



Confronting conformity with top talents from around the country.

As told to Riki Altman-Yee

SUM AND SUBSTANCE

PHOTO COURTESY THE ARTIST AND DAVID CASTILLO

YESIYU ZHAO, ABIGAIL DEVILLE, GUANYU XU AND PEPE MAR work in a variety of mediums and currently call various parts of North America home: Mar was born in Mexico but lives and works in Miami; Chinese-born Zhao and Xu are based in Brooklyn and Chicago, respectively; and DeVille is a native New Yorker. Yet they all expertly cross cultural, societal and disciplinary lines with equal aplomb whether yielding a paintbrush, camera, wire or even burlap. Here we discuss their hot buttons, inspirations and intentions:

RIKI ALTMAN-YEE: How do you define your work?

YESIYU ZHAO: Born in a more conservative culture, I would say my work celebrates a more open idea of gender identity in terms of femininity and masculinity. Outfitted with hybrid combinations of stereotypically masculine and feminine fashions and characteristics, figures in my paintings refuse to be constrained by the binary system of gender identity. For instance, I would put hairy legs and high heels in the same context, muscular bodies and flowy long hair, or stubbly chins and makeup. On the other hand, the activities these figures engage in are sometimes related to stereotypical male and female gender roles, such as manicures, pedicures, grooming hair, doing house chores, working in suit and tie, and muscle building.

ABIGAIL DEVILLE: The illusive borders of history define my work. I take inspiration from the tales that have been spun into American mythology—pulling at frayed edges and seeing how they unravel. History defines our existence; for me, it is the birth of our universe. I use assemblage, collage, sculpture, installation and painting to interrogate lost history.

PEPE MAR: I am mostly a sculptor who also makes paintings, dealing with themes of queer identity, materiality and consumerism through collage and assemblage.

GUANYU XU: Influenced by the production of ideology in American visual culture and a conservative familial upbringing in China, my practice extends from examining the production of power in photography to the question of personal freedom and its relationship to political regimes. I negotiate this from my perspective as a Chinese gay man. In my work, I migrate between mediums like photography, new media and installation. These movements operate similarly to my displaced and fractured identity.

RA: How does the overall landscape of the art world currently look from your perspective?



New York-based artist Abigail DeVille. Opposite page: Yesiyu Zhao, *Reverence*, 2021.

YZ: I think, as an Asian nonbinary artist, I do feel there is a strong momentum of push from both the Asian and LGBTQ+ communities and even the bigger society. The overall art scene has finally shown some recognition for Asian artists. I am grateful. However, I do think this is still an ongoing battle not just for Asian artists but also for any other minority as well. Finally, what we are making can be put in context of the bigger picture of America and the world. I am hopeful but it's only the beginning.

AD: I am not sure if I am on a high enough perch to get a bird's-eye view. There are as many art worlds as there are different kinds of people.

PM: I am glad to see the work of queer and Latinx artists starting to get visibility, but there's still lot of work to do. It's inspiring to be part of a growing moment that is starting to widen in the artworld.

GX: I'm intrigued by artists who are genuine to their practice, but, after all, the capital influences too much on the artworld.

RA: How do you feel you represent your community or culture?

YZ: Being an immigrant to this country, I always feel there is a sense of longing to fit in, as well as detachment. The first half of my life I was in China, and for the rest, I'm here. It was not until recently I started to find my sense of belonging in many ideas, such as AAPI, nonbinary or gender fluid, LGBTQ+ communities. I only represent a small fraction of these communities, but I do want my work to speak up about what a stereotypical model immigrant has in their mind.

AD: As an American artist, I hope that my relationship with this society is that of a lover. James Baldwin says, 'Societies never know it, but the war of an artist with his society is a lover's' ▶

“I’m in a community with question seekers and information finders. Collectively, we are asking history, our families, communities and institutions to answer for the state of affairs we collectively find ourselves in.” –Abigail DeVille

war, and he does, at his best, what lovers do, which is to reveal the beloved to himself and, with that revelation, to make freedom real.’

PM: I have always been very proud of my Mexican background and it’s something that I feel comes into the work organically. It’s a high for me when young queer audiences connect with what I do, especially when they are BIPOC. I curated ‘Tesoro’ at the Frost Art Museum in Miami with a special intent to include artists that represent these communities. I wanted these works to be front and center in the dialogue of the exhibition. My community in Miami is made up of different peoples from Latin and African diasporas. I consider Miami to be a rare city where I am embraced as a whole, and that makes home such a unique place.

GX: I certainly want to create a representation for my community and culture, however, it’s also too complex and ever-changing for me to represent. I’m here to keep learning.

RA: Do you believe you—and your work—somehow break with status quo within your community?

YZ: To some degree. Just this month the government back in my homeland banned ‘sissy’ men on major media and streaming platforms. I do feel the urge to speak up about the human rights of my communities there through my paintings. The figures in my work are either projections of myself or people in the same community who do not fit in ‘idealist’ hypermuscular images of the government. Through my work, I am trying to serve some ‘uneasy’ beauties.

AD: I’m in a community with question seekers and information finders. Collectively, we are asking history, our families, communities and institutions to answer for the state of affairs we collectively find ourselves in.

PM: My work is diametrically opposed to the status quo because it is made by a gay Mexican American man. Definitely not the status quo!

GX: I do not. I believe it needs much larger and collective work to achieve that.

RA: Are you working with NFTs?

YZ: I am not. I do think there is potential for NFTs, but I think it will need to find a more mature state eventually. I think it will be an exciting new branch of the artworld.

AD: No.

PM: No. My art is all about my hand. When you see my work, you understand how my hand moved in that moment. It’s the opposite of digital! I don’t have a crystal ball, but it definitely doesn’t enter in my language of art, so I would have to call ‘trend’ on this one.

GX: Not at all. Of course, it can and probably will continue to exist, but I’m not the expert to talk about it.

RA: Anyone planning to show at Art Basel in Miami Beach this year or, concurrently, elsewhere? What influenced these works?

YZ: I’m going to show three acrylic paintings with David Castillo Gallery. And the themes will be a continuation of my recent paintings that are mostly about these nonbinary figures living their lives without any social or political constraints. Freedom is a universal theme. From ‘Stop Asian Hate’ in America to censorship of LGBTQ+ content in China, my work really seeks an escape or a shelter for both the Asian and the nonbinary queer parts of me. From my individual experience and imagination, I hope to reckon a collective voice from people who share the discrimination and trauma.

AD: ‘Light of Freedom’ opens at the Hirshhorn Sculpture Garden from October 15, 2022. It is a sculpture based on the Statue of Liberty’s torch that was on view to raise money for her pedestal from 1876 to 1882 in Madison Square Park in New York City. The torch is encased in scaffolding and it is made from welded steel, cabling, rusted metal bell, painted mannequin arms, painted metal scaffolding and wood. I

created it in the aftermath of George Floyd’s and Breonna Taylor’s murders. Madison Square Park Conservancy approached me, hoping I might be interested in creating something that could unite people in this public space that provided a necessary respite amid the pandemic.

PM: I will be showing a brand-new assemblage work at the fair with David Castillo Gallery. These works are generally 48 by 60 inches and the materials are usually leather, brass, pottery and Formica. The materiality is heavier and the figures are definitely in more distress than in the past. I think that places them squarely in our contemporary climate. The themes of these works are: the body as a vehicle of exploration; queer aesthetics; the uncanny; the Paprika character as a doppelgänger and proxy for the Artist; referencing popular culture such as music, fashion and club scenes; referencing art history and queer history; employing techniques of exhibition design within the display contexts of the assemblages; incorporation of personal effects sourced from secondhand stores; the ready-made; hand-me-down aesthetics; the life of objects charged by their prior owners; and metamorphosis. I will also have my curatorial project, ‘Tesoro,’ up at the Frost Art Museum and a solo show at David Castillo Gallery in the Miami Design District.

GX: I will present a solo exhibition in Villa Noailles [editor’s note: a contemporary art center in southeastern France] in October called ‘Resident Aliens.’ I find participants who hold different immigration statuses in the United States. Upon invitation, I photograph their homes and personal belongings and then print these images out in addition to my subjects’ personal photo archives. These prints are installed back into their space as temporary installations and additionally documented as photographs. It is from my own experience and the accumulation of similar stories from my friends that drove me to start ‘Resident Aliens.’ The creation and the use of fear psychologically control us. A resident alien, who is required to pay the same tax as a citizen, may not only need to struggle for assimilation in the public space, but also cannot see the home as a safe haven. We are not citizens, and our homes are temporary. Under the systematic oppression, to a certain degree, staying at home could be a house arrest: We either leave to struggle for assimilation or stay in worrying about the shifts in immigration policy and foreign relations. For many immigrants, the home could never be private and secure. This perpetually ►



From Top: Guanyu Xu, *My Desktop, 'Temporarily Censored Home,'* 2020; Guanyu Xu, *Opened Closets, 'Temporarily Censored Home,'* 2020



Pepe Mar, *Untitled*, 2021



Installation view of 'Brand New Heavies,' curated by Racquel Chevremont and Mickalene Thomas (Deux Femmes Noires)

contradictory and temporary state is why I want to photograph people in their homes. Under Trump's shifting immigration policies, many people were in a constant state of uncertainty. These constructions of state power perpetually classify immigrants as potential subjects of criminality. The pandemic even adds more difficulties to many people I photograph.

RA: What message or feeling do you think the aforementioned works will evoke?

YZ: I do believe once a painting leaves an artist's studio it becomes its own thing. However, the only thing I want people to feel is that the figures in my work are humans, too, just like them. They live, they feel, they love and they pray—although they may be different.

AD: The Statue of Liberty exists in the American imagination as an enduring symbol of democracy. Yet, Lady Liberty has remained coy

and malleable in its meaning over time and generations. 'Light of Freedom' aims to recalibrate lost mythologies embedded in the Statue of Liberty. The blue arms are chain-linked to one another as the flame that burns hottest. The gold scaffold protects an idea of rule by the people. A decommissioned school bell calls for the right to education as much as the right to breathe free: These symbols of liberty nest dependent on one another, swaying together on the National Mall.

PM: These works carry a clear point of view, so long as they do what they often do: demand attention for their narrative concerns and visual vibrancy.

GX: To understand the complexity of the issue.

RA: What's next for you?

YZ: I will be working on my solo booth in Art Basel Hong Kong with David Castillo Gallery.

AD: I am in numerous group exhibitions at the

Swiss Institute in New York City, opening in January 2022. In the spring, I have exhibitions at the Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art, then the Cleveland Triennial for Contemporary Art 2022 and a solo museum show in New York City.

PM: Next year is very exciting as we are preparing a 15-year career survey of my work at the Tampa Museum of Art opening September 2022. I am making a new body of work (to be revealed later) along with a new installation similar to those I have made for several of my prior museum exhibitions.

GX: Continue working on 'Resident Aliens.'

RA: Any final thoughts?

PM: I'm hopeful about what lies ahead for the artworld given the small change I've seen so far. There are big leaps ahead left to take for each of us in the artworld. And this is clear from the top down. •

A woman with dark braids, some of which are accented with gold beads, is sitting on a wooden floor in a studio. She is wearing a white lab coat over a white skirt. She is surrounded by various art materials, including large piles of orange and white fabric or paper, a spool of yellow thread, and other tools. The background is filled with more of these materials, creating a sense of a busy, creative workspace.

Art | Basel Miami Beach

DECEMBER 2021

CHANGE EVERYTHING

GUEST EDITOR
XAVIERA SIMMONS
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ENTIRE TERRAIN

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