

YESIYU ZHAO'S 'JOURNEY TO THE WEST' AT DAVID CASTILLO GALLERY

Sep 29, 2022
Suzy V.

When are you going to grow up?

An electrified ambivalence shines forth from Yesiyu Zhao's paintings in *Journey to the West* at David Castillo Gallery in Miami. The looks on the faces, masks are reminiscent of the impenetrable expressions of amateur pornographers gazing into the camera lens. They are lost in their business in and beyond the canvas, their purpose escaping the viewer, who leans in, leans back, traverses the gallery once, twice, three times, while other viewers file in. The opening begins with strangers, later the artist's friends, the gallerist's circle, the room fills with louder and more excited conversation, laughter, mania quietly whirls around the showroom, engulfing like the fire of "Burning." Likewise, the figures in the painted scenes wait in their captured moment to continue on, trapped as they move about the Yesiyu Zhao Extended Universe: painting advertising its own latent possibility.

In *Night Out in Brooklyn*, three high-heeled nudes, male/female, spirit/human, timeless/contemporary, Chinese/American, are engaged in an orgy in puddled city streets. But on closer inspection, none penetrates the other, or grips, or bites, etc. Their contact is as naked and innocent as children's — which aren't. One splays its legs, weighed under the straddling others, pooping stars into the night sky. But this figure is not interested in the sex, the sky, the stars, or the city. It looks into its own reflection in a pool of spilled fire hydrant water.



In the Beijing Opera, from which Zhao appropriates a rich and byzantine visual language, there is an act called *bian lian*, or face-changing, in which costumed dancers' masked faces suddenly transfigure behind the quick swipe of a fan or scarf, one thousand faces dance before the audience. The discarded faces, the faces in waiting, haunt the clouds and atmosphere of Zhao's paintings, forming from the expressionist curve and line of wind and fire, in the negative space between a great buck's antlers, *Migration*. This ever-present animism brings to mind the early expressions of Google's DeepDream software, which, inundated with images of animal life, struggled to allow any object stillness.

Zhao's scenes bring into form the overwhelmed and unsorted experience of a child trying to make sense of the busy environs of an old fashioned German restaurant, the interior of a Rainforest Café, a bustling subway car. The overwhelming sensory clamour appears seemingly from nowhere, cannot be approached or anticipated, like walking through a swarm of gnats. The child, for whom the world exists for its own purpose, senses people and things speaking, exchanging tokens, knows the baroque walls and the din of the kitchen, or the wheels, or the conversation, and may begin to intuit that, rather than an eternal or spontaneous existence, the scene in which he finds himself suddenly an actor required some kind of planning, negotiation, construction, contract, to meet some enigmatic end. In these works, audience and image meet each other in dumb awe, ensnared in the moment at which "the quality of things turns from their essence into the arbitrary phenomenon of their value." [1] This incomplete process requires constant repetition. The inability to overcome childhood necessitates art as a category of life.



Image 1: Yesiyu Zhao, *Night Out in Brooklyn*, 2022. Oil on canvas, 72 x 98 in. David Castillo Gallery.

Image 2: Yesiyu Zhao, *Exile*, 2022. Oil on linen, 78 x 60 in. David Castillo Gallery.