

*O, divine vision!*  
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Throughout history, across geographies and temporalities, there has been an endless cycle of tales of visions from beyond the earthly pale. Monks, saints and mystics have claimed the reception of messages from a source transcending the secular realm, a sort of ocular divine ordinance. Rather than dreams, which are contained within the realm of sleep, these visions contain a sticky, sensual corporeality that is felt within the waking space of the day, blurring cognitive boundaries. The sudden intrusions of angels, spirits and mythic creatures into the visual realm of the mundane day-to-day opens up a perceptual gap in which two worlds - which are normally cleaved from one another - become one. In a sense, these visions act as a psychological catalyst, alchemically combining two modes of perception towards something new, or normally unthinkable. What runs through through the long history of visions is an earnest engagement with these mirages. That is, these quasi-psychedelic events have become objects of inquiry in and of themselves, taken seriously rather than brushed aside as madness. They are not defects in cognition nor ego-centric delusions but visual proofs of what lies beyond our mundane, material world. They may be messages from the beyond, or revelatory truths. What is more, they often take up an embodied aspect, a blurry line between mind and body - ecstatic, sensual and profoundly felt. It is not purely optical, but runs through every nerve of the subject. This approach to divine ecstasy (and the visions that accompany it) which centers the body acts as the point of departure from which to think about the works present at Unit 17's 2022 Art021 Shanghai Platform presentation. These paintings largely circle around a semi-hallucinatory selection of images and subjects, but not necessarily towards sacred ends. They may call up landscapes and imagery from the netherworld, but they also engage in other acts of unveiling- from breaking down popularly held understandings of much-loved symbols and icons, to transcribing the most intimate elements of the psyche's interior. Regardless, like the mystics before them, the paintings here are first and foremost entail the collapsing of planes, realms and worlds that could only apparate within the space of the canvas.

Presented is a flesh-like cave where a uterus-human chimera embraces its lover. A vista of Victoria Falls is broken up by the appearance of an impossible circular rainbow. A figure, shielding themselves from the wind with an umbrella, lights a cigarette. Executed in swaths of thick oil paint, it creates a sense of visual familiarity reminiscent of the blurred vision experienced by someone whose synapses have been fried by a long night of low light, conversation and/or dancing. In a violet swamp, a solitary *budai* figure smiles under a rain of peonies and chrysanthemums. Two anthropomorphic airplanes embrace on the tarmac.

These works lean into figuration, rather than abstraction to approach the possibility of envisioning a world that does not exist in the flesh, a world that cannot be cleanly imaged through the binary code of rendering software, nor the apparatus of the camera . It is perhaps

this reason that an interest in painting never can fully evaporate. The suffusion of time and gesture within the contours of the canvas reads as almost meditative - a painting is obsessed over, and meticulously worked in a way that becomes immediately apparent over other mediums. Quasi mystical, painting (on a particularly visible level) is bodily, strokes indexing the movements of the hand, and in a sense, collapsing the distance between pure vision and embodiment. As scholars like Jonathan Crary and Joan Copjec have noted on painting and vision, there is no such thing as a universal viewing subject, but a dizzying multitude of perspectives. The following artists exploit sight in this sense, acknowledging it as the sensory half-way point of the interior of the self, and the material forms of the exterior world.

Historically, artists have repeatedly challenged notions of sight and reading through painterly practices that re-deploy both new conceptions of viewing - but also contemporaneous image culture at large. The following artists have taken up a mode akin to a number of figurative painters from the 1990s, such as Elizabeth Peyton, Marlene Dumas and Peter Doig, among others. Working off of photographic references - from personal polaroids to clips from mass print - their practices entailed the re-deployment of quotidian imagery towards psychologically charged ends, taking mundane scraps and turning them into portraits of the psyche. Peyton's paintings, for example, eschew Wahoo's approach to icon-like studies of celebrities in favor of complete mundanity, with stars and friends alike portrayed in the same closely-cropped, intimate mode. Loose, gestural brushstrokes, extract and quote a variety of media, from tabloids to personal archives, under the same exceedingly consistent framework, troubling the boundaries between sources. As if resurrecting 19th century spirit photography, Dumas also flattens the portrayal of media icons, through works that render them as the walking dead. Alternating thin and thick patches of oil paint produce works that, at a distance, read as ephemeral watercolors. Rather than the everyday intimacy deployed by Peyton, Dumas' haunting figural studies disrobe the simulacrum of celebrity, doing away with the glitz and glamor. Like Peyton (and the artists here) a range of reference matter and portrait subjects become sub In our current moment of visual inundation, these painters have isolated parts of this flood, and re-deployed them towards a litany of ends.

In terms of vision and iconographic framing, take for example, Ezra Gray's *Untitled*. If one were to think of it as a perspectival image, it is composed from the viewpoint of a subject looking straight up into the open vault of an imaginary architectural space. The structure is square, composed of Gothic lattice work which opens up to either a blinding light or a snow-white flat dome of white pigment. It reads equally as a re-evaluation of the sacred geometry of Church architecture as well as a *mandala*, a symmetrical form of Buddhist imagery that is meant as both a map of the Buddhist cosmos as well as a point of focus during meditation (which, depending on the sect, is meant to guide the practitioner in visualizing thought forms and invoke spiritual guides from beyond the immediate material realm). Geographical spaces are often treated by the same perspectival warping - a painting of the coast of British Columbia titled *The Lips Sync* suggests both a bodily reading of the landscape as well as a moment of naturalistic perspective. Instead of the flattened rendering of topography typical of maps that eschews real size and proportion, Gray has rendered the province as it would be seen from a bird's eye view. *The Lips Sync* calls up the tension between embodied

vision and the rendering and understanding of a given space - a thematic that runs through much of his work. In another work -*Old Batch*- a benign section of stone fence outside of an endocrinology center in Vancouver is taken up as a visual focal point. This architectural feature, which sits outside of a generic medical office tour on a rarely trafficked street highlights the ways in which Gray's paintings can shift the reading of spaces both iconic and mundane. Other depictions of spaces as diverse as Zimbabwe's Victoria Falls to the Hoover Dam are pictured in the psychedelic visual language appropriate for these locales dense with meaning and interpretation.

Nadya Isabella's paintings are inflected by another kind of sight - that of the mechanical. In a moment in which the ocular apparatus of the camera is almost always at hand (and thus, through its cyborg-like attachment to the contemporary subject acts as a second set of eyes) Isabella's paintings crystallizes the crushing wave of current-day image culture. However, rather than choosing to focus on specific aspects, iconography often overlaps and meshes into surreal landscapes and portraits. One work, *Two Worlds*, is a pond scene, as seen from above at the water's edge. Goldfish teem underneath, slightly warped by the refraction of the water, as a solitary dragonfly buzzes above the flat circular forms of lily pads. A lumpy, curved shadow lurks, elongated fingers with cigarette in hand. The solo presence of the shadow implying we are in fact this unrecognizable figure. Most likely, this figure is Toadetta, a recurring figure in Isabella's oeuvre. An it-girl-cum-toad, this figure appears in fine dining spots in voluminous lashes and meticulously worked nails, playing chess and vacationing. Here she (you?) is taking a moment off by the koi pond. Often, her works anthropomorphize a litany of species. In her *Slow Dance*, a group of moths converse and bathe in a fluorescent glow-stick green light, as if milling about a nightclub. In *Backyard*, a large scale tableau depicting an East Vancouver yard is so lush with foliage and insect life that the virtual space of the painting becomes impenetrable, with all sense of depth and distance obliterated. Her works are akin to Buddhist fables called *jatakas* which teach ideal behavior through narratives centered on animals. Isabella's works read like an updated variation on this structure, mapping the experience of being young in the 21st century onto various interspecies friends.

Akin to Isabella, Unrau's practice takes up the overwhelming range of references and images that flood us in our day-to-day and distills them, often to hybridized ends. Art historical references, imagined child-like landscapes and shock imagery are all equally as likely to find themselves as the subject of his work. Matching the range of source imagery is the artist's technical tool-kit, allowing for both paintings of photo-realistic quality (as is the case in *Dew*), as well as naive, cartoon-like figuration (as is the case in *Fear, Uncertainty, Doubt*). This width of formal qualities that functions like analog to the mechanics of sight which are always in flux, always in motion. Akin to Isabella's perspectival play, *Beckmann at Cannes* is a re-interpretation of German painter Max Beckmann's *Die Landschaft, Cannes (Landscape, Cannes)*. Employing the same point-of-view of a lane flanked by palm trees as the original, Unrau's work is both a challenge to ideas of originality, repetition and iteration as well the subject's position in a painting. That is, the painting's lineage of Beckmann to Unrau means that a viewer of this work is not only occupying their own viewing position but that of both artists as well. It is perhaps this state of ocular-transformation that makes *Dew* aptly symbolic in its experience. A macro-shot

like rendering of fleshy pink plants over a black background are painted with precision. However, contained within the branches of this botanically accurate structure are a myriad of dew drops, each one endlessly refracting and changing the world around them.

On an ecologically minded note, geetha thurairajah's paintings *Transcendental Tweet* and *A Purposeful Life II* take up dreamlike arcadian scenes as a point of departure. Layers of abstraction are then placed one over the other. They communicate a sense of spatial depth and yet, an element of impossibility. It is not only that the distance between objects is indecipherable, but scale as well, with flowers either merely occupying the foreground of the work, or in fact, blooming on a titanic scale. Lurking amongst the reeds is a smiling *budai*, a 10th century Buddhist monk who has been re-produced so frequently that for many, he is confused with the Gautama Buddha, cheekily gesturing towards the formal tension between realism and fantasy taken up in her work. *Transcendental Tweet*, a title evoking the tech-spiritualism of Silicon Valley devs further speaks to her practice, which often begins with digital drawing which is then worked over and finalized in painting. This unsteady relationship between the digital and the mechanical, fact and fantasy comes to a head with her painting *Ye Constructivist*. The title, which references the early 20th century Constructivist art movement - which emphasized truth-to-material, technological or machine-like formal language and art in the service of revolution - has eschewed these ideas for something more muddled or cosmic. Like many of thurairajah's works the blue and beige, amoeba-like *Ye Constructivist* flirts with an unstable middle ground, nestled in between the scientific geometrical qualities of Constructivism and mystical renderings of a Kandinsky.

Sharafaldin's visual repertoire uses hallucinatory formal language to subvert, or undo popular imagery or symbols. *Always Coming Home*, which takes the form of a bird of prey flying over a flat landscape that is both everywhere and nowhere. It could equally speak to Sharafaldin's Iranian background or merely an index of identity building at large, with birds of prey figuring into the iconographic lexicon of nations worldwide. This rapid movement between specificity and ubiquity figures into the landscape itself, which is barren, faceless. The layered colors of the horizon are almost flag-like, but again, refuse full identification whenever we approach it. *Portal* and *Scorpio Rising*, whose figures have all been - to one degree or another - stripped of their flesh leaving their nerves, and sensory organs bare for the. It's within these fantastical spaces that the friction between science and fantasy, inner and outer are revealed. Returning to the notion of divine vision evoked earlier, Sharafaldin's paintings call up the blurred boundary between the mind and the body. Mysticism, magic and psychological states of ecstasy could not exist without the sensory tool of the body. The impossibility of sharing these visions is precisely what renders Sharafaldin and the aforementioned artists' work so crucial. It is the obsessive, bodily extension that is painting as a medium, it is both its gestural and visual qualities that make it so appropriate for depicting that which cannot be shared, that which lays beyond the earthly pale.

O divine vision!