

# MAKE ROOM

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## ARTIST YURI YUAN TO DEBUT NEW EXHIBITION AT MAKE ROOM LOS ANGELES JANUARY 2022

*Yuri Yuan's solo exhibition, "The Great Swimmer", calls upon literature, cinema, and memory in its presentation of two contrasting narratives of alienation and dreams .*

In 1920, author Franz Kafka authored a fragment of text that would never be published in his lifetime. Titled "The Great Swimmer", it concerns the victorious return of an athlete who has just won a gold medal in swimming at the Olympics. He is received in his hometown by government officials and fans, who hail his arrival. However, when he stands to speak, he offers an implausible confession: He is not from the country he has competed for, he cannot understand what anyone is saying, and he cannot swim. More than any other work by Kafka, it conjures splintering images ripped from the depth of a dream.

In the past year, Yuri Yuan has often dreamed about water. Sometimes she sees a sinking ship, sometimes in a quiet ocean. Often, she finds herself on a diving board, perched over a blue swimming pool. Yuan's latest body of work is titled "*The Great Swimmer*" after Kafka's fragment. These limpid canvases explore different aquatic landscapes, but they most often return to the landscape of the swimming pool, with its diving boards, tiles, and changing rooms. Yuan tapped into her memories of swimming lessons she took at age 13, having just moved to Singapore from China. These classes were a minefield of linguistic, bodily, and emotional alienation— not unlike the alienation expressed by Kafka's swimmer.

Yuan's images evoke these childhood memories, and— with her signature dreamlike touch— warp them into more existential reflections of the self. "Who Are You", "Diving" and "Swim Class" all depict a swimmer at the moment— or in a moment— of flux. "Who Are You" finds its central protagonist awash in the blue light of the unseen pool, seemingly at a moment of decision. The audience of "Diving", like Kafka's audience, is faceless, the main figure paused as if on a jumbotron. Like the warping of a paused video tape, the passersby surrounding the figure of "Swim Class" vibrate and stream.

"*The Great Swimmer*" marks a watershed moment in Yuan's practice. Working in a consistently larger format, the works showcase the influence of cinematic narrative on the artist's practice. Fascinated by the intricate visual constructions of filmmakers such as Wes Anderson and Wong Kar Wai, Yuan's new

works seek to understand the innate connections between narrative and aesthetics. “*The Great Swimmer*” also takes influence from the deep ultramarine palettes of the Italian Renaissance, as well as the figural masterwork of French Romantics such as Géricault. “*The Great Swimmer*” presents a narrative in two sets of fragments, hopping between visions of the internal and external, the literary and the cinematic, the real and the dream. The duality of the exhibition is reflected in two distinct and contrasting color palettes, as well as the toggling perspective from the first to the third person throughout the exhibit. For the first time in Yuan’s practice, a single protagonist— a cinematic heroine— appears in almost every painting.

In a later fragment, Kafka returned to his images of swimming. “I can swim like the others, only I have a better memory than the others, I have not forgotten my former not-being-able-to swim. But because I have not forgotten it, the being-able-to-swim does me no good, and I still cannot swim.” Yuri Yuan’s canvases— in their internal meditations of memory, isolation, and selfhood— strike a similar quandary in the viewer, showing that reflection on the self ensures that the foundational anxieties of modern existence are laid bare to the bone.

**Yuri Yuan** (b. 1996) was born in Harbin, China and raised in Singapore. She has received a BFA from Art Institute of Chicago and a MFA from Columbia University. The Critic John Yau has described Yuan’s paintings as “understated, but... signal[ing] a significant shift in consciousness.” Yuan takes as subject the everyday, capturing a mundanity and emptiness in even the most surreal scenes. Her delicate palette emphasizes a fundamental emptiness of the modern condition, a loneliness that follows her female protagonists from the city to the countryside, from reality into dream. By emphasizing the unexplainable, Yuan’s works represent a new, aching contemporary sea change for figurative painting. Yuan was a recipient of the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation scholarship in 2020, and the Elizabeth Greenshields Foundation Grant in 2019. Yuan currently lives and works in New York, NY. Yuan has exhibited work at Center for the Arts, Umbria, Italy; Make Room Los Angeles; and Asia Art Center, Taipei. Yuan recently had a solo show at Alexander Berggruen, New York.

**Make Room Los Angeles** (5119 Melrose Avenue, Los Angeles) supports artists actively engaging with cultural identity, conceptual practices and global perspectives in their practice. Make Room promotes art across a wide range of disciplines, engaging with works from video and installation to painting and sound. With a particular focus championing female, emerging and artists of color, Make Room serves as an international platform for exhibiting experimental works and telling a diverse range of stories. Not limited to a physical gallery, Make Room actively works to generate new possibilities and support its artists’ ambitious projects and new bodies of work.



**Yuri Yuan** , *Swim Class*, 2021. Oil on Canvas, 48 x 60 inches.