallery, NY until 26 September 2021.

Photos by Jason Mandella, courtesy of James Fuentes Gallery