

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

# BOMB

## Yirui Jia by Alex Leav

Painting figures in a lawless land.

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Yirui Jia, *stand shall I, shall I*, 2024, acrylic, gel, and glitter on canvas, diptych, overall: 92.5 × 142.5 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York City. © Yirui Jia.

Yirui Jia's Brooklyn studio is an artist's playground of opened paint cans, dirty paintbrushes, inflatable palm trees, satellite dishes, toy trumpets, and tubs of glitter. The act of painting is everywhere, splattered and hardened on all surfaces. A large tarp on which overlapping pools of acrylic have dried does its best to protect the hardwood flooring. Similarly, Jia's "studio pants" are sealed in a thick layer of paint and stiff as cardboard. Paintings in progress are perched on top of upside-down buckets, while finished works accumulate wherever they can find space.

She shows me the piece she is working on now, which is included in her current show at Mitchell-Innes & Nash. In it, a massive tennis ball protrudes from the center of the canvas as a cartoon-like figure in a NASA spacesuit floats above. Welcome to the world of Yirui Jia, consistent in its silliness and surrealism, an amalgamation of the mundane and the absurd. Leaning on impulse and intuition to make sense of her own reality, Jia is an artist who takes playtime seriously.

Alex Leav: Let's start from the beginning. You were born in Shandong province, China. Can you remember any early artistic influences?

Yirui Jia: I've always loved painting. When I was a kid, my mom sent me to traditional Chinese art classes after school. I would sit there for hours painting peonies and the Guanyin Buddha. I really enjoyed it. It was the first time I felt connected to art.

AL: What is it about painting that you love?

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YJ: Painting lets me forget about myself and feel free. I can be anyone and no one at the same time. Plus, the feeling of creating a thing that exists on its own in the world is true happiness.

AL: I'm interested in how you use the word thing. There's an obvious physicality to your work. Your canvases hold layers of chipped, smudged, and dripped paint, along with glitter, gel, glassine paper, and more. The surfaces are dense and heavy. To me, the paintings feel like sculptural objects. Like things.

YJ: I agree. The paintings are sculptural in a way. Each painting is a bit different, but most have quite a physical surface. The thickness and layering are just a result of my messing up or being unsatisfied with something I've done. When I'm feeling like I can't make the painting look as I want it to, I just paint over what I've already done or staple something new on top of it.

AL: It sounds like your process is reactive.

YJ: Definitely. Each work of mine is a result of experience. I crave a different experience from each painting because once the work is done I'll never have the same passion or be in the same mental state again.

AL: I'm curious what an experience with a painting typically looks like. How does a painting develop?

YJ: I'll usually start with an idea or a vision of what I want to paint, but the process is rather unknown and impulsive. I make a move, and the painting responds; then I respond back to it. So on and so forth. It's a dialogue. I think that painting has its own will. Willem de Kooning once said something about how an artist's paintbrush should move faster than his thoughts. I try to emulate that and let the painting lead me.

"When I start a painting, I stare into a blank canvas. It's a lawless land." — Yirui Jia

AL: I think painting is a funny balance between having control and surrendering. Maybe the best work comes from that sweet spot in the middle.

YJ: Exactly. That's where I aim to be. When I start a painting, I stare into a blank canvas. It's a lawless land. Slowly, though, as I understand my work more and what it wants, I start to feel more conscious about the rhythm of the whole picture. The conscious understanding and unconscious acting eventually guide me to a stage where I find that the work is in harmony.

AL: I love your description of the blank canvas as a lawless land. I feel like one could describe your finished paintings in this way too. Each composition is its own cacophony as an energetic and chaotic arrangement of figure, color, and narrative. Your cartoonish characters—for example, the one-eyed bride and the astronaut, which have become signature—find themselves in different situations across canvases and interact with various everyday objects, such as bicycles, headphones, and clocks. Yet they inhabit the same nonhuman world throughout where anything goes and everything is possible. Can you talk about this world you've created and the characters that live in it?

YJ: Well, I created a world that allowed me to visualize my thoughts, so you're right in that anything goes. It's like the inside of my brain. It starts with an interaction of forms, colors, energy, and textures of daily objects. I act like a stage person playing with their props. The characters reflect myself.

AL: How so?

YJ: They represent different parts of me at different times. The bride represents a range of emotions like regret, anger, happiness, and desire. In some work she is seen as a heroic, empowered woman; sometimes she's just a little person in a sea of many. The astronaut can be seen as the feeling of being in the unknown. Visually, the shapes and forms lead to one another. For example, when the form of a bridal dress contains more physical space, it becomes more structured and aerial like a bodily shell or a spacesuit. Undressing the suit into fragmentary

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brushstrokes leads to the form of a skeleton. If an astronaut is considered as something distant in the future, the skeleton would be settled in the past.



Left: Yirui Jia, *My dear old friend*, 2023, acrylic, gel, glitter, and map collage on canvas, 93.5 × 52.75 inches. Right: Yirui Jia, *A Sky Way*, 2023, acrylic and gel on canvas, 82 × 65.25 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York City. © Yirui Jia.

AL: In your newest work, the characters seem to appear on their own for the first time. Some paintings feel like portraits, such as *My dear old friend* (2023) and *A Sky Way* (2023). Characters are immersed in beds of flowers; the work has a subtler, more sentimental feeling. Thoughts?

YJ: Yes. The new series has evolved with more layers of sensations from natural environments. The characters act and feel more in their own presence as individuals than attached to a group. They're more aware of themselves, where they are, and what they're surrounded by. They can be more than figuration or faces. What I want to capture is the sensational force and experiences within the characters. The flower paintings in the show are also figural in having diverse sensations.

AL: It sounds like the characters grow and evolve as you grow and evolve.

YJ: Definitely.

AL: There's a refreshing lightness and silliness to the characters and their adventures. What role does humor play in the work?

YJ: My work is emotionally driven and optimistic. Humor is definitely part of the picture. I think the comedic click comes from the fact that people can relate my work to their own experience and emotions. There are recognizable objects one can project onto. Humor and optimism are subtle and internalized.

AL: What is the value of humor in art to you?

YJ: I think humor is very important in art. It delivers a charm that makes the work more accessible and, in a way, makes it feel more "real." Art doesn't have to be so serious all the time.

Yirui Jia: *Seasonist is on view at Mitchell-Innes & Nash in New York City until April 20.*