

EDITORIAL

Interview with Oscar Yi Hou

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

Interview by Kate Wong

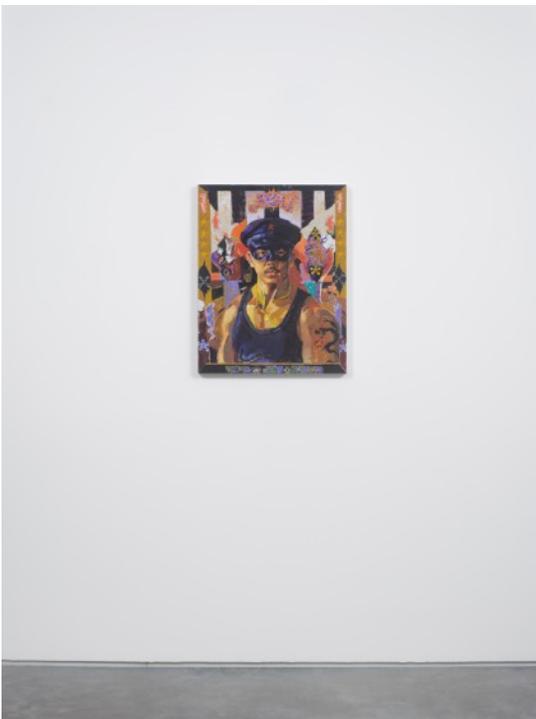
Ahead of his solo exhibition at James Fuentes Gallery in New York, I had the opportunity to speak with Liverpool-born, New York-based artist, Oscar Yi Hou. Follow along as we discuss his work, the complexities of representation and identity politics, the difference between UK and American racial politics,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

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

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

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

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



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

What role does symbolism play in your work?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

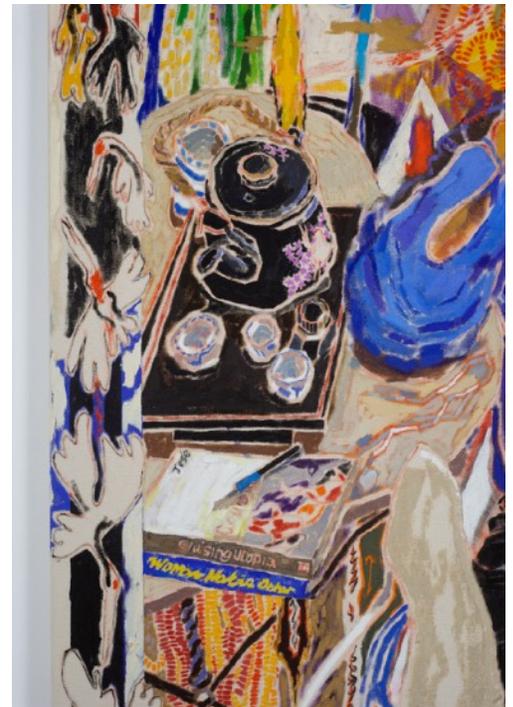
Does the rich history of painting in New York influence your practice?

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



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

Detail



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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Photos by Jason Mandella, courtesy of James Fuentes Gallery