

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

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**ArtSeen**

# Julien Nguyen: *Pictures of the Floating World*

By **Emily Chun**

Vietnamese American artist Julien Nguyen's solo show at Matthew Marks features 13 paintings that combine elements of biblical stories, sci-fi, and portraits. Take his oil painting, *The Temptation of Christ* (2020), which depicts the New Testament story of Christ's temptation. In the biblical account, we encounter an exhausted Jesus, having withdrawn from society in order to fast for 40 days. The story reveals an unusual combination of divine, unwavering self-control, and precarious human vulnerability. Precariousness is *the* common denominator; it is a condition that, as Judith Butler puts it, "one cannot will away without ceasing to be human." And yet, within such precariousness—alimentary and spiritual—we make out the contours of a self-discipline that is total, the kind that cuts through all palliative defenses and incinerates the extraneous. How do you pictorially approximate such self-discipline? The medieval Italian artist Duccio offered one suggestion in his painting *The Temptation of Christ* (1308–11), in which Jesus looms large on a mountain, pointing his finger and instructing the devil to leave.



Julien Nguyen, *The Temptation of Christ*, 2020. Oil on panel, 40 x 30 inches.  
Courtesy Matthew Marks, New York.

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Nguyen offers another, maybe more compelling, image of this scenario. In *The Temptation of Christ*, a youthful, self-assured Jesus marches forward with a steely gaze and militant step, seemingly impervious to the luring of the devil, who stands in his way. Jesus looks utterly self-possessed, as if he is intuiting truth in what everyone else sees as noise or void. He is gaunt, but not in a Giacomettian, existentially angsty way; Nguyen strikes a convincing balance between Jesus's precariousness and fortification, despite his haggard form. The scene is set in a timeless dreamscape, the sky the color of blood orange and the mountains as jagged and thorny as the tension of the situation and the sharp angularity of the figures' bodies. The devil's face is rendered in an almost machinic way; Nguyen often marries sci-fi elements and Renaissance-inspired techniques and themes, pointing out how "science fiction mirrors the Renaissance way of thinking about history, using the rubble of the present or the past."

Despite the fantastical, almost puckish, imaging of *The Temptation of Christ*, Nguyen doesn't so much wrest the story from the biblical context to give it a new spin as much as bring into sharp relief the story's subtext: the revelation of a distinctly divine precariousness. Other paintings in the show, all oil on canvas, domestically scaled, and made in the last three years, continue this exploration of relational precarity through an erotic dimension. They feature recent studies of male bodies and portraits based on friends and lovers—though one painting, *Untitled Torso Study* (2020), is of a stranger. Their oft-hidden or unmaterialized faces redirect our focus to the textures of their uncovered bodies. These portraits might register as a departure from the more biblically-based works in the show, but both groups of works embody different kinds of devotional imagery. "Desire and reverence," Nguyen notes, "are very closely linked in my mind."



Julien Nguyen, *Woman in a Lab Coat*, 2021. Oil on panel, 35 1/2 x 47 1/4 inches. Courtesy Matthew Marks, New York.

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Some of these portraits, like *Woman in a Lab Coat* (2021) and *Untitled Torso Study* feature figures with nonexistent eyes, and faces and hands so smudged that the figures almost seem to be dissolving into lack. I am reminded of an interview of writer Mary Gaitskill in 2009 about her book *Veronica* in which she says, “We come into these physical bodies ... whatever we are takes this shape that is so particular and distinct—eyes, nose, mouth—and then it gradually begins to disintegrate. Eventually it’s going to dissolve completely. It’s a *huge* problem for people; we can understand it, but it breaks our hearts.”

But this disintegration of the specificity of the body parts that distinguish us—eyes, faces, hands—shows up in Nguyen’s portraits not so much as a “problem” as prelapsarian possibility. What if the inscrutable faces of these portraits are not effaced or dissolved, but simply not yet formed, Adamic? In *Resolute in Privation* (2021), an elongated, emaciated figure hangs on two hooks holding up his shoulders, his face looking down and smudged into oblivion. As in a few other paintings, one hand is rendered and completed, but the other one is unformed or effaced. This repeats throughout his works: one foot carefully outlined, sculpted in paint, the other, a monochrome, angular, unformed wedge of paint.

The sinister, tenebrific aura of Nguyen’s earlier works, like the macabre scene in *Mary, Anne, Christ, and John* (2018), is tempered in this recent show. It’s true that his works still resist easy projection, but therein lies Nguyen’s main aesthetic claim: like good theology, his works make the familiar strange again. “If we cannot see things clearly,” Freud wrote, “we will at least see clearly what the obscurities are.”



Julien Nguyen, *Resolute in Privation*, 2021.  
Oil on panel, 40 x 30 inches. Courtesy  
Matthew Marks, New York.