

Rhyming the Invisible

John Yau

Charles Yuen's discoveries are often of ambiguous domains populated by silhouetted figures engaged in mysterious activities involving books, rocks, clouds, trees, snow, pointing, and juggling. His figures could be school boys, musicians, shamans, animated shadows, anonymous individuals, or spirits. Sometimes their arms hang down to the ground, reminding us of our distant ancestors, the apes, from whom we split off around 7 million years ago in Africa. It is a world that exists apart from ours, yet speaks to us about our anxieties, such as climate change, the fear of others, and our relationship to science and knowledge. We are not sure how time is measured in Yuen's worlds.

Yuen is part of a pioneering generation of artists living and working in the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn, paving the way for its revitalization and gentrification. Although the painters never formed a stylistic movement, as each of them pursued their own trajectory, what many of this group shared was a charged symbolic vocabulary. While some members were influenced by their travels in India or their love of Asian art, Yuen's cultural background (he is Japanese and Chinese) meant that he was born into the diaspora, and the sense of belonging and not belonging was a pronounced, inescapable condition that heightened after he left Hawaii and moved to the East Coast to get his MFA and settled in New York. It is one reason why a profound sense of dislocation permeates his work, infusing it with traces of melancholia. After all, how can you desire to return to a place or, in Yuen's biracial understanding, places you have either never been to or visited after you became an adult?

Yuen usually paints in layers, often building up a rich creamy ground over which he might lay a moiré or wave pattern. Drawing upon an ever-widening vocabulary inspired by East and South Asian art, Persian miniatures, scientific diagrams, Op art, and outsider art, Yuen dissolves the barrier between abstraction and figuration, as well as evokes a constantly changing polymorphous world. Rooted in abstraction, Yuen's vocabulary is made of lines and simple shapes with which he conjures a mythic and

folkloric world. By proceeding from abstract marks to a resonant world governed by an internal, often irrational logic, Yuen shares something with the older artist, Judith Linhares, as both depict enchanted realms.

In *Yin Yang* (2022), Yuen uses the familiar division of the Chinese cosmological symbol as the painting's ground. In the left half of the painting, which has a black ground, the artist uses white paint to draw an outlined figure whose arms reach the ground. The uneven black surface could be stone. In the smaller right half, which is a mixture of horizontal green, yellow, and orange brushstrokes, Yuen has painted a large solid black silhouette of a man with his arms upstretched. The direction of his feet is the strongest indication that they are facing each other. The top of the outstretched arms is encircled by a rich blue ellipse. Is it a stone or a cloud? Does the silhouette intend to destroy the white figure? The answer isn't cut-and-dry. I think of *Yin Yang* as a visual ideogram, which conveys complex possibilities and ambiguous meanings.

Yuen pulls the viewer into his world. We find ourselves speculating as to what is going on. And even when we deduce what is occurring before our eyes, the inherent mystery of the painting does not fade. This is because we have entered a mythic domain governed by a different set of laws than what we are familiar with.

What is going in *Saturnalia* (2023)? Yuen has painted an abstract landscape with a low horizon line. In the lower part of the painting, which streaks of brown, Yuen depicts thin white ladders hanging down the top of the horizon line? The ladders remind us that the purpose of roots reach down into the soil is to bring nutrients up. On this landscape Yuen has painted five, different-sized, loosely elliptical forms in a monochromatic color. In each of these semi-opaque forms Yuen has painted an outlined figure. In the largest one, which has scumbled blue interior, we see a figure standing on his hands, which become part of a dark brown elliptical base. All around him are almond-shaped outlines. In the other four forms a figure or two faces can be seen. Are they trapped? What is the figure's relationship to the tree it is part of? Cutoff from each other, and existing in their own worlds, what is Yuen getting at? Yuen trusts himself to asks questions for which he has no answers. He is an artist who can live in uncertainty, which is very much the state of our daily life, and not reach for an answer.

In *Dragon Fly* (2020), a prone man dressed in a long robe, floats above his couch, seemingly held in the air by his 4 veined, transparent wings. It is not clear if his eyes are open or closed. A large plume-like shape rises off the floor, from below the painting's bottom edge and ends up burrowing into a cushion on the couch. The shape is filled with yellow, blue, orange, and green brushstrokes in the state of being smeared together. How do we connect these things?

On one level, the painting is about humankind's age-old desire to fly and overcome gravity. On another level, it seems to be something seen in a dream? The fact that *Dragon Fly* both invites and resists interpretation is one of its many strengths. Yuen is not trying to obfuscate or be mysterious. There is a declarative simplicity to the painting that makes it immediately comprehensible. In Yuen's work, it is after that first moment of seeing that the viewer's deeper engagement begins to unfold. He has not separated looking from thinking and speculation.

The sky of *Saturnalia* is layered, starting with a pale bluish-gray ground with salmon-colored ellipses. Over this Yuen has made vertical rows of wavy light -grayish blue lines. Similarly colored planets and stars float in this patterned sky. Encircled by a ring, a thinly painted brown sphere floats in the upper right-hand side. What is this world that Yuen has placed before us? What are the figures that Yuen has compressed together? Are they a magical combination of human and plant life or some form of sculpture with a base? Does the title provide a clue?

Saturnalia is an ancient Roman festival held in honor of the god Saturn. In modern times, it has come to mean a period of wild revelry. Yuen recognizes that we live in a contingent world where there are overlapping connections and interdependencies extending across culture, history, and nature. Cognizant of these relationships, he evokes a rhizomatic universe where any point can be connected to any other. Rather than succumbing to didacticism and connecting the dots, Yuen invites viewers to speculate as well as reflect upon what it means to live in such a world.

Just as the mythic world of the ancient Romans and Chinese, not to mention Japanese ghost stories and children's fairy tales, have to do with the human world, Yuen's paintings bring us back to reality. They offer another way of considering our lives. They remind us that for all our solitariness, we are still to connected to others because—on some cosmic level, both individually and collectively – we share a common fate.

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Yuen was born in rural Hawaii where he began surfing, and wanted to become one with the wave – an experience which blurred the separation between body and water. He learned about what it means to possess an analytic, questioning mind from his father, who was a scientist. After leaving Hawaii to study at Rutgers, he has lived in Brooklyn for many years, at one point near Prospect Park. He has traveled and had residencies in East and South Asia. These difference physical experiences and locals helped influence his distinctive palette, which consists of earth tones (muted greens, blues, browns, and yellows) complemented by pinks, reds, violets, black, grays, and white. Whether working on paper, small, modest or large canvases, he discovers complete worlds in the process of painting them. It is the completeness of these worlds that holds our attention.