

**Shangkai Kevin Yu**  
*Hot Tub Reflections*  
March 9 – April 13, 2024

**Opening Reception: March 9, 6 - 9 pm**

**Future Gallery is proud to present *Hot Tub Reflections* an exhibition of new and recent work by Taiwanese artist Shangkai Kevin Yu. This marks Yu's second solo presentation at the gallery.**

We could see the rise of generative AI and computer modeling as a visual artist's existential threat, but those who maintain an enduring belief in the undimmed power of painting simply embrace these new digital technologies as another tool to be used in the service of painting, or as a new form of painting, altogether. This is the case for the artist Shangkai Kevin Yu, whose exhibition, *Hot Tub Reflections*, presents both paintings and digital prints (not to be mistaken for photographs) of objects posed in eerily familiar yet ultimately unplaceable spaces, where narratives play out under the radar of definitive storylines.

In a recent conversation over FaceTime, Yu points out to me that in so much computer-generated imagery, "what's missing... is the incidentals." In a 3-D rendering program like Blender, which Yu has used as a tool in developing this most recent body of work, the surfaces are too clean, and the light shines with an uncanny precision. At first glance, seen as a 2.5-inch square on my Instagram scroll, his paintings do recall the generalized seamlessness of software visuals. But a slower look, ideally one that involves an encounter with the actual surface, brings information that rewards the eye with nuances of the handmade. The view that we've blithely traded in for easy access in a virtual world is the view Yu has painstakingly created for his viewers in what feels like a solid vote for the human and the material, even in their mediated states. It is a vote that Yu emphasizes in both the imagery and the processes he employs.

The only human figure present in the entire exhibition of twelve works, somewhat ironically, is in the show's namesake, *Hot Tub Reflections*, wherein Yu depicts a portrait of a woman rendered with a Holbeinesque influence. And she is not a person, but rather a painting within a painting, in what appears to be a hypersaturated bathroom setting. The direct gaze comes not from this woman in the portrait, but rather bizarrely from a pair of toothbrushes, which lean suggestively against the side of a cup of hot water. One can only imagine it is the toothbrushes, themselves, that are doing the reflecting.



*Hot Tub Reflections*, oil on canvas, 24 x 18 inches

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Despite, or perhaps because of, the lack of figures in Yu's work, the human is always implied, suggested in both our intimate familiarity with the objects he chooses and with compositional choices that point to anthropomorphism and narrative. In every work, the objects operate as stand-ins for human figures on an evocative stage where the main characters are divested of the baggage of human representation so a viewer can empathize through their own associations. The scenarios in Yu's work appear to range from love and domestic entanglements to beheading and death. But if there is a specific story built into each work, which Yu suggests is the case, it is cut and polished like a diamond, presented for our own self-reflection.

There is a quintessentially twenty-first century non-hierarchy to Yu's creative process, one born of the computer and the internet, but also from an extensive training in historical painting techniques. There is no particular formula for how each painting is made and my quick assumptions prove shockingly inaccurate. Take, for example, the chair in *Red Drop Cloth*, diminutive not only by its relation to the fallen coat rack but also by the texture in the ground. I imagine the familiar photoshop procedure: *select layer, define object, file* → *scale* and voila but when I ask Yu, he disappears from the screen and returns holding a perfectly proportioned scaled-down wooden chair-- made for a child, one can assume-- which he found discarded on a late-night walk in his Brooklyn neighborhood.



*Red Drop Cloth*, oil on canvas, 36 x 30 inches

A presence in several of the paintings and prints, the chair is modeled after a Blender reconstruction of the real thing, created by Yu as a file in an extensive catalog of his personal belongings. Each object file is built to proportion and exacting detail down to the bolts in the fire hydrant and the LED in the lightbulb. He does this in part as a way to have access to things he's left behind in his native Taiwan; in part as a drawing tool allowing him to build imagined spaces that push uncomfortably close against the feeling of an illusion of the real.

But Yu sources freely from other places, as well, depending on the needs of the particular work: patterns from the 1970s, Baroque wallpaper, a patch of grass he makes up entirely without reference. Upon close inspection, you'll even find that the windows in *The Other Room of Observances* are cribbed from the background of Jan van Eyck's *Virgin and Child with Canon van der Paele*.

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*The Other Room of Observances*, digital composite print, 24 x 30 inches

*The room*, along with other prints in the exhibition, constitute the meta-house of Yu's mind. Each one is a seamless combination of personal history, digital language, and a history of painting that calls on the visual to reveal truths about Yu's world. Within these fabricated settings, Yu has subtly incorporated images of his paintings, pointing to a technical narrative that places painting center stage: contrary to what one might assume, the paintings come first.

Whether or not we can agree in the end that the prints are paintings or the paintings are computational, what this body of work ultimately allows for is a conversation about human experiences—the joys and the violence-- without the tension that can come with direct human references in an increasingly digitally-mediated and polarized social landscape. Asking us to feel with our eyes alone, Yu's work reflects back to us a belief in the object of the artwork as the ultimate tool for human communication.

*Emily Davis Adams*

**Shangkai Kevin Yu, b. 1987 Taiwan, lives and works in New York. Yu earned his BFA at Parsons School of Design and MFA at New York Academy of Art. He has participated in residencies with the Leipzig International Art Programme in Germany. His work has been exhibited throughout the US, as well as Germany and Denmark.**