

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

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ARTFORUM

INTERVIEWS

JULIEN NGUYEN

July 20, 2021 • Julien Nguyen on the Renaissance, conjury, and painting himself



Julien Nguyen, *hic manebimus optime*, 2021, oil on linen on panel, 20 x 16".

*At the end of our conversation, Julien Nguyen read from a poem by the eighth-century Chinese poet Tu Fu that supplied the title for one of his new paintings: "In ten warrior years and more, how / could I avoid all honor? Everyone // treasures heroes, but how shameful / to talk myself up like all the others. // War smolders across our heartland / and rages on the frontiers: all those // lords chasing ambition everywhere, / who can elude resolute in privation?" It may seem grandiose to tie yourself to history this way—and it is—but this is exactly what makes Nguyen's art contemporary. He achieves what few artists manage: the acceptance that nothing is new and nothing lasts, that we inhabit a world built beautifully from the rubble of other worlds, and that it is here we make our stand—as he has it in the title of another painting on view at New York's Matthew Marks gallery through August 31, a remarkable, subtly sci-fi self-portrait of the artist at thirty, *hic manebimus optime*: "Here we will remain most excellently."*

Nguyen, Julien, and Travis Diehl. "Julien Nguyen." *Artforum*, July 20, 2021.

I'M DRAWN TO CERTAIN ARTISTS and certain ways of making, certain techniques of depiction, that tend to come from the early Renaissance. But it's a question of method, not style. During this period, painting became a form of philosophical play. The way in which these artists began to think about and collect art is actually very similar to where contemporary art ended up in the twentieth century. Renaissance painters did not simply try to reproduce what was in front of them or arrange pleasing shapes in a field but sought to bring something into life through an analogous process of physically constructing or building or growing it in their pictures. Take the landscapes in the backgrounds of many Renaissance paintings, where painters took elements from their own region and projected them onto Palestine or Egypt or wherever the tale is set. They're constructed like stages, like dioramas, or like maps in a video game. The conjuring aspect is really powerful. I'll say this in the language of the time: They're bringing to life their own genius.

The more composed paintings in the show generally depict religious subjects: a Virgin Mary, the temptation of Christ, St. John the Baptist. These are the foundational subjects through which, in whatever contorted form, the United States of America has a relationship to the states of early modern Europe. But there's also *Resolute in Privation*, 2021, which takes its name from a line in a Tu Fu poem that is itself taken from Confucius. That's a religious or mythological painting, but it works with Eastern philosophy rather than the Western model. Allegory and metaphor have become so thoroughly scrambled over time that these stories, like clothes hangers, allow me to do the work of draping a bit more freely. It's my way of trying to strike up some form of conversation with the things I deeply admire from the past, things I find so much pleasure, joy, and love in, and to see how those things might continue to exist.



Julien Nguyen, *Woman in a Lab Coat*, 2020 oil on panel, 35 1/2 x 47 1/4".

Nguyen, Julien, and Travis Diehl. "Julien Nguyen." *Artforum*, July 20, 2021.



Julien Nguyen, *St. John the Baptist*, 2020, oil on panel, 40 x 30".

I had a tricky time with *Woman in a Lab Coat*, 2021. Originally, I had in mind a sacred conversation based on Piero della Francesca's *Flagellation*, ca. 1470, which has a wonderful atmosphere and perspectival architecture. It's a very ambiguous painting because Christ is being flagellated against a column in the back corner of the picture, and in the foreground there are some rich merchants or Roman statesmen having a pleasant conversation. I wanted to do my own version of that painting, but instead of a Roman courtyard in Jerusalem, I wanted to have it set in one of those stark white rooms where they build satellites or missiles. Instead of whipping Christ in the background, they'd be working on some device back there. And in the foreground, you'd have these three beautiful scientists having a moment around the watercooler. I posed my partner, Lili, in a lab coat. And that is about as far as that painting got. I realized that there was no way that this picture would be done for this show, but it's also a picture that I would like to do very, very thoroughly. And so it warrants having this stillborn version of it let into the world.

The Ottolinger clothing collection that uses my paintings was a happy accident. They asked if I'd be interested in doing something with them, and I basically gave them images of my paintings and was like, "Have at it, do what you will—let's see what happens." I've always gotten a lot of satisfaction from the representation of fabric, the beauty of certain materials, the way things are cut and made. But making clothes is a completely different operation than figuring out what pair of shorts this boy is going to wear in a painting. The fact that certain pop-cultural figures began to wear those clothes did elicit both excitement and a bit of a chuckle. The paintings become much more symbolic, like how Athena has the head of a Gorgon on her shield. There's a video of SZA singing a song with a naked, red-headed Christ, very alien looking, being baptized on the back of her coat.

I treated the smaller works in this show like little laboratories. In these, I would further my glazing technique or the way in which I incorporate texture into the representation of flesh. There are even moments when I allow myself an aggressive form of whimsy, as in *Reclining Figure*, 2020, where a nipple becomes a swirl, or the part in the self-portrait *hic manebimus optime*, 2021, that looks almost like a cleft palate or the tip of a hawk's beak. I've always had this strange idea of pointiness as something both delicate and strong—like, I've taken the form to a point, and it's done. It's closed off; it's contained. It has rigorous speed and can move around and cut things.

There's such a long lineage of artists I look to who paint self-portraits. But there aren't very many contemporary artists doing self-portraits in the classical way, this sort of cataloguing of oneself, one's ambitions or pretensions, or a kind of advertisement. The last time I painted a proper self-portrait in which I tried to accurately describe my features, I was fifteen. And then I made a silverpoint drawing for Matthew Marks about two-three years ago, and I loved it. That was called *Self-Portrait at Age 28*, 2019. With this new one, I'm leaving the first stage of adulthood, beginning to put youth behind me.

Painting glasses is always a tricky procedure. I do tend to see myself through my glasses, having had them as a kid and liking how they looked and what they might convey. In the self-portrait, I wanted to convey the hardness and opticality of glass, but I wanted to make it a bit more exciting for myself, a little bit magical. I was looking at a lot of eighteenth-century menswear with these beautiful metal buttons, gold, brass, silver, very shiny, very flat, with this delicate rim. They look like some indeterminant technology two hundred, three hundred, four hundred years in the future. I wanted to make the glasses look like that. And I wanted to make them float. There's a single button on the shirt that resembles the lenses; I wanted to make it look like a nice shirt, but I also wanted to make it my own.

The title, *hic manebimus optime*, comes from when the Gauls were about to sack Rome back in 390 BCE. The people were like, "OK, what are we going to do? Should we abandon the city?" And the centurion comes and he says, "No, here we will remain most excellently," and defiantly rallies everyone to stay. I heard that phrase watching this YouTube channel called the Templin Institute, which produces videos on a wide range of science-fiction and fantasy universes, and I was very stirred. Science fiction mirrors the Renaissance way of thinking about history, using the rubble of the present or the past. These were the things that led me into art. There's a bit of humor to that idea of "Here we will remain most excellently" in this context, but that's also very much how I see what it is that I do. I'm in the studio a lot, I stay here. It very slowly moves.

— As told to Travis Diehl