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## An Asian Artist's Isolation in New York

Yuri Yuan's sense of isolation is an inescapable feature of her daily life, which she simultaneously examines and holds at bay through the act of painting.



by John Yau  
13 hours ago



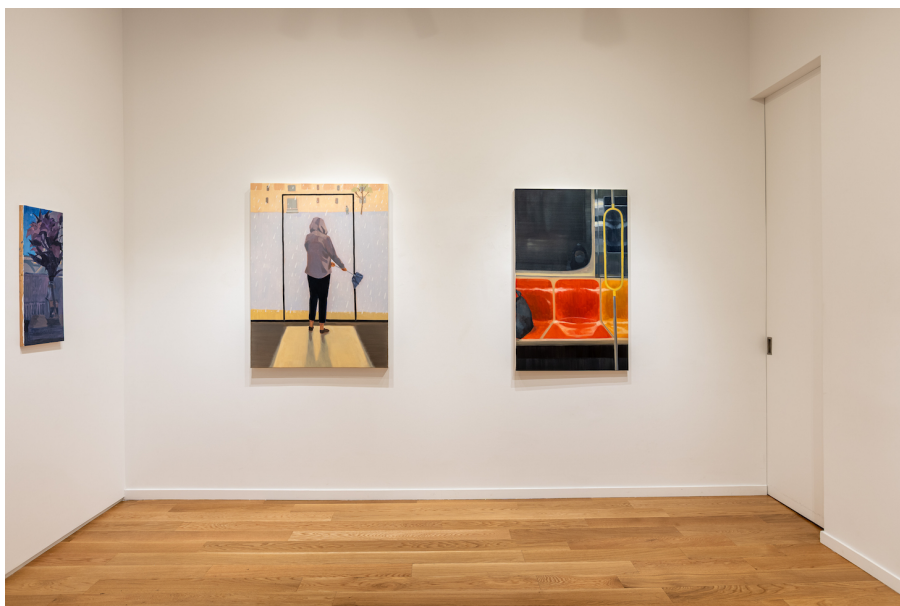
Yuri Yuan, "Norwegian Wood" (2021), oil on canvas, 63 x 73 inches (all images © the artist, courtesy Alexander Berggruen and the artist, photos by Bryan Toro)

I first met Yuri Yuan in June 2018 at the opening of *Alex Katz—Grass and Trees* at Gray Warehouse in Chicago. I was there because I had written the catalogue essay and was invited to be in a conversation with Ivy Wilson about the work. The next time I talked to Yuan was this past spring on Zoom; she was one of a small group of MFA students at Columbia whose work I had been invited to critique. During our meeting, she told me she was going to have a gallery show of her paintings and I said

I would go. This past week I went to see her debut exhibition, *Yuri Yuan: River Flows in You* at Alexander Berggruen (July 21–August 31, 2021).

Yuan is working her way through her inspirations, which include Vilhelm Hammershøi, Lois Dodd, Alex Katz, and Matthew Wong, all of whom I have written about. What struck me about the work I saw in the Zoom critique were the views she was depicting, which usually focused on an urban scene occupied by a single female figure who is turned away from the viewer. What I could not tell was the scale of the paintings and the physical presence of the paint. All of the painters she was thinking about had a sense of touch and an interest in light, but that does not come across digitally.

The 10 paintings in the exhibition can be divided into two groups. Four paintings, all measuring 14 by 11 inches, are dominated by a moody palette of blues. The other six paintings range in size, from the diptych “Night Lily” (2021), which has two stacked panels and measures 28 by 11 inches, to “Norwegian Wood” (2020), which measures 6 feet by nearly 7 feet.



Installation view, *Yuri Yuan: A River Flows in You* at Alexander Berggruen, New York

In “Norwegian Wood,” a black-haired woman in a belted brown trench coat with an orange-red scarf is in the immediate foreground, cropped by the painting’s bottom edge, her back facing the viewer. She is standing before a frozen pond surrounded by a high snow bank, which forms a kind of proscenium starting in the lower left corner

and culminating in the upper right-hand corner. Light snow is rendered as soft daubs of paint across the surface.

The pond's frozen surface is green; what we see are the reflections of upside-down trees in full foliage, depicted as thinly painted clouds of green with faint, vertical strokes suggesting tree trunks. Also extending down is the reflection of a young man wearing a black coat, with brown hair, his facial features undefined. That gap between the woman standing in wintry weather and the reflection imprisoned in the frozen green world of a dream could easily have toppled over into romantic melodrama, but it didn't.

What does come across in the painting is Yuan's sense of the isolation that is an inescapable feature of her daily life, which she simultaneously examines and holds at bay through the act of painting. It is interesting that she aligns herself with the emotional coolness of Dodd and Katz, while dealing with a loaded subject, which I would say is basic to an immigrant's experience of America, beginning with a sense of extreme dislocation.



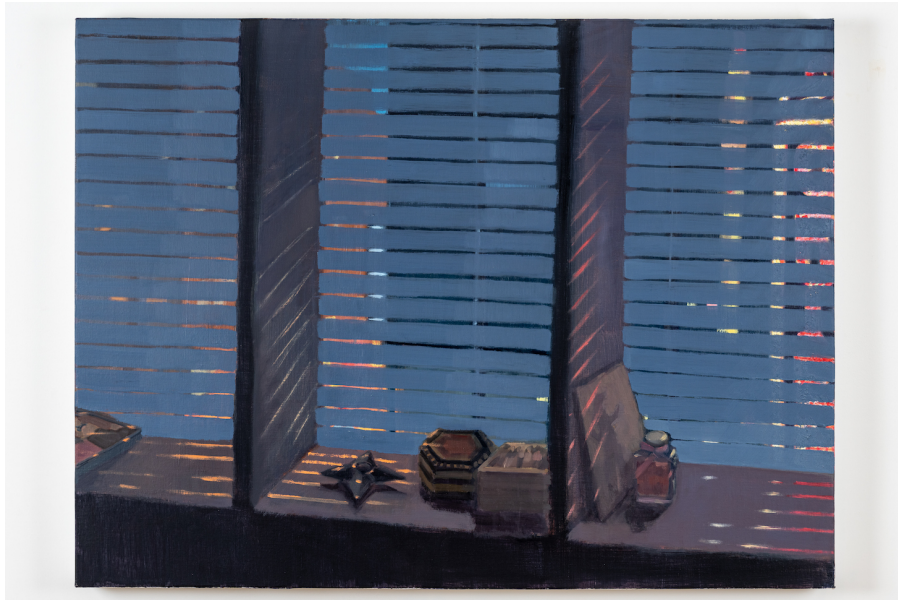
Yuri Yuan, "Puddle" (2021), oil on canvas, 48 x 36 inches

I think that sense of solitude was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown imposed on New Yorkers, not to mention the implicit and explicit racism that became a big part of every Asian's daily life in America, and the consequent apprehension that accompanied each excursion into the city. Yuan's "A Train"

(2021) is emblematic of the sense of necessary seclusion that permeated everyday life during past year.

In the painting we see part of a row of orange subway seats opposite us, the one directly across from us empty. Tucked in the curved, right-hand corner of the streaked gray window above the seat is the reflection of a young masked woman.

The painting's composition establishes that we are seeing our own masked reflection in the window: a bodiless, largely featureless face. On the subway seat to the left of the empty one, beneath the reflection, we see part of a gray cloth bag or purse, cropped by the painting's left edge. On the right is a vertical post with an elliptical opening for passengers to hold onto.



Yuri Yuan, "City of Trauma" (2021), oil on canvas, 30 x 40 inches

Ever since I moved to New York City in the mid-1970s, I have heard that Edward Hopper's views are emblematic of the malaise of urban living, most likely because the Whitney Museum of American Art was bequeathed more than 3,000 works by his widow when she died in 1968. Hopper's figures were white; they lived in a segregated world, traces of which are still with us.

In Hopper's "Chop Suey" (1929), the four patrons in the Chinese restaurant are white. While Hopper depicts two women eating, which represents a societal change and a new freedom for women, particularly for those living in a city, we should also



recognize that there are no Asians in this or any other Hopper painting; they are invisible in his visual world.

In “A Train,” Yuan gets to a moment of melancholy and vulnerability, a common Hopper theme, but her subject is a young, nondescript, anonymous Asian female. That strikes me as true to the artist’s everyday experience and therefore important for a whole host of reasons. The painting is understated, but it signals a significant shift in consciousness.



Yuri Yuan, *Blue Series* (2021), oil on board, 14 x 11 inches each

Yuan is part of a generation of emerging and mid-career Asian women artists that the art world has not yet recognized, as it has in the case of their white and, to a lesser extent, Black counterparts.

This is why I was also touched by group of four paintings done in saturated shades of blue, collectively titled *Blue Series*, as well as the larger, mostly blue paintings “City of Trauma” (2021) and “Night Lily” (2021). Yuan’s palette clearly alludes to the work of Matthew Wong, who committed suicide at the age of 35, after completing the work for his exhibition *Matthew Wong: Blue* at Karma (November 8, 2019–January 5, 2020), which I reviewed. Yuan’s embrace of another contemporary Chinese painter, who happened to have died young, underscores the particularities of a rich art history that is separate from American art and goes back at least as far

as Yasuo Kuniyoshi (1889–1953), Yun Gee (1906–1963), and Isamu Noguchi (1904–1988).

The strongest of the four small paintings is “Blue Series: Avocado Plant” (2021). The subject is a homely avocado plant, the pit held by the mouth of a jar. A root grows down into the jar and green, leafy branch emerges out. They are considered novelty plants, as they are fairly easy to grow and take care of. You might call it an urban pastime. In picking this mundane subject, and bathing the plant in blue light, Yuan again gets to a moment of wistfulness. At the same time, the plant symbolizes persistence, which signifies Yuan’s own determination. A lot is going on in the artist’s work. In the best pieces, the merging of subject, paint, color, and light snaps into place; then the painting begins singing a sweetly mournful tune.

**Yuri Yuan: River Flows in You** *continues at Alexander Berggruen (1018 Madison Avenue, 3rd Floor, Upper East Side, Manhattan) through August 31.*

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