

FIVE VISIONS OF THE WORLD

John Yau

I met the artists in this exhibition in different cities and countries: New Brunswick (NJ); New York City; Chicago; an artist residency in Tao Hua Tan, Anhui Province, China. Their work made such a strong impression on me that it was easy to see their work together in my mind's eye. I went to the studio of Maisie Luo many times over two years, as she was an MFA student at Mason Gross School of the Arts (Rutgers University), where I was teaching at the time. I saw Eunha Kim's paintings when I was invited by six graduate students in Hunter's MFA program to critique their work. I saw Xingzi Gu's work when I guest critiqued students in the MFA program NYU. Similarly, I encountered Nanako Kono's work in a graduate group show at the School of the Art Institute. Finally, I went to Nidhi Agarwal's studio when we were in residency at Tao Hua Tan.

With each of these artists, I was struck by their adventurousness and determination. They worked across mediums, from cut-paper and collage to plastic sheets, acrylic, and oil, to sewn cloth and animation. They were uncompromising and seemed to care little about fitting into the latest trend. Talking with them, I learned about their backgrounds, their feelings of uprootedness, and their search for something that could convey their sense of dislocation. Their art is one of agency. They are in touch with their local circumstances, cultural heritage, and their culture's art history. Their subjects include UFOs or being labeled an "alien, folk tales, the production of meat, and misunderstandings in communication and language. Their work does not look like each other's, nor does it look like any other work that I have seen in recent years. That alone is reason to single them out. Beyond that, what I am impressed by is how easy it is for me to call up their work, how vivid it remains to me, even in the cases where I saw their work only briefly.

Drawing upon the Chinese folk-art tradition of paper cutting and mandalas found in Buddhist art, Maisie Luo uses repetition to depict society's desire for efficient food production. Humor and pathos often overlap on her work, particularly when it comes to how humans treat animals. Her use of pattern evokes networks of wires and tubes, Tibetan mandalas, and the repeated acts of violence and drudgery that take over many people's lives.

Eunha Kim blends Korean folk art (Minhwa) and her sophistication to make mysterious paintings and ceramics, such as "Open Theater" (2025) where animals' heads are visible, but the viewer has no idea what is going on. In "Aliens," Kim conflates two meanings of the word (Extraterrestrial and immigrant) into one image.

Xingzi Gu's vaporous paintings depict androgynous adolescents engaged in everyday activities. They are on the brink of adulthood, when they need to become productive citizens, but seem reluctant to let go of their adolescent fantasies. Gu's combination of calligraphic line and stained color reveals an artist working to update China's artistic legacy on their own terms.

Nananako Kono paints on acrylic sheets with acrylic paint as well as uses silkscreen in her work which can be to-dimensional and on the wall or three-dimensional and freestanding. Inspired by Shintoism, an indigenous religion of Japanese, which believes all objects in nature (rocks, trees, hills) are inhabited by spirits or gods, Kono evokes a world where potatoes are alive. Growing up with English as a second language, she is interested in the slippage misunderstandings that occur something can be communicated in one language, but cannot be expressed in the other.

Nidhi Agarwal embroiders and watercolors. Her work is populated by divine creatures and geometric forms. Her use of saturated colors evokes gulal – the bright powders and water people throw on each other during the Hindu festival of Holi, also known as the festival of colors. Holi is celebrated on the last full moon in the lunar month of Phalguna. Agarwal's work is funny and mysterious. Her creatures do not seem to be of this world.

When I was selecting the artists I would put in this exhibition, I did not think of a theme I could group them under. I remember their work as being singular and memorable. As i was finishing my choices and work on this introduction, I realized that these five very different artists did share one thing: each of them had depicted a world. That world, and the laws governing it, which were not always clear, infused their work with visual power. That power is direct: everything we see in their art has to be there.

Exhibition details:

Five Visions of the World curated by John Yau

Artists: Nidhi Agarwal, Xingzi Gu, Eunha Kim, Nanako Kono, and Maisie Luo

Dates: November 15 – December 21, 2025

Opening Reception: Saturday, November 15, 3pm - 5pm

Location: LaiSun Keane, 460C Harrison Avenue, C8A, Boston, MA 02118

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