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Suyi Xu: All That Is Solid Melts Into Air Review

January 1, 2023 by Dominique Musorrafiti

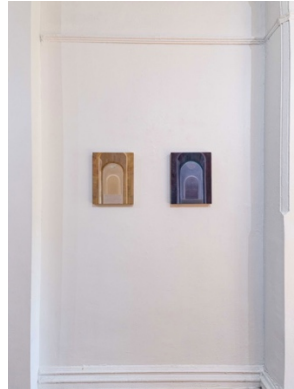
The [latest exhibition at the Fou Gallery](#) (September 24 – December 18, 2022) in New York presented the works of contemporary Brooklyn painter Suyi Xu to the metropolitan public.

The artist has a noticeable harmonised gift, which leads her to merge a reasoned eclecticism and a personal coherence in her paintings, allowing her to communicate different eras and fashions without ever renouncing her personal touch. In her artworks there are evident visual roots that draw from the past: there are distinct references and inspiration to the styles of authors such as **Rembrandt Harmenszoon Van Rijn, Johannes Vermeer, Édouard Manet, and Edward Hopper**, as well as explicit references to works by **Jean Fouquet, George Minne, and Bruno Dayan**.

Suyi Xu's paintings, displayed in her debut solo show, emphasized punctual and intense attention to absorbing visible subject rather than attempting to produce idealisation or transfiguration of reality. Her painting has an intimate adherence to the reality she interprets, without imposing her vision, since her creative energies are inclined to reveal the **eternal that adapts**: she realistically paints light, but directs it where she wants, on particulars or details.

Echo He, the curator of the event, gallerist, writer, as well the founder of Fou Gallery, and the mind behind the concept of an alternative method for the fruition of art, explains that the artist draws inspiration from different sources, artworks from different times, literature, films, up to the contemporary fashion catwalks. She creates temporal bridges between her imagination to focus her attention on the meditation on the fields of colours, analysing space, light, time in distinct coordinates, moving between the themes of the spiritual crisis of contemporary existence,

idiosyncratic symbolic elements represented here and now in one's being. So we deduce that in her works of art, albeit descriptive and realistic, the contents of moral warning are also fundamental. The painter doesn't condemn the traditions, and she doesn't ask for examinations of conscience, from those who don't respect the inscrutability of the divine will, the author puts herself in a position of mediation and shows a non-judgmental analysis of our times.

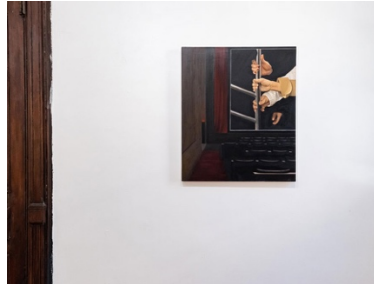


Suyi Xu: *All that is Solid Melts into Air* installation view, photo by Zhou Xi ©Suyi Xu, Courtesy of Fou Gallery

The painter studies the nature of light and shadow and gives color contrasts the job of investigating and modeling everything while emphasizing the drama of reality with them. Light is a symbol of clarity, of evidence, its dynamic application captures the reality of a condition. Her colour palette represents human states in all their forms, both physical and mental through a brilliant contrast of light and shadow capable of enhancing the tension of the scene. In her artworks, the strokes of colour evoke the accumulation over time, in its state of transitory but permanent moment.

Architecture has a bodily presence in Suyi Xu's paintings, an evident example of which can be seen in her light studies of Louvre's Daru staircase, which also recurs in her artworks "*Bella Donna*" and "*The Unwinged Surrender of Kneeling Youth*". The Daru Staircase is one of six grand staircases built during the Second Empire, in the 19th century, by the architect **Hector Lefuel**. **Emperor Napoleon III**, to give more space to the exhibition halls of the Louvre, ordered the construction of a new staircase, allowing the access to three levels in four different directions. The *Victory of Samothrace* (190 BC) was installed on the landing which is the ideal place for a magnificent staging, in this way ancient sculpture and modern architecture strengthen the communicative connections of art. In Suyi Xu's paintings, the choice to stage different works instead of Nike is connected with the motivations of the creation of the Daru staircase: "access to different levels in different directions". In the work "*Bella Donna*", although the artist doesn't represent the famous Hellenic statue, there are the shadows of her "ghost", whose presence we can perceive, also echoed by the seraphim and cherubim angels portrayed behind the "*Madonna with child*" by **Jean Fouquet**, which bring to mind the wings of the absent statue. In this work, the artist shifts the focal point of the scene, putting the observers in a position to recalibrate and revamp their point of view. She rearranges environments and scenes, and chooses to create a painting that thinks and makes the audience think, which raises questions about

how roles, spaces, and spotlights that illuminate certain realities instead of others have changed. Questions about the evolution and change of values, about what is important, and in the foreground, about where the eyes place their attention.



Suyi Xu: *All that is Solid Melts into Air* installation view, photo by Zhou Xi ©Suyi Xu, Courtesy of Fou Gallery

In the painting "*The Unwinged Surrender of Kneeling Youth*", the Nike is replaced by a statue of a suffering figure, "*Kneeling Youth*" by the Belgian modernist **George Minne**. The substitution is motivated by the fact that the artist believes that when a sculpture appears in the paintings, it always carries all its narrative weight and therefore also offers precise answers, this causes a limitation of imagination. She, therefore, decides to place a subject that embraces the space, and that disseminates the visual sensation of the dancing grains of dust filtered by the air and by the rays of light. Her choice of tones and colors evokes a sense of human warmth that balances the bodily plasticity of the statue of **George Minne**, which is the exact opposite of the pride that represents Nike. In the artwork, there is a sense of misplacement that yearns for protection, to which Siyi Xu offers an embrace of light. The statue highlights inner spiritual conflicts, despite being in a symbolic place of maximum exposure, the pedestal par excellence of one of the most famous museums in the world. We are not witnessing a triumph or a celebration of glory or power, on the contrary, we are participating in a moment of fragility. Considering the author's attention to establishing a dialogue between the past and the present through her works, the audience could think about the relationship that many people have today, especially the younger ones, with social media, where the exaltation under the spotlight often turns into an isolation of suffering, in which achievement, success, and victory are simulated, but there is an escape from reality and oneself. The eyes that observe carefully could see in the artwork a sense of self-closure that is not only physical but also psychological. The themes of self-absorption, interiority and psychophysical isolation are staged at the maximum expression of one's being with explicit, simple, and empathetic means.

This reflection is also revealed by taking into consideration that the artist draws inspiration and refers to her paintings from the writing "*The Agony of Eros*" by the German philosopher of Korean origin **Byung-Chul Han**, on the threat to love and desire in today's society. **Han** bears witness to the profanation of love in contemporary society: degraded love becomes a commodity. The painter writes "*Since my early adulthood I have experienced a longing for rigorous and profound experience, a reverence for something that you can sacrifice your life to.*" The souls of individuals, therefore, find

themselves living in a space between inspiration and expiration and her artistic work tries to understand and hopes to shed light on the contemporary narcissism of society.

The female protagonists in her paintings are emotionally alone, on the threshold between desire and sorrow, pleasure and punishment, on the borderline between light and darkness, and between holiness and sin. She places her subjects in architectural frames that carry sacredness. The protagonists are set like the gems of a ring, the precious stones of the sacred jewels of the tabernacle. She uses architecture to build modern refined display cases or elegant caskets where the magnificence makes today's individualism and narcissism resonate, but where the female protagonists live a suspended destiny.



Suyi Xu: *All that is Solid Melts into Air* installation view, photo by Zhou Xi ©Suyi Xu, Courtesy of Fou Gallery

In her artwork "*Fidelio*" the surreal portrait reiterates the agony. Starting from the image of the "*Vive La Bagatelle*" catwalk (1997) by **Vivienne Westwood**, she carries out a meditative journey on the image and the body of the woman in the field of fashion, connecting the focal points of the fetishization of beauty and what results from it in the domain of power and its absence. She decides to strengthen her creative path by instilling further emphasis on the title: *Fidelio*. Those who choose fashion often follow a path like that of the believer, faithful, someone who perhaps doesn't rationally and voluntarily accept their destiny. Trust in brands, for some individuals, is unconditional, without ifs, but, without doubts. Beauty requires sacrifices, economic, physical, and structural and sometimes it also implies submission of various kinds, in fact, as Echo He explains, Suyi Xu chooses this title also inspired by **Stanley Kubrick's** latest film, "*Eyes Wide Shut*" (1999) where *Fidelio* is the password to access an elitist, secret and vicious world.

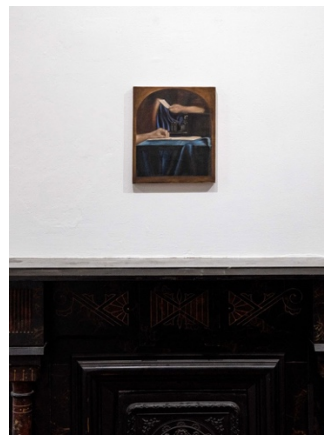
We also find devotion in "*A Woman Under the Influence*" which takes up the image of *Balenciaga 1998* created by **Bruno Daya**. The artist felt a sudden need to create a scene that relates proportions to her body, her flesh, where the colour palette gives rise to a collaboration between her and the light, where her desires are expressed full of new breath. The protagonist is placed in a meditative space, where there is a ceremonial atmosphere that recalls a woman during the ritual phase of the Eucharist, with the absence of a host. The image full of tension and contradiction raises questions about whether we are witnessing an imposition, constraint, or something desired and wanted since the woman's face seems abandoned to pleasure. The moment does not offer interpretative certainties.



Suyi Xu Studio in Brooklyn, August 2022. ©Suyi Xu, Photograph by Xi Zhou, courtesy of Fou Gallery

The symbolic, simple, and elegant temple that evokes the Metropolitan Museum was chosen by Suyi Xu as the perfect monumental cathedral. Her places are not only spiritual, mental, or virtual, they are real spaces made of stone bricks with flesh-like textures, and the fine nuances of warm and/or deep colours, the dusty and soft lights, create a poised balance where one adores art in a slow meditation over time, composed of precise and powerful images.

These frames where the artist fixes her reflections and moulds them into creations, bring to mind the act of the individual who creates or chooses the stories to believe or with which to decorate the personal mind, or own temple. Each era creates a symbolism according to its needs and Suyi Xu remembers the past, diagnoses the present, and tries to understand the future. She decides to unite and reveal the intrinsic nature that lies beneath the surface of everyday life. We live in an age where everywhere we look there are hearts, love quotes, books that tell love stories, TV series, movies, and songs, but people have never been so hungry for love, to the point that they never feel full, in a sort of emotional bulimia. No one thinks it is necessary to learn to love, since many think they deserve to be loved. The ability to love is not questioned. Love manifests itself only if there is an exchange "Do ut Des" reciprocity takes place precisely in the conscious and voluntary exchange, but if the exchange does not take place fairly and honestly, the balance is not in symmetry.

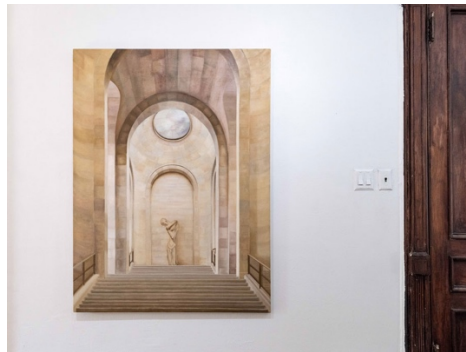


Suyi Xu: All that is Solid Melts into Air installation view, photo by Zhou Xi ©Suyi Xu, Courtesy of Fou Gallery

In the architecture that Suyi Xu paints, there is the search for a balance to maintain equilibrium. Loving is not easy, it involves sacrifices, managing the balance between lights and shadows, between

past and present, without neglecting the possible changes of the future. The flow of time leads to questions about today's problems and whether they can be judged by the laws and terms of the judgement of the past. Are we sure that the choices of now, will be seen as right, human, and rational, tomorrow? Morals, ethics, and values may not be similar to what we know, the future is unknown, and this generates insecurity that leads individuals to choose faith. Faith can be anything: religion, sport, nature, science, rationality...

Each individual has their personal and own faith which is unique and individual, which will never be the same as that of another person, despite being able to be in the same environments (church, museum, sports centre, mountain ...) and being able to perform the same rituals with others (praying, practising athletic activity...) for each one it will always be exclusively private and unrepeatable for the others. The artist brings her mind and experience to the canvas, combines real and imaginary spaces, and allows the audience with her artwork to get closer to her, painting realistically allows her fantasies and desires to be seen and felt tangibly. As Echo He illustrates, the painter based on the book *"The Painter of Modern Life"* by the French poet **Charles Pierre Baudelaire**, also wants to convey in her artworks a message of invariability and circumstantiality: Nothing is real and everything changes and, above all, nothing is natural.



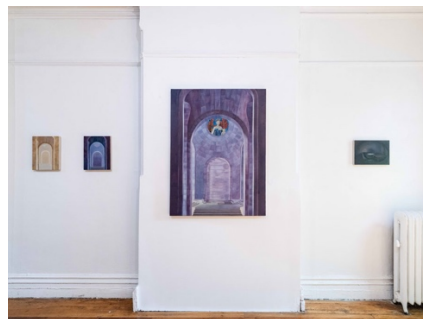
Suyi Xu: All that is Solid Melts into Air installation view, photo by Zhou Xi ©Suyi Xu, Courtesy of Fou Gallery

Suyi Xu has always had a strong interest in painting hands, which recurs in many of her artworks. In *"Through A Glass Darkly"* she depicts an empty movie theatre in downtown New York where the big screen shows a common scene from a subway cart, commuter hands holding onto the metallic poles, coming in close proximity, but carefully avoiding touching. The artist paints through inner thought and lets the colours speak, their choice and lights instil alienation. She reflects on the contingencies of the time in which the sense of loneliness is amplified, but at the same time, there is a lack of personal space. The cinema is a perfect environment to reaffirm the concept of sharing and alienation, in the end, everyone is alone within themselves absorbed in personal thoughts, despite everyone participating in the same ritual at the same time.

In her artworks, there is a pictorial narrative structure that tells of something that refers to something else that concerns the same thing or something complementary: a narration within the narrative. Her

paintings lead the viewers in a recursive algorithm, that is, the iteration of similar environments in which each repetition or similarity is the starting point for the next one. The repetitions evoke the cycles and loops of life, where there are elements of vulnerability, humanity, and universality. It creates new perspectives and energy by uniting disjointed realities in spaces, architectures, and interiors that deny time. Even the titles of her artworks have this function, they create a precise identity and are echoes that reaffirm and lead those who approach her paintings to have a more persistent and grasp the series of visual references.

This structure also reappears in *"Vermeer's Hand"*, where the title refers to the work of **Johannes Vermeer** but also to the painter's personal experience when she saw *"Mistress and Maid"* at the *Frick Collection*. The choice of colours and the combination of tones are carefully dosed by the artist in relation to the psychological impact on the observer; the studies of light modulations create "out of focus" effects in the outlines often shaded by a stroke of colours intermediate concerning the background. Suyi Xu is fascinated by how things appear in the dark, where shapes are outlined by soft lines and shapes suggested by colours. She brings the sunlight into dark tones, with great attention to detail and the creation of plays of light: she creates areas of shadow and semi-darkness in contrast with fully illuminated ones. The luminist research is obtained through a dense and full-bodied mixture of colour and a free but disciplined application on the canvas, where the dark tones give greater brightness by bringing out the colours with great strength, by contrast, through elegant and dramatic brushstrokes.



Suyi Xu: *All that is Solid Melts into Air* installation view, photo by Zhou Xi ©Suyi Xu, Courtesy of Fou Gallery

Just like **Johannes Vermeer**, who inspired her, she draws delicate lines, she blurs colours to soften the line between shapes. The painting is touched, stroked, and brushed with layers of colour to allow shapes to build up over time and colours to emerge from underneath. The eye is the organ that receives light, so a sense of physical immediacy is created, thanks to the subtle effects of light that appeal to the visual experience. In addition, the artwork leads to meditations on space, interiors, and architecture that transform into fields of colour, charged with the author's desire for intimacy with the painting, just as it happens in their hands, whose identities are hidden.

Even in the artwork from which Suyi Xu's debut exhibition takes its name, *"All that is Solid Melts into Air"* we find hands, a subject always full of meaning for the artist. This time, however, hands without

identity, no gender, or even race are the focal point. The title comes from a sentence from **Karl Marx's Communist Manifesto**. The original text said: "All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind." Suyi Xu was intrigued by the way **Linda Nochlin** in her essay shifts the quote from its original context to expose her thoughts. The artist then explains "I realised later that much of my artistic process also starts with taking things out of context, embedding them with new meanings, and merging disjointed realities." The hands seem to be conjoined, in prayer, like when someone twists them to hold a rosary they are not hands of flesh and blood, but of a transparent and shiny substance, the artist decides this time to create a new alchemy detached from physicality but remains a sense of fragility and delicacy. Also, in this case, her pictorial choices generate contrasts that arouse moments of reflection, invite the audience to stop and reconsider the meaning of what they see, reshape ideas, feelings and emotions.

Photo courtesy of **Fou Gallery**

Art: © **Suyi Xu**

Photographer: **Zhou Xi**



Dominique Musorrafti

CHINA-UNDERGROUND. Ciao! My name is Dominique. I'm Italian and I'm proud to be a mix. My father was an Italian chemical engineer and high school teacher, with Greek and Polish heritage. My mother is Haitian, she was high school language teacher, with Dominican, Spanish, French, Portuguese, African and Native American heritage. Being a mix makes me appreciate to want to understand different cultures and lifestyles. I grew up in Italy, lived few years in Haiti, travel around main European capitals, lived seven years in China, six in Spain and UK. Traveling makes me feel that we can learn something from every situation in every part of the world.

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