

Oscar yi Hou



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On languishing,
languaging, loving,
aka: A dozen
poem-pictures

The following chapters were written by
Oscar yi Hou in 2021.

What existence has spread all around, dis-course organizes. Or better: what the folding has concealed, poetics unsolds. From folding to unfolding, the movement is unceasing.

Édouard Glissant
Treatise on the Whole-World, 1997

i
On languishing

I feel a lot of tension during the disfluency—
In my lungs
In my throat
In my tongue
and/or
In my jaw—

Stuttering as a kind of linguistic block—one's first foray into disjointed languaging. A small bird trying to take flight off a frozen lake, but simply slipping forward across the ice, failing to catch enough wind velocity to take off. It's something that's well-concealed through speaking softly, lowly, and with intention. Largely, it is undetectable. Clandestinely shaping sawtooth sounds in my throat into smooth, liquid, gel. I know what I wanna say. Just give me a few more fucking seconds.

Hard syllables confound my jaw, which is why back in high school I began requesting to go to the toilet with *may I*, rather than *can I*, which always gave off a particular English high politeness, but was simply another one of my speech acrobatics. The *T* of *to* or *toilet* bears too hard on my tongue, so often *Can I go to the toilet?* would become *May I go the bathroom?*—the formality of *may* offsetting the absence of the preposition *to*, which is fine to say in my native Liverpool dialect. I've found the Americanism *restroom* to be a far smoother utterance. The question optimises, shedding some weight: '*Scuse me*—restroom?

The consonant blend *cl-*, as in *clumsy* as in speak clearly as in *closeted*, grips hardest on my tongue. At times it feels like one of those letter blocks for children clogs the throat, the corners and edges of the wood gripping hard the folds of my vocal tract, splintering. You gotta take a big breath—just say the word on the exhale—the trick is to practice one's breathing, as if training to go underwater for a very long time... Once the word finally flies off the tongue, it is like blowing fire.

To stutter is to feel very briefly the fallible entanglement of body and speech. Because to speak is always but a corporeal flex, proof of the mind's matter. Neuronic misfires or broken circuits in the material brain arrest the tongue and lock the jaw—tripping speech, hacking it, which always serves to remind me, at least, of the ever-present capacity for my body to spontaneously fail me. Which itself is, I wish to think, maybe, a form of freedom. Or perhaps flight?

Relinquishing control over the supposed successes of a body, of a mouth—my tongue, jaw, lungs... Simply waiting for the stammer to pass—which is to neither fail nor succeed. The natural sequence of speech, which is to say the process of the externalisation of something internal—the well-worn neurological circuit between thought, mouth, tongue, and finally, utterance and breath—such a sequence glitches. Language collapses by the broken tongue.

Somersaulting lexically over these gaps in speech—so carefully braiding bridges across these lacunae, pleading with myself that language does not become this sad chasm of languishing, because I love to language. Language enables one to fly, and I love to fly. Flight promises freedom. So wise up on the glitches, the disfluencies. Just try to relax. Quick-fire word substitutions. Have you tried CBD? Eliminate one's blood-borne cortisol and adrenaline. Try psychosomatically chilling oneself the fuck out. Looping clauses at the end of the wrong syntactical threads. God forbid you have to give a speech, 'cos on that podium I won't give shit!

Perhaps language will always be something that the queer child either fails or masters. It infects the sissy boy; it clocks him, spits him out. He'll spend a long time ruminating on all those second glances and those softly pointed questions. How do they know? Or did we as a queer polity already move on from such shame? Let us all play back the recordings we made of our own voices, wresting out the sibilance that marked us as fag. Gents, to bestow some bass to your voice, try doing vocal exercises at home, in the shower—say “ah-ah” in the lowest pitch you can muster, six sets, six repetitions. Stretching sound thickly out as if to pull bubblegum into tar. I always wonder what was lost. The quickness of a once ‘flamboyant’ speech, dulled into a measured pace—shedding feathers. Gained weight, too much to fly.

Oftentimes, I wonder if I stutter because my first language was actually Cantonese. But leaving the childhood cot entails a kind of all-consuming looking at, listening to, and reading of the foreign world one enters: a survivalist, pragmatic study. My parents knew this well, and gave me an English forename on my birth certificate. Perhaps it was Britain's true national treasure—publicly-funded children's television—that was the floodlight that burnt, rinsed, and dried the Chinese off my tongue and ears. Anglicised, my fluency in Cantonese quickly sunk lower and lower, until it became what it is today: minimal and illiterate. *Ngo giu Hao Yat Ming. Ngo mhoyi gong guang dung wah gum ho.* English gripped hard onto my tongue, jaw, and throat, which perhaps still operate in a Chinese muscle memory—caught in between, an interstitial voice.

It's a minor feeling to feel shame at my inability to read or write Chinese. My parents tried, especially my father. They sent me and my brother to Sunday Chinese school near the church. I still remember how to write the first ten numbers; I remember how to say *fuck you*. But in class, staffed by unpaid international students from China, they taught Mandarin in drills and by rote, discontiguous with the Cantonese that was spoken at home. After a few weeks, my brother vomited his lunch in

protest, and we stopped going.

In the following weeks, my father, ever the entrepreneur, taped up Chinese characters on the kitchen wall and decided to teach us himself. He devised ingenious tricks—mnemonics that he'd always said he wanted to copyright. But he was a busy man, with plates to shift and woks to burn. Even on Sunday, he lacked the hours, and one by one the characters would slowly peel off, floating like leaves onto the floor from which my mother would eventually sweep them away.

To the foreign eye, Chinese, an anti-Roman language of logograms, is but a flat surface of pure inscrutability. It's often used colloquially to signify something totally foreign and impenetrable—it's all Chinese to me, these Chinese whispers. We might note the history of such opacity if we think about the Anglo-American capitalist-imperialist project attempting to open China up to 'free trade' in the 19th and 20th centuries through treaty ports, most notably with Britain's illegal exporting of opium as an exertion of imperialist biopower. I also like to think of this as contiguous with 'Business Chinese' being a popular course amongst college student capitalists. The way a minor language is interpreted—aesthetically, socially, politically—within a given society is reflective of that society's rendering of the minor culture at large.

In the West, the inscrutable Chinese language is a specular, superflat surface. It's specular

in the sense that, like a mirror—like if you were to buff stone for long enough—it tells the West more about itself than it does about China, that age-old schema in which the formation of the Orient was all but to give the Occident its own identity.² It's superflat in the sense that a perfectly flat surface, free of relief or depth, is impossible to grasp or grip yet aesthetically pleasing to gaze at. It's purely surface in the sense that it has no underlying substance beyond its immediate appearance. *Westerners etching Chinese tattoos onto their bodies indexes how Chinese exists as a pure aesthetic surface, pure ornament.*³ Rey Chow writes about how the Chinese language is so potent a signifier of Chinese people and culture that language and nation overlap—the former occluding the latter. Such a convergence renders China reduced to (sur)face, image, and ideogram. The face of the Chinese person and the face of Chinese writing thus converge in what must now be seen as a composite visual stereotype—the-other-as-face.⁴

As has been remarked on Tseng Kwong Chi's practice: He became a kind of cipher, a smooth

2 Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 1978

3 See Anne Anlin Cheng, *Ornamentalism*, 2018

4 Rey Chow, *The Protestant Ethnic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 2002

surface that because it was so impenetrable, this persona, it reflected everything!⁵ In the early '80s, for his *Moral Majority* series, Kwong Chi, dressed up as an 'ambiguous ambassador' from China, would take self-portraits standing next to Reagan Era Republicans, instrumentalising his yellow, superflat fungibility as a form of political critique just as the HIV/AIDS epidemic in New York was about to begin. *Breathing fire. Becoming the cipher.* Perhaps we might disidentify⁶ with the formless, yellowy, perilous mass of East Asia—the substantive-yet-empty opacity of China and Chinese—as a means to political ends. *To become the perilous minor subject.*

Deleuze suggests that stuttering, when done in the minor key, has the potential to place language in a state of boom, close to a state of bust.⁷ Mobilising stuttering beyond the mere earshot purview of the utterance, of the spoken word, he

5 Tseng Kwong Chi was a pioneering photographer-cum-performance artist, active in New York City's art scene in the 1980s. He passed from AIDS in 1990. See Joshua Chambers-Letson, *After the Party: A Manifesto for Queer of Color Life*, 2018

6 See José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 1999

7 Gilles Deleuze, "He Stuttered," 1994

suggests that the minor writer can cause a major language (*langue*) itself to stutter—to push it off balance into a state of disequilibrium. To stutter imperial English, then, is to minorise a major language, causing it to flee. Bad English, accented English, foreigner English, is to thus make English run along a witch's course.⁸ Diasporic languaging thereby extends outward, far beyond the realm of interpersonal speech, far beyond the bounds of identity-based confessional autofiction. It's not just a pretence for further individuation. It serves to make language itself cry, to make it stutter, mumble, or whisper.⁹ The affect of speech-stuttering—the brutal way it feels to choke on a word—is echoed and multiplied in the act of language-stuttering, which is to make the whole language system stumble, to toss it back and forth across one's tongue. To fuck up language—to do fucked-up languaging—may reveal an imperial language's contingencies and cracks. What would it mean to language in the minor key? To attend to the interstices in language, not as though they were jarring, foreign stutters, but as if they were welcome respite?

Ornamenting English with a surface of Sinicised inscrutability. Rubbing language against itself,

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

rubbing it the wrong way, fusing it with something wrong, something off. Bad English is the diasporic child's nemesis. It's something you quickly learn to avoid. You locate it in your parents' speech, in the 'ugliness' of the Chinese accent. *We love you long time.* It indexes a dislocation—the quality of being not from here. *Translating for your mother, but failing that still.* Spellchecking the manifold menu of the family restaurant. *Why can my brother speak it so much better than I?*

Fusing English with Chinese is not necessarily just to express one's hybridised condition. It's to produce a provisional third language. Bastard ideograms of pure opacity, inscrutability. Surfaces that are rough and jagged; you scrape across them like letters blocked in the throat. Ornaments that confuse, re-circuit, and demand your time. Fragments of languaging that, once uttered, can never be semantically recuperated, because they express no content, no meaning, only the synthetic-ness of their own production.

As Frank Chin wrote: Born? No! Crashed! Not born. Stamped! Not born! Created! Not born. No more born than the heaven and earth. No more born than nylon than acrylic. For I am a Chinaman! A miracle synthetic! Drip dry and machine washable.¹⁰

If the Orient is the perfectly flat, essential-surface mirror to the Occident—through which,

10 Frank Chin, *The Chickencoop Chinaman*, 1972

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by specularly gazing at, the Occident comes to realise its own Occident-ness—then these poem fragments might behave like its shattered, broken shards. *To bloodlessly slice open the fat belly of imperial English.* There's joy in that. I'd like to do languaging that necessitates time, solicits care. Refusing the enclosure of meaning. To neither fail nor succeed.

It was once a source of shame, but now I say it proudly: bad English is my heritage. I share a literary lineage with writers who make the unmastering of English their rallying cry—who queer it, twerk it, hack it, Calibanize it, other it by hijacking English and warping it to a fugitive tongue. To other English is to make audible the imperial power sewn into the language, to slit English open so its dark histories slide out.

Cathy Park Hong
Minor Feelings, 2020

ii
On languaging

Language is a skin: I rub my language against the other. It is as if I had words instead of singers, or singers at the tip of my words. My language trembles with desire.

Roland Barthes
A Lover's Discourse: Fragments, 1977

Nothing could be more normative, more logical, and more authoritarian than, for example, the (politically) revolutionary poetry or prose that speaks of revolution in the form of commands or in the well-behaved, steeped-in-convention language of "clarity." Clear expression, often equated with correct expression, has long been the

criterion set forth in treatises on rhetoric, whose aim was to order discourse so as to persuade. The language of Taoism and Zen, for example, which is perfectly accessible but rises with paradox does not qualify as "clear" (paradox is "illogical" and "nonsensical" to many Westerners), for its intent lies outside the realm of persuasion.

Trinh T. Minh-Ha
Woman, Native, Other, 1989

The real is a body of meanderings and life throbs in every corner of it. The real and life make up the folding. Considering them together comes down to building a rhetoric, by a slow work of unfolding that aims to enlighten rather than to convince, to persuade oneself rather than confusing the reader—the mute confident—with an excess of reasons.

Édouard Glissant
Treatise on the Whole-World, 1997

In the multiplicity of writing, everything is to be disentangled, nothing deciphered; the structure can be followed, 'run' (like the thread of a stocking) at every point and at every level, but there is nothing beneath...

Roland Barthes
The Death of the Author, 1967

Translated into the context of high theory and philosophy, "inscrutable Chinese" no longer simply signifies the enigmatic exterior of the oriental but also an entire language and culture reduced to (sur)face, image, and ideogram. As Stanley K. Abe writes, "The alterity of Chinese writing in relation to romanized scripts, is, of course, central, but it is the visuality of the characters—the manner in which it is made manifest in highly abstract forms—that most contributes to its enduring effectiveness as a symbol of China." The face of the Chinese person and the face of Chinese writing thus converge in what must now be seen as a composite visual stereotype—the-other-as-face—that stigmatizes another culture as at once corporeally and linguistically intractable.

Rey Chow
The Protestant Ethnic and the Spirit of Capitalism, 2002

That Friday was beautiful summer day—6th July 2001. I received her Majesty The Queen reception invitation to celebrate 30 years of Chinese Education in Edinburgh.

I opened my Camphora chest drew. Those smell filling of the living room again, never changed a little after years and years.

That smell like wooded mountains, like ravine steam, like my mother's breast, like my little sister's milky sweet, they were coming faintly from seemed far away.

'the Queen must wear red colour,' I thought.

妈妈

Rather than seeking to "rhetorically demystify" a deciphering turn seeks to decipher what a process of rhetorical mystification does. It seeks to identify not what texts and their signifying practices can be interpreted to mean but what they can be deciphered to do, it also seeks to evaluate the "illocutionary force" and procedures with which they do what they do.

Sylvia Wynter

Notes Towards a Deciphering Practice, 1992

How many people live today in a language that is not their own? Or else, no longer even know their tongue—or do not know it yet—and know a major tongue which they are forced to use poorly? Problem of immigrants and especially of their children. Problem of minorities. Problem of a minor literature, but also the problem of us all: how to wrest a minor literature from our tongue, a literature that can hollow the language out and spin it along a sober, revolutionary line? How to become the nomad and the immigrant and the gypsy of our own language? "Steal the infant from its cradle," Kafka says, "dance on a tightrope."

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari
Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature, 1975

Let opacity, whether it be ours for the other or maybe the other's for us, not close down in obscurantism or apartheid; let it be a celebration, not a terror. Let the right to opacity, whereby Diversity will best be preserved and acceptance strengthened, be a lamp watching over our poeties.

Édouard Glissant
Treatise on the Whole-World, 1997

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It is when the language system overstrains itself that it begins to stutter, to murmur, or to mumble; then the entire language reaches the limit that sketches the outside and confronts silence. When the language system is so much strained, language suffers a pressure that delivers it to silence.

[...]

Face to face, or face to back, to cause language to stutter, and at the same time to bring language to its limit, to its outside, and to its silence—all this will be like the boom and the bust.

Gilles Deleuze

"He Stuttered," 1994

Writing necessarily refers to writing. The image is that of a mirror capturing only the reflections of other mirrors.

[...]

From mirage to mirage, the subject/object takes flight and loses its existence. Trying to grasp it amounts to stopping a mirror from mirroring.

Trinh T. Minh-Ha

Woman, Native, Other, 1989

aka: A dozen poem-pictures

If you surrendered to the air, you could ride it.

Toni Morrison

Song of Solomon, 1977

She mimicks the speaking. That might resemble speech. (Anything at all.) Bared noise, groan, bits torn from words.

[...]

But the breath falls away.

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha

Dictee, 1982

iii
On loving

MORE RED-DRA
WNED CRANE OF
EAST INDIA'S
IN EXILE THE
OTHER REQUEST
TAKING OF ONLY
HER 2 PINS.

IT IS SAID, TOGETH
ER, THEY LIVED A
THOUSAND YEARS
APART, ONLY FIFTY
DANCING AND SO
AMUSED IN THE
MARCHES, SPENT
UP ONLY SEVEN A
UN DOWNT.

AT TIMES, I THINK
OF ONLY
HAD I TAKEN
WE WERE
THOSE BIADS.

Oscar yi Hou

*Notes toward
a sky-licker relation*

The second characteristic of minor literatures is that everything in them is political.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari
Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature, 1975

i Notes on Relation

- 1 For minor artists, the politics of representation is unavoidable; representation is always already political. The dominant social code of liberal representationalism will always interpret our work under its own rubric. Since representation has been instrumentalised and recuperated by representationalism, similarly, we must take care not to become deputised by those with the louder voice. Let us speak on our own behalf!
- 2 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak pointed out the doubled meaning of the word represent:
 - i To re-present; to make visible; to present anew
 - ii To represent; to speak for; to be elected to speak on someone's behalf"
- 3 In recent art history, the first meaning—to re-present—has assumed a sort of
- 11 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", 2008

counter-presenting politics of representation. Its aim has been to make marginal subjects visible in ways that are counter to the dominant social code, to those false historical presentations—to present ourselves anew, otherwise. Within these notes, this is referred to as *minorism*.

- 4 How many representational artists believe they are **re-presenting** when they are actually **representing**? All but ethnographers on the sly? The depicted subaltern subjects do not speak. The artist is a ventriloquist, moving their lips, mouths, to effect the simulacra of speech, but all one hears is the artist's own voice. The subjects earn no share of the generated surplus value. In this schema, the subject is precluded from stakeholdership.
- 5 The image itself has become an ethnicised, minorised, puritanical commodity. The possession and circulation of particular images now signify a moral value.
- 6 Was it only Alice Neel who could do it? How do we still express empathy with the Other? How do we honestly observe our surroundings, our lifeworlds? As Rey Chow interrogates, in avoiding committing “the indignity

of speaking for others,” how do we avoid the solipsistic, self-referential, confessional practice of only speaking About oneself—the impelling of the minority to keep disclosing their own ethnic-ness, their own minority-ness, only in ways that can be easily consumed by liberal multiculturalism? In ways that perhaps only reproduce and reaffirm marginality? As Chow continues, “Such acts of confession may now be further described as a socially endorsed, coercive mimeticism, which stipulates that the thing to imitate, resemble, and become is none other than the ethnic or sexual minority herself.”¹²

- 7 Surely there is such joy in *minorism*—the beauty that lies in the margins—in being given the means and gain in painting one's lifeworld and community—in the art-making about those who have been rendered null and void, undeserving of study or visibility. Those who occupy a null subject position in the visual imaginary. Those rendered marginal. Histories, long evacuated; how lies our lives?
- 8 Perhaps it is this: Rather than to speak about
- 12 Rey Chow, *The Protestant Ethnic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 2002

or to speak for, it's to speak near.¹³ If *being-with*¹⁴ is a necessary condition of human existence—our mutual human condition—then I'd say let's give testament to such a shared ontology.

- 9 Speaking alongside, however, is of course always tricky when there is only a single artist-subject producing the artwork-object... But, as diligent artists, we should work within the limitations of the medium as best we can. Let us recognise the limitations of discourse, lowly chatter.
- 10 For all the outdated gossip about the death of the figure, the death of the author, the dematerialisation of art, of the body, the waning of affect, many of us still cling steadfast onto the body, the self—onto material, desirous life. It seems as if some have been trying to attain nirvana, the ultimate release, which is all but to extinguish the fire of life, to terminate the *being-with* of our world. To give up on the rest of us earth-dwellers. The body, the very earth, has become *minor*. You may leave on your spaceships if you so wish.

13 Trinh T. Minh-Ha, *Reassemblage*, 1982

14 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 1927

- 11 The human is the most conceptual concept there is. It is the axis around which all our lofty discourses, abstractions, and ideas orient themselves. We think of Figuration as narcissistic and narrow, as mired in its own excesses of visibility and legibility, locked in a vain struggle with the politics of representation. On the other hand, its intellectualised, Descartian counterpart, Abstraction, is seen as cleaner, purer—in pretending to shirk the *politics of representation*, it instead enacts a *representation of politics*. But why do we condescend the human in this way? Why do we insist on cleaving apart Figuration and Abstraction, on the compartmentalisation of art-making into such a reductive dualism? We foreclose figurative representation's potential for radical politics, along with its capacity to express the vast complexities of a *minor* personhood, because we simply lack the utopian thought to imagine what it could be like. After all, the human being is never an inherently transparent, legible entity.
- 12 Prostheses are extensions of the self. They help the self live in the world, in the environment; they provide support and are integral to the body. They are extensions of the body. Similarly, the self is constituted through the Other—through those around us, those we

surround ourselves with. We are discursively formed, sure, but I care more about our *social* formation. Others are prostheses of ourselves, and our selves are prostheses of others. Humans are social, collective creatures. To speak in this way—of a *prosthetic ontology*, of our shared being—is to simply point out the way we are *thrown* into the world with, alongside, and atop of others.

- 13 The way Édouard Glissant approaches *being* is, in lieu of *single-root identity*, to instead imagine *rhizome-identity*.¹⁵ This is to say that our personhood is a relational thing—it is not static, it is continuously formed by our encounters with others and through the *Whole-World*. It is actually always in motion. We don't possess substantive identities; our subjecthoods are formed through identity-relations. *Subjecthood* itself may be a misnomer here, for we are talking about intersubjectivity, or rather, the lack of any single singularity. As Achille Mbembe writes, “Identity is a matter not of substance but of plasticity. It is a matter of co-composition, of opening onto the over-there of another flesh, of reciprocity between multiple fleshes and their multiple
- 15 Édouard Glissant, *Treatise on the Whole-World*, 1997

names and places.”¹⁶ On a good night, I feel this way in the club. Heeding José Esteban Muñoz’s call to “take ecstasy with me,”¹⁷ at times, the queer party transports me to a collective utopia, the sensation of sharing a single skin, the same rhythm, the same sublime. You are *rhizomatic*. You never feel extinguished in the way that k-holing might make you feel. Rather, you feel, all at once, unitary, flickering, shared, and reciprocal. Branched out. It’s like a glimpse of some kind of communism.¹⁸

- 14 At least in the way that Frank O’Hara describes it, I would call my figurative works *Personist*.¹⁹ Like him, I’m interested in people, and the relationships that I share with People, Persons, and the *Whole-World*. As O’Hara writes, *Personism* puts the work of art “squarely between the poet and the person... The poem is at last between two persons instead of two pages.” In other words,
- 16 Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 2019
- 17 José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 2009
- 18 See Joshua Chambers-Letson, *After the Party*, 2018
- 19 Frank O’Hara, “Personism: A Manifesto,” 1959

Personism is a representational practice of relation, namely, the relation shared between the artist and the depicted. It's dialogical. There's a push and pull, which is dynamic. There may be some who still believe that portraiture really is all but an honest depiction of another—and to this, a common axiom may be said in response: *No, that's not true. When you paint the other, you're only really painting yourself.* But even with this flipped schematic, it's still a little too one-sided, a little too lonely. I think, more specifically, you're actually painting the relation you share with that other. And, like O'Hara, I would like to make that salient. To neither speak for nor to speak about, but to speak near and to speak alongside. To speak of one's shared existence, of one's shared personhood, as a representational practice of nearness. If you face someone, go pivot and stand beside them instead. Sharing a gaze together—*having a Coke with you*—is to enter into a moment of communion. This is to give honest testament to the queer lifeworld one may inhabit. *To paint in the minor key.*

¹⁵ Queerness is formed in the negative—not straight, not cis, not square. Odd, strange... As such, queerness is an open signifier. It is boundless, which I think is what is meant by

queerness as horizon.²⁰ If the condition for a line is that it is not a straight line, then the set of lines produced is infinite, with infinite curvatures and shapes. Such is the case when one thinks of infinity as queer. As is written in the Tao Te Ching, “Thus what we gain is Something, yet it is by virtue of Nothing that this can be put to use.”²¹ Things gain meaning by virtue of their negative, in the sense that the sea only becomes a sea once the sky floats above, or only once land divides it into oceans. *The earth became Earth only once we saw the sun and the heavens.*

¹⁶ Queers understand Relation in a more profound way because we have been excluded from the many types of relation mandated by the nation-state. *The rectum is a rave.*²²

²⁰ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 2009

²¹ Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, 4th Century BC

²² See Leo Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave?: and Other Essays*, 2009

ii

Representationism, aka: Representation and its Discontents

Visibility is often a trap. Since we live in an intensified world of appearances, the image or appearance of a thing is bestowed the same significance as the thing itself. Since we live in a spectacular, puritanical world, the appearance of a thing is bestowed the same moral sign as its underlying substance. The signification replaces the actual signifier. It is commodity-fetishised; it is also Myth.²³ The appearance of the ethnic/minor thing becomes a fetish that can now be owned, bartered, traded, and exchanged. Counter-presenting artworks that are meant to institutionally critique are at risk of becoming absorbed, recuperated, and defanged by those selfsame institutions. These fetishes run the risk of doing nothing more than gilding the ivory walls of the oppressor. The perfectibility of liberalism is also the perfectibility of its apparatuses, its institutions, the collectors, the dealers, all the buyers...

Representation has been recuperated by liberalism. We might describe this zeitgeist as **representationalism**. The cultural shift that has taken place over the past couple of decades—one that has shone a light on minorities, on the oppressed, on the concomitant practice of counter-presenting that has seen whiteness point out its own hegemony—is becoming completely recuperated by spectacular capitalism. Once fully absorbed into the grim totality of **representationalism**, the initial revolutionary

23 See Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, 1957

sharpness of counter-presenting representation is blunted and transmuted into a liberal dullness. For example, the image of whiteness critiquing its own whiteness has become a moral commodity in itself, which white people can trade and exchange amongst themselves for social capital. Institutional critique has become institutionalised. The use of images of minorities by corporations to pander useless products to the everyday person exemplifies the ways in which our spectacular society successfully absorbs all of its aberrations into itself.

Diversity itself has become an empty signifier of pure surface—sly signals of virtue lacking any real depth. Herein lies Félix González-Torres's ambivalence: his refusal to partake in this particular representational economy,²⁴ in which identities become surface-bound, shallow, and are assigned a fat moral premium. Corporatist financial capitalism rules steadfastly, even if they use minorities in their marketing campaigns, even if they install minorities as directors and shareholders. Even if Exxon appoints its first lesbigay CEO of colour, environmental doom differentiated along the racial axis of the Global South will continue to transpire. Diverse corporations pride themselves in their diversity; the bourgeoisie pride themselves in their diverse art collections, as if the appearance of diversity were an end in itself. The process of tokenisation is

24 José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 1999

the sensation of your insides evaporating, to then condense against the cold shell of the body. The sensation of becoming a pure skin, to leave only a human-shaped husk behind, a depthless, fungible, stackable surface marked gracelessly as Other, as collectible, as sellable, as diverse. As human beings, our differences are complex and irreducible to just our surfaces. Glissant proposed we let diversity “be a lamp watching over our poetics,”²⁵ yet it would seem diversity is becoming all but a currency used in the same way as an alibi—the purchase of innocence. As Guy Debord wrote, “[Spectacular society] has learnt new defensive techniques, as powers under attack always do.”²⁶

Across the political spectrum, across all industries and spheres, the political representation of minorities is harnessed in this way—as an alibi, as a way to skirt around systemic or substantial change. Diversity has become a tool of state violence. Minorities have become deputised and instrumentalised to perpetuate the very systems that oppress them, both at home and abroad. Perhaps Euro-American minorities will finally one day be free from their own nations' oppression,

25 Édouard Glissant, *Treatise on the Whole-World*, 1997

26 Guy Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, 1967

only to happily continue the imperialist oppression and extrajudicial killings of the global minorised majority—of W. E. B. Du Bois's *dark proletariat*.²⁷ Give Brown civilians representation in US Congress; drone-kill them in the Middle East. After all, the historical root of liberalism entails this very global asymmetry; for us to have a liberal society, the world we imperialise must not.

To summarise: *Representationalism* within art, within visual culture, is but a single manifestation of a larger, increasingly globalised zeitgeist. This is largely ocular in format, owing to a few things: namely, the primacy of vision within the human sensorium—which helped give rise to the image-based format of late capitalism—as well as the ways in which spectacular society induces us to live our lives through images. Since we live in the image-based world of Euro-American multicultural liberal society, the immediate appearance of the *representation* of the minority is used to mollify and conciliate, rather than to refashion or remake, our puritanical, ocular, spectacular society. *Diversity* is but a rhetoric deployed by those great machines of power, which all but serves to suppress a clarity of vision and struggle. We must close our eyes every so often and instead listen to what is whispered in the subterrains...

27 Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, 2015

iii Notes on Yellow

I was never that good of a pianist. From when I was six, my mother forced me to play for almost a decade. Back then, I am sure my tiny hands struggled to make the octave. I remember little of the anxiety I must have felt in entering my new teacher's unfamiliar house, encountering a cat for the first time at such close proximity, whose name I forgot or perhaps never wanted to remember. Even though I lived less than a seven-minute walk away, my mother always drove me, fuelled less by suburban fear than by the navigational ineptitude of a kid who stayed at home and played Pokémon all day.

I barely practised, scraping by. It was such a drag, to drag myself to the piano, to drag my limp fingers across the keys to play another dead white man's masterpiece. In an exam system graded with *fail, pass, merit, or distinction*, I would always only *pass* by a handful of marks—the ever sweet and merciful D- equivalent for the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music.

All the set pieces that the ABRSM provided felt so humdrum: Bach, Strauss, Mozart... Mononyms always told on a surname-only basis. The only piece I ever liked throughout that decade, and that I still remember to this day, was Oscar Peterson's "Hallelujah Time." Of course, I didn't know much about the freedom, history, or potency of jazz at the time, and its initial allure came from the fact that Peterson and I share a forename. It was with this new man from the piano book that

I finally felt a little communion. "Hallelujah Time" made practising for my final exam bearable, feasible, even if I struggled with the virtuosic exigencies of the tune.

I passed. In an unsurprising turn of events, out of the three set pieces I had to play, my lowest mark was for Peterson.

I think of all this against the trope of the Asian American, legible only as a "talented, finely-tuned instrument of Western art," in the way Ocean Vuong has described it.²⁸ I was never able to be the yellow, prodigious Bach savant. *I was never able to scrub his feet, nor iron his clothes, nor massage him and whisper into his ear I love him long time.* He never spoke to me in my dreams or idle thoughts. I wasn't a vehicle for the Western greats. I was steering my own mediocre wheel. But this wasn't some political, great refusal. I was a kid. *I just didn't give a shit.*

What is it to refuse instrumentalisation? After all, the story of the Chinese diaspora in the West—at least beginning in the 19th century—has historically been a tale of instruments. After the de jure end of slavery, the Chinese were imported to the Americas as a new form of cheap labour—"free labour," in contrast to enslaved African labour. The British planned to use "Chinese labor

28 Ocean Vuong, talk at A/P/A Institute at NYU, 2019

as a solution to both the colonial need to suppress Black slave rebellion and the capitalist desire to expand production” in the West Indian colonies.²⁹ In Cuba, the Chinese coolie became figured as a “viable supplement to slavery,” vital to the “modernization of the sugar industry.” In Australia, Chinese labour replaced convict labour.³⁰ In Hawaii, the Chinese were introduced to replace Indigenous labour. In North America, laying steel across deserts and blasting Sierra rock, the celestial Chinese were used to construct the First Transcontinental Railroad (and several other subsequent railroads), ultimately enabling the westward expansion of the United States and its global ascendancy.³¹ In each of these instances and more—either through coercion, indentured servitude, or simply to seek a better wage than they could find in their tumultuous homeland (tumultuous, of course, not least in part due to the imperial machinations of Western powers, such as Britain’s illegal opium trade)—sailed or shipped across the Pacific passage, the Chinese were instrumentalised as labour as a means to

29 Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, 2015

30 Ibid.

31 See Gordon H. Chang, *Ghosts of Gold Mountain*, 2019

serve the white man’s ends.

Back in 1996, Mari Matsuda cautioned Asian Americans to reject the position of the racial bourgeoisie. As she writes, “The role of the racial middle is a critical one.”³² In striving to ascend the racial ranks, it can reinforce white supremacy. Conversely, in refusing to be the middle, in striving to build alliances and communion with other communities of colour, it can help dismantle it. Of course, in contemporary times, the first path is the one perpetuated by the state by way of the pernicious model minority myth. The deputisation of minority groups is a way for white supremacy to maintain the American racial program and the overdetermining death drive of anti-Blackness. Representationalism exemplifies such deputisation. For example, claims that diversity is a way to allay brutal, racially-differentiated policing fall flat in seeing Alex Kueng, a Black cop, and Tou Thao, an Asian cop, in the videos of George Floyd’s murder back in 2020. This, of course, might be but a surface-level assessment, an analysis of appearances in order to generalise culture to make a claim. But still, I can’t help it, because unavoidably so, here we see Thao as another Asian instrument. But this time, rather than an instrument of Bach, he is an instrument of oppressive brutality. The representation of people of colour in law enforcement does little to change the

32 Mari J. Matsuda, *Where is Your Body?*, 1996

actual violence of the police state.

Of course, however, this intermediary, proximate position of the racial bourgeoisie is ambivalent, vexed, and tenuous. The rise of anti-Asian hate crimes over the past two years illuminates how the deputised are most often the first to go. We are “America’s punching bag.”³³ I want to ask: Were the elderly men and women picking up cans off the street, curb-stomped and beaten blue for being yellow, ever the racial bourgeoisie? Were Xiaojie Tan, Daoyou Feng, Hyun Jung Grant, Soon Chung Park, Suncha Kim, and Yong Ae Yue, murdered in the Atlanta spa shootings, the racial middle? And those Chinamen speeding down Madison Avenue on their electric bikes, plastic bags wrapped over their hands, to hand you your takeout, cooked and prepared by undocumented kitchen workers? We mustn’t forget how class is deeply imbricated with yellowness—a mutual inflection. *Asian America*, after all, contains the widest economic disparity of any racial category in the United States. Refusal of deputisation is to align oneself with the global proletariat—in addition to the Black and Brown communities we often live adjacent to and amongst—for all these positionalities overlap and are formed in relation to each other. As Vuong might say, *Prepare to be unfathomable*.

Refuse to be the instrument.

In 1867, there was a moment when it became apparent that the Railroad Chinese were not the easily disciplinable yellow instruments that the Central Pacific Railroad company thought they were. In the height of construction, thousands of men put down their tools and refused to work. They might have chosen to drink tea, gamble, meander, or have sex instead. Instrumentalising their collective labour power, they used their superior bargaining position to demand equal wages with white workers and reduced workdays in the dangerous tunnels. Despite the fact that the labour strike was the largest to date in the United States, history has not paid the Railroad Chinese much attention. Too marginal, too minor. The strike doesn’t even have its own Wikipedia page. *Prepare to be inconceivable*.

I have been asked this a few times, and the answer is yes. I am probably going to pressure my future child, gently so, to play an instrument—at least for a few years, at least for a good while. To know the language of music is to know another culture. Fluency in a second language betters you at the third or fourth. Of course, they’ll have the option of which instrument, which teacher, and which music they’d like to play. Even if it’s Bach. And they can quit after giving it an honest try, of course. *A decade is far too long of a drag*. But, if they want to, they can play as inconceivably, illegibly,

and unfathomably as they like. If this means they play brokenly, defectively, off-key, then so be it. A defective flute can be sharpened into a spear. Craft your own instrument, play your own tune.

Cento

I do not intend to speak about, just nearby.

Trinh T. Minh-Ha
Reassemblage, 1975

A responsible work today seems to me above all one that shows, on the one hand, a political commitment and an ideological lucidity, and is, on the other hand, interrogative by nature, instead of being merely prescriptive. In other words, a work that involves her story in history; a work that acknowledges the difference between lived experience and representation, a work that is careful not to turn struggle into an object of consumption, and requires that responsibility be

Oscar yi Hou

assumed by the maker as well as by the audience, without whose participation no solution emerges, for no solution exists as a given.

Trinh T. Minh-Ha

When the Moon Waxes Red, 1991

The provincialization of gay Asia within the United States is particularly egregious, producing what we might call queer chop suey, a persistent rendering of Chinese or other national-ethnic exotica as most "interesting" insofar as it is spectacular and foreign.

Cathy Park Hong

Minor Feelings, 2020

The present tense of the verb to be refers only to the present; but nevertheless, with the first person singular in front of it, it absorbs the past which is inseparable from the pronoun. I am includes all that had made me so. It is more than a statement of immediate fact: it is already an explanation, a justification, a demand—it is already autobiographical.

John Berger

About Looking, 1972

Cento

If Whitman's I contained multitudes, my I contained 5.6 percent of this country.

Cathy Park Hong

Minor Feelings, 2020

Coercive mimeticism demands that the ethnic occupy a space in modern Western society that is categorically equivalent to that of caged animals described by John Berger; it is, thus, arguably the very mechanism that holds together the fabric of this particular captivity narrative.

Rey Chow

The Protestant Ethnic and the Spirit of Capitalism, 2002

"What is the human race, anyway, but a multitude of outlets for desires? There's no suppressing the truths that arise from our experiences. Desires teach us lessons, and we have to go forth into the new worlds that we construct for ourselves." Chu Kuang's voice trembled. "When you can't, that's when you die."

[...]

"The new worlds that we construct."

Qiu Miaojin

Notes of a Crocodile, 1994

So happy together
How is the weather
So happy together
We're happy together
So happy together
Happy together
So happy together
So happy together (ba-ba-ba-ba ba-ba-ba-ba)

The Turtles
"Happy Together," 1967

Visibility is not necessarily better or more positive than invisibility, and visibility is not necessarily indicative of a more evolved or progressive political state of being for Asian Americans.

[...]

Invisibility and visibility work to fix, shift, and refix the figure of the Asian immigrant according to the particular political exigencies and historical demands of the nation-state. The battle for control of this representational currency has serious material effects as to which Asian American ethnic groups will or will not be—how they will or will not be seen—in national political, economic, and cultural life.

David L. Eng
Racial Castration, 2001

It is sometimes advantageous to be unseen.

Ralph Ellison
Invisible Man, 1952

It is important not to hand over futurity to normative white reproductive futurity. That dominant mode of futurity is indeed "winning," but that is all the more reason to call on a utopian political imagination that will enable us to glimpse another time and place: a "not-yet" where queer youths of color actually get to grow up.

[...]

The here and now is simply not enough. Queerness should and could be about a desire for another way of being in both the world and time, a desire that resists mandates to accept that which is not enough.

[...]

Heteronormative culture makes queers think that both the past and the future do not belong to them. All we are allowed to imagine is barely surviving the present.

José Esteban Muñoz
Cruising Utopia, 2009

If diasporas are not inherently sites of political resistance—as queer is not always an oppositional or radical state of being—what might the unorthodox pairing of queerness and diaspora politically yield?

David L. Eng

Racial Castration, 2001

Hey Sexy !

Greetings from Alliance, Nebraska :) I have been thinking of you lots lately, since I'm out West on a road trip to Yellowstone with my family, and it's so damn American, and I keep wanting you to get back to America!

A.B.

I am referring to the "Asianness," "Africanness," "Arabness," and other similar kinds of nativenesses with which ethnics in North American society, for instance, are often expected to conform.

[...]

I propose that it be defined as a coercive mimeticism—a process (identitarian, existential, cultural, or textual) in which those who are marginal to mainstream Western culture are expected, by way of what Albert Memmi calls

"the mark of the plural," to resemble and replicate the very banal preconceptions that have been appended to them, a process in which they are expected to objectify themselves in accordance with the already seen and thus to authenticate the familiar imagings of them as ethnics.

Rey Chow

The Protestant Ethnic and the Spirit of Capitalism, 2002

We are overcome with the feeling that in this small corner of the atmosphere there reigns complete and utter silence; that here in the darkness immutable tranquility holds sway. The 'mysterious Orient' of which Westerners speak probably refers to the uncanny silence of these dark places.

Jun'ichiro Tanizaki

In Praise of Shadows, 1933

If you are going to be an Asian American artist, be prepared to be unfathomable to the rest of the world and the rest of the country. When it comes to Asian American innovation and agency, we are often legible when we are at service to larger structures and art, often Eurocentric ones.

Oscar yi Hou

[...]

We hold the doors, we nurse, we put our heads down, we wash the feet, we do the nails, we press the clothes, we iron it. We accommodate. And I think, because of this, when it comes to Asian American talent, it is only legible when it is seen in service of Bach as prodigies, or Beethovens. You can play the piano well as an instrument—a talented, finely-tuned instrument of Western art—but when it comes to your own thinking, your own creation, you will not be legible. You will be inconceivable.

[...]

Be prepared to be inconceivable, and then be prepared to innovate beyond that.

Ocean Vuong

Talk at A/P/A Institute at NYU, 2019

Why not simply try to touch the other, feel the other, discover each other? Was my freedom not given me to build the world of you, man?

Frantz Fanon

Black Skin, White Masks, 1952

Cento

Exactly. Rather, we have to create a gay life.
To become.

Michel Foucault

Interview by Bob Gallagher and Alexander Wilson for
the Advocate, 1982

I am also part of a queer relational orbit, a force field of belonging.

José Esteban Muñoz

Cruising Utopia, 2009

"Strings of Life" is a 1987 song by American electronic musician Derrick May, in collaboration with Michael James, and released under the name Rhythim Is Rhythim. It is his most well-known song and considered a classic in both the house music and techno genres. May is credited with developing the futuristic variation that would be dubbed "techno."

Wikipedia Description:

Derrick May, "Strings of Life," 1987

OSCAR!!

I'm writing from a bar by the Tiber River where I am drinking an Aperol Spritz. This is mostly what I've been doing in Rome, since I don't simp for Western Civ and going to the museums/monuments/etc. is mostly about that. So I spend my time wandering through gardens, drinking in cafes, staring at the river—and I love it.

I.M.

Family has been much criticized in contemporary queer theory as an oppressive totality. But such a characterization, from the perspective of queers of color, is deeply reductive. One the one hand, it is true that not all families of color affirm their queer sons and daughters. On the other hand, the generalized gay community often feels like a sea of whiteness to queers of color, and thus the imagined ethnic family is often a refuge. It is a space where all those elements of the self that are fetishized, ignored, and rejected in the larger queer world are suddenly revalorized.

José Esteban Muñoz
The Sense of Brown, 2020

In the nineteenth century as well, San Francisco's Chinatown was the site of polymorphous sexual formations that were marked as deviant because they were nonreproductive and nonconjugal. Formed in relation to exclusion laws that prohibited the immigration of Asian women to the United States and out of U.S. capital's designation of Asian immigrants as surplus and redundant labor, Chinatown became known for its bachelor societies, opium dens, and prostitutes. Each one of these formations rearticulated normative familial arrangements and thereby violated a racialized ideal of heteropatriarchal nuclearity.

Roderick A. Ferguson
Aberrations in Black, 2004

Chinese folklore is full of stories of the righteous bravery and honor of an upright general or official who was wrongly treated but finds a way to gain redress and make things right. An actual episode in 1867 in California inspired a populist version and remains one of the most outstanding and intriguing of the many dramatic moments that punctuate the CP&R construction effort—the mass collective action taken by thousands of Railroad Chinese in June 1867. It is known as "The Strike" and was the

Oscar yi Hou

largest, or certainly close to it, workers' strike against a private employer to take place in America to that date.

Gordon H. Chang

Ghosts of Gold Mountain, 2019

TAM (as a Bible Belt preacher): Born? No!
Crashed! Not born. Stamped. Not born! Created!
Not born. No more born than the heaven and earth.
No more born than nylon and acrylic. For
I am a Chinaman! A miracle synthetic! Drip dry
and machine washable.

Frank Chin

The Chickencoop Chinaman, 1981

I have an Other-Ache
compassion / compassion

The subject experiences a sentiment of violent compassion with regard to the loved object each time he sees, feels or knows the loved object is unhappy or in danger, for whatever reason external to the amorous relation itself.

Roland Barthes

A Lover's Discourse: Fragments, 1977

Cento

Personism has nothing to do with philosophy, it's all art. It does not have to do with personality or intimacy, far from it! But to give you a vague idea, one of its minimal aspects is to address itself to one person (other than the poet himself), thus evoking overtones of love without destroying love's life-giving vulgarity, and sustaining the poet's feelings towards the poem while preventing love from distracting him into feeling about the person. That's part of Personism.

Frank O'Hara

"Personism: A Manifesto," 1959

The parting, like the white fruit of an apple discolouring instantly around the bite, had begun three days before when they had met aboard the Rakuyo.

Yukio Mishima

The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea, 1963

Oscar yi Hou

My sandpaper sigh engraves a line
Into the rust of your tongue
Girl I could've been someone, to you
Would have painted the skies blue

King Krule
"Baby Blue," 2010

In ancient African traditions, for example, the point of departure for the questioning of human existence is not the question of being but that of relation, of mutual implication, that is to say of the discovery and the recognition of a different flesh from mine. It is the question of knowing how to transport myself to faraway places that are at once different from mine and implicated in it. From this perspective, identity is a matter not of substance but of plasticity. It is a matter of co-composition, of opening onto the over-there of another flesh, of reciprocity between multiple fleshes and their multiple names and places.

Achille Mbembe
Necropolitics, 2010

Cento

There is a wor(l)d which is lived and the wor(l)d which is met.

Modified from Jean-Paul Sartre
"What is Literature," 1948

The idea of identity as a single root provides the measure according to which these communities were enslaved by others, and in the name of which a number of them led their liberation struggles. But could we not propose, against the single root that kills everything around it, an extension of the root into a rhizome, which opens up Relation? It is not rootless: but it does not take over its surroundings. Onto the imagination of a single-root identity, let us graft this imagination of rhizome-identity.

Édouard Glissant
Treatise on the Whole-World, 1997

Happy Valentines Day.
OSCAR, DO YOU HAPPEN TO HAVE A
BAND-AID? BECAUSE I SCRAPED MY
KNEES FALLING FOR YOU!

J.H.

Oscar yi Hou

Such pluralist multiculturalism may be, for the contemporary period, a central arena for what Antonio Gramsci called "hegemony."

[...]

The Terrain of multiculturalism is then marked by the incorporative process by which a ruling group elicits the "consent" of racial, ethnic, or class minority groups through the promise of equal participation and representation.

[...]

Multiculturalism [is] a discourse designed to recuperate conflict and difference through inclusion.

Lisa Lowe

Immigrant Acts, 1996

If one were to insist, the opposite of professionalization is that fugitive impulse to rely on the undercommons for protection, to rely on the honor, and to insist on the honor of the fugitive community; if one were to insist, the opposite of professionalization is that criminal impulse to steal from from professions, from the university, with neither apologies nor malice, to steal the enlightenment for others, to steal oneself with a certain blue music, a certain tragic optimism, to steal away with mass intellectuality.

Stefano Harney and Fred Moten
The Undercommons, 2013

Cento

Could this melody
Be sung in other countries
By other birds?

Richard Wright

Haiku: This Other World, 1998

AN UNDYING BIRD... forever lives, forever breathes, forever, with its two wings fluttering, flies.

[...]

Time never passes.

[...]

The bird flies with the two wings, on and on.

Younghill Kang

East Goes West, 1937

bearded eagles

blind birds singing
in glass fields
these moonmad swans and ecstatic ganders

trapped egrets

charcoal owls

Lawrence Ferlinghetti

A Coney Island of the Mind, 11, 1958

Plates

















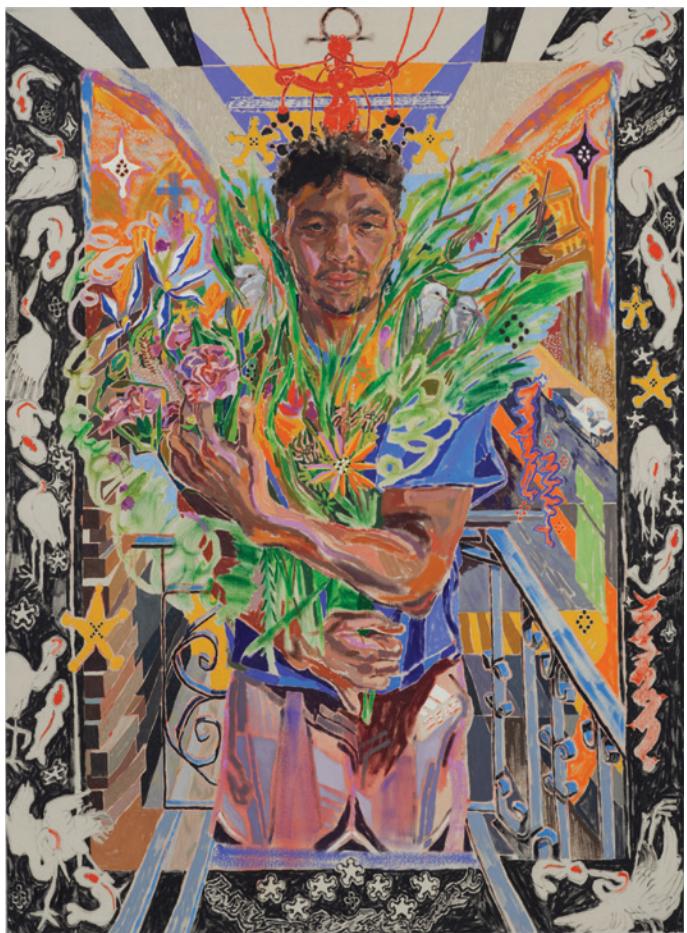




GANGOL OF CRASPEUT







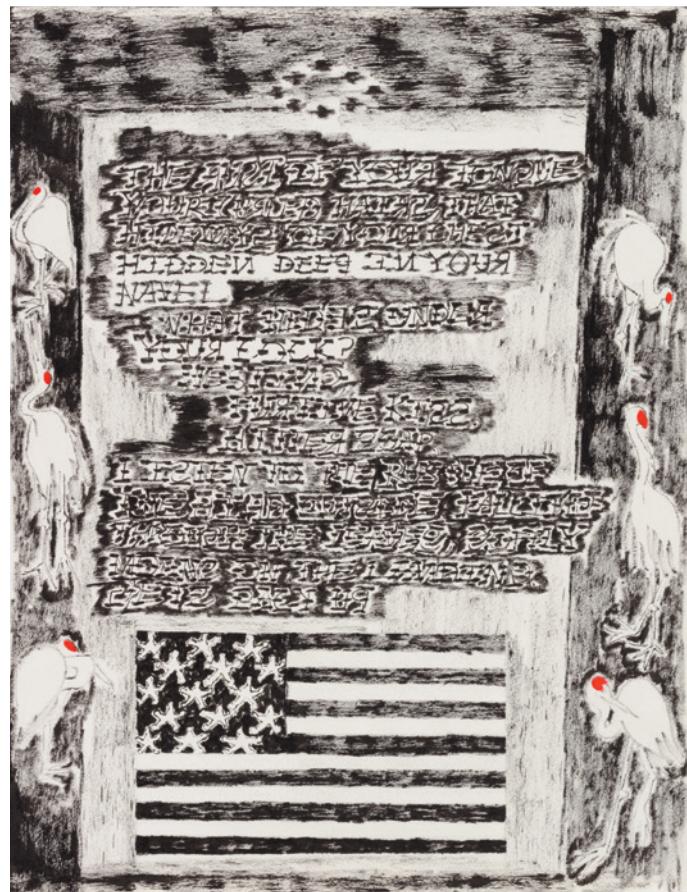


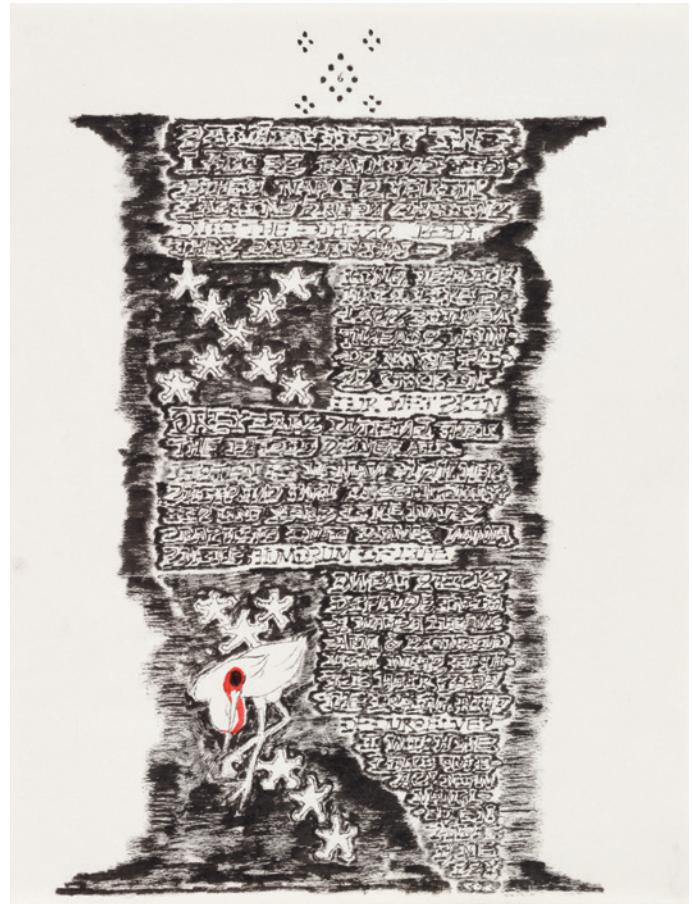


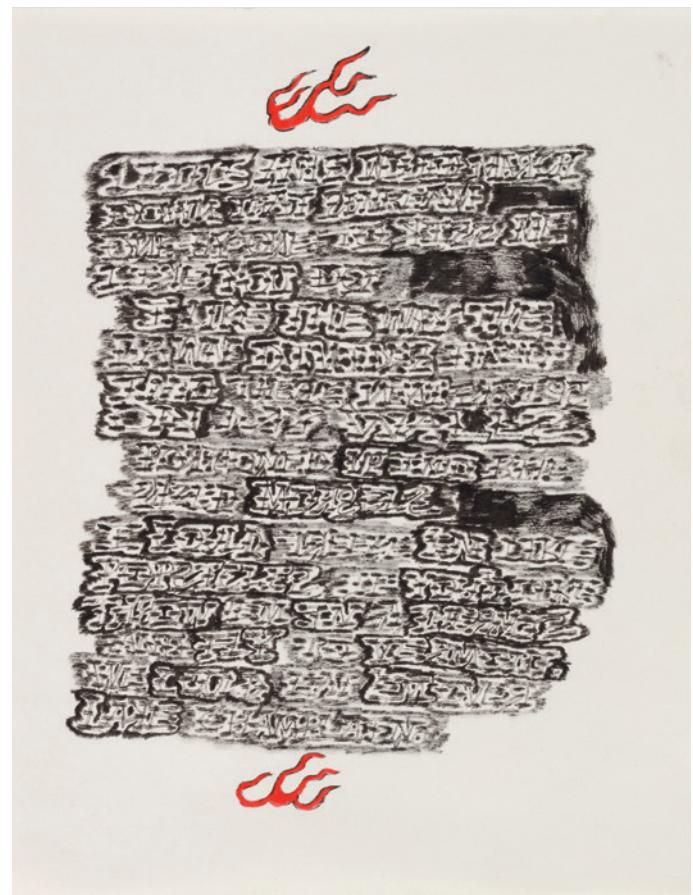


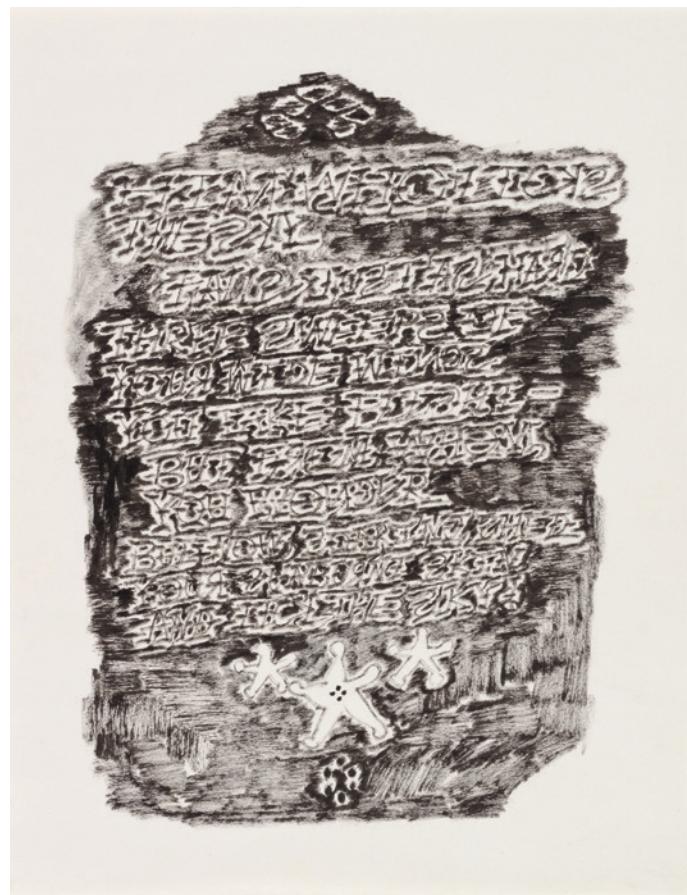




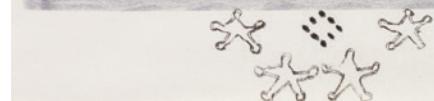
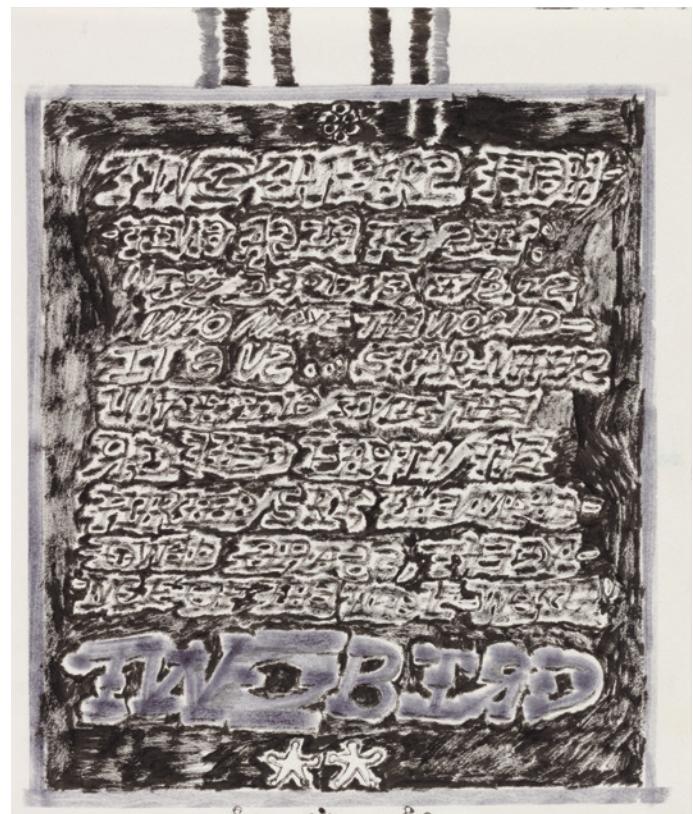


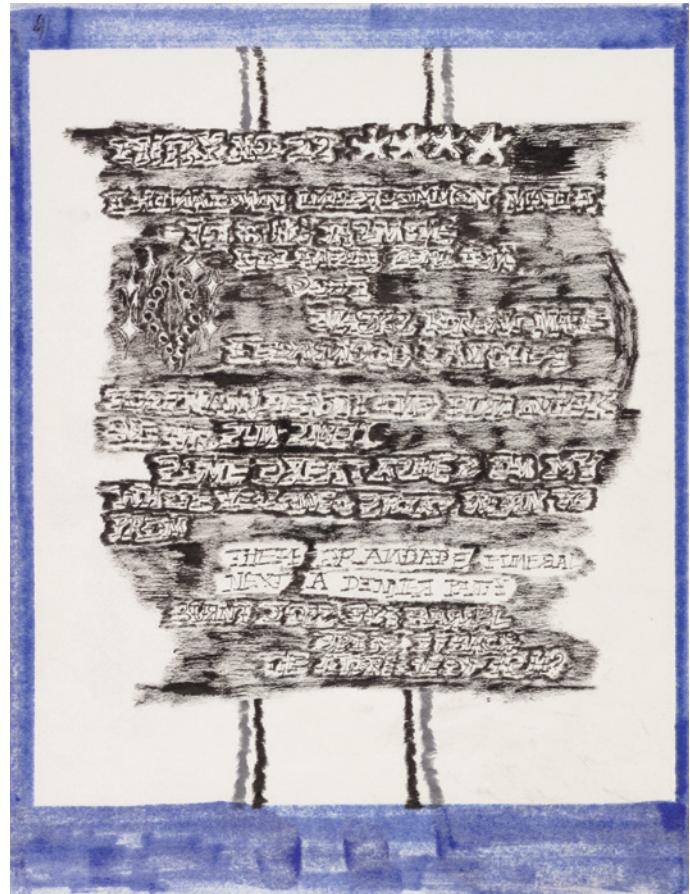


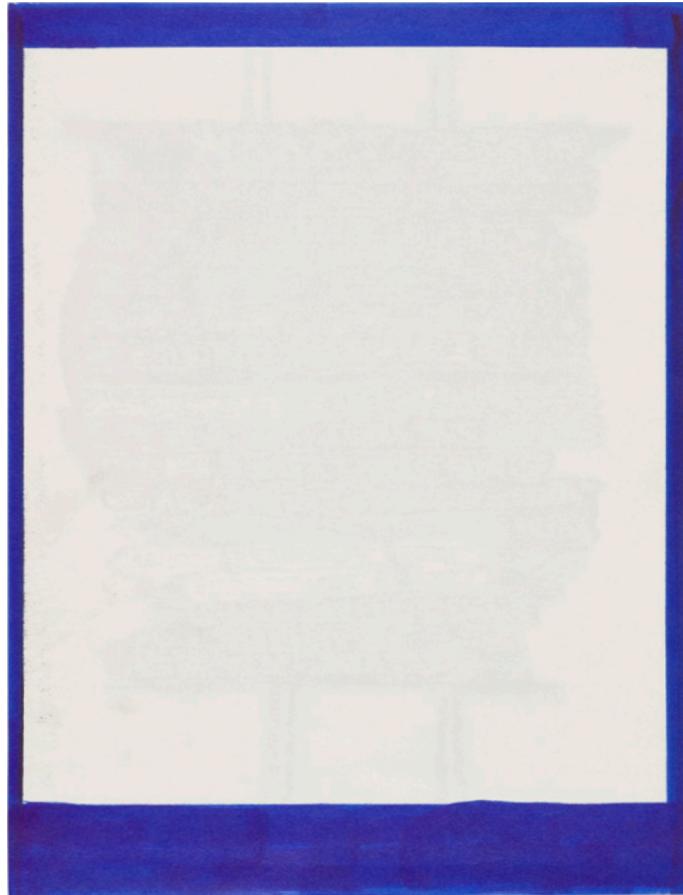










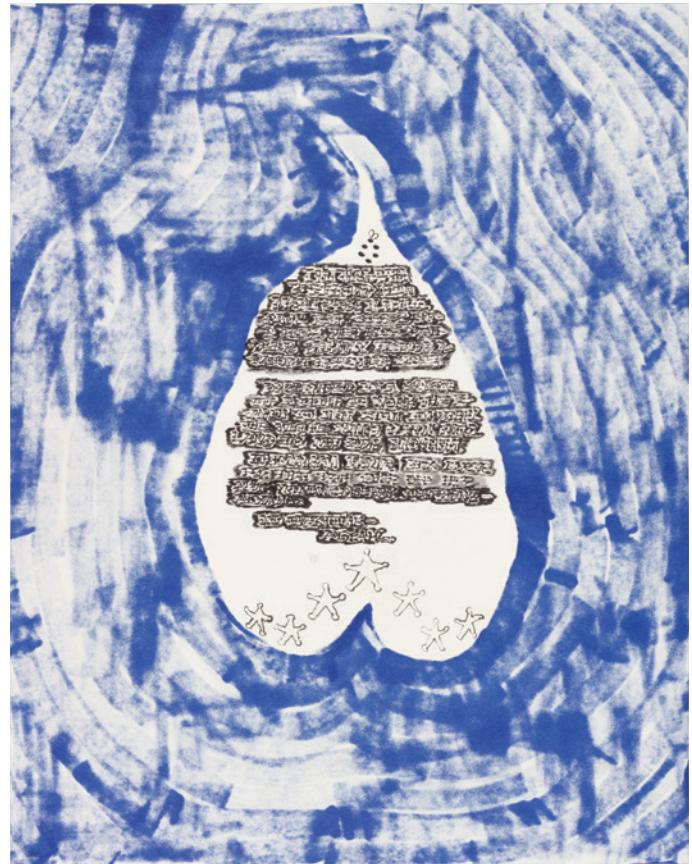


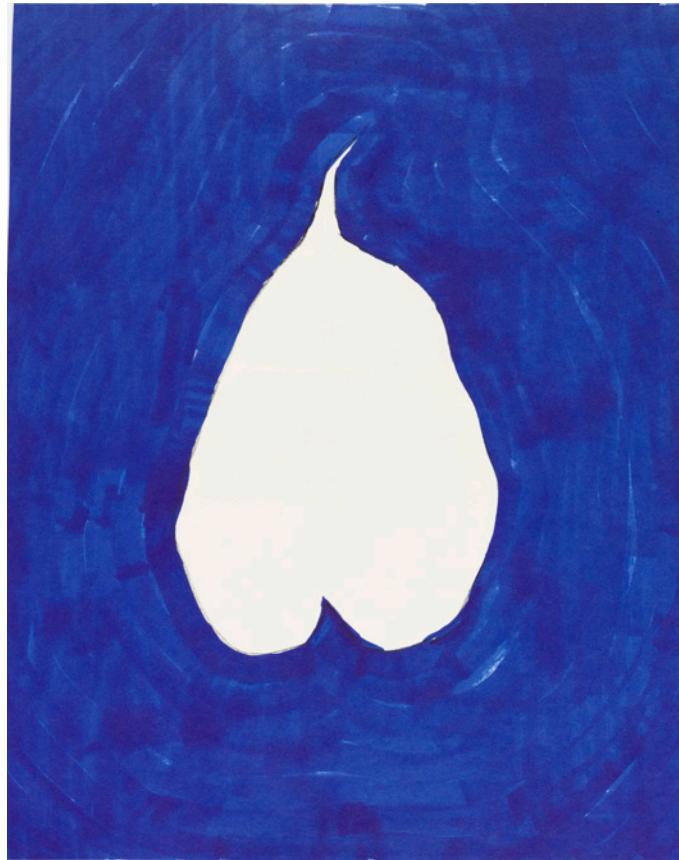
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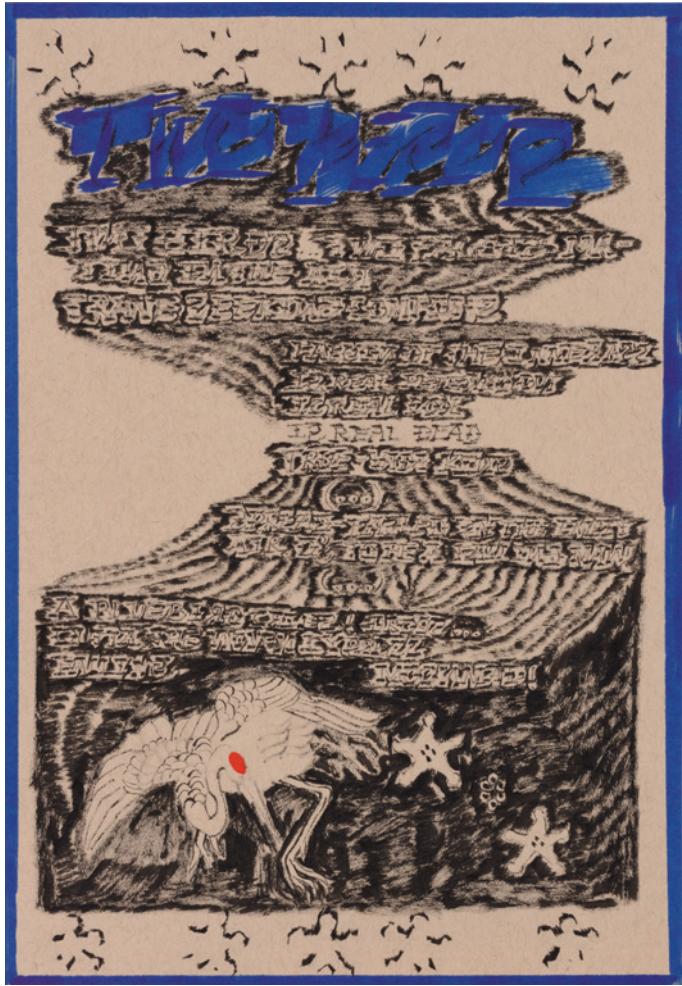
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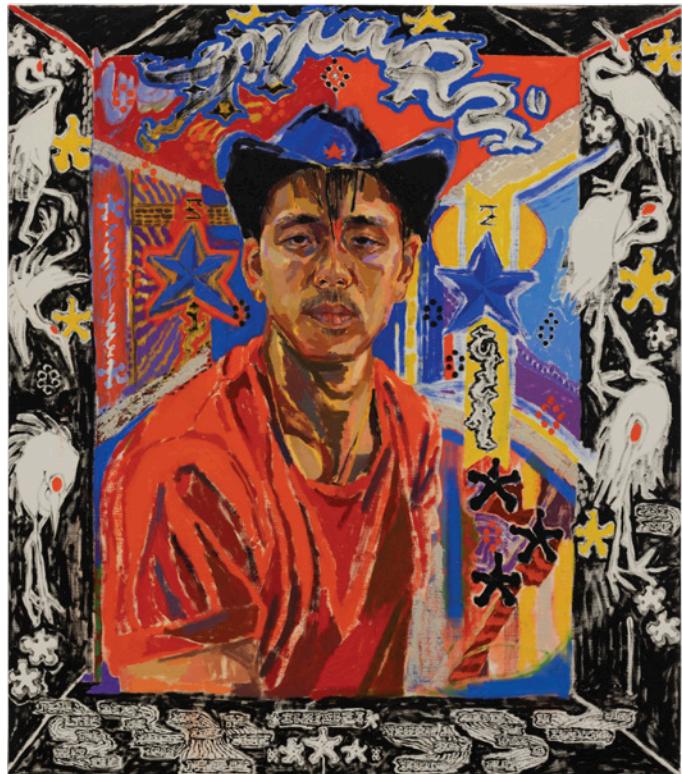
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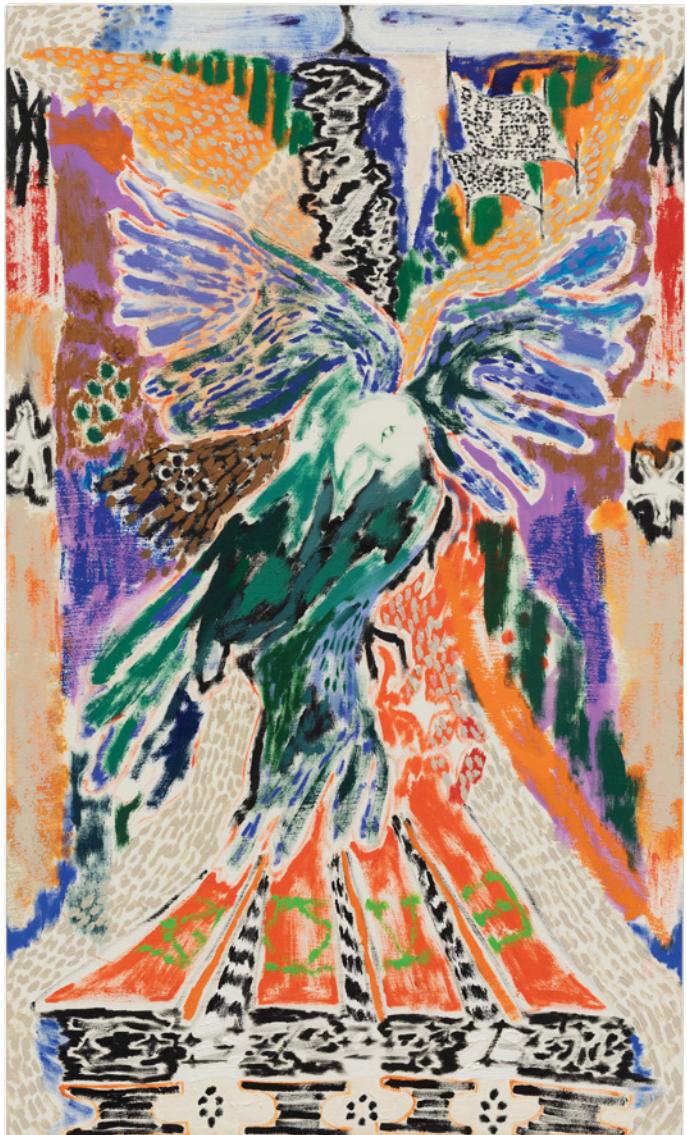


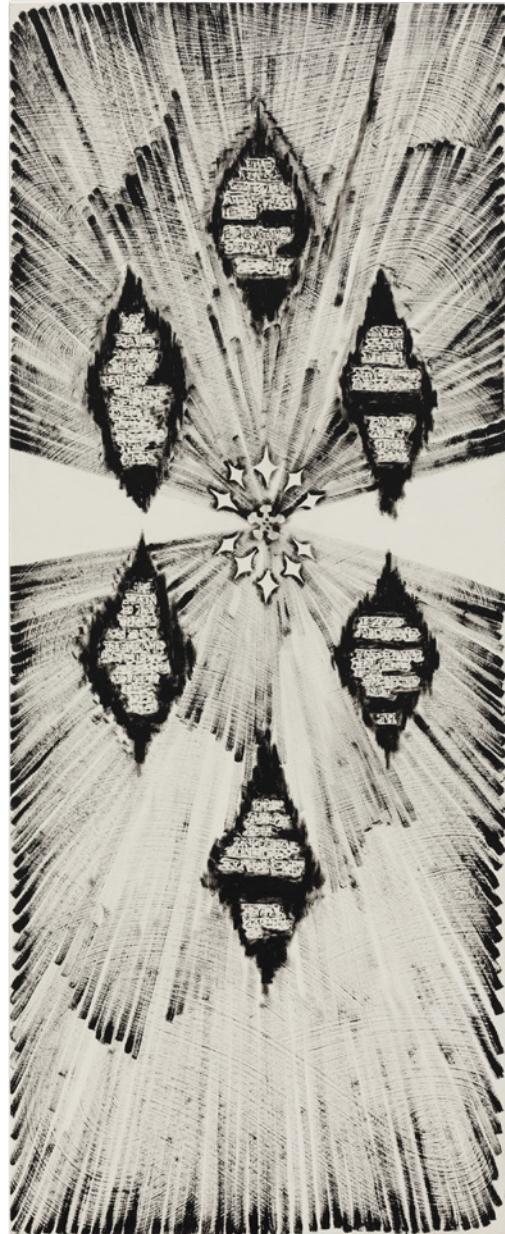


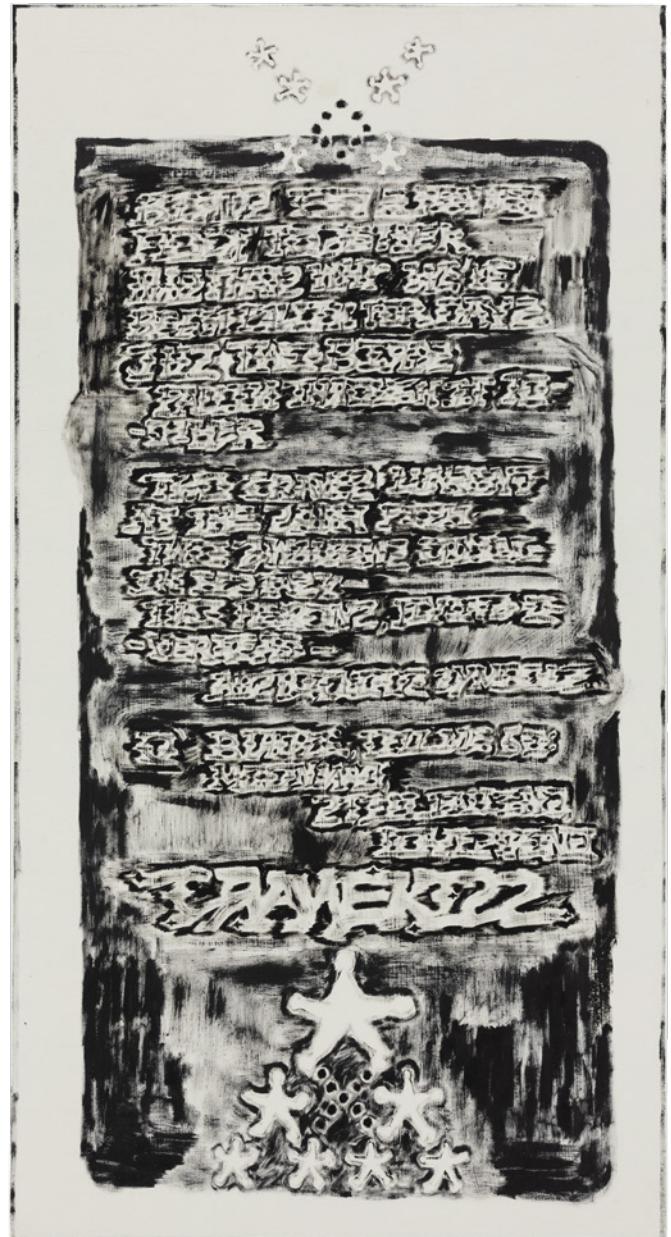


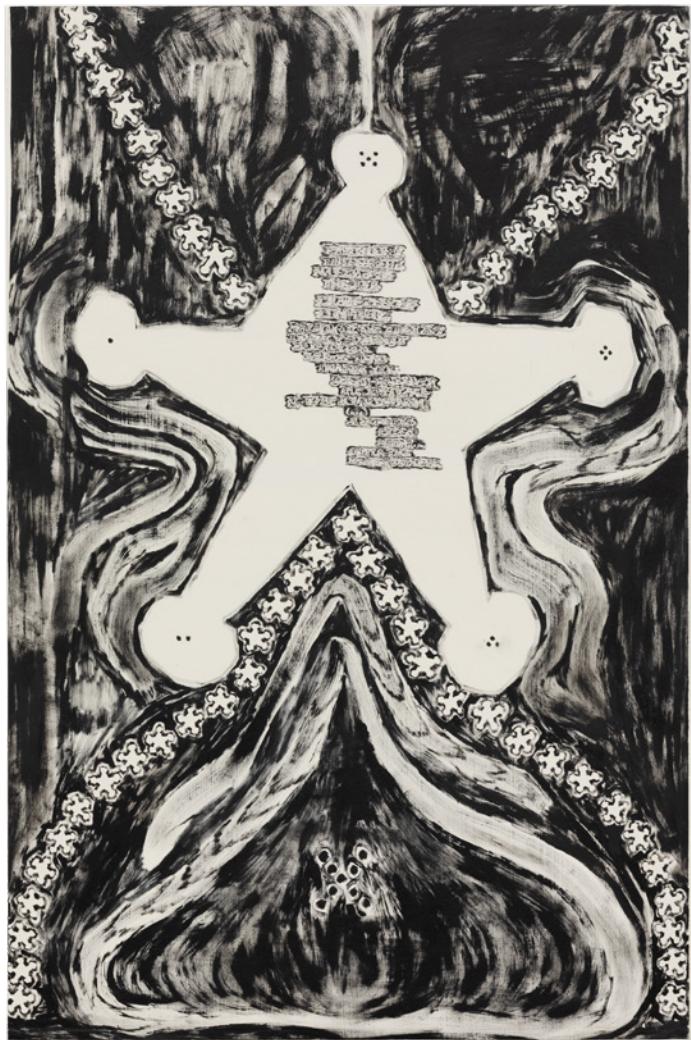






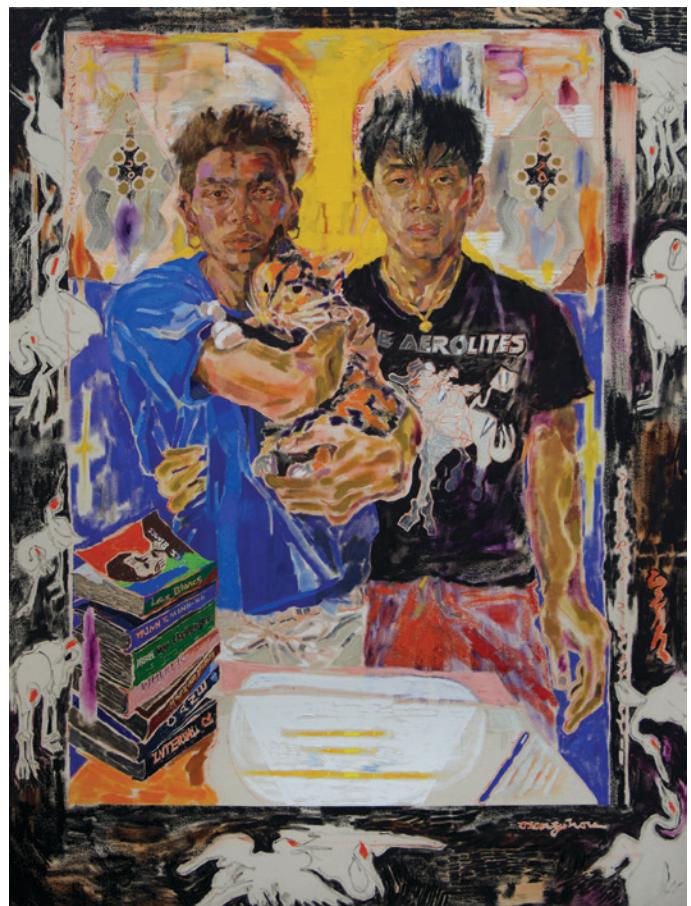


















A terrible sense of when he was wanted and when he was not

¹ How much of desire is about belonging?

Whenever I go to gay bars, I wonder if I should be having more sex. Should I be hornier? Should I actually want to wear leather? It's not that I'm a homebody, or that I don't enjoy parties. Actually, I probably enjoy them a little too much. I just don't like mixing sex and dancing.

I'm fond of saying that most straight clubs try to combine spaces for socializing with spaces for dancing, and then end up doing neither very well. When people ask how queer raves are, I say that they are more intense in both regards, because they split them up: There's a really intense dance floor, where the music is so loud and the fog is so

thick that you can't really talk to anyone, even if you wanted to. Then there are the gardens where people smoke and chat. The relationship between these two places is not dissimilar to that of a pool and a pool deck, which is maybe why, when we leave the garden, I often ask my friends, "I'm going in, care to join?"

Most words associated with nightlife are so embarrassing. Terms like *dance floor*, *rave*, and *club*—perhaps because of their overuse in pop culture—seem to have been drained of any substantive meaning, instead existing as vacant signifiers of someone trying to convince you that they are having a good time.

Usually, a night out is preceded by the idea or expectation of the night out—the kind of debauchery, self-destruction, romantic conquest, and camaraderie one might find. Of course, not all nights are like this. There are just as many where you might want to simply unwind with friends. But in high school, looking at pictures of parties on Facebook, I began to construct an idea of what it meant to go out at night. I would look at pictures of people with their mouths half-open, their eyelids heavy, seemingly relieved of control over their bodies.

Because I didn't drink in high school, I pursued this sense of dissolution elsewhere, namely through music and music cultures. The first time I went out, I was eager and expectant for that

sensation. Ke\$ha featuring LMFAO at Penn's Landing was a 16+ event, but I knew I was closer to "substances" than ever before. From many Sunday meditation sessions with my parents, I knew that Buddhism forbids alcohol and other "mind-altering substances" as earthly distractions from reaching a kind of universal equanimity. Perhaps if meditation had provided a sufficient outlet for dissolution, I would not have gone looking for it.

2
Without roots but flowers

The Burmese-Buddhist temple in Manalapan, New Jersey is the only place in the US I can go to and point to something my parents helped build. They've donated to that place since we first moved here. We go maybe two or three Sundays a year.

At the temple, women introduce themselves to me as "the aunty who held you when you were born." My mom corroborates: "We'd get here, and I'd need to set up the food, so I'd hand the baby off to the aunties." The same aunties now tell me I deserve a hot wife, because I've been a good son. There are so many old people here that no one gets priority to the bathroom. Sometimes, we'd run into a woman who was Asian, but wasn't Burmese, so she'd speak to us in English. Everyone there is Chinese and not Chinese, or Chinese and something else.

I hear in Chinese culture, they start counting your age at birth. You are one when you're born. How beautiful, that the first year of your life is actually a year of your mom's. Dovetails. Arguing and throwing rocks by the river and sleeping. Cousins are known as *half-wombs*. In nearly every culture, your parents pick your name, so your first expression of taste is also not your own. Dovetails again. I shouldn't romanticize the idea of bearing a child, seeing as I don't have a uterus. I'm also not

Chinese. I'm something more like third-generation Chinese—my grandparents moved to China from Burma—and second generation Burmese-American. Neither my parents nor my grandparents speak Chinese, and our relationship to Chinese culture is both innate and very abstract.

We don't speak Chinese at home, but Burmese. There are so many phrases that translate from Burmese to English in a poetic way. For example, there's no direct translation of the words *I love you*. The Burmese phrase is something more like, "I 'chip' on you." Literally: "I want to chip a piece off you."

It was my younger brother Duke who started saying "I love you" every time we parted ways. He's the most sentimental. He also doesn't like to drive—my older brother Nick does. Now, we always say it. If this is the last time that I am going to see someone, how would I feel about the way I left things? If there was a car accident, I couldn't forgive myself. So we don't leave fights hanging. It doesn't feel all that perfunctory yet, at least with my parents. Because saying it in English still feels odd to them, like marbles in their mouths.

3
Two men

Julie and I used to come up to the city during college to go to gay bars near Times Square. Now when we go up there, Julie says it feels like time travel. Walking around New York can feel like that.

I remember being in Chelsea one time, just after leaving a circuit party and coming down from MDMA. The week before, I had been in Berlin. I wanted to cry but I couldn't. There was a guy at the party. I think he was Chinese, maybe Burmese, who knows?

They're called circuits because they go around the world, and men travel to them so that they can see the same men. Everyone's wearing harnesses. Shirtless. Smells like cold air. Music that doesn't throb, or slink, but sags energetically.

Anyways, this guy. He's Chinese, kinda chubby, virtually invisible in the crowd of torsos. People speaking Spanish next to me. Starting to sweat on the come up. This guy, he's wearing Christmas lights all over him, and a white t-shirt and jeans. A giant light-up thing on his head. People are looking at him because of the lights. Not because of his body. *No one wants to sleep with him*, I think. He does not have a good sense of when he is wanted and when he is not. Or he has too good a sense, and that's why he's wearing the lights. Some attention is better than no attention. This makes me

feel so terrible. Like my throat is the spine of a book and someone is stepping on it, flattening the book open. Someone grabs my waist and I push them away. I grab someone else's waist and they push me away. A group of bearded dudes from Brazil want to play fight, capoeira-style, and I get pulled into the ring. In the end, they point to the Chinese guy in the lights and say I should go be with him. Maybe he was having a good time, and I was projecting. But it made me feel bad. So bad, bad, bad.

4
A blood wound

In Burmese, there are no surnames. My mom's name is Mya Mya Sann; my father's name is Aye Maung Maung. My Burmese name is Aung Phyo, and my English name is Simon Wu, and my Chinese one is Wu Hui. There is no way to know of a relation beyond a mutual agreement that blood is shared. Of course, in Chinese, it's the opposite. Names are almost all surname, with your first name as a kind of adornment to your identity otherwise.

Once, while introducing myself to a class of children at the Brooklyn Museum, I was notified that I was not the only Simon Wu in the room. A fourth grader, missing two of his front teeth, wearing round glasses, raised his hand. When I try to imagine the moment from memory, I can't reconstruct his face. I only see *my* face, drawn from pictures of my younger self. He might have had a bowl cut, like I did when I was a kid. At the end of the lesson, we took a picture together, Simon Wu and me, but I can't seem to find it anymore.

My earliest memory of art is bloody. Running around a fountain in front of the Philadelphia Museum of Art with Nick. Chasing him and tripping on the gravel. A little gash on his forehead opening, with pickled skin underneath. There's a picture of that day, right before the blood, that

my father took. There's no picture in the museum, though—just outside of it.

My brother lives with me now, and the other day he used his new razor to give me a close shave. I hadn't been so close to my brother's face in a while. I noticed that his hair has the same kind of soft flop that mine does, stubbornly not voluminous. His forehead has the same crease. "You have the same laugh," a friend told me when we went to dinner together. Nick shaved against the grain, and the follicles made a soft ripping noise as they left my face. My brother has to shave a lot more than I do, even though he is younger. People say that he is more like my mom, and that I am more like my dad. Duke is like neither. He is sentimental and humorous, laid-back and jovial. He played the drums, while Nick and I played the clarinet. We inherited different genes.

I don't remember anything else about that day at the museum, other than the blood. It was cold outside. My parents tried to keep us from running around too much. My mom called me something like *hyperactive* in Burmese. I think she has access to these past versions of me more acutely than I do—the version of me that was there, wiping blood from Nick's face.

Later, we learned of Nick's chickpea allergy from a kiss. My kiss, actually. We'd just eaten some chickpea fritters, and for a reason I can't summon, I wanted to give him a kiss on the cheek.

I think I was five, and he was three. The greasy heart left by my lips turned angry—redder than lipstick. He started to cry. We figured it was the chickpeas, but we weren't sure until he tried to eat some a few days later. I am not allergic to chickpeas. Neither of my parents are. Some things are inherited from nowhere.

5
On belonging

I remember talking to a guy, a guy one might call older, at one of those gay bars in Times Square with Julie. He was in the corner wearing a Hawaiian shirt. He really wasn't that old. We hoped he was happy. How was his sense of when he was wanted and when he was not? What was he looking for here? We went on a date later that month. We didn't kiss. He said the music had changed in New York, had come back around to the techno of the '90s. I remember feeling terrified of being that old. But I think I know now that the undesirability I grafted onto him, and the Chinese Christmas lights man, said more about my immaturity than it did about either of their actual lives. When I'm out at a club with people, I feel that I want to stay out longer than they do. And when I'm alone, I feel I shouldn't allow myself to stay out late. I've never been brave enough to go out on my own. When my friends got into Berghain and I didn't, I could have gone to Lab, that gay sex club. I didn't. When I was in Mexico City for a week, I could have gone to that gay party, BonBon. No responsibilities the next day. I didn't. What was I scared of? Becoming the man in the Christmas lights at the circuit party? The old gay? It seemed uncouth to want that much attention in public. Better to cauterize the want before it festered into need.

Sometimes, wanting can be like cinema. A blue coat. The color red. Sunlight moving across the floor in an airplane cabin. Raked leaves. The feeling when you've forgotten something, but you remember it just in time. Flower after flower on the street. Happy trails. A single person, standing in the water at the beach, yelling at kids for playing, bitter for youth.

You'll Never Walk Alone

I don't have access to [the authentic or quint-essential selves of my subjects]. I have access to surface, and to social dynamics.

Jennifer Packer¹

Written initially as a show tune in the 1945 Rodgers and Hammerstein musical *Carousel*, "You'll Never Walk Alone" was covered in 1963

- 1 Juliana Halpert, "Jennifer Packer on Her Changing Approaches to Painting," *Artforum*, 8 Dec. 2020, www.artforum.com/interviews/jennifer-packer-on-her-changing-approaches-to-painting-84607.

by the Liverpool band Gerry & The Pacemakers. The song became wildly popular, topping the UK charts; soon, it was enthusiastically embraced by the Liverpool Football Club as its anthem and motto. The melodic, emotionally suffused song valorizes solidarity through hardship, which is profoundly bound to the working-class roots of the team; it was also the first thing (and tune) that popped into mind when I learned of Oscar yi Hou, the Liverpool-born, Chinese-British artist who now lives and works in New York City.

Yi Hou is a naturalized Liverpool fan—in a *Sure, I support it* kind of way that has allegedly disappointed cab drivers who seem much more impassioned by his home team. I've long associated Liverpool's anthem, however, with awe and heartbreak: No avid AC Milan supporter could forget the collective singing of Liverpool fans which resounded in Istanbul's Ataturk Stadium, surely contributing to Liverpool's miracle comeback after falling 0–3 to a stellar Milan lineup in the 2005 UEFA Champions League final. The feat was so improbable that it evokes something almost ancient or mythological, which is perhaps why soccer remains a space of spectacle and the spectacular, where the primal, the debased, and unique intersectionality cohere.

That this association supersedes the more conspicuous connections yi Hou and I share—being Asian, Chinese, and diasporic—feels

significant. After all, I grew up in a communist China (that yi Hou's parents fled from) with a multitude of socialist legacies in its modernity—an essential aspect of Chinese-ness that is often lost, or very superficially understood at best, in the identity starter pack from a Euro-American perspective. (It is also a big soccer country.) And with the visible rise of Asian American and diasporic artists over the past few years—disturbingly coinciding with escalating xenophobic and racist violence against Asians worldwide during the COVID-19 pandemic—art practitioners like myself have come to grapple with an exquisitely tricky balancing act: between presenting a unified voice in our activism, and mining specificity, questioning monolithic narratives, and expanding nuance. Time and again, visibility rewards (read: demands) a catered, pre-packaged story.

It is through this conundrum that I've come to recognize the potency in yi Hou's intricate yet playful algorithm, which constellates myriad cultural, identitarian, and personal references in his predominantly figural paintings. The dry application of paint in small, irregular blocks to build up physiognomy and textures reflects a frugality; especially for a young artist who had just graduated from Columbia University in 2021, these infinitesimal, fractured segments also seem to mirror a community as incongruent in its layers as the individuals who constitute it. Often the

sitters are close friends and relations, such as fellow painters Amande Ba (in *Sayonara, Suzie Wong*, aka: *Out the Opium Den*, (2022)) and Sasha Gordon; other times, they are engineered in fantasy.

Yi Hou speaks of an *avatar of the Asian male* in the conception of a recent large-scale painting titled *Coolieisms*, aka: *Highbinder Odalisque* (2022), part of the artist's upcoming exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum opening in fall 2022. It features a half-naked, extremely muscular East Asian man, confidently straddling railroad tracks against rocky formations in the background. These elements—together with the title, the cowboy hat, and a Chinese tattoo reading *labor* on the man's right forearm—seem to conjure the ghosts of Chinese construction workers who built, and perished along, America's Transcontinental Railroad in the 1860s. Though in yi Hou's cosmos, the cowboy hat also evokes the artist's personal hero: the Chinese-American artist Martin Wong, known for his gritty images of queer desire, belonging, and of transformations of neighborhoods and communities that are both woeful and affirmative. *QUEER OUT T/HERE*, a group show yi Hou curated at Tong Art Advisory in New York City in 2021, included Wong's lesser-known calligraphic works, which have also found their way into yi Hou's compositions—especially in the graffiti-like passages in his poem-pictures.

Other signs in *Coolieisms*—the radiating halo, the black leather pants, the long, braided

flogger—point to the figure's divine and BDSM characteristics. Here is a visual nod to Sadao Hasegawa, the Japanese graphic artist best-known for his highly detailed drawings of homoerotic imaginations and fetishes. Other references have come to adorn and define yi Hou's canvases, almost as iconography: contradictory signs such as prayer beads, sheriff stars, and Taoist symbols. The ubiquitous crane adds a layer of autobiography, as the artist's Chinese name, Yi Ming (一鸣), derives from the tale of a mythical bird that is otherwise inconspicuous, but commands all attention when it sings.

While languages abound in yi Hou's paintings, they often obscure or pervert—rather than elucidate—meaning. In the lower registers of *Coolieisms*, one will detect *handsome highbinder* written backwards in small English fonts, and *Tales of Ise* upside down in Chinese or Kanji. The former describes a hitman in Chinatown triads, whereas the latter refers to the Heian Japanese classic: a collection of poems and prose that traces romantic affairs and encounters. Together, though quite peripheral to the overall composition, these terms conjure up a richly anachronistic, literary, and erotic space. It does not bother the artist if his intricate web of references comes across opaque—in fact, the cursive Chinese writing on the red stripe next to the figure's arm is completely illegible, though it would have served

to identify a character or place in, say, narrative scrolls, where these stickers typically appear. Often, the calligraphic citations are simply borrowed for their formal qualities, which curiously resonates with the hierarchical preeminence of calligraphy as the foundation for all pictorial art in premodern China.

Patterns, figurations, signs, and languages are deployed kaleidoscopically in yi Hou's paintings, bringing a formal exuberance—as well as temporal depth—to the main figure or figural group, intensifying human interest and stories. These portraits feel almost forensic, as much as they are imaginary. Yi Hou speaks of painting *with* his subjects—creating and extending conversations with them (including when the subject is the self). It's redolent of the way Martin Wong included the expression *I am you, you are too* on one of his old calling cards, inspiring another Asian diasporic artist, Danh Vo, in his 2013 Hugo Boss Prize installation, **I M U U R z**, which featured over three thousand objects—knickknacks, precious scrolls, personal gifts—collected by Wong and his mother, Florence Wong Fie. It subsequently prompted yi Hou's self-portrait, **IMUUURz**, aka: **Cowboy Crane** (2021), in which the term metamorphoses into floral cursive graffiti above the artist's head. In other words, you'll never walk alone.

In the firmament of the dark

In order to speak the conception of ontological sovereignty, we would have to move completely outside our present conception of what it is to be human, and therefore outside the ground of the orthodox body of knowledge which institutes and reproduces such a conception.

Sylvia Wynter¹

¹ David Scott, "The Re-enchantment of Humanism: An Interview with Sylvia Wynter," *Small Axe*, 2000

I

For centuries we have flown too close to the sun.

Drawn in by heat and light,
intoxicated by the promise of enlightenment,
we have singed our wings
and turned our burnt backs on the fertile grounds
of darkness.

Let's delve into disharmony.
Let's dive face-first into the blood-thick mist
where our most secret voices and rhythms can
bring us closer to an 'infinite bursting forth.'²

Once upon a time my soft belly was cut open, my insides spilled out, and the empty space filled with cement. In the muted night and in the same foul breath, they came and replaced my brittle bones with steel, and released my fascia into a new vision of oblivion. Thinking their job was complete, they sewed me back up, but poorly, leaving large gaps in my chest, and my brain intact where it should have been removed. They talk about the human and yet murder her everywhere on the street.³

2 Édouard Glissant, *Treatise on the Whole-World*, 1997

3 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 1968

There is a kind of tofu that was invented, as legend goes, over two thousand years ago by Li An, the grandson of Emperor Gaozu of the Han dynasty. Believed to grant eternal life, the tofu is so silken and tender that one of its names is 妈豆腐脑 (dòu fù nǎo), or *tofu brains*. It is also called 豆花 (dòu huā), or *tofu flower*.

In this body that they formed-instituted-reproduced, my brain is still a flower, and it has ample space to grow. When the rains fall tumbling from the sky, I bow my flower head to the earth and raise my multitude of grey-brown seeds as an offering. Together, in and through our difference, we will find a path that is congruous with the past. Though lined with their names, it will lead outside of the present conception of what it means to be human.⁴

Within this cosmology of the sun—in Ra, Sol, yáng, helios—I will pick up and re-form my soured body. Within this grave of many colours, and with the help of the cool moss and damp soil, I will be able to remove the broken pebbles and brutal stones that they planted, and that spill out from my nose, my ears, and my mouth.

4 See David Scott, "The Re-enchantment of Humanism: An Interview with Sylvia Wynter," *Small Axe*, 2000

II

I wake up as if from a dream, but on a broken beach, not in my bed. My niveous body shuddering and drenched in a cold sweat, I realise that I have been violently removed.

Rolling towards me like fog from over the distant hilltops, an electro-acoustic guitar reverberates in the cavity where solar knowledge was once lodged. The emptiness of systematic degradation crescendos—is felt, grieved, and no matter how perverse, it is released.

With my mouth ajar, the scent of the guitar hits and seeps into lymphatic tissue: an inflammation, an irritation. This is an existential cut.

A cold slab garden wall, a smattering of cobblestones, and my protruding belly full of rocks. Though we want to project ourselves anew, we know we cannot turn our backs on that which the West has brought in.⁵

III

Here I am fertile, not fungible.
Here, I ride not just for the feeling
but to imagine.

I am re-enchanted, re-configured
no longer crystalline but
dark, sooty, and of this earth.

Even if you do not know the name of the flower (Chinese fringe, Chinese pinks...), let its vivid colour wash over you. Submit to it and let its heady, mysterious scent transport you, and its velvet-soft petals and hot sticky stamen be instruments of change. Let the blossom take you into the unknown—to a place of self-determination. I promise, these flowers will have an affect so great that they will unpick all systems and ideologies with their radiant tentacles. Their leaving is never-ending and they will continuously question, *Who do you think you are?*

Our bodies made lithe by the shape and shade of a golden ginkgo tree; we have landed.

This must be heaven, we say!

Or at least the place we have clamoured to and in which we can reconstitute ourselves. Stone bodies that were once heavy and cold dissolve in shades of gold, back into the hot silt of the Yellow River's bank. With discordant voices and a

5 Ibid.

multilingual consent, we weave a new world out of the shadowy past and our own sweet manure. Here we are dank but safe, dark and common.

With the waves lapping at this new shore, our tofu hearts have mended, and they beat at once but out of time, next to but not on top of one another. And on the horizon, a ghost rises into the clouds from the ashes of the bodies we have cast aside. She carries in her sturdy beak both lock and key, setting us on a course towards a new superstructure, sailing towards a black hole sun.

Within this opacity, light and dark do not exist in binary relation, but are instead entangled in a complicated hybridity. The light of the past provides the torque to throttle us towards a planetary humanism, formed upon the most interconnected and totalising ground.⁶

Within this new episteme, we vibrate, we breathe. We think, speak, and dance with one another in our shared ontology.

I've never seen a crane before, but I know the mark she leaves on your heart. In her sky, a deep wide glow, eyes like stars, here in the firmament of the dark.

6 Ibid.

Amanda Ba
in conversation with
Oscar yi Hou

Amanda Ba

How are you? How are you feeling?

Oscar yi Hou

Good, super busy.

Amanda Ba

Me too. I'm deeply tired, but chilling. Are you deeply tired?

Oscar yi Hou

Yeah. I was just in the gym, and I knew that I had this interview at 2:30, so I rushed out really quickly and I was running everywhere. So I'm pretty hyped up.

Amanda Ba

You have gym endorphins in you.

Oscar yi Hou

Yeah.

Amanda Ba

Do you work out every day before you go to the studio? You have a gym downtown, right?

Oscar yi Hou

It's the FiDi gym, which is FiDi Crunch. I specifically don't go to the Equinox, because that place is, I've heard, very cruise-y. I go during a mid-afternoon break.

Amanda Ba

Nice. Staying sexy.

Well, I feel like something not a lot of people know is the story behind your name. I remember there was a bird connotation, and there is a lot of bird imagery in your new works. I thought that the actual story was quite interesting, because it's like a Chinese *Chéngyú*. It's using very poetic illusions to create an idiom. Maybe you could explain your name again?

Oscar yi Hou

I never explain it well. I think in Cantonese it's like, *Yat ming ging jan*. What is it in Mandarin? How would you say it?

Amanda Ba

Yīmíng jīngrén, I think.

Oscar yi Hou

From what I know—from what my parents told me, and what I've had to Google Translate—it comes from an idiom involving an emperor. So this king ascended to the throne three years ago, but hasn't taken much political action. His court doesn't understand why. Then, one day, an official asks him: 'Your Majesty, I heard that in the South, there was a bird dwelling in the hills. Three years passed, it neither flew nor cried. Could Your Majesty tell me the reason?'

I don't know what adjectives I should attach to the bird. Is it a big bird or a normal bird? I don't know.

Amanda Ba

I think it's just a regular bird, but I imagine all Chinese ancient things are very grandiose. So I don't think it's a pigeon or a sparrow. It's probably—

Oscar yi Hou

A phoenix. [Laughs]

Amanda Ba

No. Probably a crane or a stork.

Oscar yi Hou

The king replies in response: 'The bird didn't spread its wings for three years in order to grow fully fledged. It didn't make a sound for three years in order to carefully observe the conditions of the people in the world. This bird, once it flies, will soar high into the sky; once it cries, it will startle the world.' My Chinese name, Yī Míng, refers to this single bird's cry. Anyway, then the king makes a bunch of major political moves that benefit the kingdom. When the time was right, he did what he had to do.

Amanda Ba

He popped off.

Oscar yi Hou

He popped off.

Amanda Ba

I think I researched it, and it was King Gong of Chu. This is very ancient China. He died in 560 BC. Did your parents come up with the name themselves?

Amanda Ba in conversation with Oscar yi Hou

Oscar yi Hou

Yes. In Cantonese, my name is *Ya Ming*. Relatives would often affectionately call me *Ming Ming*.

Amanda Ba

My parents couldn't come up with anything, so they asked an older writer friend. They came up with something highly feminine. It doesn't mean anything specific, but it has water and forest and vegetation.

Oscar yi Hou

Wow. So you're, like, high-femme druid vibes.

Amanda Ba

How are you and your parents feeling about your upcoming show at the Brooklyn Museum?

Oscar yi Hou

They're really excited, obviously. There was recently an article in *South China Morning Post* about the show and me, and it felt like I was coming out to the whole of South China. The title was something like, "Queer Artist..."

Amanda Ba in conversation with Oscar yi Hou

Amanda Ba

Isn't that how everything is? The hook in the headline *has* to be about identity?

Oscar yi Hou

I know. It's almost like I overcame my queerness to become a successful artist.

Amanda Ba

Almost like it's not interesting if you're just a straight artist.

Oscar yi Hou

There are so many artists who happen to be queer, or happen to be Asian, or happen to be of a particular minorization who don't necessarily make work that is related to or about that—which is fine. I think I would much rather see the discourse around identity be about the work itself, rather than just the identity that the artist happens to inhabit.

Amanda Ba

Yeah. You coined that term, *representationalism*,

which I thought was really nice. It points to the neoliberal recuperation of identity. This plays out in everything you see now in the art world, where the artist's own identity—who they are—and what they make are often conflated. It's rare to see care taken when people write about this stuff. Sometimes, an artist makes work that is not immediately, obviously about their identity. But then their identity is tacked on to further validate the thing that they're making, when there's already plenty going on in the work.

Oscar yi Hou

I get, on one hand, the need to tell everyone, 'Oh, this artist has this background, is of this ethnicity. Therefore, it's okay that they're making this type of work.' Because on the flip side, there are artists who will make work that is—because they don't belong to a particular identity—seen as offensive or appropriative. But it's annoying to be tokenized in that way—for an identity itself to have moral currency when discussed. When it's reiterated all the time.

Amanda Ba

We're all aboard this trajectory where, hopefully, one day, it won't be so tokenizing. It's interesting to think about how long this wave of interest in

identity-based representational art is going to last. It's emerged in a very strong way amongst young artists in the last five years. Do you ever think about whether we'll go down as a brief movement?

Oscar yi Hou

I think no, because of those particular tenets of liberalism—culture is dominated by mainstream liberals. I think it's here to stay. I think it gives people something to fight for, so to speak. And I know I'm talking about it as if it's this absolutely bad thing, even though I'm benefiting from it. But I just have a very complex view on it. I do think that people like me having the opportunity to make work and have it be successful is actually a very good thing.

Amanda Ba

Yeah, of course. I think it's great that we're young and coming up in this moment. The moment is benefiting us. Actually, I think everything from BLM and after has greatly benefited Asian artists.

I have the same complex relationship, where I realize I'm profiting off of a neoliberal recuperation of BLM, basically. And that's a very complex thing to deal with, when you know that a large part of the Asian community is not in solidarity with the Black community. To profit and benefit off of

it—and to have a portion of the spotlight shown on the Asian community—is a very complicated feeling.

Oscar yi Hou

I mean, the push for racial equity and progress amongst racial minorities is always indebted to Black people and Black politics. The texts I read—critical race theory, for example—are completely indebted to Black studies, and Black scholars are completely foundational to what is called Asian Americanist critique.

Amanda Ba

You can't read a single critical theory book on Asianness without having a million citations to Angela Davis, Saidiya Hartman...

Oscar yi Hou

Fanon is absolutely foundational to pretty much everything.

Amanda Ba

I think it's really interesting to talk about our writing practices. Because not all artists have a writing practice, and not all artists who have a

writing practice have a very research-heavy writing practice. It's nice to share that with you.

When I wrote the text for my show, I hadn't written in two years, aside from some press releases for other things. Doing a lot of reading in between definitely improved my writing, and it improved my art so much. I've learned that, at least for me, reading is fundamental to maintaining a steady creative practice and getting out of any artistic blocks.

Oscar yi Hou

I've never really experienced artist's block. I'm sure I will one day. As a visual artist, part of the pool of resources you can consume is other visual things—film, photography, other paintings, history, landscapes. Writing, and reading academic texts, are also really fruitful resources. I think because I'm always consuming, I'm able to constantly be responding and synthesizing these ideas together.

Amanda Ba

It's quite a nice relief that you don't have to synthesize them in the way that an academic or research text would. It's a process where you're jumping from a text-based medium to a visually-based medium. A lot of things can become very fluid and mixed.

Oscar yi Hou

Yeah. I think it fills the gaps. In writing an essay or academic text, you have to literally fill the gaps with words.

Amanda Ba

It's interesting to see how all these things end up being interconnected in this very large web. When you talk about Glissant's rhizome identity, it reminds me of Judith Butler's ethics of vulnerability and precarity that I was reading about, which are different facets to this very radical outlook on how sociopolitics could be in the future. Butler talks about precarious life in a way that she's essentially indicating that we're all vulnerable to one another, no matter how you view it—we're all vulnerable to the power that is afflicted upon one another.

That vulnerability essentially makes us all precarious. Human life as we know it has become very precarious in the wake of climate change and things like that. I thought rhizome identity was a very beautiful antecedent to Butler's writing. Maybe you could talk a little bit about that, and how you see it playing into your work, where you essentially paint portraits of queer interconnectedness and queer relation.

Oscar yi Hou

I think the gist of it is that no man is an island, and our selves are formed through other people. I have to think of it in the sense that, we have our own separate bodies, whatever, but all of our selves are coextensive with the Other. We gain meaning and value from being around other people—humans are inherently social creatures.

The way Glissant talks about rhizome identity is, I think, to mean a kind of relational ontology. Human beings are formed in relation to other things and everything else, which I think is important to declare and think about. We are not separate from what we represent. In my work, where I'm making representational portraiture, I read a lot of image theory as it pertains to photography and ethnography. It's often perceived that the artist has the sort of ethnographic chops to occupy this status of a third party—a separate, 'genius' observer. It's like the Descartian separation of mind over body. The artist has the smarts—almost the arrogance, the suprahumanity—to be able to separate himself from the world, observe it, document it, study it, and then do a depiction of it.

But in actuality, the artist is part of the world, the photographer is part of the world, the ethnographer is part of the world, the documentarian is part of the world. There's no real separation. There's only the pretense of that, because

you have a static image that's bound by canvas. I mean, I've talked and thought about it a lot—how to basically express this idea that, as an artist, I am embedded within the world, within society, with other people. I gain my meaning, my identity, through other people, and so when I'm painting these interrelations between people and myself, it's a way just to give testament to that.

This includes including myself, or symbolic depictions of myself, in the paintings, which are often of my friends or people in my community. And this is something that other artists have been doing—I'm only really choosing to make it apparent and to talk about it a lot. I think I have a socially-oriented practice in that sense. It's about sociality and it's about myself, ultimately, in relation to the people around me.

Amanda Ba

Like queer sexuality. Even though you're painting portraits of others, implied in that act is your own presence with that person.

Oscar yi Hou

Exactly. In every artwork, there's an absent-presence, which is the artist themselves. I'm trying to make that absent-presence fully present. And I think, obviously, community and sociality are

hugely related to queerness and queer politics. There are a lot of strands of this in queer of color theory texts, especially in José Esteban Muñoz's work, about finding queer refuge in community. Historically, we've always been relegated to the margins politically, socially, geographically. That's why you had formations of gay ghettos, as they're known. Queer relation is very different from heteronormative relation—family structure, relationships, things like that. As a queer person, you can't take these things for granted.

Amanda Ba

Do you think that you'll always be a portrait painter?

Oscar yi Hou

Yes. I just love painting portraits. I never consider myself to be exclusively a portrait painter—I've done the poem-pictures, and I've done more abstract works. But I always paint humans and figures. Ultimately, because of the way I write and the way I talk about my art practice, I would consider myself a really conceptual art-maker.

It's funny. I think there's a tendency for curators to think that a figurative work is less intellectual than a completely dematerialized conceptual work—like abstract work, for example. But

in actuality, the human is the most conceptual concept there is. It's what all these discourses revolve around: the human, the figure. Our work is human-oriented in that sense. And so I think I'll always paint humans. After all, I am a human, so it would be amiss if I didn't depict them.

Amanda Ba

I feel the same way, for slightly different reasons. I don't necessarily paint portraits; I think I paint more characters. Even though my characters are fashioned in my likeness, it's very different.

Oscar yi Hou

I recently completed a work for the Brooklyn Museum show that is vaguely based off me, but it's a really muscular, Tom of Finland-esque dude that draws from a bunch of different homoerotic references. So I'm painting this anonymous figure that's a stand-in, an avatar, for every Asian man represented. Which has been a new thing for me—conjuring a fake person. I've painted you many times. Painting someone you know is very special. I paint myself a lot, as well, and I get it over and done with. It's almost like a task. It's almost like an instrumentalization of my own likeness for the sake of some other thing, which is why I haven't actually recently painted myself.

I remember in college, you made a lot of portraits of other people, then you transitioned to these figures based on your own likeness—but again, ultimately, anonymous, avatar-like figures. When you painted the portrait of Justin, it was very intimate and very special. I remember being taken aback, because I hadn't seen you do that in a while.

Amanda Ba

It takes a certain care. The artist is grateful for what that person has brought into their life, and the relationship that they share. They feel so much gratitude that they want to paint a portrait of them. And that other person is very grateful, as well. Because, first of all, it's such an honor to have your portrait painted.

There's a lot of thought put into what that person will think or feel when they see their portrait. With my anonymous figures, I can just throw them around and make them do anything. They're like little minions. They can be humiliated or venerated or grotesque or beautiful—it doesn't matter. But everything you put into a portrait of someone else is essentially a visual biography of them, and your relationship with them. I always take a lot longer composing my portraits of Justin. There's a lot of reflection that is required to make a successful and meaningful portrait.

Oscar yi Hou

It's funny—you talk about taking more care with Justin when painting her. I've painted you so much, and over time... It's not like I care less and less, but I become less and less concerned for it to look exactly like you. When you paint the same face over and over again, you end up recording its changes. I've painted Justin a few times as she's transitioning. I feel like I've inadvertently recorded her...

Amanda Ba

Her feminization?

Oscar yi Hou

Essentially, yeah. It's reflected in the titles of the works, as well.

Amanda Ba

That's really interesting, isn't it? I've noticed that, too. It's a very lovely thing. Justin is a very special girl.

Maybe when I go back to New York, I should try painting another portrait of you, and we'll see how it turns out.

Oscar yi Hou

I still have the one that you did of me in my studio. It's rolled up.

Amanda Ba

I might as well just give that one to you.

Oscar yi Hou

You sure?

Amanda Ba

Yeah, you can have it.

So why did you feel like you wanted to go to America?

Oscar yi Hou

I wanted to study more than just art. In the UK, most courses—firstly, they're three years, and secondly, you only study one subject and one course. So it would need to be fine art. I wanted to be able to study whatever I wanted.

Amanda Ba

When you were in high school, did you have a very

clear idea of what you wanted your college experience to be like?

Oscar yi Hou

Around the world, you think of American universities. You think of frats and sororities and things like that. That wasn't something I was ever interested in. But in terms of academics, I wanted to do a double major. I was going to be in visual art, and then either math, physics, or philosophy. Or some crazy shit like that. I went to Columbia with the intention of doing that, and then I kind of realized, 'Wait, that's a bit much.'

Amanda Ba

But in high school, you had no idea that you wanted to study... gay stuff?

Oscar yi Hou

What I've always actually been interested in is visual studies. But I didn't realize that was a phrase or a field of study you could even do. I'm pretty sure there's a course at Goldsmiths. There's a course at Parsons, I think. If I actually knew about it, I probably would've stayed in the UK and tried something like that.

I majored in visual art, but I think what I was

doing was more akin to visual studies. Less than a quarter of my overall course load was actual studio art classes. I took a lot of film classes, for example. I took a few theoretical classes based in visuality. Contemporary Media Theory with Jonathan Beller was a very formative class for me. I became interested in the politics of film and the image, the circulation of images, stuff like that. How it relates to power, race—applying critical theory to the field of the visual.

Amanda Ba

When did you come into your interests? It took me a while in college to figure out what it was I wanted to study. Unfortunately, by then it was too late to take all of the courses I wanted to.

Oscar yi Hou

That's okay. A lot of learning takes place after college.

In high school, between the ages of 16 and 18, I took only four subjects: maths, further maths, physics, and art. I was basically a STEM kid who also did visual art. When I came to Columbia, I had to take all these humanities classes. Specifically, I took a class called Introduction to Architecture and Visual Culture. It was more of an architectural sculpture class—having to use a

Amanda Ba in conversation with Oscar yi Hou

ruler and an X-Acto knife to make something for the assignment of the week. I still incorporate a lot of architectural drafting techniques into my work, especially for its more graphical elements.

As part of the class, we would also do some visual studies readings, but the professor barely went into them. I became really interested in what we were reading, like, ‘Holy shit. This is actually what I want to learn about and study. This is the field of academia I actually want to explore.’ For one of the assignments, I made an architectural model of a completely mirrored trough-style urinal. It was something to do with reflexivity and privacy amongst men.

Amanda Ba

Do you think that was when you let go of your STEM background and pursued this new path in visual studies?

Oscar yi Hou

Yeah. Also, taking college-level math—the lectures were so boring and dry. I didn’t go to any of them. I just taught myself, which was kind of a bad idea. At least in high school, it was a small class size, and my school was STEM-focused. In college, going to these big math lectures was just depressing. I didn’t actually enjoy it. I was just good at it. That’s

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why I did it in high school—it wasn’t something that actually brought me joy.

Amanda Ba

I came from a different perspective. I just thought art history would teach me interesting stuff. But I realized, art history is historical. It’s not always theoretical. Pretty much every class I took, a major part of the course was predicated on memorizing certain artists, dates, locations, these sorts of things.

Oscar yi Hou

You were more interested in the politics of art.

Amanda Ba

The history would be like, ‘Okay, we’re learning about the social environment and the political environment that spurred these art movements.’ Or if you were in a class about ancient art, it’d be like, ‘This was sort of the culture.’ But it didn’t always go into theory, which is what I realized I was much more interested in. Only in the last year and a half did I start taking more theoretical courses. But even then... I took a course on the advent of cinema and reflexivity within that with Jonathan Crary. I thought it was really cool. But then I was like, ‘Damn, there are so many more classes that

Amanda Ba in conversation with Oscar yi Hou

elaborate on this, and actually tie it to other fields like theory or philosophy.' It's interesting. We kind of ended up in the same realm of interest, but we came from two very different directions.

Oscar yi Hou

In high school I was asked whether I wanted to study art history. And I was like, 'No, that sounds really boring.' That stuck with me throughout the beginning of college.

Amanda Ba

I cannot explain how naïve—to a lot of things—my high school made me.

Oscar yi Hou

Your environment has a big impact.

Amanda Ba

I know. Maybe I'm blaming suburbia for being a cultural desert.

Oscar yi Hou

For me, it was the opposite. I mean, I lived in suburbia, but I was such an internet kid. Growing

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up on the internet expanded my view of the world. My surroundings were so dull. I was just indoors all the time.

Amanda Ba

Me too, but I wasn't in the right part of the internet. Maybe I just never made it to intellectual Tumblr when I was 15, and that's my greatest flaw. I don't know.

Oscar yi Hou

I think a lot of people who went in that direction came out being assholes. Don't worry about it. [Laughs]

Amanda Ba

We were recently talking about your high school program, which linked you to one of my classmates, who linked you to me, which resulted in a FaceTime call.

Oscar yi Hou

I FaceTime called you—well, what did you think of that?

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Amanda Ba

I don't remember. I think I was like, 'That was nice.' I always have a lot to say about Columbia, even to this day. I think once every six months, a young student—either about to go to Columbia, or just starting there—DMs me and asks about my experience. I actually always answer, because I think it's interesting, and it only takes ten minutes out of my day. But it began with you, because I was only in my first year. You were the first *What's Columbia?* call I ever took.

Oscar yi Hou

I'd seen the painting you did of your high school boyfriend. With the turtleneck. Remember that painting?

Amanda Ba

That wasn't my... That was just a guy in New York.

Oscar yi Hou

Do you still know him?

Amanda Ba

Oh my god. I don't want to. I literally met him at a

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party. I used to paint off of photographs, and I was like, 'You look hot and cool.' I looked up his name and he's a model, but also kind of a gay porn star.

Oscar yi Hou

Whoa. Maybe I know of him.

Amanda Ba

I don't know what he's doing now. I just know that he's big in homoerotic Tumblr imagery.

Oscar yi Hou

It was that painting. I thought it was a very beautiful painting and very technically brilliant. I was like, 'Okay, there actually are good artists at Columbia.' That's one of the main reasons I chose to stay with Columbia over the other options I had—just because of knowing you.

Amanda Ba

I always wondered if I made a big impact on your decision.

Oscar yi Hou

You did. Haven't I told you this before? You made a

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big, huge impact.

Amanda Ba

Maybe I just wanted to hear it again.

Oscar yi Hou

Then we met for the first time at Friedman's on Amsterdam.

Amanda Ba

For brunch. Gabe was also there.

Oscar yi Hou

Gabe was there. I think you were my first friend—my first proper friend—at Columbia. It's very special.

Amanda Ba

That's great. We were in different grades, so we always had our own groups, but we maintained our independent friendship throughout all of college. I thought of you as a very close friend, but we didn't see each other all the time. We would go through periods of seeing each other often, and then sometimes we'd go off on our own tangential life eras.

Amanda Ba in conversation with Oscar yi Hou

Maybe we should talk about Berlin. Berlin was like, 'Okay, we're homies now for real.'

Oscar yi Hou

That was 2018. Summer 2018. You talked me into Cocktail d'Amore at Griessmuehle. That was the first proper, faggy, gay experience that I had—of going to a gay party, being surrounded by so many gay men, even if they were mainly just white gay men.

Amanda Ba

I was such a fag hag.

Oscar yi Hou

It's Berlin. You gotta do it.

Amanda Ba

I don't know what it was. I was 19. I had these 20-year-old, 28-year-old, 30-year-old gay guys obsessed with me. I think Berlin is obsessed with new people.

Oscar yi Hou

That old gay guy, as well. You were close with him.

Amanda Ba

I know.

Oscar yi Hou

I feel like Berlin wants young blood so it can consume it and stay forever young.

Amanda Ba

That's beautiful.

Oscar yi Hou

That was fun. It introduced me to raves and ecstasy and stimulants, and just being in altered states of being amongst other people, allowing you to engage in that kind of communion with others—like a dissolution of boundaries, bodily boundaries. I would say it was pretty formative for my philosophy.

I didn't really have time to go out during the school year. I was working a lot.

Amanda Ba

I went out a lot.

Oscar yi Hou

You did, yeah. I could never keep up.

Amanda Ba

You know that about me. I would go out four nights out of the school week.

Oscar yi Hou

Berlin was probably the most hardcore I went in a single weekend. But I'm always... What's the word? I'm always down to clown.

Amanda Ba

I mean, we did stay up for 36 hours.

Oscar yi Hou

We did.

Amanda Ba

We had an evil, fake eggs Benedict that was the most dry and abrasive thing you could eat with molly mouths.

Oscar yi Hou

My tongue was all cut up from the fucking bacon I had, because my mouth was so dry.

Amanda Ba

It was the only café that was open at 8 a.m. in our area. It was like a broke college breakfast. It was rough on the mouth.

Oscar yi Hou

It was rough physically and also psychologically.

Amanda Ba

It's hard to eat anything in that state. You need something that really whets the palate.

Oscar yi Hou

We should've gotten soup or something. A loaf of bread and soup.

Amanda Ba

I know. No regrets.

Oscar yi Hou

You dip your toes in Europe quite a lot. Berlin, and now London. You're finally coming back to New York. I'm someone who's always kind of eschewed Europe, because I left Europe. Or, when Britain was in Europe, I left to come to New York.

Amanda Ba

I like London and New York equally, for different reasons. They're very similar cities. It's a pretty seamless transition. I want to go back to New York because I feel very American. And also, with the sort of work that we do, New York—and America as a whole—is the most exciting place politically to have those dialogues.

You left Liverpool to come to New York, and now your parents are leaving Liverpool. You won't really have a home to go back to in Liverpool anymore.

Oscar yi Hou

It's really sad. I mean, I feel like I've already lost the accent in a profound way.

Amanda Ba

You have. In the beginning, it was actually difficult

to understand you.

Oscar yi Hou

Really?

Amanda Ba

Yes. I never told you that because it's really annoying, and an obvious, stupid, American thing to say. 'I went over to Europe and I couldn't understand what anyone was saying.'

Oscar yi Hou

Lots of people thought I was Scottish, or something crazy like that.

Amanda Ba

I don't remember exactly what it sounded like. But your cadence now is very American. There's a little twang, but I wouldn't be able to pinpoint where it is now.

Oscar yi Hou

I couldn't really fathom how different my accent was until I left Liverpool. In Liverpool, it was always considered to be pretty mild. As a kid, I

wanted to sound American because I thought it was cool and different. When I left, I was like, 'No way. Actually, I want to sound like I'm from Liverpool for the rest of my life.'

I tried really hard to hold onto it. There are very few people from Liverpool in New York. People are always surprised—they think you're from London if you're from the UK. I try really hard to maintain my accent because I feel like it's a big part of my identity. But ultimately, it's kind of faded. I don't really get a chance to top it up. I've been here continuously for over five years now.

Amanda Ba

Do your parents feel sentimental about letting go of the restaurant? Or was it always the sort of thing they were going to do so that they could retire eventually?

Oscar yi Hou

Exactly the latter. This was a job. My dad, he actually came to the UK in the '90s on a student visa to study computer science at a local university. I think he has a degree in physics back in China—he was teaching at a high school. My mother has a law degree in China, and she was working at a newspaper as a writer and editor. Obviously, those qualifications and work experiences from China meant

nothing in the UK. They ended up both working in this restaurant as waiter and waitress. Eventually, the owner entrusted them with the business and sold it to them. They worked there for about 28 years.

Amanda Ba

Is that how they met in Liverpool, as waiter and waitress?

Oscar yi Hou

No, they met in China. They were teenage sweethearts. They didn't go to the same high school, but I think they must have started dating around then.

Amanda Ba

It's funny to think about these things. There's this gap within immigrant communities between people who came for labor and people who came for higher education. People within the Chinese community are sort of the most cognizant and enforcing of that gap, actually.

Oscar yi Hou

How do you mean?

Amanda Ba

All of the friends that my parents made were from their college experience, and it made them feel like they were so solidified into a sort of upwardly-mobile or upper-middle class strata. They think of themselves as having a different experience than the Chinese immigrants who run grocery stores or restaurants. It sounds like I'm talking down on people like your parents, but it's just that there's surprisingly not that much solidarity—or recognition that they all came under the same circumstances, essentially, and are now under the same circumstances within America.

Did your parents know how to cook when they first came?

Oscar yi Hou

My dad, yeah. Cooking Chinese-British food, or Westernized Chinese food, isn't hard—at least compared to those grand Chinese banquet halls and restaurants, where they cook super ostentatious, really technically challenging dishes. In Liverpool, in a restaurant in the suburbs, all people would ask for was sweet and sour chicken or beef black bean sauce—which basically is, like, you fry chicken and you stir fry sauce, add vegetables. That's it. At the same time, my dad took a lot of pride in what he was doing, and the food in the

restaurant was really good.

Amanda Ba

It was really good. I ate there.

Oscar yi Hou

You're one of my only friends who recently ate there before it closed down.

Amanda Ba

It was awesome. I feel like when we ate there, your parents gave us the best dishes on the menu.

Oscar yi Hou

Definitely. Our crispy duck was really, really good.

Amanda Ba

It was not a sweet and sour chicken vibe. We had the nice food.

Oscar yi Hou

We ordered off-menu.

I guess it was like this: Despite having degrees that would have suggested more prestigious

career paths in China, my parents left that all behind. Eventually, they came across an opportunity to run a business in the West, which subsequently offered them the chance to be upwardly-mobile. Even though they were doing physical labor every day, they lived a very middle-class life in Liverpool—especially during the restaurant's heyday, before it started to decline. We took vacations. Lived in the suburbs. But because they were working as a cook and a waitress, they might have been perceived as part of a different sect of Chinese immigrants: like you said, one that's based in physical or service-oriented labor rather than intellectual labor.

Amanda Ba

It is truly the end of an era for the Great Wall Restaurant.

Oscar yi Hou

It really is.

And working there in my adolescence and stuff... I mean, I've written about this before, but being at the interface of Chinese-ness and the West—and observing the ways in which immigrant culture has to repackage itself and hybridize itself in order to survive or thrive in the West—was really interesting. I think it relates a lot to my own

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practice, dealing with... I mean, I actually hate saying East versus West. I think it's so clichéd.

Amanda Ba

It's very reductive.

Oscar yi Hou

I guess what I mean to say is, being really, really familiar with the terms and conditions of hybridization. Of being between two cultures, that whole vibe.

Amanda Ba

I think a restaurant is a very direct analogy for that kind of experience. Being a little kid growing up in a Chinese immigrant's restaurant—it's kind of classic, in a way.

Oscar yi Hou

I always knew that I was Chinese, and everyone always knew that my parents ran a Chinese restaurant. Some of my high school teachers would patronize the business. It's been there for 28 years. It's part of the community and its ecosystem. And it was a good restaurant. I definitely had pride in the restaurant. I had pride in our food.

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Working a service job teaches you how to observe and interact with people, even just talking on the phone. I had to do phone takeouts, and I still struggle. I still am affected by stuttering in particular situations. Taking a phone call when I was 14 from some stranger who's demanding food from you was the most nerve-racking thing I've ever done. I would always stutter on certain dishes—popular dishes—because of the particular consonant that began the word. I would always have to repeat the order back to them, and so as a result I developed these adaptive mechanisms and strategies. It honestly improved my speech a lot, having to talk to all these people and being forced to say all these difficult words that I couldn't really avoid. Normally, I avoid using words that I can't say. One big thing was, there's a takeaway app in Britain called Deliveroo.

Amanda Ba

I use it sometimes.

Oscar yi Hou

Deliveroo. And the D is so hard for some reason. This word is so hard for me to say. Having to say *Deliveroo* over and over and over again to customers was really stressful.

Amanda Ba

Fuck Deliveroo. [Laughs]

Should we talk a bit about painting before we end?

Oscar yi Hou

Yeah, back to basics.

Amanda Ba

When two painters talk to each other about painting, it gets so technical in this funny way. It becomes very nerdy. It's like two guys in a comic book store, talking about what type of paint they use to decorate their Warhammer miniatures. It's very like, 'This brand of spirits? Nice. How slow-drying is that? Very cool.'

Oscar yi Hou

Since we've both watched each other's practices develop, how about we talk about that: the ways in which our practices have changed over the years?

Amanda Ba

I think I can pick out some things that have changed a lot, and then some things that have kind

of always been there. You've always done portraits. A painting I remember well from your time in high school is the one you did of your mom. You've always been interested in a more graphic, drawing-based type of painting, where there are small rectangles of color created by brushstrokes that together form a clearer picture.

I think the really big jump that took you to where you are now—that sort of solidified your practice—would be the incorporation of linguistics, text, and iconography. That's what took your paintings from a sort of diaristic portraiture into a more conceptual realm.

Oscar yi Hou

I think that's a hundred percent accurate. It allowed me to be more political with my work.

I think you went in a similar direction. A lot of your earlier work is just portraits of other people. Then, as you went on and became more conceptual, the portraits tended to become figures—almost like avatars of yellow womanhood and your own womanhood.

Amanda Ba

If I can pick out the thing that's always been there for me: In high school, I was painting pretty explicit half-nude portraits. I wasn't painting

Amanda Ba in conversation with Oscar yi Hou

vaginas then, but I was painting a lot of nudes of myself as a minor, which is actually funny to think about. In that moment, you're like, 'I'm grown as fuck. I'm a sexual beast.'

Oscar yi Hou

You've always done sapphic stuff.

Amanda Ba

Definitely, but in a very **high school** art kind of way. High school art is so funny. There's something about high school art that you just look at, and you're like, 'That is high school art.'

Oscar yi Hou

Neither of us learned classically how to paint.

Amanda Ba

We were both self-taught.

Oscar yi Hou

Obviously, we both studied visual art in university, but I think that's misleading—neither of us really learned the classical way of rendering a face. The way I learned was through making studies from

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other artworks—Freud, Bacon, van Gogh—or just through observation. At Columbia, they don't do any kind of technical training.

Amanda Ba

Literally never received a demo in my entire time at Columbia. Well, except in this one academic drawing class. Hardly ever received any technical advice on painting.

Oscar yi Hou

Or much professional advice. It's funny—you mentioned how I've always stuck with the little rectangles and stuff in my work. I kind of forgot that I was doing that in high school. I think it's because I just love Vincent van Gogh, and I did as a kid. I loved him. He was probably a big inspiration as to why I became an artist. That's why my name is stylized in the way it is—after Vincent van Gogh, with the lowercase **V**.

Amanda Ba

That's so cute.

Oscar yi Hou

I kind of figured, 'If van Gogh can do it, then why

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the fuck can't I?' I decided to sign my artist name in that way when I was 14 or 15.

Amanda Ba

I'm glad you kept that little relic.

Oscar yi Hou

Because it's pretty.

Amanda Ba

How basic to like Vincent van Gogh. He was a depressed, sad, outsider artist.

Oscar yi Hou

What I love about him is that he was always trying to search for joy and beauty in his wretched little life. He was so human in that way. He's been romanticized a lot, but I always return to him, because there's something so... I just love him, I think.

Amanda Ba

Well, in high school, I wanted to paint exactly like Lucian Freud.

Amanda Ba in conversation with Oscar yi Hou

Oscar yi Hou

Looking at your work, it makes sense. I love Freud, too.

Amanda Ba

Further down the line, are there any things you'd like to take some time to work on?

Oscar yi Hou

A big painting. Like, a huge painting. If I had enough money, or if my works reached a high enough price that I could just produce four large paintings a year—honestly, I would love to do that.

Amanda Ba

You can and you will.

Oscar yi Hou

Please. I don't like having to make work constantly, within a particular time limit, in order to pay rent and buy groceries.

Amanda Ba

In the beginning, you want to say yes to more opportunities. It's kind of exciting to push yourself. I think it's definitely a mid-career thing to just take your time and chill.

Oscar yi Hou

I really want to spend three months on one painting, just to see how far I can push it.

Amanda Ba

You always hear late-career painters being like, 'And this was sitting in my studio for a year, and I've just come back to it.' It's like, 'Nice. Good for you.'

Oscar yi Hou

I'm pretty obsessive with the details. I really want to just do one painting. It'd be incredibly large and full of things. That's what I would like. How about you?

Amanda Ba

Currently, what I really want to do is take a fucking break.

Oscar yi Hou

Me too. Awesome, is that it? Anything else?

Amanda Ba

No. Anything else for you?

Oscar yi Hou

No, I think that's it.

Amanda Ba

Okay. I might go to this Yves Tumor afterparty.

Oscar yi Hou

You should. I love Yves Tumor.

Amanda Ba

So tired.

Oscar yi Hou

You can do it. Just have coffee.

Amanda Ba in conversation with Oscar yi Hou

Amanda Ba

Okay. Love you.

Oscar yi Hou

Okay. Love you. Have a good night.

Amanda Ba

Bye-bye.

Oscar yi Hou

Bye.

Contributors

Amanda Ba

Amanda Ba is a painter who lives and works between New York City and London. She was born in Columbus, Ohio but spent the first five years of her life with her grandparents in Hefei, China. Diasporic heritage is central to her work—vivid paintings that combine personal memory with psychosexual fantasy are populated with figures that challenge a predominantly white Western canon of figurative painting. Her work is also born out of her interest in critical race and queer theory, which help to situate her identity within more nuanced frameworks of hybridity, otherness, and Chineseness.

Morgan Becker

Morgan Becker is a writer, ingénue, and friend of Oscar yi Hou. She graduated from Barnard College in 2021, and works as an editor at Document Journal in New York City.

Xin Wang

Xin Wang is a New York-based art historian, curator, and writer who operates in global and multilingual contexts. Currently pursuing a PhD in modern and contemporary art—focusing on

Soviet hauntology in postmodernism—at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, Wang has also worked as the Joan Tisch Teaching Fellow at the Whitney Museum of American Art, producing a series of popular virtual lectures focusing on Asian diasporic art, technology, Mexican Muralists, eroticism in art, among other topics. Wang is a Critic at the Yale School of Art and a 2021 recipient of the Warhol Foundation's Arts Writers Grant. Forthcoming, she is a contributor of the NYU Shanghai Center for AI and Culture's inaugural publication.

Kate Wong

Kate Wong is a curator, writer, and poet invested in the decolonial possibilities of artistic practice. Interested in discursive approaches to art and knowledge production, her work seeks to unpack social and ontological hierarchies, with a focus on the body, labor, and virtuality. Living in London, Kate currently works as Assistant Curator at Serpentine Galleries and is the founder of *low theory*, a bi-annual journal and reading group. She is a contributing writer for *frieze* and *Another Magazine*, and her writing on contemporary art and culture has appeared in *Yishu Journal*, *TANK Magazine*, and *Heichi Magazine*, among others.

Simon Wu

Simon Wu is an artist and writer involved in collaborative art production and research. Since 2017, he has served as a Curator and the sole Program Coordinator for Claudia Rankine's Racial Imaginary Institute. He has held curatorial positions at MoMA, the Brooklyn Museum, the Whitney Museum, and the New Museum and he has organized exhibitions and programs at David Zwirner, The Kitchen, and CUE Art Foundation, among other places. In 2021 his art writing was awarded an Andy Warhol Foundation Art Writers Grant and he was featured in *Cultured* magazine's 2021 Young Curators series. He writes for *Artforum*, *Bookforum*, *BOMB*, *frieze*, and *The Drift*, where he is a contributing editor. In 2018 he was named the Van Lier Fellow in Curation by the Asian American Arts Alliance and in 2018–2019 he was a Helena Rubinstein Curatorial Fellow at the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program.

Oscar yi Hou

Oscar yi Hou is an artist and writer based in New York. He was born and raised in Liverpool, England. His work is anchored in personhood, pulling together a syncretic field of iconography that describes complex layers of identity and relation. Alongside his solo exhibition *East of sun, west of moon* at the Brooklyn Museum, yi Hou is

recipient of the third annual UOVO Prize in 2022. In 2021 he presented *A sky-slicker relation* and *A dozen poem-pictures* at James Fuentes, New York and JamesFuentes.Online, respectively. His work has also been included in exhibitions at the Royal Academy, UK; Asia Society, New York; T293 Gallery, Rome, Italy; Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles; and Sprüth Magers Online.

List of Plates

- | | | | |
|---|---|---|--|
| 1 | Coolieisms, aka:
Leather Daddy's
Highbinder
Odalisque, 2022
Oil, acrylic,
gouache on canvas
64×46 inches | 5 | Girl with the
Dragon Tattoo, aka:
Bushwick Bleeding
Hearts Club, 2022
Oils and gouache
on canvas
46×28 inches |
| 2 | Sayonara, Suzie
Wongs, aka: Out the
Opium Den, 2022
Oil, gouache, inkjet
transfer on canvas
64×46 inches | 6 | Old Gloried Hole, aka:
Ends of Empire, 2022
Oils and gouache
on canvas
83×44 inches |
| 3 | Une rosace entre moi,
toi, and l'autre, aka:
l'éventail of l'orient
(Mont-real-est),
2022
Oil, ink on canvas
64×46 inches | 7 | Coolieisms, aka: Sly
Son Goku turns 23,
2021
Oil on canvas
30×24 inches |
| 4 | All American
Boyfriend, aka: Gwei
Lou, Leng Zai, 2022
Oil, acrylic,
gouache, ink on
canvas
43×52 inches | 8 | Cowboy Kato Coolie,
aka: Bruce's Bitch,
2021
Oils on canvas
$28 \frac{1}{8} \times 22$ inches |

9	Fire Snake of El Barrio, aka: Sunflower, 2021 Oils on canvas 38×26 inches	13	Forlorn fire-escape flowers, aka: New York strings of life, 2020 Oils on primed canvas $53 \frac{5}{8} \times 39 \frac{1}{8}$ inches	17	I had an "other ache", aka: God, how young I was, 2020 Oils on canvas $53 \times 29 \frac{5}{8}$ inches	23	Untitled (Two subway cars kissing), 2020 Ink on paper $10 \frac{7}{8} \times 9 \frac{1}{4}$ inches
10	Cowgirl of Connecticut, aka: Today, All Fruits Ripen, 2021 Oils on canvas $28 \frac{1}{8} \times 22 \frac{1}{8}$ inches	14	The Arm Wrestle of Chip & Spike; aka: Star-Makers, 2020 Oils on canvas $55 \frac{1}{2} \times 43$ inches	18	Untitled (ex), 2020 Ink on paper $12 \times 8 \frac{7}{8}$ inches	24	Untitled (twobird), 2020 Ink on paper $12 \times 9 \frac{1}{4}$ inches
11	A crane and two sea-goats walk into a bar, aka: Summertime Cosmogony on Old Broadway, 2021 Oils on canvas $62 \frac{1}{8} \times 44 \frac{7}{8}$ inches	15	Far Eastsiders, aka: Cowgirl Mama A.B & Son Wukong, 2021 Oils on canvas $61 \times 49 \frac{5}{8}$ inches	19	Untitled (Let's go shower), 2020 Ink on paper $12 \times 9 \frac{1}{4}$ inches	25	Untitled (Entry No. 22), 2020 Ink on paper $12 \times 9 \frac{1}{4}$ inches
12	The siblings in my studio, aka: Gemini, Sagittarian, 2021 Oils on canvas $54 \frac{3}{8} \times 35 \frac{5}{8}$ inches	16	Self-portrait (21); or to steal oneself with a certain blue music, 2019 Oils on canvas $52 \times 42 \frac{3}{4}$ inches	20	Untitled (Martin Wong's Saturday Night), 2020 Ink on paper $12 \times 9 \frac{1}{8}$ inches	26	Untitled (Chinaman 1), 2020 Ink on paper $17 \times 12 \frac{1}{2}$ inches
				21	Untitled (Sumer), 2020 Ink on paper $12 \times 9 \frac{1}{4}$ inches	27	Untitled (Chinaman 2), 2020 Ink on paper $17 \times 13 \frac{5}{8}$ inches
				22	Untitled (Him who licks the sky), 2020 Ink on paper $12 \times 9 \frac{1}{4}$ inches	28	Untitled (Very windy today), 2020 Ink on paper, collage $12 \times 9 \frac{1}{4}$ inches

- 29 **Untitled (Two Birds)**, 2020
Ink on paper
 $12 \times 8 \frac{1}{4}$ inches
- 30 **Hey Handsome**, 2021
Oil on canvas
 20×26 inches
- 31 **All American Girl**, aka: **Cowboy of Ohio**, 2020
Oils on primed canvas
 31×20 inches
- 32 **IMUURz**, aka: **Cowboy Crane**, 2021
Oil paint on off-white paper primed with transparent acrylic gesso
 $32 \frac{3}{8} \times 28 \frac{1}{2} \times 1 \frac{1}{8}$ inches
- 33 **Taijitu**, aka: **Cruising**, 2021
Oil paint on off-white paper primed with transparent acrylic gesso
 $27 \frac{1}{8} \times 16 \frac{5}{8} \times 1 \frac{1}{8}$ inches
- 34 **Twobird**, aka: **Copulation**, 2021
Oil paint on off-white paper primed with transparent acrylic gesso
 $27 \frac{1}{2} \times 16 \frac{1}{2} \times 1 \frac{1}{8}$ inches
- 35 **Street·bird of New York**, aka: **bye bye Birdie**, 2021
Oil paint on off-white paper primed with transparent acrylic gesso
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- 36 **Sphincter**, aka: **Two·Pines**, 2021
Oil paint on off-white paper primed with transparent acrylic gesso
 $31 \frac{1}{2} \times 12 \frac{5}{8} \times 1 \frac{1}{8}$ inches

- 37 **Moonmad**, aka: **Cranekiss**, 2021
Oil paint on off-white paper primed with transparent acrylic gesso
 $33 \frac{1}{4} \times 17 \frac{1}{2} \times 1 \frac{1}{8}$ inches
- 38 **O', to be a falling man!** aka: **Crane Seek Comfort**, 2021
Oil paint on off-white paper primed with transparent acrylic gesso
 $33 \frac{5}{8} \times 22 \frac{1}{2} \times 1 \frac{1}{8}$ inches
- 40 **2 Lovers**, and then we got bagels, 2019
Oils on canvas
 60×44 inches
- 41 **2 lovers, 2 cranes (and then we took a bath)**, 2019
Oils on canvas
 50×40 inches
- 42 **Mille. Chris à central park 103rd, en automne**, 2019
Oils on canvas
 60×40 inches
- 43 **Portrait of Anuk**, 2018
Oils on canvas
 47×36 inches
- 39 **Chickendick, duckfeet**, 2020
Oils on primed paper
Diptych:
 $22 \times 14 \frac{1}{2}$ inches
 20×15 inches
- 44 **birds of a feather flock together, aka: A New Family Portrait**, 2020
Oils on canvas
 61×43 inches

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A standard linear barcode is positioned horizontally. It consists of vertical bars of varying widths. To the left of the barcode, the number "9 781736" is printed vertically, and to the right, the number "541562" is printed vertically.