

Artists to Watch: Yirui Jia

March 4, 2024 | Nicole Bray



Portrait of Yirui Jia in her studio. Image courtesy of the artist.

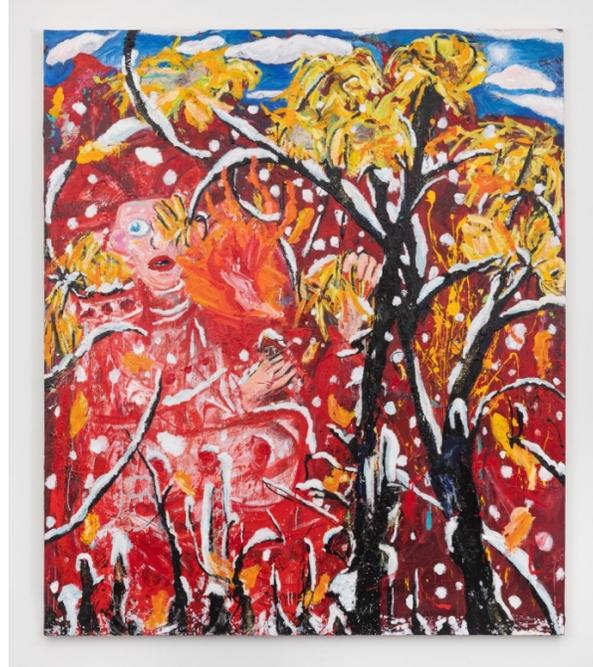
NB: Your paintings evoke a sort of childhood nostalgia. Can you tell us about how your practice has evolved over time and how you either deal with this nostalgia or keep the inner child alive?

YJ: That's just who I am, being honest about what I feel and being honest to the painting. My practice is more like a play, like flying a kite. I lose the string first and then it's all between gaining and losing control. I always start with losing control then pull some control back. It's always the painting that leads me, although sometimes it leads to a dead end. Then I just start over.

NB: Who are the characters in your paintings? Where do they come from and what do they represent to you?

YJ: I used to have many characters that went in and out of the frame, but for this new series I'm focusing more on their solo presence. A lot of my most recent works are about the astronaut, the bride, and the skeleton. This painting behind me is sort of a mix because I painted pharaoh figures before and I'm very amazed by the visual look of the pharaoh's head cloth – its shape feels so fictionalized and scenic, the pattern and volume... So this figure is actually a mix of astronaut outfit and pharaoh head (Home.....sick, 2023-2024). Then there's the girl, I call her 'The Bride', and there's the skeleton, that little guy over there (pointing at skeleton painting).

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH



Yirui Jia, Home...Sick, 96 x 85 1/8 in, Acrylic, gel, glitter and map collage on canvas, 2023-2024. © Yirui Jia. Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York.

For me, all these characters are connected and they morph between their visual forms. I began with the female character 'The Bride', which I think has some reflections of myself, fearless but at the same time sentimental. When I was painting the white dress, very loosely, I started to see this translucent, almost structured outfit. That's how the dress evolved to a physical shell or a cocoon of the figure, similar to what an astronaut suit means to an astronaut. Conceptually the astronaut for me is about someone who's devoted themselves to outer space – to the danger of the unknown. As for the skeleton I think about how we are all skeletons with different skins, which is also at the core of all the other characters. The skeleton resonates with the astronaut in a funny way visually because I like to think that this astronaut I paint could undress from their white NASA outfit into a skeleton. The astronaut sounds futuristic, and the skeleton belongs to the past, so you have the past and future meeting in one character.



Yirui Jia, stand shall I, shall I, 92 x 142 in, Acrylic, gel and glitter on canvas, 2024. © Yirui Jia. Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York.

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NB: Would you describe your painting process more as storytelling, or as a play/game with paint? (Perhaps both?) What does that look like when you're working on a new piece?

YJ: In some of my early paintings there may be a feeling or a sense of narrative in them, although the narrative parts seem very fragmentary and temporary to me. The parts that seem to be narrative are only fragments of information. In other words, the visual forms and shapes of objects are always more important in my paintings than how they serve the painting to 'make sense'. My newer works start to lose that intentionality and external narrative, they rather feel more grounded and internalized, with more dimensions and depth of emotions.

NB: We are now in your studio. What do you keep in here that you draw inspiration from?

YJ: I draw inspiration from how I feel in my life. I had a honeymoon period with New York, because I moved to the city a few years ago from a small town, Gettysburg, where I went to college. So at the time the paintings were about all these sorts of objects, dissonance, speed and city life. There used to be a lot of objects that would fly in and out, like cigarettes, cherries, matches, lips.

As I stay longer in the city, I feel I'm more and more internalized. Now I tend to go back to natural things like flowers, weather, and seasons that are always around – I think they convey a more pure and liberating feeling.



Yirui Jia, *Yellow is the color of their eyes*, 92 x 72 in, Acrylic, gel and glitter on wood panel, 2023. © Yirui Jia. Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York.

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NB: So can you tell us about your upcoming exhibition with Mitchell Innes & Nash? What would you like to highlight about this new body of work?

YJ: The show will open on March 14th, very soon! I'm done with the big works and now I am just spending the last months finalizing the sculpture and some smaller works. I think there's been many changes since my last show. The latitude of the paintings is expanding, and there's definitely more personal emotions and more sides of me reflected on the new works.



Yirui Jia, Waiting for a bud, 120 x 57 in, Acrylic, gel and glitter on canvas, 2023. © Yirui Jia. Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York.