On protecting your creative self

Painter Yuri Yuan on dealing with criticism, painting as a vocation, and creating a space to reflect.

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As told to Claudia Ross, 2557 words.

Tags: Art, Process, Mental health, Business, Inspiration.

I noticed that in your show at Make Room, *The Great Swimmer*, there's a central protagonist—a character that repeats across the paintings. I'm curious about how those narratives come about. How do you enter that creative space?

I noticed while I was in grad school that a lot of my work was very story-based. It was very narrative. So in grad school, I actually took some writing classes. I took one that's on personal essay, which I really liked, because it can be fiction, it can be nonfiction. It's short. I love a lot of short stories written by Murakami. Because they're short, it really requires you to set up the characters and the scene.

I love having a writing practice. It's a very different story from my painting. I never actually illustrate anything that I write, and I never write about anything I've painted—but they all have the same sentiment, the same sense of longing, loss, melancholia, and the same way of using metaphor.

Have you thought about exploring other mediums?

I think painting is my major medium. It's like a language that I speak in. Writing supplements my painting practice. I've never published any writing. A lot of times I'll just have random thoughts and I'll jot it down. I wouldn't call it a formal practice. I don't want to diminish what other writers do in comparison. They do it as a profession. I don't want to say I am a writer just because I'm writing.

Wrecker, 2023, oil on linen, 36 × 48 inches

How did painting became a profession for you?

I've always wanted to be a painter. I never thought about anything else. I started doodling when I was four or five, and I was always been pretty good at drawing as a kid. I took art classes and went to an art school with special art program, went to an art undergrad. It's been that throughout my life, that's where I focus. Basically, my whole meaning of existence centralized around painting. I never really considered other professions. I hate to call it a career, but I love to call it a vocation. Because it's something that I want to do throughout my life and it has nothing to do with whether I'm getting paid or not.

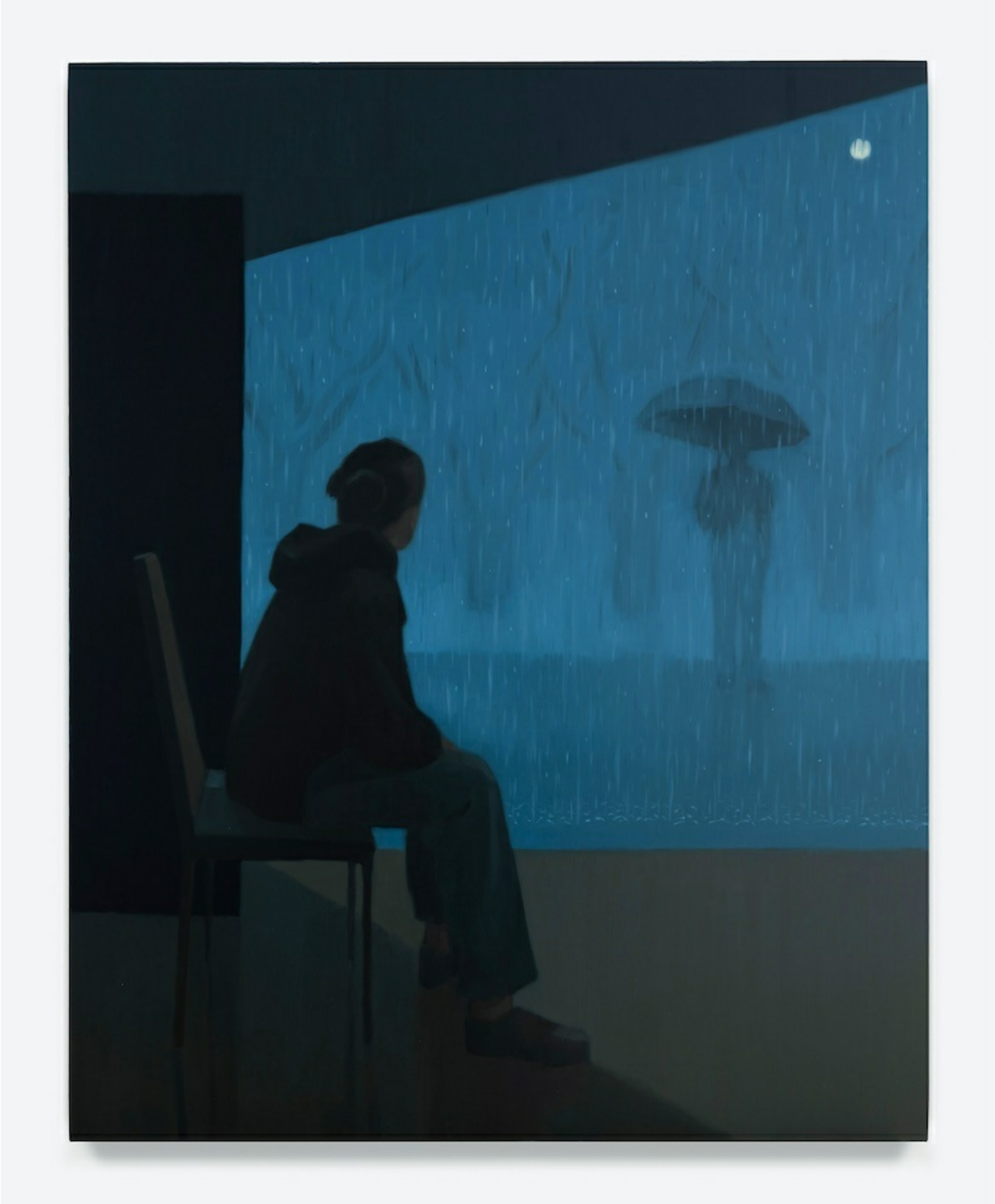
How do you balance your creative direction with the demands of professional life?

I think that was a difficult lesson to learn as a young artist because school definitely did not prepare me for that. Career was kind of taboo, especially in my undergrad.

I have a slogan in my studio that helps me. It's always hanging in my studio since my first studio in undergrad, and it says "Paint Whatever the Fuck You Want." Recently I added another sign that says "Leave the Art World Bullshit Outside of the Door."

I definitely think I insisted on some stuff that probably isn't very strategic career-wise. I turned down some shows. It's just what I had to do. I moved out of my New York studio, too. I moved to a Jersey City studio. I didn't move to Brooklyn. One of the reasons besides rent, was so that I could get some distance. I could hide out

in Jersey City like a hermit. When I want to go into Manhattan and socialize, I can, but for my studio, I'm protecting it. I turn down studio visits when I'm not ready, because I know whatever they say, it's going to get to my head.



Eight Thousand Layers, 2023, oil on linen, 60 x 48 inches

What is going through your head when you're making that kind of decision? How do you arrive at that place where you say, "Oh, I actually can't take on another show this year"?

My top priority is to make sure I have good work. My work is the foundation. If I do not have the work, I can socialize every day, but it still will not get me anywhere. No one is blind. So for me, the moment all the art world stuff starts to get into my work, that is the moment I say, "No, I can't."

Another thing I've noticed about this art world circus is that it will get into my head even when people say nice stuff. When people say, "Oh, Yuri, I love your work. This work is fantastic." Even that will affect me in a negative way.

For example, someone might say, "You're so good at using blue. I love this blue color in your painting." So the next time when I'm painting, when I pick up a blue, that's what my mind will remember. I become more hesitant to pick up an orange tube of paint because, well, maybe I should just stick to what I know.

So I've noticed that even when galleries or collectors have the best intention, they love your work, it can still negatively affect my mindset. That's why I say no to a lot of studio visits or shows. I'm trying not to overexpose my work before it's ready.

How do you deal with those experiences when they happen? Are there things you do going into that space to shield yourself creatively?

I usually like to imagine myself having three hats: the artist hat, the business hat, and the philosopher hat. When I'm wearing my artist hat, I'm never thinking about career, shows, gallery. I'm just focusing on, is this shape the right shape? Is this the right color? A lot of the conversations I have as the artist are in the studio. There I can have more meaningful conversation around the work, and that really helps me to grow my practice.

But when I'm wearing the business hat, I understand I'm doing this as a career. I can't deny that part of this. So when I work with a gallery, I have a professional hat. I know that's what I'm supposed to do. I'm supposed to be at the opening. I'm supposed to talk to people about the work. It is definitely not my favorite thing to do, but I still enjoy the conversations.

And the third hat is the philosopher hat, which I wear when I think deeply about why this work needs to exist in this world. It's about my emotions and my story, but how is it going to help other people? What can other people get from it? Where does this work exist in this world?

Lost in Translation, 2023, oil on linen, 60 x 48 inches

So having these three different personas is one way of protecting yourself from that experience of praise or criticism.

If you go into the opening wearing the artist hat, you're going to get hurt. When people say crazy stuff, you may

get hurt. Because the artist's persona is way too vulnerable to talk to the rest of the world. But the business person will be okay.

Have there been moments where it was difficult to distinguish between those things

I think, over the years, I've trained myself to separate them well so that I wouldn't be hurt, because I did go through art school.

And I had this helpful conversation with a curator from Whitney Museum, Chrissie Iles, who I really, really like, and I asked her when I was a student, "Do people care? Do these people actually care what I have to say?" She said, "Well, I want to say 80% or 70% of them don't."

To a lot of people, art is just a form of investment. "Painting is basically money on the wall," to quote Larry Gagosian. They are more interested in buying young artists as stocks.

But for the 20% to 30% people who actually care, who are very invested in you as a person, as an artist, who want to see you grow and are very interested in what you have to say and your interpretation of the world, just those people alone are enough for all of us to give our 200% to this.

How did your experiences at SAIC and Columbia shape you as an artist?

SAIC taught me how to paint. Columbia taught me how to be an artist. SAIC is a very fine art school. We have a very good collection in the museum. So besides having a lot of artists that I can study with, I also went to the museum a lot and just learned from the top painters. When I was stuck in my studio, I would just walk over to the museum hoping someone would give me the answer. Maybe Manet will, or Degas. That was a very good experience for me because I definitely believe in looking at paintings in person. There's just no match. And in that four years, I basically only took painting classes.

At Columbia, you really get to know what the art world is and how artists function socially in this circle. I learned a lot about how to be an artist and the importance of developing your own community. I have a very strong support system from my classmates still.

The downside I'll say is that I don't understand why art school needs to be so expensive. It's very difficult. I had to work almost every single job possible. In undergrad, I had three or four jobs. At Columbia, too, I had three or four jobs.

So whenever people ask me, "Hey, do you think I should do MFA?" I don't know the answer. I don't know. Not everyone can make a living out of it. I'm still paying the debt I owe, the loans I owe from going to school.

Any Way The Wind Blows (After Jules Breton) , 2023, oil on linen, 72 x 60 inches

How did you decide to make that financial commitment? Especially at the MFA level?

One of the main reasons was very realistic. It's because I'm an immigrant. I was on a student visa, so I was only given one year of internship before I would have to leave the country. And it's almost impossible for anyone with a higher degree to stay here as an artist, to get an artist visa. It would be very difficult to get an artist's visa fresh out of undergrad because I didn't have any shows. I can't prove that I'm a professional artist. So I

applied to a few grad schools and chose Columbia.

How have you managed the transition out of school? What does a typical day look like for you now?

At Columbia, it was so structured. There were a lot of studio visits. You have to do the visits even when you are not ready. I definitely feel like me and my peers felt like our works were overexposed to other people's opinions and voices.

I like being on my own right now. Outside of school, I can be very selective about who I invite for student visits. I can invite people I truly think will be helpful, that I really admire, and I don't have to expose my work outside of that.

And the second thing is that being overexposed to theory can be a problem in an MFA. Sometimes people try to focus on making art, not painting. They let go of their genuine emotions, their own vulnerabilities, what makes the work true and what makes the work resonate to other people.

There's this sense of apprehension and waiting that's present in your new work. Why do those emotions interest you right now?

I think a lot of those emotions originated from my own experience of growing up in different places. I was born in China. I grew up in Singapore and went to Chicago for undergrad. Now, I moved to New York. Because I'm moving places every few years, I'm constantly saying goodbye to people I know, to people I love. Constantly having to tell them, "I really miss you, but I can't come back this year." I haven't been back to China for four years now. So a lot of the work comes from that place, that emotional place. I'm not illustrating me missing my family, I'm tapping into the emotions of missing, and also anticipating the unknown. What's going to happen next? Who's going to come into your life? You don't actually have a say in those things.

The paintings originate from my experience, but they're not about my experience. I'm not illustrating what I went through. I'm creating a space to process what I'm feeling, and hopefully the viewers, when they see the paintings, can resonate with that, but they don't need to know my origin story. They don't need to know where I have lived. I don't think that's necessary or helpful.

Blood Sun, 2023, oil on linen, 30 x 40 inches

Do you feel pressure to articulate the experience of being from China, coming to the US? Do you feel pressure to articulate that experience in your painting?

I do get asked a lot about my background, my identity, but because my work is not about that the conversation isn't as frequent, which I appreciate.

And I definitely feel like "tokenization" can be a thing. I don't want to be a token, so whenever we phrase press releases with my galleries, I would say just "Yuri Yuan is an artist. She was born in China." It's a lot better than "Yuri Yuan is a Chinese artist." My artistic identity should come first before my nationality, race or gender, anything else. For me, at least in this space, I'm existing professionally as a painter. That should be first.

I'd love to dig deeper into cultural identity rather than just staying on the surface. For example, the movie Past Lives, which I really liked, is very much about the veiled emotions between two people. There's no explicit expression. I think my work can represent that too because that, to me, is very Asian. We don't like to say stuff out loud. We like to say it more poetically or metaphorically. Asian parents never tell their kids, "I love you. I love you so much." They'll be like, "I made you your favorite dish." Something like that. I think that's part of our culture that's less obvious.

I don't want my paintings to function as slogans or propaganda. They're not telling you, "You should think this way. You should behave this way." They're providing you a space for you to reflect.

Yuri Yuan Recommends:

Letters to a Young Poet by Rainer Maria Rilke. My go-to self-help book.

Have close friends outside of the art world. Especially those who have never heard of Basel or Gagosian.

The Burnout Society by Byung-Chul Han. It's important to have "profound boredom" to stay creative.

Take a walk every day, preferably near the waterfront and/or with a dog.

Eat well, sleep well, exercise. Have to be alive to paint.

Name
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