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NOT YOUR TOKEN ASIAN

This Painter Broke All The “Rules” To Fulfill Her Childhood Dream

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Picture this: A gauzy, dreamlike canvas depicts a young Asian woman [sitting hunched on a chair](#), her chin resting on one hand. Dark swimming goggles mask the expression behind her eyes. Lost in thought, she looks downward toward the edge of the pool. The striking cerulean blue of her bathing suit offers a spike of emotion. It's entirely likely that the painting, titled “Swim Class,” will cause a visceral wave of emotion to wash over you — familiar stirrings of loneliness, of feeling like an outsider.

“Because of my background — of growing up in different places — I don't have a sense of belonging. I feel I'm always alone,” explains New York-based painter Yuri Yuan. With her 2021 pool-based series, [The Great Swimmer](#), the China-born artist delves into those emotions through two perspectives: looking out at the world through “an external gaze” and deeply within, or the “introspection gaze.” The collection evocatively illustrates her experience as an Asian-American immigrant exploring — and code-switching — “different personas” in the States, while putting up protective walls.

“I have to always do the best and exceed expectations. Because I'm an immigrant, I can't get complacent,” says Yuan. “[Otherwise], I will lose my ability to stay here.”

Since childhood, Yuan has worked hard to chase — and accomplish — her artistic dreams, even defying her disapproving mother, while continuously challenging perceived societal limitations to claim space in an industry that's historically lacking in representation for Asian and female artists. A 2019 study by [Plos One journal](#) found that, in 18 major U.S. museums, 85% of featured artists are white, with 87% of them male. The same study found that white women artists comprise 10.8%, Asian men 7.5%, and Asian women less than 1%.



Yuan's interest in Western-style kicked off during her childhood, growing up in Harbin, China, which borders Russia. Her mother, who worked in trade and tourism, would bring Russian art catalogs back for her, and she'd

devour the contents. “That planted the seed for my love for oil painting, because I didn’t grow up with traditional Chinese painting,” says Yuan.

Her dreamer of a father, who worked in sales, encouraged Yuan to explore the world through literature — a habit she maintains today. “He had a very forward and liberal way of thinking. Other parents rewarded their kids with toys, but my dad rewarded me with books — and he didn’t mind buying me all these art catalogs,” says Yuan, rattling off her early influences: Van Gogh, Monet, Cézanne, and Picasso.

“My family liked it when I had art as a hobby,” says Yuan, who enjoyed drawing classes in Harbin. “But they didn’t like it when I started thinking about doing it professionally, especially when [my family and I] moved to Singapore.”

There, the 11-year-old excelled in the country’s “pragmatic” and science-focused education system, but longed for a medium for creative expression. “I had to really beg the principal of my school to let me take art as an extra class,” says Yuan. “So I didn’t get lunch breaks. I spent all my lunch break doing art.”

Once she hit high school, Yuan nabbed a spot in an official arts program, which fueled her passion for oil painting — despite objections from her mother, who pressured her to follow her uncles and grandfather down the more traditional paths of architecture or engineering. Her mother also believed outdated tropes that artists lived destitute lives and struggled with mental health issues. “There’s this [Chinese] stereotype about artists,” says Yuan. “My mom always thought I was going to be starving and begging on the street.”

On top of that, Yuan had trouble identifying famous Asian artists — much less women of Asian descent — to present to her mother as examples of success. Her lifelong influences like Picasso all hailed from Western Europe.

When time came for college applications, the laser-focused Yuan dove all in on her plan to pursue her dreams. While studying for the intensive Singaporean GCSE exams, she secretly took the SATs and only applied to American art schools (even borrowing her friend’s credit card to pay for fees), lying to mother that she’d compromised with architecture school.

She received her only acceptance to the prestigious School of the Art Institute of Chicago. So close to her dream, she gave her mother an ultimatum: “I presented her with only one choice. It’s either I go to school or none at all. Because I know my mom — she doesn’t want to look bad in front of her relatives, and she also doesn’t want me to not have a college degree,” says Yuan, with a pause. “I’m not proud of it. But back then I really didn’t have any choice.”



Yuan's mom eventually had a change of heart after seeing her daughter's dedication and commitment to her craft in Chicago. "Nowadays, she's just very supportive," says Yuan. "When I was in college, she saw how hard-working I was. I had three part-time jobs to support myself."

After receiving her Bachelor of Fine Arts with distinction in painting, Yuan headed to New York City to earn a Master of Fine Arts in visual arts — with distinction — from the Columbia University School of the Arts. The experience also marked a career milestone: finding a mentor and role model in a famous Asian-American female artist: Sarah Sze.

"It was really life-changing," says Yuan, about meeting the visual arts professor who's made waves in the art world with her visionary multimedia work. Yuan also values learning first-hand, from Sze, how to navigate the competitive

art world. “She’s given me a lot of advice on how to be an artist. A part of it is just to be fearlessly yourself, [to not] give in because you are Asian-American. People have that stereotype of Asian women being very docile.”

Yuan refuses to be put in a box because of her heritage. She stands by her motto to “paint whatever the f— you want” — a slogan displayed in her studio. She’s a Chinese immigrant New Yorker, by way of Singapore — and she’s proud of her experiences and background, which are intrinsic to her self-expression — but her heritage doesn’t *define* her or her art.



“I’m Chinese and I don’t have to write it out,” says Yuan, who refrains from blatant messaging. Being Asian-American and an immigrant always involves walking that line of being seen as too one or the other, while

often feeling like an outsider either way. Yuan's art also treads that balance of "two extremes," which she often discusses with accomplished Columbia visual arts professors of Asian descent.

"They understand," she says, of Sze, [Tomas Vu-Daniel](#), and Rirkrit Tiravanija. "The two extremes: one is being just a token and the other, just pretending you're white. They understand how to be in the middle and we discuss how not to be a token. We can't lump everyone together and say, 'This is the only way you can represent Asians in America or the experience of Asians in America.'"

Now, she's preparing a new collection, which explores fear. "Everyone has been living on edge: 'Am I gonna get COVID? Am I gonna die? Am I gonna be stabbed on a train?'" says Yuan, who, in 2019, faced successive hardships: hospitalization with a near-fatal health condition, the death of her beloved father, and then the pandemic.

In a deep depression following the passing of her father, she found support and solace in therapy. Through her new work, Yuan subverts the art world's and society's misconceptions about mental health — which threads back to her mother's early concerns. And as part of a flourishing cohort of Asian-American female artists, Yuan hopes to be an inspiration to young aspiring creatives — who now have a growing list of names to give as examples to anyone who challenges their dreams.

"F— you to the glass ceiling. There is no glass ceiling," says Yuan. "We are breaking it."