MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY
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Julien Nguyen

Press Packet

Nguyen, Julien. "One Place After Another: Albrecht Dürer." *Artforum* 60, no. 6, February 2022, pp. 140–45.

Moffitt, Evan. "Julien Nguyen's Necrophiliac Twinks." *Frieze*, no. 222, October 2021, pp. 198–99.

Dwyer, Kate. "Drawn to 2 Worlds." *The New York Times*, August 22, 2021, p. ST7.

Chun, Emily. "Julien Nguyen: Pictures of the Floating World." *The Brooklyn Rail*, July/August 2021.

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

Samms, Gianna, and Julien Nguyen. "Julien Nguyen." *TheGuide.Art*, June 27, 2021.

Fateman, Johanna. "Julien Nguyen." *The New Yorker*, July 5, 2021, p. 8.

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ARTFORUM

JULIEN NGUYEN

Page 141: **Julien Nguyen**, ***Vision of a Cloudburst***, **2021–22**, digital drawing.

Page 142: **Julien Nguyen**, ***A Native of Hancock Park and the Prayer Book of Maximilian I***, **2021–22**, digital drawing.

Page 143: **Julien Nguyen**, ***Emilio***, **2021–22**, digital drawing.

Page 144: **Julien Nguyen**, ***Ideal Proportions***, **2021–22**, digital drawing.

Page 145: **Julien Nguyen**, ***Damon, Within a Budding Grove***, **2021–22**, digital drawing.

I AM HAUNTED BY DÜRER. I read recently that in examining closely his sketchbook of silverpoints, scholars could find no discernible hesitations or preliminary marks, that everything emerged fully formed from the tip of his stylus. I find this terrifying.

Under his spell, I have made the following drawings with an electronic tablet, a device that allows for corrections both infinite and invisible. I pray that he might smile at my choice of tools. Dürer was an archangel of the printing press, the wooden block, the copper plate, the engraver's burin; the tablet, too, lends itself well to broad and rapid distribution. May that my small efforts here continue to spread his legend and frighten others.

One night in 1525, Dürer had a vision in his sleep in which "great waters fell from heaven." The image that he recorded in watercolor shortly thereafter looks like a mushroom cloud. My first drawing, made in response to that image, portrays something equally oneiric. More specifically, it is my vision of a test explosion at the Nevada Proving Grounds in June of 1957.

My second drawing borrows directly from Dürer. In a fanciful border illustration on the page of a prayer book for Maximilian I, he depicts some of the emperor's subjects recently gained from Cortés's ongoing and bloody labor. I have collaged his drawing onto the page, and adjacent to it I have drawn a young native of Hancock Park, Los Angeles, regarding himself in the mirror of my apartment as he tries on a tricorne recently given to me.

On the third page you will find the face of my friend Emilio. His locks of hair in the photo from which I drew reminded me of Dürer's own.

Then we have some dolls: a gray mannequin borrowed from a doll maker online, loosely sketched, and a water-polo player painted digitally against a landscape. Both are faceless reflections on ideal proportion. Dürer drew about this too, using Vitruvius as his measuring stick. I have followed different guides.

Finally, I have made a portrait of my friend Damon on a winter evening in Silverlake. I am particularly proud of the collar of his natural suede coat. Look closely and you can almost feel it.□

—Julien Nguyen

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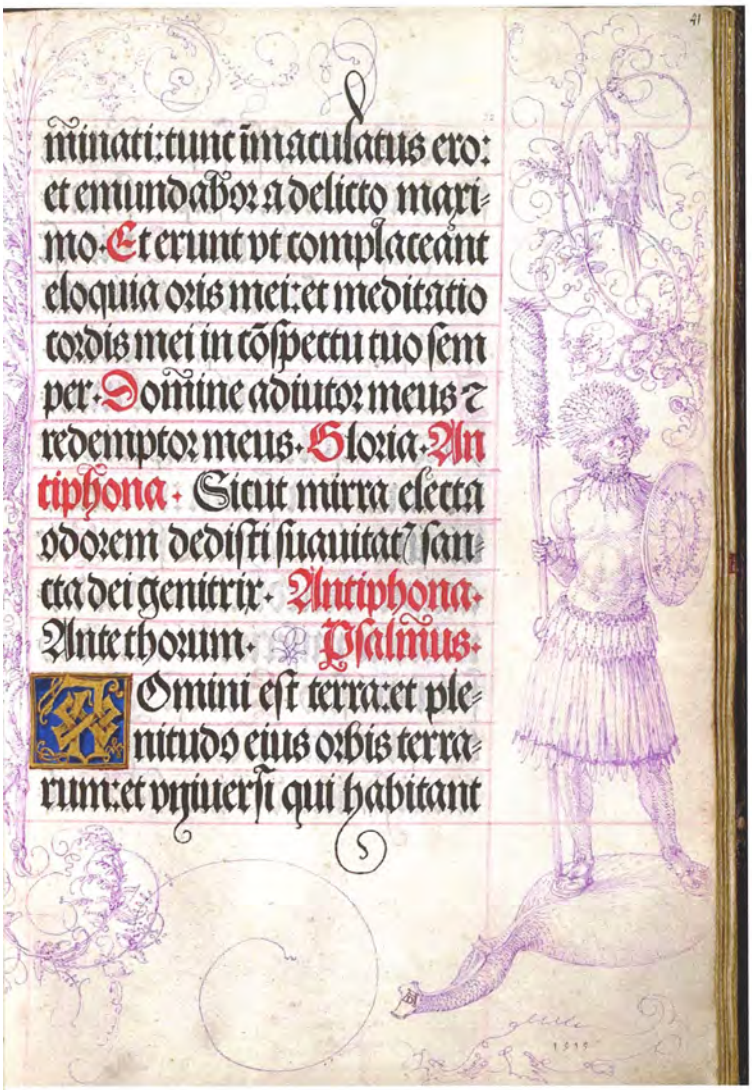
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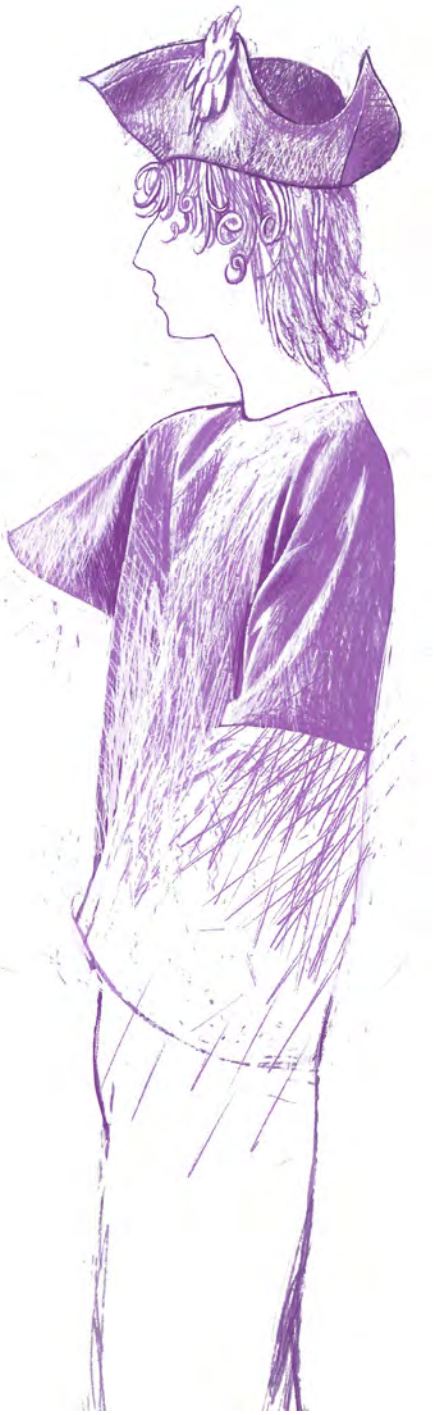

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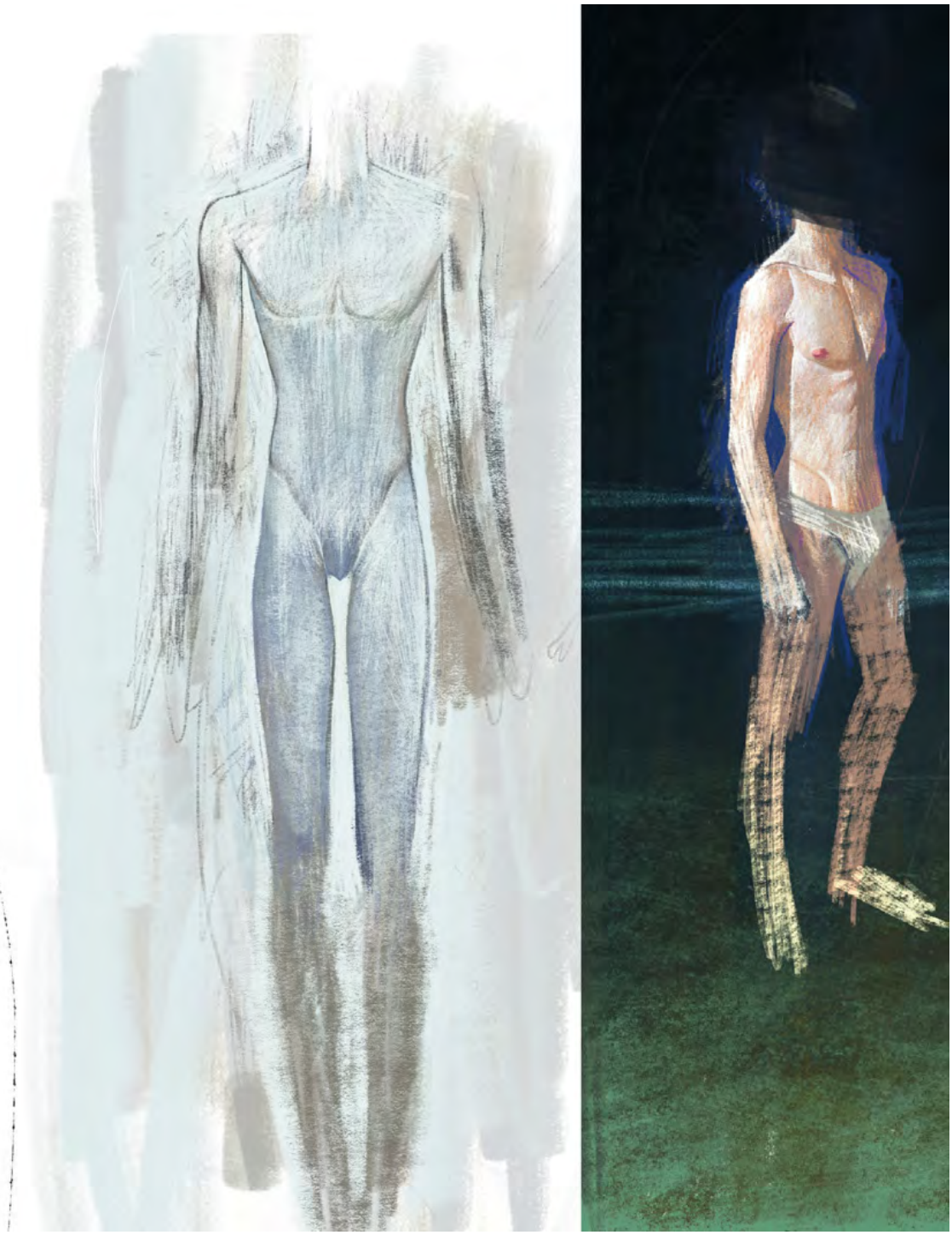

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frieze

ESSAY

JULIEN NGUYEN'S NECROPHILIAC TWINKS

The artist's sleek tableaux – inspired by biblical and classical themes, Japanese woodblock prints and European paintings – present ghoulish, lithesome male figures as both objects of desire and graven images of death

There's something sinister about the lithe young men in Julien Nguyen's paintings. I imagine the Internecivus raptus from *Alien* (1979) ready to burrow out of their pale bellies and strike. That creature, or something like it, crops up in *The Temptation of Christ* (2020) – its devilish corkscrew tail recoiling from Nguyen's nubile Son of Man. Posed in taut ballet counterpoint, his soft pink nipple exposed, this young Jesus seems more seducer than seduced. The lissom figure in *Richard* (2020), with his lupine yellow eyes and hair as kinky as a gorgon's, is equally desirable and demonic. Conversely, the bloodless body in *Resolute in Privation* (2021) – his face a dull grey smear beneath greasy bangs – hangs limply from a pair of hooks. The work's title suggests a militant asceticism, while a small window at the painting's lower right corner looks out onto a desolate Martian landscape. 'I'm like a thing, or like ... a meal, or ... whatever!' says the horny teen Henry to a john in Dennis Cooper's 1991 novel *Frisk*. The twink in *Resolute in Privation* has surely come to the same realization from his nightmarish meat locker. These boys want to both eat and be eaten.

Right
Julien Nguyen, *Richard*, 2020, oil on panel, 61 × 46 cm

Opposite top
Julien Nguyen, *Capricorn Rising*, 2018, oil and tempera on wood panel, 91 × 91 cm

Opposite bottom
Julien Nguyen, *Resolute in Privation*, 2021, oil on panel, 40 × 30 cm

'Pictures of the Floating World', Nguyen's exhibition at Matthew Marks this summer, took its name from *ukiyo-e*, 17th–19th century Japanese woodblock prints and paintings. The 'floating world' they depicted was a hedonistic fever dream of the Edo period's growing mercantile class, full of geishas, kabuki actors, courtesans and prostitutes. *Shunga*, or erotic *ukiyo-e*, often depicted same-sex desire. The prints of Hokusai and Hiroshige were especially instrumental in forming the Western perception of Japanese art, inspiring Edgar Degas and Vincent van Gogh, among others. *Ukiyo-e* offered the impressionists a way to escape the European preoccupation with vanishing-point perspective and return to the pictorial flatness that predominated before the Renaissance. Their shared subject matter, meanwhile, from Tokyo to Paris, was a world of bourgeois decadence and decay filtered by hazy romanticism. Nguyen's youths break free from painterly convention while remaining trapped in a flat, subterranean world where their unblemished skin barely conceals the rot. 'He was slender, bony and his skin was the colour of steamed glass,' writes Cooper of another boy in *Frisk*, but he could have been describing Nguyen's *Jake* (2019). If we drew a finger across his bare torso, would we see through to the other side?

Nguyen accomplishes this translucency by glazing wooden panels with oils until their surfaces are smoothly saturated with colour. His favoured points and whorls, meanwhile, add a compact dynamism to figures set within disquietingly serene landscapes. For instance, in *Capricorn Rising* (2018) – exhibited in the 2018 group show 'Positioner' at Matthew Marks Gallery in Los Angeles – a boy sits in a bare room,

Moffitt, Evan. "Julien Nguyen's Necrophiliac Twinks." *Frieze*, no. 222, October 2021, pp. 198–99.

the darkness of the window behind him contrasting with the ghoulish whiteness of his eyes. The palette is Lucian Freud, but the features are more redolent of Francis Bacon. *Noli me tangere, Caesaris sum* (Do Not Touch Me, I Am Caesar's, 2018), meanwhile, depicts a youth in languid repose on earth the colour and texture of worn leather. According to the third-century CE historian Gaius Solinus, these words were written on the collars of white stags nearly 300 years after the Roman emperor's assassination. This boy is an object of desire who remains forever out of reach: he is literally owned by death.

Nguyen's morbidly beautiful subjects remind me of Tadzio from Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* (1912). The novella follows a middle-aged writer, Gustav von Aschenbach, as he stalks Tadzio, a prepubescent boy, through the titular city (another floating world). When Aschenbach first sees Tadzio, he is struck by his 'imperfect' teeth, 'rather jagged and bluish, without a healthy glaze', and imagines that 'he will most likely not live to grow old'. Aschenbach, Mann writes, 'did not try to account for the pleasure the idea gave him'. The writer hopes that death might embalm the youth so age will never disturb his beauty. In the end, it's Aschenbach who's sick, like the decadent bourgeoisie to which he belongs. I imagine Nguyen's brittle twinks have come to sweetly warn us that the end is near.

Executive Solutions (2017), which Nguyen exhibited at the 2017 Whitney Biennial, is one such apocalyptic vision. Panels and a tondo, arranged beneath the banner for *The New York Times*, turn 'the paper of record' into an altarpiece for the end of days. Their forms quote European painting from Fra Angelico to Bronzino, while their figures are either ghostly or skeletal. At the bottom of the work, in a radioactive orange chamber, two boys based on Thomas Eakins's homoerotic *Wrestlers* (1899) have been rendered with rat heads. No longer simply playing, they appear to devour each other.

Click on any image from an online selection of works on the Matthew Marks website and DJ Sammy's 2002 club hit *The Boys of Summer* will play. 'I can tell you my love for you will still be strong / After the boys of summer have gone,' Dutch pop star Loona sings in the chorus. Summer's over, but Nguyen's boys are still here, trapped in a nuclear winter that has preserved their beauty but left little else intact.

This year, Nguyen completed a rare self-portrait. Opaque, frameless lenses float over his eyes like a pair of silver coins. A lunar landscape behind him resembles the craggy backdrop in Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* (1503). The work's title, *hic manebimus optime*, is another bit of Roman apocrypha: according to Livy's *History of Rome* (25–27 BCE), the phrase was first uttered in 390 BCE by the centurion Marcus Furius Camillus as the Gauls prepared to sack Rome. It means 'here we will stay, most excellently', and it could be a description of Nguyen's painterly resolve. Or perhaps a bit of winking self-deprecation from an artist who finds beauty by sifting through the ruins. Embalmed in oil, his boys will outlast us all ●

Evan Moffitt is a writer, editor and critic based in New York, USA.

Julien Nguyen is an artist based in Los Angeles, USA. His work was included in the 2017 Whitney Biennial and has been the subject of solo exhibitions at the Swiss Institute in New York, USA, Kunstverein München in Munich, Germany, and the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati, USA.

Moffitt, Evan. "Julien Nguyen's Necrophiliac Twinks." *Frieze*, no. 222, October 2021, pp. 198–99.

The New York Times

UP NEXT
JULIEN NGUYEN

Drawn to 2 Worlds

MAGGIE SHANNON FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Above, Julien Nguyen. Below, his work, "Executive Solutions."

JULIEN NGUYEN, VIA MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

Age 30

Hometown Hermosa Beach, Calif.

Currently Lives In a one-bedroom apartment in the Mid-Wilshire section of Los Angeles that doubles as his studio.

Claim to Fame Mr. Nguyen is a Vietnamese American artist who depicts friends, lovers and mythical creatures in the tradition of Italian Renaissance painters. His work gained a wider fan base through collaborations with the avant-garde fashion label Ottolinger. Two of his works, "Executive Function" and "Executive Solutions," which depict nymphs and demons on the front page of The New York Times, were included in the 2017 Whitney Biennial.

Big Break In 2016, when Mr. Nguyen was preparing for an art show, he met Christa Bösch and Cosima Gadient, the founders of Ottolinger, through mutual friends. "We became fast friends and had some wonderful nights out on the town," he said. The next year, Ottolinger based its fall collection on Mr. Nguyen's painting "The Baptism." which shows a young man being baptized in a silvery river. Dua Lipa, Bella Hadid and Barbie Ferreira were photographed wearing pieces from the collection, and SZA wore a shirt from it in her music video for "Hit Different."

Latest Project In June, Mr. Nguyen had his first major solo exhibition at Matthew Marks Gallery in Chelsea. The show was titled "Pictures of the Floating World," a reference to Ukiyo-e, a style of Japanese paintings and woodblock prints that depict a "cosmopolitan but also decadent and isolated world of pleasure," Mr. Nguyen said.

Next Thing Mr. Nguyen is producing new work at his home studio in Los Angeles, where he is known to paint at all hours of the night. "It's nice to start some paintings again without the immediate pressure of one's first big show at a gallery," he said. "I have some issues with time management. I'm in control of my own schedule, but that schedule is very erratic. I like living with the work."

Space Crusader As a teenager, Mr. Nguyen played a lot of video games, including Civilization III, Age of Empires and StarCraft, which he now credits with informing his aesthetic. "You're building your empire and conquering different parts of the world or space," he said. He later studied illustration at the Rhode Island School of Design. "I wanted to become a concept artist who designs all the characters and spaceships and buildings." *KATE DWYER*

Dwyer, Kate. "Drawn to 2 Worlds." *The New York Times,* August 22, 2021, p. ST7.

THE BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

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.

ON VIEW
Matthew Marks
June 4 – August 13, 2021
New York

Chun, Emily. "Julien Nguyen: Pictures of the Floating World." *The Brooklyn Rail,* July/August 2021.

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*, 202. Oil on panel, 35 1/2 x 47 1/4 inches. Courtesy Matthew Marks, New York.

Chun, Emily. "Julien Nguyen: Pictures of the Floating World." *The Brooklyn Rail,* July/August 2021.

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."

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

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."

Chun, Emily. "Julien Nguyen: Pictures of the Floating World." *The Brooklyn Rail,* July/August 2021.

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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.

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

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

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

THEGUIDE.ART

Photography Ye Rin Mok

Julien Nguyen

By Gianna Samms

Making use of a vernacular that ranges from Renaissance painting to science fiction, Julien Nguyen's meticulous paintings simultaneously reference history while looking into the future. Here, the lines between fantasy and reality are blurred: the Los Angeles-based artist paints real-life friends and lovers, but places them in alien settings and infuses their bodies with otherworldly qualities.

Nguyen's latest show at Matthew Marks Gallery, "Pictures of the Floating World," brings together a group of paintings made during the past two years. While many were begun before the pandemic,

lockdown brought about a new dimension to the 30-year-old's practice. Afforded more time and space to experiment under quarantine, the contemplation and isolation that characterizes Nguyen's work seems to have intensified. The show's title, which references the hedonistic and isolated Edo-period Japan, is reflected in the uneasy atmosphere of the paintings, whose characters seem to dematerialize against strange and uncertain backdrops. By making use of both art historical and digital motifs, the young artist dwells in a zone of indistinction, where past, present, and future spill into one another.

On occasion of his new show, we spoke about finding inspiration in social media, the relationship between desire and reverence, and the speculative possibilities in the future.

GIANNA SAMMS: I'm curious how this body of work came together. Some of the works were made before COVID, and some after.

JULIEN NGUYEN: I began working on the show in 2019. Originally, it was supposed to be earlier, but it was pushed back because of the pandemic. As horrible as the pandemic was, I think the work benefited from more time. The chaos of the world made me look at certain aspects of the work in different ways. My practice has always been very quiet, contemplative, and isolated, and the pandemic exacerbated those qualities.

SAMMS: Did you find it more difficult to work during this time?

NGUYEN: There were moments where it was more difficult. I spend a lot of time and enjoy working from home. While my routine wasn't greatly impacted, it was difficult not having those moments to go out into the world which made it very hard to work at times. But it also gave me more conviction. Allowing myself to wait and see how things gestate really demonstrated the critical importance of time itself in the production of painting. It gave me the ability to see how far I could push certain material or technical concerns rather than closing off possibilities before they could go further.

SAMMS: There's some extra time and space to experiment.

NGUYEN: Yes. What happens with oil painting when it's given more time? I think so much of artmaking is part of that. You think about painters of the past and how much time was given to certain things. And in a strange way, a pandemic is kind of a situation from the future and also a disaster scenario from the past. And while this is a tenuous connection that I'm making, I felt I was working in an even more pre-modern mode than before.

SAMMS: I'm curious as to how you navigate the tension between the art historical and the digital references in your work—whether they're in conflict, or if it's a synthesis.

NGUYEN: It's more of a synthesis than a conflict. There are always a lot of different art historical

touch points in my work, but I think particularly so in this body of work. "Pictures of the Floating World," of course, references the Edo period in Japan. While I was working, I was reading a lot of ancient Chinese literature and looking at a lot of Western and Asian art. I'm also inspired by the painting of the Renaissance which was an attempt to build a world through the ruins of the past that they could see. So I think that the digital serves mainly as a tool for comparison. When I look at all the things from the past that influenced me, I wonder what would have happened if those things were in contact with one another at the same moment they were being produced. What sort of picture would that create? Going back to certain old tools, but with a much more expansive vision, is an attempt to do that. I'm not working in the same structures as artists of the past. I'm working along much more individualistic and personal lines. But I think there is something there that is similar.

Julien Nguyen, *Resolute in Privation*, 2021. Oil on panel, 40 x 30 inches. © Julien Nguyen, courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery.

SAMMS: I'm thinking of your work, *The Temptation of Christ* (2020), which strongly references the Duccio painting of the same name: the flatness of the picture plane and the composition of the exaggerated figures against the dark mass of the mountain. I'm curious if you see these specific references as an appropriation of art history or more complicatedly in conversation with the lineage.

Julien Nguyen, *Woman in a Lab Coat*, 2021. Oil on panel, 35½ × 47¼ inches. © Julien Nguyen,courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery.

NGUYEN: It's more complicated and personal than appropriation. I think it's an attempt to put myself in the shoes of the artist who made it or the person who would see the work when it was first created. I'm always trying to figure out why exactly I'm making the work as I make it. But the pull feels stronger than an attempt at analysis. It has to do with embodying something or seeing if certain devotional impulses can still be felt today, even though the structures that those sensations are experienced in are totally scrambled.

SAMMS: I notice a strong sense of sensuality and

temptation, and also all of these religious motifs, and I was wondering if you could speak to how they inform each other.

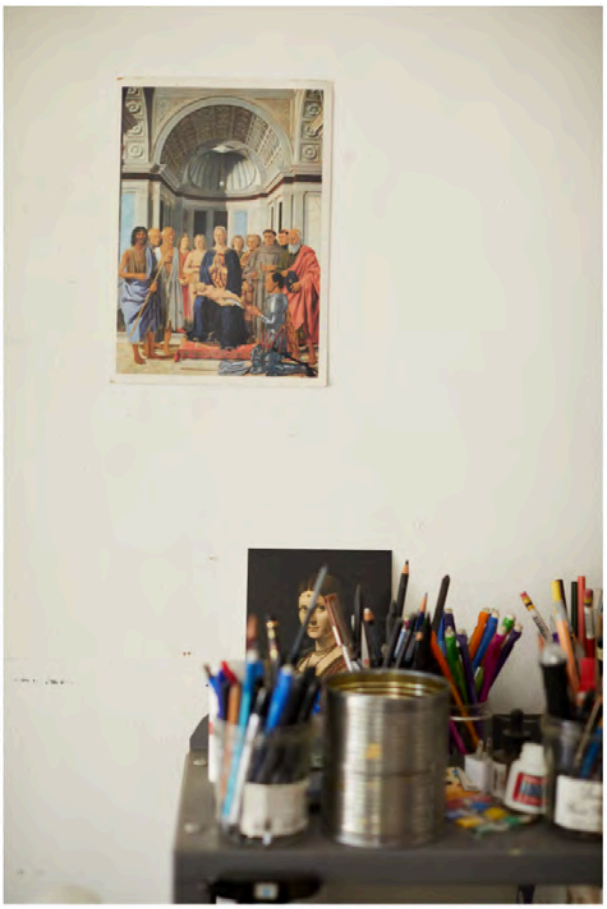
NGUYEN: Desire and reverence are very closely linked in my mind. There's also fear and desire. The tension between fear and awe and the sublime—that something that is beautiful can be both frightening and attracting—links to a certain idea of ancient experience.

SAMMS: What about sci-fi interests you?

NGUYEN: A lot of it attracts me because of how beautiful and wild it gets. You're imagining the future, but it's also a form of alternate history, written in the future tense. It seems like things are not closed off there. One can use it to pervert certain things that are given today and imagine them in a totally new configuration. And I think that's what's so wonderful about certain historical sources. It's not that the past is something to be worshipped or returned to, but with so much information and human experience, there's an ability to imagine possibilities that exist outside of how things actually progressed. That's very important for me, going both into the past or into the future.

SAMMS: What role does the internet play in your practice, personally and in finding inspiration?

NGUYEN: The internet was really my first exposure to art and history. My first contact with serious drawing and painting came through looking at sci-fi video game characters as a kid and thinking, "Oh, that's amazing. This just looks so cool." But in trying to learn how to draw those things, I was led to more classical techniques of drawing and painting. So the internet has been a very useful tool that provoked a lot of wonder in me as a child. But it's also a very scrambled and frenetic tool and trying to make sense out of the images and experiences and thoughts that I encounter has always been very important for me.



Photography Ye Rin Mok

SAMMS: I'm reminded of the Matthew Marks site which has a banner with different videos and media. Is there a source where you find the things that you reference, or are they things that you create yourself?

NGUYEN: There's a lot of things that I put together myself and a lot of stuff I'm reading. There's a multiplicity of tools at one's disposal on the internet that you can get sucked into the whole universe in a very special way. I'm also very conscious that it's a kind of mirror of reality and not necessarily reality itself. Where those two things bleed into one another is very fascinating to me.

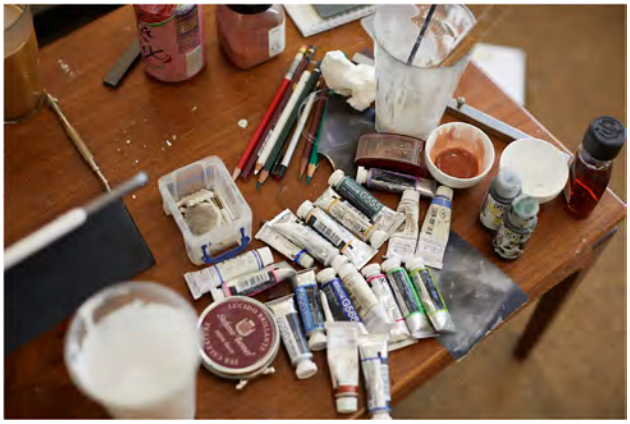
SAMMS: Right, you can find the same figurations of bodies across art history and the digital—the same gestures and poses of classical statues appear on personal social media.

NGUYEN: Exactly. I think there's a very poetic structure to the whole thing, and what I put into that sphere when I'm posting takes on a different quality. It's both a form of writing and speech. It's fragmentary. One of the things that I put on the website is a poem by the 8th century Chinese poet Du Fu. I was reading his poetry while working on the show, and the fact that something written in the 800s in a completely different societal structure could cut across hundreds of years was so wonderful and astonishing to me. You could feel a human heart trying to make sense of a world in flux across such vast distances. I think that goes back to the question of whether it's appropriation or something more complicated. That feeling of transmitting, not simply information, but something larger across distances of time is very important for me.

SAMMS: Pivoting to process, how do you begin a painting? Is it with an idea or a sitter?

NGUYEN: It's a bit of both. Sometimes, I would like to paint a friend of mine, someone I know or have come across. For the more religious or devotional

Julien Nguyen, *Jake*, 2019. Oil on panel, 24 x 18 inches. © Julien Nguyen, courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery.



Photography Ye Rin Mok

paintings, I'll think, what about this person and my experience of them would fit into the historical subjects that I've been thinking about? Someone's personality, profile, or the way they carry themselves might remind me of something, and I'll attempt to fuse those things together. With the more direct portraits, there's something I would like to immediately capture about them, and it becomes a very traditional painter and model situation of working from life.

SAMMS: Do you mainly paint friends, lovers, and people that you know, or have you ever painted strangers?

NGUYEN: One of the paintings in the show, *Untitled Torso Study* (2020), is a painting with a stranger. It's a painting of a boy from the front, mostly focused on his musculature. When I was working on that painting, it was very much a figural study in the tradition of academic painting of the past: a way to practice modeling the human form in oil paint. But I mostly paint people that I know or have at least come in contact with. I think it makes the work more real. There's a physical, emotional draw that wouldn't exist if my references were completely from elsewhere.

SAMMS: When I visited the show with a friend, we picked up on a level of suffering to your figures. We were thinking of Egon Schiele's elongated bodies and wondering about the inner state of your figures and the ambiguous emotional positions they occupy.

NGUYEN: I think there's definitely that tension in there. It's important to me that these are bodies in a state of transformation, whether that's a sort of suffering or ecstasy. It relates to the religious character of certain ideas that I'm working with, and the fact that it's a tradition in flux. And the body, for me, communicates that physically and gesturally. I think I may be drawn to certain figures because they express that strange tension of representation.

Julien Nguyen, *Rivers and Mountains*, 2021. Oil on panel, 35½ × 47¼ inches. © Julien Nguyen, courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery.

Julien Nguyen, *The Courtier*, 2021. Oil on panel, 24 x 24 inches. © Julien Nguyen, courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery.

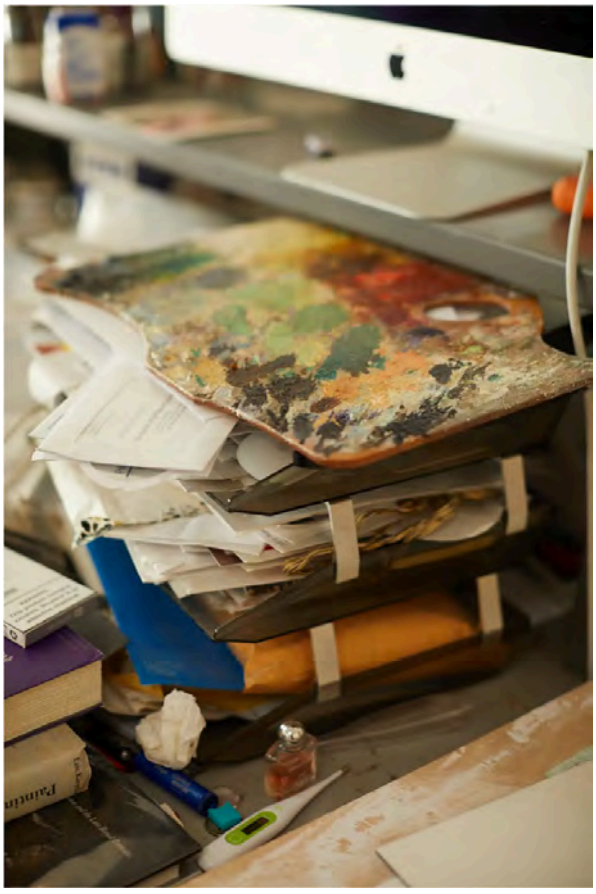
Egon Schiele was working in turn of the century Vienna, when everything was coming under question: whether these images were relevant to the production of art, whether the figure should even be in the image. And I think the specific stylizations that I use are an attempt to ask myself and the viewer, where does the figure fit in? Where does the body fit in?

SAMMS: Speaking to that question of the figure, I'm curious which elements of the body you choose to render more fully and what you allow to dematerialize.

NGUYEN: Sometimes it's a question of what I have the time to do and what draws me immediately. Sometimes it's whether it should be known as a specific character or if it's a more allegorical figure. But that's something that perplexes me too. I look at a lot of my paintings and as happy as I am with the show, I tend to think of some things as horribly unfinished or wish I had more time to work. But a little while after a work has left my studio, I view those parts which aren't as clearly rendered as important as the things that come into a high degree of focus.

SAMMS: What do you take away from the experience of painting? Do you think about what you want your viewer to take away?

NGUYEN: People have said interesting things about looking at the pictures, that they're not necessarily welcoming paintings. In many ways you could describe them as beautiful in a more prosaic sense of the term. The surfaces are rich and the forms are very built up in a fastidious manner. But at the same time, there's a desire to push technique to its limit where it becomes challenging. There's an attempt at a provocation that comes from a place of stillness and composure rather than aggression. So I'm very much thinking about an imaginary viewer. A lot of the figures address themselves to the viewer in a



Photography Ye Rin Mok

purposefully ambiguous way. I want them to reach the level of their own sentience or agency, to give them enough so they can exist on their own as objects, but also as something more than just an object.

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"Pictures of the Floating World" is on view at Matthew Marks Gallery, 523 West 24th Street, through August 13, 2021.

Photography Ye Rin Mok

THE NEW YORKER

ART

Julien Nguyen

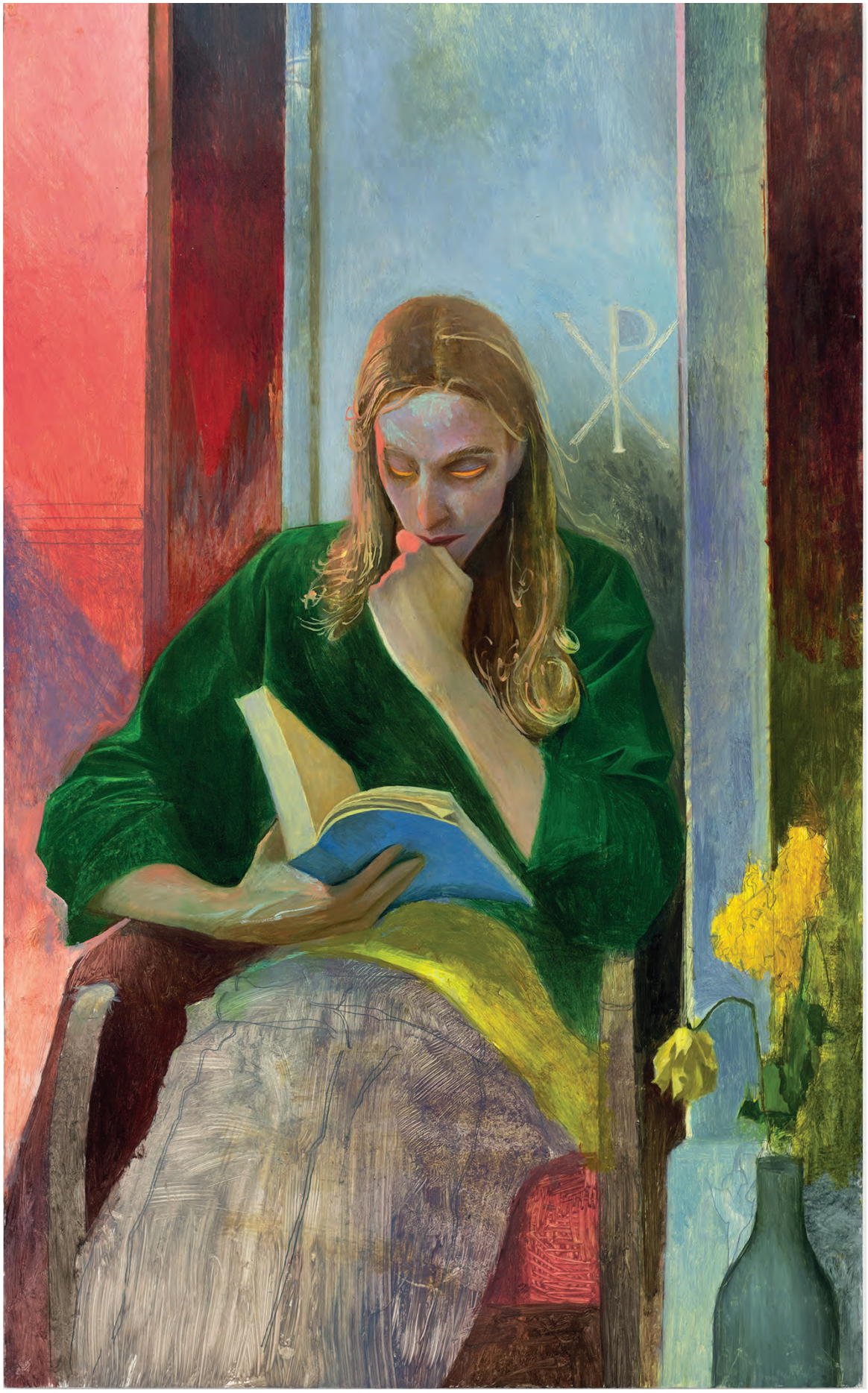
The imagery of this buzzy Los Angeles painter feels informed by the strange, shifting hierarchies of life online, where a Sienese altarpiece and a pulp sci-fi paperback cover have equivalent value. But his elegant work is complicated by the fact that Nguyen often paints from life, practicing an observant, detached strain of realism. The dozen or so recent canvases in his solo début at the Matthew Marks gallery are united by their silvery palette and pared-down style. "Jake" is a naturalistic portrait, in profile, of a gaunt young man posing in a straight-backed chair, his features concealed by a lock of hair; the subject of "Richard" is similarly lithe, but he's also part monster, with pointed features and blank yellow eyes. The art-historical references here are clever, if unrelenting; "The Temptation of Christ," in which a Giacometti-esque Jesus faces off against a demonic dragon, may spark thoughts of Duccio's take on the theme, at the Frick. To accompany his captivating show, Nguyen has compiled a soundtrack and digital clips on the gallery's Web site, including a shirtless TikToker (who might have stepped out of a Nguyen portrait) brushing his teeth and a violinist serenading a beluga whale.—*J.F. (matthewmarks.com)*

Fateman, Johanna. "Julien Nguyen." *The New Yorker*, July 5, 2021, p. 8.

MOUSSE

In early 2021, JULIEN NGUYEN will be holding his ninth solo exhibition, and his first at Matthew Marks Gallery, New York. The following is a survey of his recent work and dominant themes through the lens of Mónica Belevan's "Covidian aesthetics," an effort launched in March to analyse perception and representation at the end of the long twentieth century, and the dawn of the next.[1]

Nguyen, Julien, and Mónica Belevan. "New Pictures for the Old Ceremony." *Mousse*, no. 73, Fall 2020, pp. 68–81.



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JULIEN NGUYEN (b. 1990, Washington, DC) has had the recent solo exhibitions *Returns*, Contemporary Arts Center Cincinnati, Ohio (2019); *Evil in the Defense of Good*, Swiss Institute, New York (2018); *Ex Forti Dulcedo*, Stuart Shave/Modern Art, London (2018); and *Superpredators*, Freedman Fitzpatrick, Los Angeles (2016). Recent group exhibitions include the Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2017); *Städelschule Absolventenausstellung*, MMK Frankfurt (2015); LISTE: Young Art Fair, Basel (2015); *The Gossip*, H12, Frankfurt (2015); *Late European Decadence*, Neue Alte Brücke, Frankfurt (2014); *S.O.A.P.Y III.*, What Pipeline, Detroit (2014); *Snakes in the Grass*, Clarence Mews, London (2014); and *S.O.A.P.Y. II*. Vilma Gold, London (2014).

MÓNICA BELEVAN is a design historian and philosopher, and an alumna of the Harvard Graduate School of Design. She is a cofounder of the design outfit Diacrítica, and the author of *Díptico gnóstico* (Hueso Húmero, 2019), *The Wreck of the Large Glass/Paleódromo* (Sublunary Editions, 2020), and *OUTSIDEIINSIDEOUT* (Formato Público, 2021), the Peruvian exhibition catalogue for the 17th Venice Biennale. She is currently tracking emergent "Covidian aesthetics" and #Kulturinstinkt on lapsuslima.com and has recently completed "Recognitions," a blogchain on epochal art, for ribbonfarm.com. She can be found on Twitter @lapsuslima.

Nguyen, Julien, and Mónica Belevan. "New Pictures for the Old Ceremony." *Mousse*, no. 73, Fall 2020, pp. 68–81.

Julien Nguyen is Vietnamese American, gay, and under thirty. He is also fox-shaped enough to have dodged—in the course of a vertiginous career spanning eight solo exhibitions in three countries, at a rate of one per year—the identity traps so many of his colleagues have succumbed to. As far as boy wonders go, this one's less Tao Lin than Lautréamont—evil in the Blakean sense, without the rounded edges favored by contemporary branding. There really isn't much here one could deem "relatable," down to the nature of his interest in representation, which is more in the line of Max Beckmann—a possible wink to his Frankfurt training—than in what we now take, or mistake, for merely seeing oneself at the table. Nguyen is, in short, a regenerate poet, which is why we should *expect* trouble from him, and why we should *encourage* it.

He is, furthermore, an unmoored mandarin, with the stress firmly on *unmoored*. On his father's side, he hails from a long line of imperial bureaucrats that began its continental drift of decades—first southward, then west—with the advent of the 1945 August Revolution. Because mandarins are the priesthood of the state, and with such few Leviathans left to serve, it is all but impossible to inscribe their relicts in the artless postindustrial class system. They are thus a displaced demographic that inherited the wiles of a once creative—and occasionally destructive—underclass, but without the trappings needed for its operation. And while, with notable exceptions, only the visible tip of the mandarin iceberg is openly accounted for in histories, its members were the shadow workers of civilization as we knew it, and their diaspora endures. With nothing greater than itself to serve, though, the daemonic profession—for that is indeed what it is—becomes ingrown. Evil that's not in the service of go(o)d has a knack for dissolution.

Negotiating (t)his particular displacement in a dislodged time accounts in part for how Nguyen came to dedicate his imminent show at Matthew Marks Gallery to the concept of *ukiyo*-e (浮世絵, pictures of the floating world).

Ukiyo is a term of art for demimondaines, ascribed to the urban and urbane delights of Edo-period Japan, best known to the Western eye for having ushered in the work of art in the age of artisanal reproduction through Hiroshige and Hokusai, the twin peaks of printmaking. Sprung from the sock of sorrowful Buddhist transience and the buskin of its fleeting, flightier Japanese counterpart, *ukiyo* amounts to a more elegant, much more intelligent take on YOLO—with epidemic waves included.

Ukiyo is a mirror we can (s)cry in, a much-needed resource, given our low future visibility, and the circumstances that have brought us all together, over many months, for the global unmasking of the rot within our institutions and the psychopathology of our past everyday lives. Adding fuel to the fire, we are collectively immersed in a media ecosystem codesigned to function as a strange loop for our own manipulation. There are more perils to our situation than those immediately posed by the virus or the impact of protracted economic lockdowns with no end in sight. We risk losing control of our means of projection, and with that, part of our capacity to self-determine. The choice is simple: we can re-inaugurate our pleasure domes or have our bubbles gerrymandered for us. And we're running out of time.

In his now universally reviled study on shamanism, Mircea Eliade produced one of the most perceptive remarks on liminality in the literature. Couched so well within his broader argument as to evade attention, once it has been seen, it's irresistible. The "absence [of initiation rites]," he claims, "in no sense implies absence of an initiation."[2]

This has major Saturnalian implications: if not all liminal space is ritually bounded, then the absence of bounds does not preclude the presence of liminal space. Make way for the hyperlocal form of revelation found in "the most elementary hierophanies," which take place where "some tree, some stone, some place" becomes radically distinguished from its "surrounding cosmic zone." An instance of this can be found in the opaque epiphany of William Wordsworth's *Lucy* poems (1798–1801), when read not as mere elegies but as the sublimated brush between humanity and the prefigural condition. That which dwells "among the untrodden ways" holds a deeper, darker sway than Hermes, who at least extended us the courtesy of a crossroads.

Now here's the catch. If the dialectic of the sacred "tends indefinitely to repeat a series of archetypes," and if it is indeed reversible, it could conceivably be brought full circle through its (re)enactment in the realm of the profane. If a hierophany "realized at a certain 'historical moment' is structurally equivalent to a hierophany a thousand years earlier or later," then the same may be said for any number of profane expressions which, precisely on account of being external to the sacred, can be used to establish what Eliade (and Georges Bataille) described as "intimacy" in the framework of the world.

This *neue Heiligkeit* is the semantic field in which Nguyen's painting operates.

Nguyen consults with his ancestors, but he does not worship them. That is not what ghosts are for. For technical advice, he's printed out all of London's National Gallery's technical bulletins on early modern conservation. It would be idle of me to repeat what every other piece of writing on his work has said about his rapport with the Renaissance masters. He is fluent in the language, as are many others. But this isn't where the magic is, although, in floating times, it's easy to seek anchorage in technicalities that underplay the resoluteness of appearance.

A sure indicator of being in a floating world is it's *always* fashion-forward, and it helps to keep tabs on how, exactly, each one goes about breaking the speed barrier of Stewart Brand's pace-layers, of which fashion (and art) is the fastest and most trigger sensitive. By leading with fashion, floating worlds mark civilizational hotspots lacking the virtues found in tenable dynamic systems—they are not durable, adaptable, robust, or resilient—and frequently described as decadent or "late." This hardly matters if what they are is, in fact, cultural particle accelerators that can only ever be pushed to the point of breaking, and will last for as long as it takes *something*—sometimes *someone* very minor in the larger scheme of things—to strip the screw. It is why these periods are most usually re-membered—or historically reintegrated—as parentheses between catastrophes.

Nguyen, Julien, and Mónica Belevan. "New Pictures for the Old Ceremony." *Mousse*, no. 73, Fall 2020, pp. 68–81.

The emphasis on *fast*—"quick, irrelevant, engaging, self-preoccupied and cruel"—brings out another feature typical of floating worlds.[3] They are attention—that is to say, libidinal—economies, with ours as possibly the most extreme one thus far. It is only fitting that the rapid pace-layer of Fashion, as sister of Death, should court attention. It will be followed, in relative order, by the increasingly accretive, slower, deeper pace layers of Commerce, Infrastructure, Governance, Culture, and Nature, which pivot away from attention and move toward power. But our substructures are, alas, infirm and our liberties cowed. The end of the long twentieth century has found us groundless.

As with us, Edo—but also, to reach for some recent examples, Paris during the Belle Époque, Secession Vienna, Weimar, 1970s New York, Silicon Valley in its heyday—was a crest of entertainment culture. It was innovative, though guided by gossip, rich in genre art yet rife with imitation, and peopled by personae—actors, grifters, courtesans, hipsters—for whom money couldn't buy class, even if immortality through art (or craft) was not out of the question. *Plus ça change*. Today we speak through avatars, are led by self-professed influencers, and masks—of all things—have become our dominant floating-world signifiers. Times like these are primed for advanced trendsetting, and abstract strategists—the displaced mandarins among them—will run through alts like underwear.

Bella Hadid—a hyperstition—glides by, wearing one of Nguyen's paintings through the tailored lens of Ottolinger. Nguyen recast and re-filmed a key scene in Oliver Stone's *Nixon* (1995) with handpicked ephebes as a linchpin to his pre-Covidian oeuvre. Nothing is *really* true, everything's more or less permitted. And it's this blended equilibrium of unmoored-ness and enmeshment that makes Nguyen's foray into *ukiyo* his most mannered effort to date.

Because they have nothing to prove and might even *want* to be stolen, the pieces in this new collection are thirty by forty inches at most. Against the faddish posturing of gigantism, Nguyen is now going about his business like a *parfumier*—with exceedingly controlled ingredients, in exquisitely controlled amounts. He is a cold painter, for whom work in confined possibility spaces—Russian icon, Byzantine mosaic, individual tile, microchip—looms large.

Consistently, his work has privileged extreme compression and symbolic density. *Executive Solutions* and *Executive Function*, the diptych he presented in the 2017 Whitney Biennial, reads like a contemporary version of the *Très riches heures du Duc de Berry*. It certainly insinuates the possibility of a timepiece. The *New York Times* header, with its (twice) copied, custom typeface (first as tragedy, then as farce?), is acutely reminiscent of illuminated manuscripts. Each of the identical but individual headers fronts six orthogonal and un-identical tableaux (the twelve months of our year). Each half of the diptych is connected to the other through a centered, circular button that connects it to its dyad: sun/moon, solstice/equinox, animus/anima, whatever floats your *rebis*. This catoptric intricacy extends to other work of that period, like *The Annunciation* (2017), in which the Virgin and the archangel are almost featureless reflections of each other, and where, in keeping with Eliade's commutative sacrality, each one can and maybe *must* instantiate the other for transmission to succeed.

This is alchemical precision painting of significant ambition. It follows, then, that Nguyen's themescape should be of a piece with his materials. His initiation was acrylic, which he appreciated as a plastic and a poison. In developing as a painter, though, he realized one could master many instruments, but lead with *one*. (In which sense, Nguyen is *procedurally* a minimalist.) Such was his anointment with oil, which he cultivates with culinary grandeur. He will rarely if ever use Prussian blue, the first synthetic, nor touch cadmiums or other modern chemical pigments. This is art from pure concentrate, built on a gemological palette that is pared down and polished to luster.

Having delved into the brilliant, the metallic, and the viscous, Nguyen is now working with the touchy registers of the silken, the dull, and the vitreous. A few of his earlier paintings hint in this direction—see the powdery transitions in *Son of Heaven* (2016), the Lautrecian pallor of *Julian the Apostate* (2017), or the inchoate fugue in *Elementary, Dear Watson* (2016)—but the shift in emphasis from the reflective to the translucent is now clear, sustained, and deliberate.

Three of Nguyen's Covidian paintings push his "landscape" explorations beyond anything he's done before. His *Temptation of Christ*—with its Devil in the details—uses its background to compress the psychedelic magnitude of its storied standoff into an image. *John the Baptist* ventures further: amid swirls of flesh, fleece, cloth, and air, the patch of unfilled space between John and the Lamb could be a mountain or a chasm, a vacuum or the Face above the waters. Nguyen knows exactly what he's feeding us as visual cues, and he exploits surface and depth as mutually collapsible illusions. A deliciously neurotic self-portrait is staged against a synesthetic scene of wiry spikes and waves, suggesting sight through sound, while channeling an unexpected northern range, from Edvard Munch to Thomas Fearnley (And then it clicks. Those almost comically sublime landscapes are very Fearnley!) A Black Madonna of the Ma(i)ze is as syncretic as an arquebusier angel, if considerably more unsettling. She is deathly rigid, and it is impossible to say if she is closer in spirit to Hans Holbein's ripe Christ or to the hieratic bust of Nefertiti.

But it's the portraits that show the most growth, in a diaphanous and lunarized array of silverpoints and oils replete with snares. They turn viewers into participants by demanding cinematic double takes: the placid first impression, followed by the sudden pull of the prehensile detailing, all hooks and burrs and barbs. It is an effective predatory mechanism for work geared toward the capture of hierophanies, or what is radically grounded in an unmoored world. Julien Nguyen is painting for those who have eyes.

1 See the author's website for more on "Covidian aesthetics."
2 Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (1950; repr., New York: Bollingen, 1964), 13.
3 Stewart Brand, "Pace-Layering: How Complex Systems Learn and Keep Learning," *Journal of Design and Science* (2018): https://jods.mitpress.mit.edu/pub/issue3-brand/release/2.

Nguyen, Julien, and Mónica Belevan. "New Pictures for the Old Ceremony." *Mousse*, no. 73, Fall 2020, pp. 68–81.

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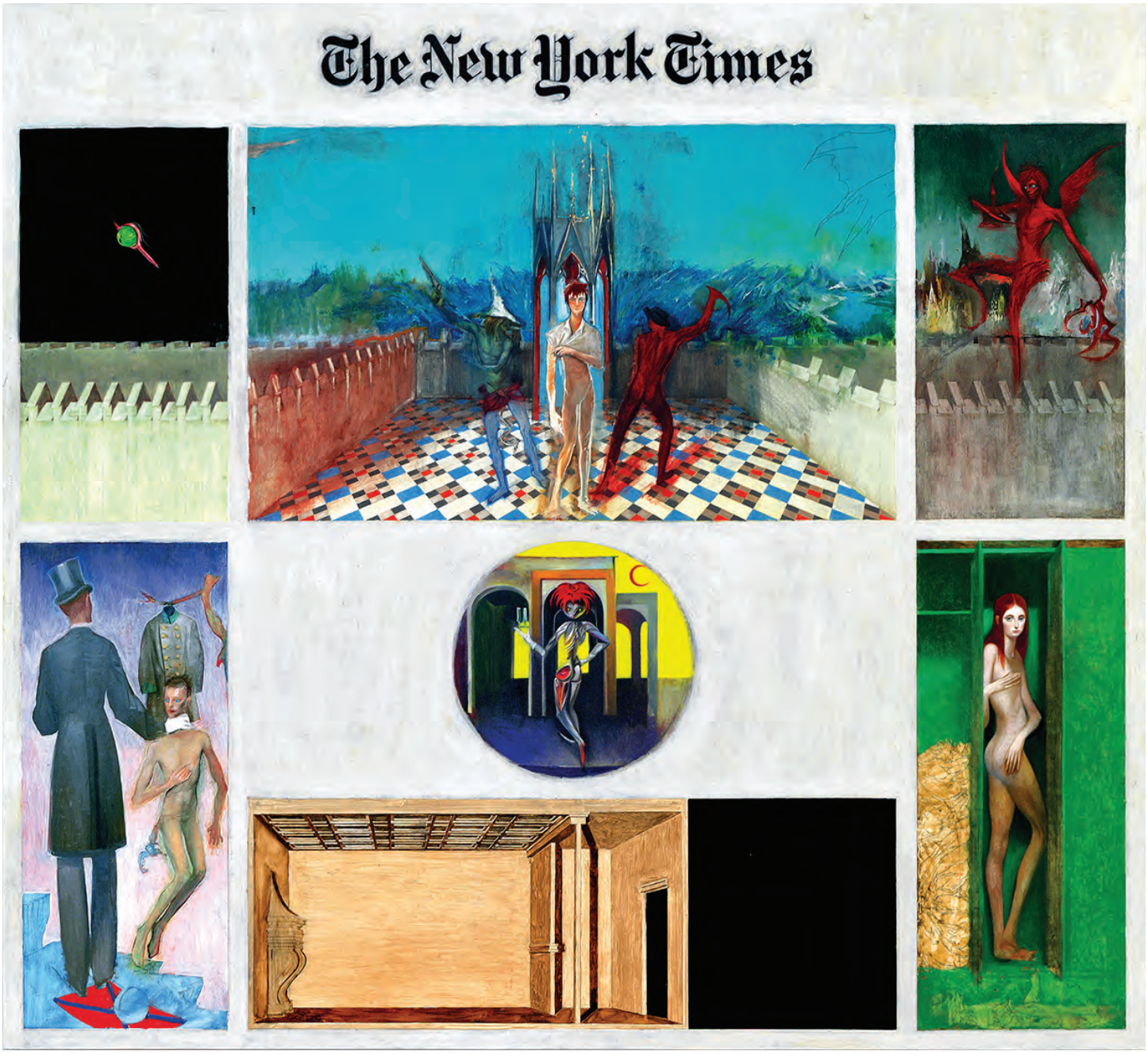

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66 *Jake,* 2019.
© Julien Nguyen. Courtesy: Matthew Marks Gallery, New York / Los Angeles
69 *Julian the Apostate*, 2017.
© Julien Nguyen. Courtesy: Matthew Marks Gallery, New York / Los Angeles
70–71 *Son of Heaven* (detail), 2016.
© Julien Nguyen. Courtesy: Matthew Marks Gallery, New York / Los Angeles
72 *The Baptism*, 2017.
© Julien Nguyen. Courtesy: Matthew Marks Gallery, New York / Los Angeles
73 *Mary, Anne, Christ and John*, 2018.
© Julien Nguyen. Courtesy: Matthew Marks Gallery, New York / Los Angeles
74 *Self-Portrait at Age 28*, 2019.
© Julien Nguyen. Courtesy: Matthew Marks Gallery, New York / Los Angeles
77 *Executive Function* (detail), 2017.
© Julien Nguyen. Courtesy: Matthew Marks Gallery, New York / Los Angeles
78 *Executive Solutions* (detail), 2017.
© Julien Nguyen. Courtesy: Matthew Marks Gallery, New York / Los Angeles
79 *The Temptation of Christ*, 2020.
© Julien Nguyen. Courtesy: Matthew Marks Gallery, New York / Los Angeles
80 *Ave Maria*, 2019.
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Nguyen, Julien, and Mónica Belevan. "New Pictures for the Old Ceremony." *Mousse*, no. 73, Fall 2020, pp. 68–81.

CULTURED MAGAZINE

30 UNDER 35 2020

JULIEN NGUYEN MODELS THE 21ST CENTURY MASTER

DEAN KISSICK

PHOTOGRAPHY BY AUBREY MAYER

Somewhere in the heart of Los Angeles, Julien Nguyen has been recreating a slice of post-war London bohemianism. "I've been thinking a lot about Lucian Freud and replicating his process, to a certain degree, by having friends sit for me," he says. "I find that's quite productive, practically and experientially." He's begun painting more from life and developing more of a traditional studio practice, working quickly and directly and learning how to build up the paint and sculpt a body from it. These are "muscular, or athletic exercises as much as anything else," he says. Though perhaps the most fêted painter of his generation, and one whose works are already too much in demand, he's not resting on his laurels just yet, nor is he travelling the world. Rather, he's in his studio every day, pushing his uncanny technical ability even further, striving to approach the great masters; what brought him to Freud, he says, was a fascination with Rembrandt and a desire to create the kinds of textural effects that Rembrandt could. He is nothing if not ambitious.

What's kept Nguyen with Freud, though, is an idea of "the romance of the artist's life, of living in a kind of box and slowly recording whatever is around you that you find satisfaction or excitement in." He's confined, for the most part, to his studio, where his friends come sit in his Chinese chair by the window in varied states of undress (though he's yet to paint a full nude, but soon, hopefully soon). Here, he can have his meals and sundries delivered to him and can build his own world to set down in oils and sometimes share fragments of on Instagram. Nguyen has spent, and will continue to spend, many months putting together a big, yet-to-be-announced New York show in September and, alongside these paintings of friends and lovers, is also working on some more carefully planned and complicated devotional images of traditional subjects: Saint John the Baptist, the Temptation of Christ, the Virgin Mary and, all being well, an Apollo the Python-Slayer on the beach in Los Angeles, painted en plein air in front of the waves.

Kissick, Dean. "Julien Nguyen Models the 21st Century Master." *Cultured Magazine*, November 26, 2019.

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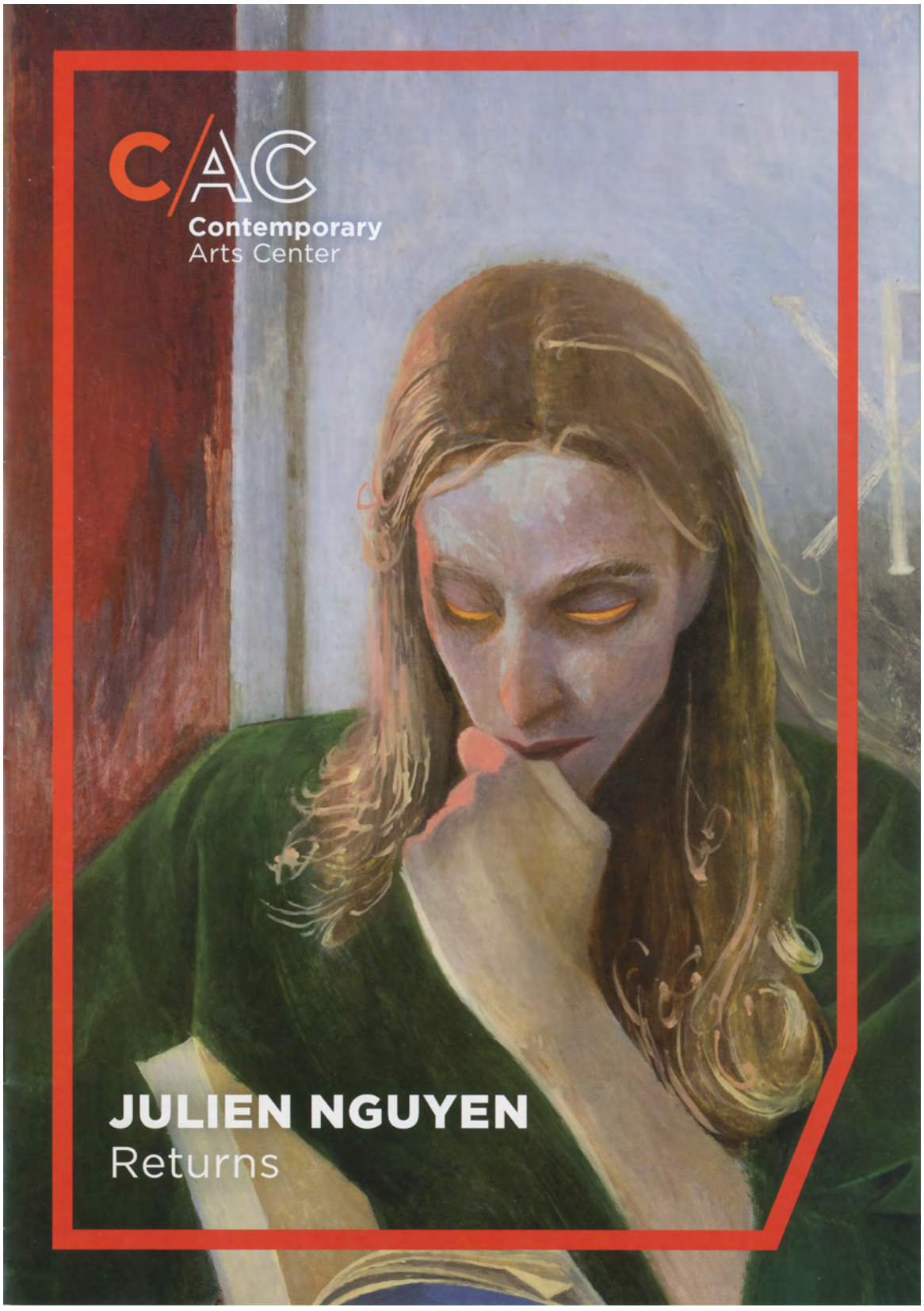
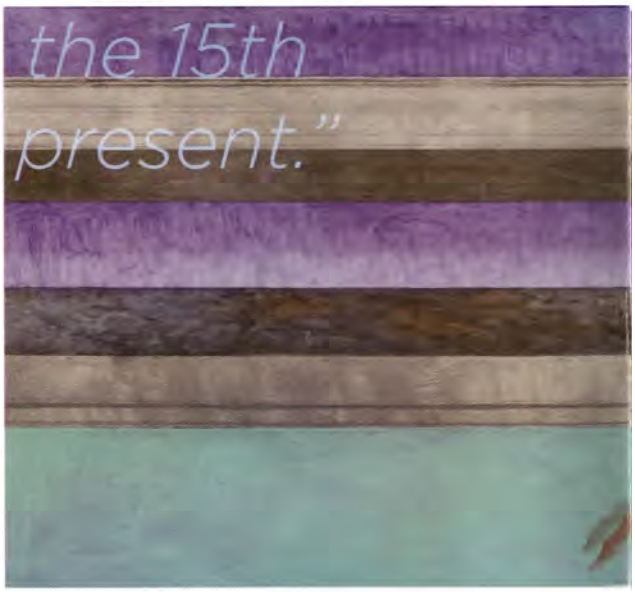


Matijcio, Steven. *Julien Nguyen: Returns*. Cincinnati: Contemporary Arts Center, 2019.

Described as "eternally a student, a self-taught apprentice" of masters that precede him by centuries, Julien Nguyen surveys muses, mythologies, and unresolved questions that resonate from the 15th century to the present. From a one-bedroom Los Angeles apartment in which life and art are invariably intertwined, across a pan-historical library that spans Giorgio Vasari, *WIRED*, and *The Washington Post*, "It is my strong belief,"he posits, "that from the 17th century onwards much of western art slowly transforms into (bad) apologetics for imperialism—but not before! It is from before where we might still learn, if we could only remember." His work proposes a redress to this shared fugue, circulating somewhere between archaeology and phantasmagoria as Nguyen traces articulations of power and transgression as spoken through the epoch-spanning language of art. From decorative flourishes of imperial Byzantium and the Renaissance's construction of rational perspective, to the stylized artifice of French Mannerism, the biomorphic reverie of Japanese manga, and the unnerving theatre of politics today, he enters a dialogue of Masters – artistic, governmental and mass media – to audit the life of archetypes. And, while he remains reverential to the histories of art as an oracle of both aesthetic and philosophical inspiration, Nguyen resolutely disrupts the assumed notions of its discourse – collapsing a variety of visual languages to conjure preternatural stages for hybrid protagonists to play. Through a combinatory lens that incorporates 21st century elements of science fiction, fantasy, soft porn, anime, and a coterie of friends, lovers and otherworldly chimera, he orchestrates evocative tableaux where legacies are played through the lens of today. This is neither appropriation nor critique, as writer Franklin Melendez reiterates, but rather a "re-staging that seeks to bring into relief these lingering structures as they inflect our current socio-political realities."

"Julien Nguyen surveys muses, mythologies, and unresolved questions that resonate from the 15th century to the present."



Top: *Executive Solutions*, 2017, Oil and Encaustic on Linen-mounted Panel, Collection of the Whitney Museum of Art

Right: *The Annunciation*, 2017, Oil on Aluminum Panel, Private Collection, The Bahamas

Matijcio, Steven. *Julien Nguyen: Returns*. Cincinnati: Contemporary Arts Center, 2019.

Matijcio, Steven. *Julien Nguyen: Returns*. Cincinnati: Contemporary Arts Center, 2019.

As seen in work like *Faust II* (2017), Nguyen draws most frequently, and fundamentally, upon the Early Renaissance of the 15th century, which retains an aura as one of the noblest traditions human civilization has borne. Italy was at the forefront of this encompassing movement as it complicated the singular orbit of the Church – marrying Classical tenets with scientific methods and ascendant humanism across a wide swath of society. In this paradigmatic campaign of enduring cultural currency, visual art became the most prominent flagbearer – propagating an image culture transmitted via the esteemed brushes of artists such as Piero della Francesca (1415-1492), Fra Angelico (1395-1455), Masaccio (1401-1428) and Donatello (1386-1466). Flexing the dogma of devotional assignment, their work expressed a seemingly emancipatory shift in the relationship between man and the universe where more realistic, empowered subjects populate Biblical tableaux, as well as an expanded spectrum of mythological scenes, portraits, battles, landscapes and depictions of the everyday. Pushing the previously impervious jurisdiction of piety, these paintings imagine subjects repatriating their agency (or at least a fraction of it) from the exclusive domain of the divine. The purported liberation of subject and author was, however, underpinned by a lexicon of scientific devices and pictorial order that included one-point perspective, foreshortening, proportion, anatomical detail and low, flat relief carving called *relieve schiacciato*. Thereby grafting one dialect of power with another, the employment of perspective in painting ever since has, for Nguyen, coincided with exercises of sovereignty and the construction of frames that span actual and imaginary. Such borders, niches, columns, and framing devices appear frequently in Nguyen's work, as in *Executive Solutions* (2017) and *Homestead* (2016-18), serving as much to organize compositions and bodies as they do to play the protagonist. Moving from object to subject, as well as the constructed spaces of art to the solidity of bricks and mortar, he considers how the architectural manifestations of ideology shape our ways of seeing and being. And it is here, where presiding ideals of allegiance and order meet the inevitable deviations of human imperfections, emotions and parallax, that Nguyen locates libidinous interventions in the shadows of the Renaissance.

Matijcio, Steven. *Julien Nguyen: Returns*. Cincinnati: Contemporary Arts Center, 2019.

In Nguyen's return to Biblical scenes reformulated through the aspirations of the Early Renaissance [i.e. *The Flagellation* (2018)], to the place where many foundational narratives of Western mythology radiate, he locates a sensual constellation of power, desire, fantasy and spiritual pursuits. And while the erotic pulse of many purportedly ecclesiastical artworks remained implicit at the time, the camouflaged mobilization of salacious content became an increasingly potent means of motivation. What is faith, one must ask, if not impassioned belief in deferred gratification? The relatively common Renaissance custom of the painter incorporating his young assistants (often lovers), as characters within these scenes heightens the sexual charge of the composition all the more – carving out intimate niches in the most grandiose of stages to entwine the personal and divine. Centuries later, the eros of Nguyen's paintings in this ongoing tradition smolder quietly, but feverishly as he "queers" his mythical evocations with the sinuous bodies and stoic visages of friends and lovers. In a discourse where the quest for heavenly embrace is an exercise in both stimulation and denial, arousal and decorum, writer Mimi Chu highlights the ways in which Nguyen's "androgynous, inflammatory and highly eroticized…figures pick up on the taboo of undercurrents of conventional religious depictions." By "subtly warping sacred iconography," and amalgamating hallowed veneration with what friend and curator Jenny Borland labels our "perversity and imperfections," he forges "a gateway," in her appraisal, "to consume the elusive ideal." In this hybridized, anachronistic arena, Chu calls attention to the way "dainty millennials" play "sacred figures from the Western canon"– inhabiting various states of wakefulness, dress and animus "in archetypal poses." And it is here, in works like *Noli me tangere, Caesaris Sum* (2018), where Nguyen refashions the figure as a liminal, transgressive mutation (akin to the Late Renaissance style of Mannerism) – bending the space around his bodies to unhinge the presiding pictorial rule.

Above: *Faust II*, 2017, Oil on Panel, Collection of David Hoberman

Opposite: *Noli me tangere, Caesaris Sum*, 2018, Tempera and Oil on Panel, Private Collection, Germany

Matijcio, Steven. *Julien Nguyen: Returns*. Cincinnati: Contemporary Arts Center, 2019.

Above: *Kye, Semper Solus,* 2017, Oil and Tempera on Wood Panel, Domus Collection

Opposite: *The Flagellation*, 2018, Oil on Aluminum Panel, Collection of Patrick and Lindsey Collins

The serpentine twist of lithe bodies undulating between agony and ecstasy become guerilla agents in Nguyen's operatic constellation of history, humanism and speculation. Stretching the body beyond the normative ideals of Classical proportion (both literally and figuratively), he pushes the human frame into an amorphous, virtual frontier where attendant codes are rendered askew. As a case in point, the subject of *Good Sweet Night Prince* (2018) writhes in a state of becoming, eyes closed and legs flung open, lost in a somnambulant simper. Space and subjectivity are negotiated rather than given, as composite creatures proliferate in the guise of timeless statuary, "like exquisite corpses," according to academic Jeanne Dreskin, "absurdly suspended in temporal limbo."Adhering to no one era or aesthetic in a slurry of cross-pollination, icons are very purposefully "rendered incomplete"according to Chu, who underscores the way Nguyen attenuates his virtuosic technique to provide foils rather than finish. Despite the capacity to craft subjects and spaces with the same immaculate lacquer of his Early Renaissance mentors, his paintings feature a spectrum of stages from pristine polish to barely formed. And, while our eye is instinctually drawn to the peaks of Nguyen's technical prowess, it is in the seemingly unfinished zones resembling historical under-painting – where limbs and walls slide into limbo – that our gaze ultimately lingers. This is where the supernormal pantheon of Nguyen's intervention gathers, and where surrogates ponderously, if only partially, coalesce. In this light, in a half-formed space with its perspective subtly, but noticeably off-kilter, the long, statuesque figure sitting dreamily at an easel in *Kye, Semper Solus* (2017) is arguably autobiographical. As the lines of his easel trail into a hazy background, the geometry of the dividing screen dissipates in/to brushy suggestion, and white calligraphic filigree winds up and down his arm, this pensive painter directs his brush/pen towards an indefinite composition.

Swimming through the surreal worlds Nguyen conjures with age-old materials and youthful restlessness, we enter a place where the histories that paintings once told fray, and "the image," in the words of Chu, "precedes the story." These scenes

and stories live at the intersection of "the sublime, the picturesque, and the uncanny" – which is how Nguyen describes the city in which he lives and works, Los Angeles, as a hyperreal paradise drifting along a precipice. "Empty and full in equal measure," according to Borland, Nguyen's work manifests the suburb in which he grew up in – South Bay – which she describes, much like his paintings, as "a cozy, yet unsettling place to return to." And while Nguyen is by no means tethered to his biography, and explores a breadth of history, politics, art and visual cultures with relish, he admits that his Vietnamese heritage – and its fraught relationship with the United States – informs his vocation. In a diaspora that oscillates between subjectivities, state, and how the histories of art speak to those inside and outside the canon, Nguyen aspires to be a hopeful, if no less infectious virus in his adopted country. From one of the West's bastard sons, propelled by geopolitics into a place of adaptation and translation, this strain of cellular realignment is, like him, "forever fueled by an intensity," in the words of Borland, "that oscillates wildly between fear, desire, confidence and sadness." Measured in its extremes and melancholic in its majesty, the work of Julien Nguyen is forever torn between desire and disruption – contributing lovingly to the history and visual language he aspires to interrupt. In this evolving displacement, in the in-between where he and his protagonists float, we find an equivocal oasis, a curious refuge, an inner sanctum where something above, beyond, and yet part of us hovers, almost within reach.

SM 2019

Matijcio, Steven. *Julien Nguyen: Returns*. Cincinnati: Contemporary Arts Center, 2019.

C/AC
Contemporary
Arts Center

JULIEN NGUYEN
RETURNS
February 8 through June 16, 2019
Curated by Steven Matijcio

Generously supported by Alice F. Weston
ArtsWave Corporate Sponsor: P&G

Julien Nguyen (b. 1990) is an artist of Vietnamese heritage who was born in Washington, DC and currently lives and works in Los Angeles. He completed his undergraduate degree at Rhode Island School of Design, Providence (2012), and received his Meisterschulle from Staatliche Hochschule für Bildende Künste, Städelschule, Frankfurt (2015). His work has been the subject of a solo exhibition at the Swiss Institute, New York (2018), Freedman Fitzpatrick, Los Angeles (2016); and Kunstverein Munich, Munich (2014); and has been included in group exhibitions such as the 2017 Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, (2017); *Parked like serious oysters*, MMK, Frankfurt (2015); and *Lost Boys*, Glucksman Gallery, Cork, Ireland (2013).

Exhibition Checklist

- **Homestead,** 2016 – 2018, Oil on Panel, Private Collection, Germany
- **Executive Function,** 2017, Oil and Encaustic on Linen-mounted Panel, Courtesy of Stuart Shave/Modern Art, London
- **Executive Solutions,** 2017, Oil and Encaustic on Linen-mounted Panel, Collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art
- **Faust II,** 2017, Oil on Panel, Collection of David Hoberman
- **Julian the Apostate,** 2017, Oil on Wood Panel, Domus Collection
- **Kye, Semper Solus,** 2017, Oil and Tempera on Wood Panel, Domus Collection
- **The Annunciation,** 2017, Oil on Aluminum Panel, Private Collection, The Bahamas
- **Good Sweet Night Prince,** 2018, Tempera and Oil on Panel, Private Collection, Germany
- **Noli me tangere, Caesaris Sum,** 2018, Tempera and Oil on Panel, Private Collection, Germany
- **Spiritus Mundi,** 2018, HD Video, Courtesy of the Artist
- **The Flagellation,** 2018, Oil on Aluminum Panel, Collection of Patrick and Lindsey Collins

Cover: *Julian the Apostate* [detail], 2017, Oil on Wood Panel, Domus Collection

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Matijcio, Steven. *Julien Nguyen: Returns*. Cincinnati: Contemporary Arts Center, 2019.

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The Life of Julien Nguyen

A Personal View by Jenny Borland

Writer's Note:

To truly come to know an artist's work one must spend time in their world. Mindful of our ancestors, we cannot ignore the example set here by Giorgio Vasari and his Lives. A close companion to Michelangelo and apprenticed to Andrea del Sarto, Vasari was deeply attuned to the landscape of his contemporaries and masters, absorbing the history of these lives, examining both their successes and struggles, and uniting the personal and the professional into the singular object of their Art. His life of Michelangelo is the apotheosis of this form, just as for him Michelangelo was the embodiment of divine creativity itself. While I would not be so bold as to equate ourselves to these two peculiar 15th century Individuals, there remains a profound familiarity between us that allows for an exploration without critical distance but instead through pain, sweetness, and strength.

Julien and I both came of age in the South Bay, the all-encompassing name for the ocean lined suburbs just below LAX and the outer limits of Los Angeles. Although he was born near Washington D.C., his true nature took shape in a sun-kissed homestead. Geographically, the South Bay is flanked by the Los Angeles International Airport to the north, the ports of Long Beach and San Pedro to the south, and the Pacific Ocean all along the west, which makes it a transportation byway, and the area relies heavily on the aerospace industry and major defense contractors, giving the whole region a vaguely military, right wing odor. Quentin Tarantino worked here as a clerk for a video-store. Thomas Pynchon called it Gordita Beach. It is both close and very distant from the stereotypical idea of LA, and literally everything that one could ask of a suburb is available. Most of my adolescent years were spent at the beach, or the mall, smoking weed at the park, and going to raves and punk shows once I had the freedom to drive. Julien did not learn how to drive, and his freedoms were more limited. He smoked cigarettes on the pier, and spent what time he could sitting on the floor at the local Barnes

Borland, Jenny. "The Life of Julien Nguyen." In *Julien Nguyen: ex forti dulcedo*. London: Stuart Shave Modern Art, 2019, pp. 31–36.

& Noble with a stack of books while his mom ran errands. Looking back it was a relatively painless teenage experience, but I still couldn't help feel the creep of alienation.

> *It was to this inherited sentiment, this practical decision that to be pre-occupied with the thought of death was in itself dignifying, and a note of high quality, that the seriousness of the great Florentines of the fifteenth century was partly due; and it was reinforced in them by the actual sorrows of their times. How often, and in what various ways, had they seen life stricken down, in their streets and houses!*[1]

These primarily white coastal enclaves were also home to strong, vibrant communities of Asian-Americans and Asian immigrants. Julien's family is from Vietnam. His parents moved to the United States in 1975, weeks before the fall of Saigon and the collapse of The Republic of Vietnam. His father's line, stretching back some time, were properly Mandarins: imperial and then colonial administrators who worked closely with their French and American overlords to uphold the planter's regime. To the revolution, these were the worst sort of collaborators, and fated for death. There is something of this bloody past and it's conflicted loyalty in Julien's painting. The Japanese side of my family has lived in Southern California for three generations, with some displaced in internment camps during World War II. They currently reside in Torrance, home to the second largest Japanese population in the country. Julien's parents lived in Hermosa Beach, and the two are connected by a 15 minute drive. It is a cozy, yet unsettling place to return to. Empty and full in equal measure. Whenever we've met someone from the South Bay in the context of our lives now—especially in the bizarre club of the art world—it's immediately met with total simpatico—a sort of natural understanding and tired ambivalence. From our respective pasts, we've both lost contact with almost everyone. The South Bay is symbolic of a certain sort of affluent American comfort; an athletic, stoner fascism of the suburbs that produces well-rounded but ultimately apathetic individuals. For most people I knew then, a perfect future included an apartment by the beach, a dog, babies, and a relaxed career in yoga or real estate that allows for more time to surf, tan, and drink. For a person who desired something completely different, or sensed a darkness emanating from the lifeguard towers, it was necessary to fight against the swell.

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It is very Californian to bemoan paradise. Despite the ennui, one real benefit of being a teenager in Los Angeles was the endless, towering swarm of beautiful young men; a parade of sun-kissed Apollonian gods particularly thrilling for us zealous and awkward Asian youth. In our new-model American suburbs, the hierarchy of athleticism was different from what you would see on film. Football was clumsy, for brutes. Beach Volleyball got you scholarships to go to good schools, but for the cool-factor—that profane reverence that teenagers as a whole are particularly attuned to—aquatic sports reigned supreme. Water-polo was at the top of Neptune's trident. Swimming was nice, but a little boring. You looked good, but you were just running laps. Water-polo combined this with the violence and swagger of a teamed competition. While relatively unknown to most people outside of our state, it produces athletes of unbelievable physical attributes. I played it myself in high school—hardly in order to develop athletic prowess, but mostly for the rare occasions we were granted swimming practice with the boys team. Speaking for both of us, there was hardly anything more divine than ogling jocks in Speedos. For Julien, these sculpted forms sauntering through campus were no less startling than the figures that emerged from Michelangelo's marble, fused also with the brazenly erotic androgyne of Donatello's *David*. Sensitive too; dumb and a little indie. It is here, no doubt, that the alluring male image was imprinted in Julien's mind—a significance that would eventually lead him to discover his love for Renaissance painting and a desire to create a fantasy in his work. There is a feeling of conquest in Julien's imagery, maybe even a sense of ownership over the boys they depict. Back then though, we always did have to try a little bit harder than everyone else to get their attention.

> *For him it is not, as in the story itself, the last and crowning act of a series of developments, but the first and unique act, the creation of life itself in its supreme form, off-hand and immediately, in the cold and lifeless stone. With him the beginning of life has all the characteristics of resurrection; it is like the recovery of suspended health or animation, with its gratitude, its effusion, and eloquence.*[ii]

Young men aside, high school was lacking in most departments. Julien recalled a paleo-conservative history teacher who frequently popped in a VHS tape of Kenneth Clark's

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Civilisation rather than deign to lecture to the students. It was a moment of almost divine revelation for him—drawn in by Kenneth's tweed blazers and the story of how Europe first preserved itself and then triumphed in the centuries after the Dark Ages. One has to understand how incredibly distant the idea of Europe seemed to us from the confines of the South Bay. I too felt the angsty drive to escape from banal, beautiful California, which led me to New York City—to experience real culture!—and later on a study abroad sojourn to Florence, which completely certified my obsession with the Renaissance. Julien's ticket out was to attend the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence, though the confines of New England were not entirely satisfying to his restless tendencies. He ventured to the stoic Städelschule in Frankfurt am Main, which attracts scores of young artists mostly from outside of Germany, lured by close proximity to famous professors, and the perks of clubbing, better drugs, and free tuition. This education was not wholly sentimental, generating unhealthy patterns of intense partying, lack of sleep, delirium, and ultimately a lack of fulfillment. He shares a characteristic which I find in myself as well, of going to utmost extremes, but managing to maintain his composure, at least to the surface. Only as we grew older, living in the respective toxicities of New York and Frankfurt, I think we realized the estrangement of our youth probably made us much stronger in the end. We are forever fueled by an intensity that oscillates wildly between fear, desire, confidence, and sadness. Yet oddly enough, a few years apart in age and barely knowing each other amidst these sympathetic experiences, Julien and I both found ourselves back in Los Angeles, and became close friends.

Visiting him today in the one bedroom apartment where he lives and paints, the division of studio and personal space is completely blurred. He is a voracious reader and continues to amass impressive piles of books on art, philosophy, poetry, religion, and novels, a constantly growing library. Julien possesses a great respect for knowledge, and a desire to understand the processes and materials of the artists he holds in regard. In this sense, he is eternally a student, a self-taught apprentice. Essential, too, in understanding Julien's practice is found in his impassioned sensibilities. He is of a fiery spirit, displaying incredible confidence in himself and his talents that borderlines on arrogance, exciting occasional jealousy in his peers. A quick wit and charming presence, he attracts many admirers especially of the angelic male set, which will undoubtedly remain constant as he ages. Though for all of his outward

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self assurance, at heart Julien is a dreamer, believing in fate, and often consults the I Ching and lights incense offerings to his ancestors before embarking on any important decisions. He requires the affections of those close to him to keep him in line, and for nearly the entire time I have known him, he has lived and worked alongside intimate companionship, which always in one way or another seeps into his art making because the roots are so intertwined.

> *And this gives the impression in him of something flitting and unfixed, of the houseless and complaining spirit, almost clairvoyant through the frail and yielding flesh. He accounts for love at first sight by a previous state of existence*—la dove io t'amai prima.[iii]

At certain moments the shared space of the boudoir-studio becomes too heavy, too easily fractured into roles that cast each other in a gloomy antagonistic light. But mostly it reveals itself to be fortuitous, an alluring synergy of an artist and his muse, a model always at the ready to be immortalized and desired. During the Renaissance, often lovers and assistants posed and stood in for beautiful male figures of angels, saints, and attendants, but always with the exception of Christ, a universal and revered archetype of devotion. In Julien's paintings however, the sacrifice is made erotic. While the works in this series are recognizable in their depiction of classical Biblical scenes, the object of desire is displaced to the sensuous body of Christ and all of his carnal flesh. Here I believe lies the ultimate strangeness of Julien's project - the images as a whole are instantly understood in their religious iconography, similarly to how Renaissance paintings are immediately powerful in an uncanny way. But a dissonance occurs between this recognition and the overt sexual energy of the figures themselves, it almost forces the viewer to feel guilty for their own perversity and imperfections. When I see these paintings I don't think about Christianity or God but I remember youthful pains and desires, the blonde devotional icons who are forever implanted in my mind, and undoubtedly Julien's as well. For me, it is a gateway to consume the elusive ideal, which must count as some kind of salvation in the end.

> *A certain strangeness, something of the blossoming of the aloe, is indeed an element in all true works of art; that they shall excite or surprise us is indispensable. But that they shall give pleasure and exert a charm over us is indispensable too; and this strangeness must be*

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sweet also—a lovely strangeness. And to the true admirers of Michelangelo this is the true type of the Michelangelesque—sweetness and strength, pleasure with surprise, an energy of conception which seems at every moment about to break through all the conditions of comely form, recovering, touch by touch, a loveliness found usually only in the simplest natural things—ex forti dulcedo.[iv]

i Walter Pater, "The Poetry of Michelangelo" in Walter Pater: Three Major Texts (New York: NYU, 1986), 131.

ii Ibid. 94-95.

iii Ibid. 108.

iv Ibid. 92-93.

Borland, Jenny. "The Life of Julien Nguyen." In *Julien Nguyen: ex forti dulcedo*. London: Stuart Shave Modern Art, 2019, pp. 31–36.

ARTFORUM

Hatfield, Zack. "Julien Nguyen." *Artforum* 57, no. 7, March 2019, pp. 208–11.

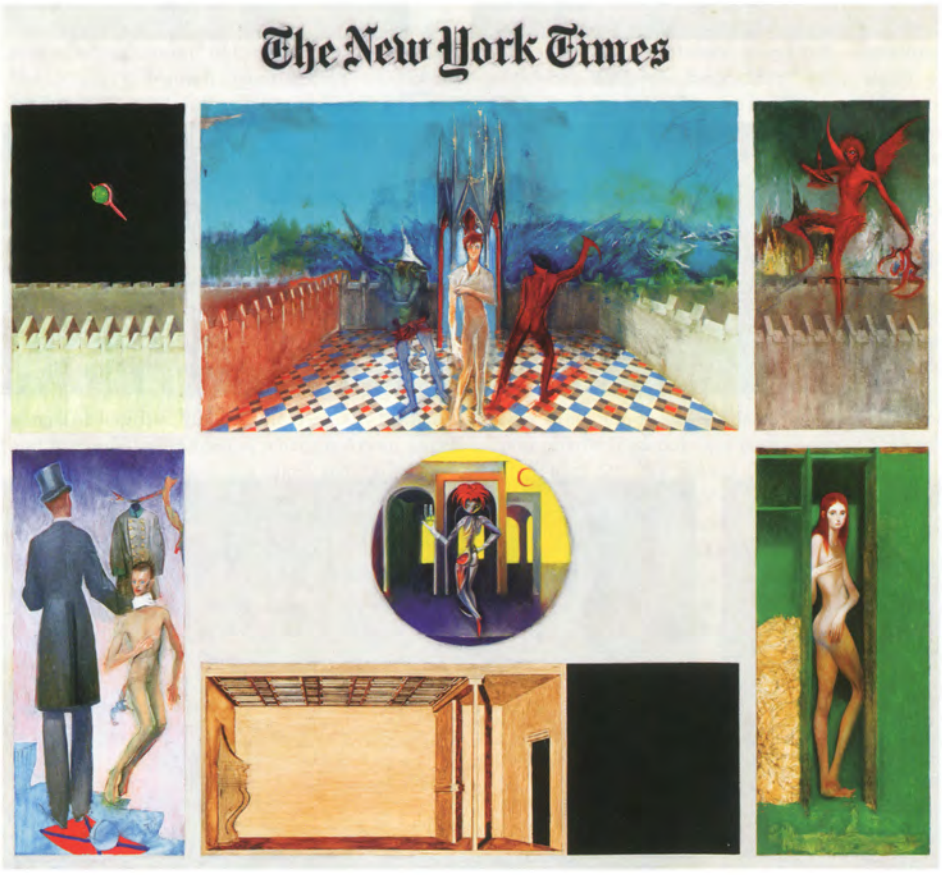
JULIEN NGUYEN

ZACK HATFIELD

Opposite page: **Julien Nguyen, *Mary, Anne, Christ, and John*, 2018**, oil and tempera on aluminum panel, 56 × 48".

Below: **Julien Nguyen, *Executive Function*, 2017**, oil and encaustic on linen-mounted panel, 69 × 63 ½".

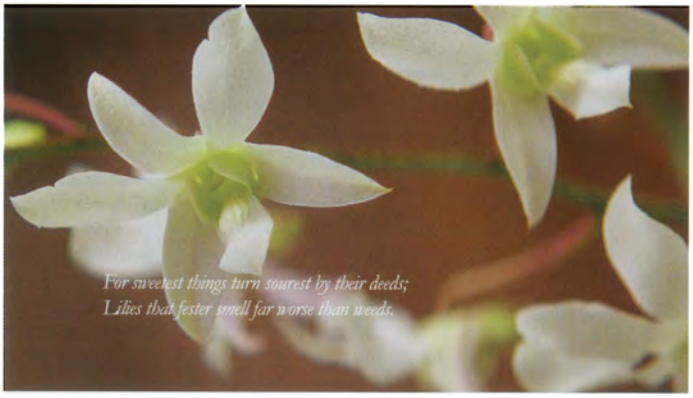
SOME DECLARE the end of the world; others make new worlds. Julien Nguyen does a bit of both. Shuffling allusions from the Renaissance, anime, and the artist's own life, his paintings reliably broach the familiar tropes of the powerful. You may remember *Executive Function* and *Executive Solutions*, both 2017, his contributions to that year's riling Whitney Biennial: Subdivided into panels and tondi, they boasted satanic nymphs, skeletons, and nudes while evoking artists like Sandro Botticelli and Giorgio de Chirico—all portrayed as the front page of the *New York Times*. Here was the paper of record, that bastion of both compassion and complacency, reimagined as comic book, as peeling altarpiece, as final draft of History. The overall impression, as is so often the case with this artist's work, was of innocents and demons alike poised at last on the edge of eschaton. Nguyen recently said in an interview that "history is ultimately a universal story, *despite* its tragedy." Curious, that despite. Even more curious is how his fantasias intimate again and again that universality, or at least its spectacles, is innately alienating.



The year before the biennial, the Washington, DC–born artist staged his first solo exhibition, "Super-predators," at Freedman Fitzpatrick in Los Angeles, where Nguyen is currently based. The title, with its sci-fi and Clintonian connotations, snappily hinted at the artist's flair for merging politics and pop culture. Here, extraterrestrials and princely waifs stalked Boschian realms in mannered tableaux that toyed

Hatfield, Zack. "Julien Nguyen." *Artforum* 57, no. 7, March 2019, pp. 208–11.

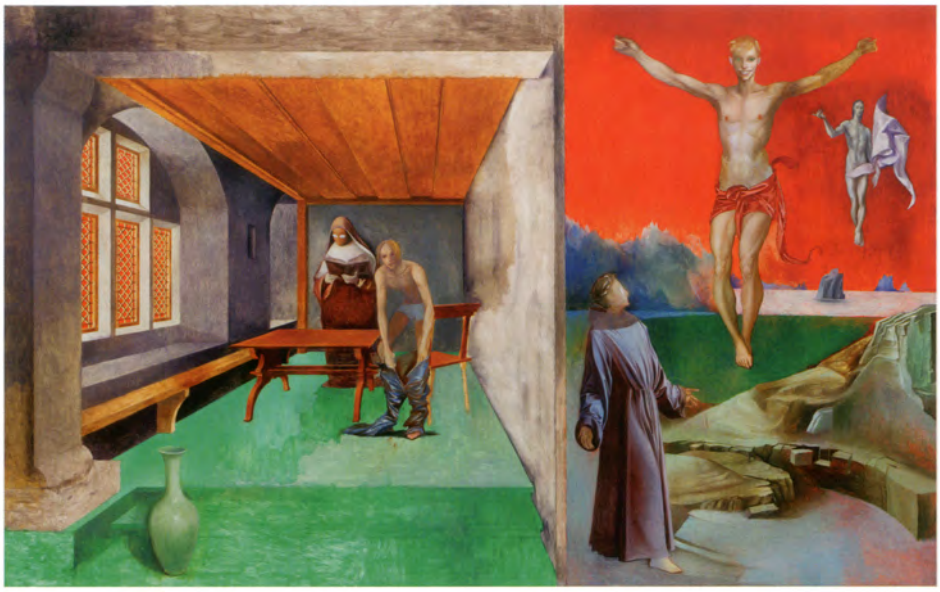
To whom does history permit grace? How does desire shape a self, and when and how do we look away?



Hatfield, Zack. "Julien Nguyen." *Artforum* 57, no. 7, March 2019, pp. 208–11.

Opposite page, clockwise, from top left: **Julien Nguyen, *New World Order*, 2016**, oil on panel, 48 × 72". **Julien Nguyen, *The Baptism*, 2017**, oil on wood panel, 40 × 30". **Julien Nguyen, *The Annunciation*, 2017**, oil on aluminum panel, 6' × 26' 10". **Two stills from Julien Nguyen's *Spiritus Mundi*, 2018**, HD video, color, sound, 15 minutes 10 seconds.

Right: **Julien Nguyen, *Faust II*, 2017**, oil on panel, 44 × 72".



with suffering, want, whiteness, and spectatorship. In an oil-on-panel titled *New World Order*, 2016, an attenuated, pantsuited sentry (critics noted a resemblance to both Christine Lagarde and Hillary Clinton) lords over a checkerboard-tiled terrace, her ophidian face communicating something different than the shaka her right hand flashes. Nguyen's is a sharpened, double-edged ambiguity. Along with one-point perspective, he often lends his settings the placelessness of throwback video-game arenas. But there are usually several registers of antiquity in any given Nguyen painting: the 1980s as a kind of pre-internet Eden; early modernity; the mythic past that early-modern painters so assiduously depicted; the future antiquity that will eventually glaze our online present. "Super-predators," with its electoral red-and-blue palette, left all of these legacies skewed, skewered.

For his next exhibition, "Ex Forti Dulcedo," at London's Modern Art gallery in the spring of 2018, Nguyen found Christ—not as religion but as role, one the artist doled out to friends or lovers. The conflations of identity and devotion already implicit in his project at that point became more pronounced. Of all the quattrocento interpretations offered in the suitably apse-like space, perhaps most striking was *Mary, Anne, Christ, and John*, 2018, based on a preliminary drawing by Leonardo da Vinci. In both works, the Virgin Mary rests on her mother's lap, dandling a baby Jesus enthralled by the young Saint John the Baptist. *Mary, Anne, Christ, and John* could be considered a "realization" of Leonardo's work. And yet, like so many of Nguyen's paintings, it's intentionally left incomplete. While the old master's sketch eternalizes the figures in a moment of bliss, Nguyen finds something unmistakably sinister. His gaunt subjects, pyramidally arranged before a lapis ether, are muddied and aged, their features, save for the Madonna's, eroded into something Slendermanesque. A mouthless Saint Anne aims a crooked pointer heavenward in a gesture of inauspicious benediction. The adolescent Christ wears his crown of thorns as a choker. The boys' extremities dissolve into taupe smears, and in fact the entire bottom of the painting is unfinished, so that the family seems mired in quicksand. Nearby hung *The Baptism*, 2017, inspired equally by manga and Piero della Francesca, wherein Aryan angels attend the eroticized rite of a naked, redheaded, doll-like Christ. One recalls the haunted heavenliness of Lisa Yuskavage, who once said, "If I were ever to paint men, I would paint Jesus and his friends." Also: *The Annunciation*, 2017, starring a Martian Mary and a bejortsed Archangel Gabriel, the latter genuflecting on a Tiffany-blue swimming pool.

Embedded in Nguyen's temporal and perspectival fuckery is an invitation to rethink the extent to which old (and valuable) meanings hold up in a secular milieu. That his anachronisms are rarely blatant makes this more absorbing; they manifest in moods, in postures and facial expressions that startle because they don't match what's stored in our imaginations. Representations of spirituality remain anomalous. I see in Nguyen's handling of hallowed iconography—which involves neither parody nor debasement nor biblical fanfic, as some have suggested—something of Simone Weil, who wrote that "the mysteries of faith are degraded

Hatfield, Zack. "Julien Nguyen." *Artforum* 57, no. 7, March 2019, pp. 208–11.

if they are made into an object of affirmation and negation, when in reality they should be an object of contemplation." Through its take on Renaissance humanism and beauty, "Ex Forti Dulcedo" arrived at questions that shadow Nguyen's entire output: To whom does history permit grace? How does desire shape a self, and when and how do we look away?

These concerns were taken up again this past autumn, when Nguyen debuted his first moving-image work in "Evil in the Defense of Good," his solo show at the Swiss Institute in New York. Though the work's medium marked a departure, it retains the appropriative tendencies and puckishness of Nguyen's oils. Titled *Spiritus Mundi*, 2018, the sleek video opens with a voice-over of one of Shakespeare's "Fair Youth" sonnets (the ones addressed to an anonymous man) recited by a woman, and moves on to a nearly shot-for-shot remake of a scene from the director's cut of Oliver Stone's 1995 film *Nixon*, in which the thirty-seventh president (Anthony Hopkins) meets CIA director Richard Helms (Sam Waterston) in the latter's orchid-strewn office. Nguyen heightens the borderline camp of the original scene, adorning the room with Orientalist décor and costuming his limber, attractive actors (Alaïa Parhizi and Aidan Nelson) in slightly oversize suits. Their dialogue, which starts as a tense Faustian confrontation before easing into a lyrical meditation on death and evil, immediately feels *off*, fumbling, half-understood: American power as an unrehearsed read-through of an inherited script. But there's also a libidinal anxiety that peaks when Helms describes US intervention in Chile as "not an operation so much as an organic phenomenon. It grew. It changed shape. It developed . . . appetites."

The video (which is currently on view in Nguyen's latest exhibition, "Returns," at the Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati) was shown at the Swiss Institute along with a portrait of each actor, limbs fizzling off into lack. These canvases seemed to channel the drably miraculous regionalism of Andrew Wyeth along with that artist's gnarled legacy surrounding race, class, and American-ness. Yet the subjects remain possessed entirely by the artist's own covetous if markedly disaffected gaze. Indeed, the exhibition title, "Returns," was chosen by curator Steven Matijcio as a nod not only to Nguyen's canonical revisionism but also to economic meanings, to how the painter may be returning a defective item, tradition, or world and bartering for something newer. His paintings bring to my mind Weil's idea of "decreation," defined by the Christian mystic and philosopher as "undoing the creature in us" to let God in. Nguyen's bodies often do appear undone, raveled by a grace that falls somewhere between Flannery O'Connor's grotesquerie and Raphael's empyrean tenderness. Most admirable about his art is how, although it draws on the work of masters, Nguyen submits mastery itself—which is to say virtuosity and perfection, domination and conquest—to a writhing ambivalence.

"Returns" is on view at the Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, through June 16.

ZACK HATFIELD IS AN ASSISTANT EDITOR AT ARTFORUM.

Hatfield, Zack. "Julien Nguyen." *Artforum* 57, no. 7, March 2019, pp. 208–11.

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KALEIDOSCOPE

Julien Nguyen

Interview by Franklin Melendez
From: Issue 33 FW18/19

Weaponizing the pictorial as holy archetype, the L.A.-based artist goes back to Biblical iconography to source the foundational micro-dramas and ur-narratives that have propelled Western mythology—all the while speaking to power, desire, fantasy and spiritual pursuit.

Melendez, Franklin. "Julien Nguyen." *Kaleidoscope*, no. 33, Fall/Winter 2018–19.

FRANKLIN MELENDEZ Robert Crumb once noted: "You don't have to be a Fundamentalist Christian to be interested in the Bible. It's really a fascinating mythology." You go a step further for in the biblical you recognize the foundational micro-dramas and ur-narratives that have propelled the Western mythos in all its destructive glory. This holds true not just for the source scripture itself, but its expanded image universe as propagated from the Quattrocento on: the pictorial weaponized as holy archetype. This might be in part what animates your fascination with the period: the suturing of these origin myths onto their pictorial modes of dissemination until the two become inextricable (or are made so by the Renaissance masters). Your most recent solo exhibition at Modern Art / Stuart Shave in London, entitled "Ex Forti Dulcedo," showed how your exploration is neither appropriation nor critique, but something much more subtle and profound: a re-staging that seeks to bring into relief these lingering structures as they inflect our current socio-political realities. This is also the germinating point for your latest undertaking, a solo at New York's Swiss Institute, that tackles more recent histories as well as the artist's first live-action film. This project is a full departure from painting. How did it come about?

JULIEN NGUYEN I had re-watched Oliver Stone's Nixon (1995) and was looking for some clips on the Internet to refresh my memory. In this particular scene, Nixon (played by Anthony Hopkins) visits then-Director of the CIA Richard Helms (played by Sam Waterson) at his headquarters in Langley. Leveraging one another in a terse power struggle, what begins as a strategic negotiation of funding and rank escalates into an ominous rumination on geopolitics, hubris, mortality, and corruption. Waterson's office is filled with orchids, and it ends with his eyes going black as he recites The Second Coming by William Butler Yeats. Watching this, the idea of the work came to me immediately. I had the sense that I could be inside one of my own paintings, and that if I replaced the actors with beautiful and eager young American men—with the look and energy that they would convey – and have them recite the complicated and disturbing dialogue, that there I might be able to make a film of my own. The camera was the only way in which I could convey this feeling to an audience. A painting of it wouldn't make sense, and I was interested in the dialectical and formal relationship that recreating a fictional scene of a possible historic event in a new film would create. I thought there was something similar in this to how I sometimes take figures from the Renaissance and repurpose them for my own use. Or that it would be similar to the strategy of all the various versions of Shakespeare put to film—the text is the same, but the window-dressing changes to suit the time and interests of those putting on the play.

JN When I was given the opportunity to do a show at Swiss Institute, I saw it as a chance to make something that I would normally not be able to with the limited hands, skills, and resources that I am allowed with the paintings. To make something that illustrates that the concerns of my previous work extend beyond the individual objects, and that those objects are part of a larger attempt to process the realities of my life and of my position within the world as it relates to the civilization to which I am born. With a film and with this specific subject matter, I can show that my concern is as much with history itself as it is with any specific image from or moment within it.
In order to accomplish any of this, the work needed to be made with a level of technical facility beyond what I could do myself with friends and a camera in my hand, and in this I was blessed to work with the brilliant cinematographer, Sebastian Mlynarski and the production team he brought to the set. This needed to be something that existed halfway between the logic of conceptual video art and commercial production, that bridged the social, political, and economic structures implicated in each of those forms.

Melendez, Franklin. "Julien Nguyen." *Kaleidoscope*, no. 33, Fall/Winter 2018–19.

FM Movies are perhaps the most prevalent vehicles we have for contemporary mythologies, but they also expose how secularized we've become—no universal stories, instead fractured sects and fan groups. Is there a freedom to be found in this?

JN I guess I would say to this that history is ultimately a universal story, despite its tragedy. This is something people are waking up to—for the better, ultimately, but with violent fits and starts. The past has been a tale of differing paths for differing peoples. This is no longer so, and will cease completely to be the case in the future very soon—unless of course the flow of information, goods, and people across the planet is no longer possible and we are back in a situation where different communities around the globe must struggle again in isolation—without either the possibilities or warnings that concurrent examples in other communities provide. Whatever the current political climate, we are now a global civilization, and it is imperative we come to understand the processes that got us here, and how we might use this knowledge to influence the society of the future.
This is not the "globalization" of which the plutocrats speak. That was a now-dead cover for the economic and political project of the postwar consensus, a tool of the now-dead West. I think Newton's third law might very well ascribe to history: "for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction." While Europe divvied up the globe, and America tried to fool the globe into believing it was itself, subjecting the rest to its rule and outlook—it did not establish complete control over or exterminate the conquered. We survived, and those that survived, even in their trauma, were changed for both the better and for the worse. In this transformation lies a possible future. Not that the east and the south will rule—for they died under the old order—but that imperialism eventually collapses under its own weight, that it has eaten what it cannot fully digest, that it will be digested in turn from within and that new centers will emerge for which new compasses must be drawn. I am speaking here of the demographic changes and the movement of peoples that have the world both ablaze and sprouting at the same time.

FM Is democracy our last spiritual pursuit?

JN I don't think so. Who or what exactly are "the People"? Can any of us say for sure? This is a crack in the foundation that leaves me skeptical.

Melendez, Franklin. "Julien Nguyen." *Kaleidoscope*, no. 33, Fall/Winter 2018–19.

“History is ultimately a universal story, despite its tragedy. The past has been a tale of differing paths for differing peoples.”

FM I want to talk about the idea of fandom, which seems to be rich terrain for you. Digital sci-fi and fantasy illustration, as well as deviant art have been sources of inspiration for you, and you draw on some of their idioms, but you also harness fandom as a potent conceptual strategy—for instance one could say making ‘fanfic’ works of Christian narratives or Renaissance paintings. Can you tell me a bit about how ‘fandom’ in this sense works for you?

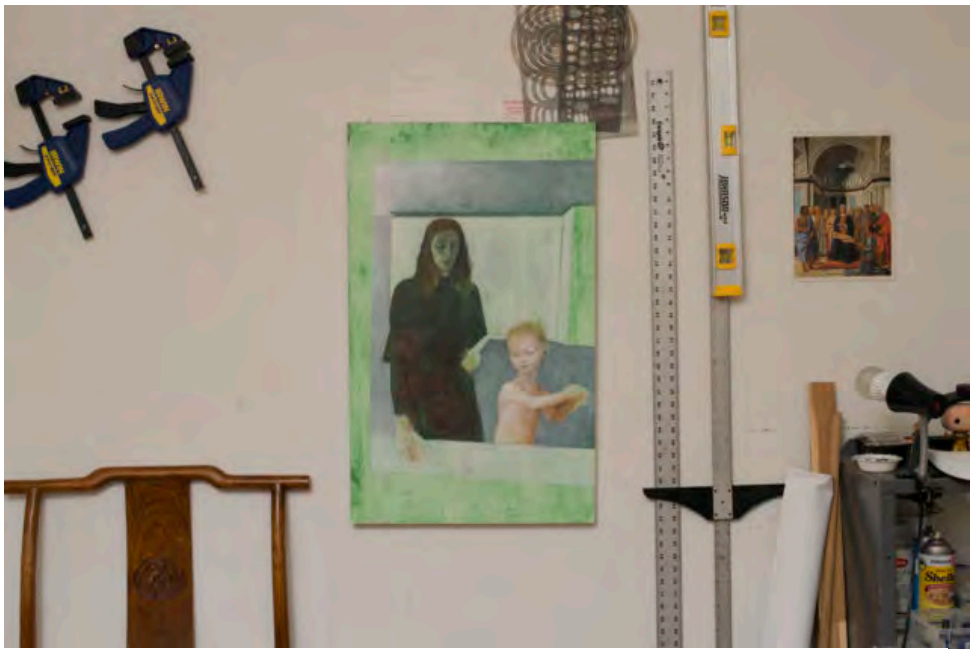
JN As far as I can tell, fan-fiction posits desire as a rogue hermeneutic of perception. This goes against the key operations of my practice for several reasons. First, there cannot be a “queer” reading of the Renaissance inasmuch as two of its central pillars were openly homosexual (Leonardo and Michelangelo). Raphael is the exception—and his incomplete legacy (dead at 39) looms large. Venice takes over and from Titian is born the Baroque. Long as he lived, I hope he is now long wandering in purgatory. It is my strong belief that from the 17th century onwards much of western art slowly transforms into (bad) apologetics for imperialism—but not before! It is from before where we might still learn, if we could only remember.

Secondly, my religious work should not be seen as fan-fiction; if I have made a painting of the Virgin Mary, it cannot be understood as anything but an image of the Holy Mother. There is, funnily enough, a fragment of Clement of Alexandria in which he references the secret Gospel of Mark, which putatively contains references to an initiation into the mysteries of the church involving acts of same-sex love.

Finally, when we are talking about fan-fiction are we talking about a narrative unconscious? Is this narrative unconscious repressed? Or is it rather that desire is a means of reading anything according to the one true logic of everything: power. Did excited adolescents de-sublimate the incestuous ur-text of *Supernatural*, or rather did desire make itself real, impinging on the writers themselves to feed the ravening drive for the mysterion of same-sex-brother-love until the love object was itself brought into the world? Are these mysteries carried out by night hidden in shame or simply in acknowledgement of the absolute truth that reality occurs only in the intimacy of understanding and being understood?

If anything, I would like my work to be a virus in the biological, not digital sense of the word. A (positive, hopefully) infection within my country and the larger society of which I am a part by the product of one of its bastards. And by bastard I mean the Republic of South Vietnam.

Melendez, Franklin. “Julien Nguyen.” *Kaleidoscope*, no. 33, Fall/Winter 2018–19.



Julien Nguyen (American, b. 1990) is an artist who lives in Los Angeles. His work on view at the Swiss Insititute in New York through 11 November.
Franklin Melendez is a NY-based writer and curator and Editor-at-Large of KALEIDOSCOPE.
Photography by Nathanael Turner. Images courtesy of the artist and Stuart Shave/Modern Art, London

Melendez, Franklin. "Julien Nguyen." *Kaleidoscope*, no. 33, Fall/Winter 2018–19.

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SPIKE

THE DOWNWARD SPIRAL: THE FIGURE CANNOT HOLD

Column

by Dean Kissick

Julien Nguyen
Noli me tangere, Caesaris sum (2018, detail)

Why beauty today wishes to float free of our bodies.

Kissick, Dean. "The Downward Spiral: The Figure Cannot Hold." *Spike Art Magazine*, October 10, 2018.

Julien Nguyen's paintings have been on my mind lately; partly because I'm writing a story about them to read at the Swiss Institute on the 26th, but they're often on my mind regardless as they present an alluring synthesis of my interests in the history of art, particularly Renaissance visions of beauty, and the similarly transactional and purposefully enchanting aesthetics of contemporary life. Nguyen takes old compositional structures and present-day muses (young men, lovers, twinks, androgynes), takes both of these recurring forms and folds them into one another to collapse time and make the past appear futuristic. His works speak of a worship of the body today, of youths parading along the streets and down the arcades of Instagram thirst traps, but also of 15th and 16th century reimaginings of antiquity, and construct a new body, one that's unreal and on the cusp of vanishing. The figures in the paintings in the basement of the Swiss Institute have, for the most part, hard, sculpted abdominals like rock formations in Paolo Uccello paintings from which Saint George might emerge to slay a dragon; however, more curiously, they don't have hands or feet, their lean arms and legs just melt away to nothing. These boys cannot grasp the landscape around them, nor can they feel any solidity underfoot, for the world is unstable, and the world is chaos, and they don't have any hands or feet.

Jacopo Pontormo
Group of the Dead (1550)

In Nguyen's own hands religious stories, such as his series of scenes from the life of Christ, are also heavily eroticised and the writhing, violent sensuality with which so many were already depicted in the Renaissance is heightened yet farther, but again Christ's limbs just fade away, like the bodies in Pontormo's orgiastic sketches of his unfinished *Last Judgement* for the Basilica of San Lorenzo, which meld with one another and recede into the paper. God is nearly absent from contemporary art and plays little role in the society I live in. But without god, where do we look for meaning? Without souls, all we have left is our bodies and identities. But the body is fading away!

"THE BODY IS REINTERPRETED AS RAW MATERIAL FOR ART, AND NO LONGER A CONTAINER FOR OUR IDENTITY"

For decades now Comme des Garçons' shows, with their sickly silhouettes of ready-to-wear tumours and burrs, have sung to us of how, "God is dead and all we have left's our mutating bodies." In the latest collection however, which was just shown in Paris, there's something more going on and the canon itself is mutating slightly; I know this because the artist Bruno Zhu told me, and also sent me a couple of looks from the show, twelve and thirteen, that he said reminded him of Julien's paintings. Next spring's woman, Rei Kawakubo suggests, is lithe and in bondage, and slashed across the chest. Her long sleeves wane to hanging chains like a ghost. You buy some Comme des Garçons. You wonder if you're really here anymore. You hold your hand up in front of your face but there's nothing there.

Kissick, Dean. "The Downward Spiral: The Figure Cannot Hold." *Spike Art Magazine,* October 10, 2018.

Comme des Garçons SS19 look 12

Some of us (and this is Karl Ove Knausgård's latest fear) worry that we're disappearing below the seas of images that we make. Others take pleasure in the same process. "I think we cut down all the forests," Deanna Havas wrote in the text for her recent show at Sundogs, "because we didn't like them. Also we needed stretcher bars for paintings. I once rode a Flixbus through the Alps, the trees all looked like fractals and it made me feel ill. It was too much. I'd much rather look at a painting than some obscene fractal, even a bad one." The world, in this telling, is just materials for art. Havas also elaborates on her sense of disgust with the natural. "I am revolting. We're merely bacteria crawling on the face of this wretched planet that quivers with cadence of the living and decomposing," she says, returning us once more to the body. How have the new conditions of virtuality and continuous online performance changed our relationship with our bodies? And what is the proposition of the new body?

"ARE WE BEAUTIFUL ON THE INSIDE, OR ONLY ON THE SURFACE, OR SOMEWHERE ELSE ENTIRELY?"

Kissick, Dean. "The Downward Spiral: The Figure Cannot Hold." *Spike Art Magazine,* October 10, 2018.

Earlier this summer, Jon Rafman, who has just produced a spectacular tunnel of explosions, collapses and shuddering wipes of computer-generated textures as the set for Balenciaga's latest show, showed me some renders of bodybuilding girls that he'd found on Deviant Art. These, he suggested, were more visually thrilling than anything happening in contemporary art; not so much because of their ridiculous, Bellmer-expanding forms (although those do have a tendency to linger in the mind) but rather the extraordinary textures in which they're contained and how those go beyond anything one might expect to see in the flesh. They represent a twisted new idealism, and an early foray into the hyperreal sublime.

Deviant Art renders (found by Jon Rafman)

Likewise, the Dazed Beauty site that has just launched under the creative directorship of Isamaya Ffrench proposes a new model of beauty that's just as weird: a shimmering, warped, grotesque transhumanist body. Every launch story was sculpted by "3d artists" who scanned the bodies of their subjects in the round before breaking their virtual bones, flaying them and then manipulating the underlying forms using modelling software: Arca is reanimated as a see-through agglomeration of blood vessels, organs and factory parts; Slick Woods becomes a black catwoman, and Princess Gollum a goth mouse. Here the

body is reinterpreted as raw material for art, and no longer a container for our identity so much as a jumping-off point, in keeping with a growing desire to be more than one's own reflection, to be many different alters and swap faces, colours, textures and shapes as you please; to watch your body disappear.

Dazed Beauty Homepage

What I find most uncanny about Dazed's new platform though, is how such pantomime theatricality and liquid crystal roleplay is presented alongside the same old body positivity ("ARTIST @BOIHUGO IS CHALLENGING THE EXOTICISATION OF ASIAN MEN ON GRINDR") and rather delirious identity politics ("THE MODEL WHO DREAMS OF BECOMING THE FIRST FEMALE PRESIDENT OF SOUTH SUDAN"). Somebody is playing a complicated game of representation here. Today's popular movements often double-down on the primacy of the body, on its importance as a political site, or alternatively seek to leave it behind entirely and float free unto the metaverse, but Dazed Beauty appears to embrace both of these urges; which has happened before, for instance amongst the otherkin subculture with its continuous shifting between genders and chimeric forms, but now it's taking place on a major corporate platform courting the world's leading cosmetic brands and hoping to reinvent our standards of beauty. The underlying concept is that our fluid identities demand fluid representations, ones likely to grow increasingly untethered from the physical body, and that these will be the latest way to express our unique personalities and, perhaps, spirits. Our identity could become an idol that we sculpt anew each morning from the digital clay.

When I scroll down Dazed Beauty I see the sanctity of the self reasserted by those leaving their bodies behind. When I look at Julien Nguyen's paintings I see body worship mixed with the dissolution of the flesh, and vanity with a yearning for the rapture. In a world without a centre, or even a shared reality, contradictory ideas such as these are always overlapping. So where does beauty reside now? Are we beautiful on the inside, or only on the surface, or somewhere else entirely, in a painting on the wall, or a collection of malleable body parts saved on a stranger's hard drive? Or all of those places together; which sounds horribly exhausting.

DEAN KISSICK is a writer based in New York and a contributing editor for Spike. A new installment of The Downward Spiral *will be published online every second Wednesday a month. Last time he wrote about visiting Portland, Oregon for the Utopian Visions Art Fair.*

Kissick, Dean. "The Downward Spiral: The Figure Cannot Hold." *Spike Art Magazine*, October 10, 2018.

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ARTFORUM

Julien Nguyen, *St George & The Dragon*, 2017, oil and tempera on wood panel, 36 x 22".

LONDON

Julien Nguyen

MODERN ART VYNER STREET
50-58 Vyner Street
May 18–June 23, 2018

Lithe, androgynous bodies inhabit the canvases in Julien Nguyen's first solo exhibition here. Hung in the gallery's chapel-like upstairs space, the artist's works are homages to Western religious painting, with tableaux such as the Annunciation to the Virgin Mary and references to biblical suffering: mortification of the flesh and, of course, crucifixion. Nguyen queers his images by making strangers, friends, and old lovers the characters in his pictures. The artist asks us to consider the significance of these ancient Christian stories in contemporary life.

St George & The Dragon (all works cited, 2017) features the titular character wielding an enormous blade while wearing a regal tricorn hat. His crimson military jacket and shirt are unbuttoned, revealing a smooth and tightly muscled torso. He stands triumphant over the slain beast's head as both a homoerotic hero and a brilliantly flamboyant dandy. There's a similar sexual charge in *The Baptism*, where an ectomorphic Christ, rendered in a decidedly manga style, readies himself for the sacred ablution. The composition is quite similar to that of Piero della Francesca's *Baptism of Christ*, ca. 1437, though there is no dove famously marking the presence of the Holy Spirit. And why would it? Nguyen's picture—with its well-endowed, smoky-eyed, ginger-haired Jesus tended to by a handsome, ephebic John with a trio of twinky angels in attendance—suggests a different kind of passion play.

— *Eliel Jones*

Jones, Eliel. "Julien Nguyen." *Artforum,* June 14, 2018.

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frieze

Reviews /

The Gospel According to Julien Nguyen

BY MIMI CHU
31 MAY 2018

The LA-based painter's exquisite skewing of Renaissance and biblical scenes at Stuart Shave/Modern Art, London

From a flurry of flecks in tempera and oil, England's patron saint emerges in drag. A panel painting by Julien Nguyen, *St George and the Dragon* (2017) depicts an attenuated female figure pouting in a red coat. Hips thrust to the side, she theatrically points her sword at a red-eyed demon. Her setting suggests that she is not of this world. A meticulous play of geometries and hues creates the illusion of a steel recess, which hovers somewhere between trompe l'oeil sculpted niche and spacecraft accessory. In spite of her flouncing pose, the figure's facial expression is notably withdrawn. Hanging her head and looking askance, she appears disillusioned by the fantasy role she is playing. Bored beyond belief.

The spirit of drag seeps into every corner of 'Ex Forti Dulcedo', Nguyen's first exhibition with Stuart Shave/Modern Art. Dainty millennials play sacred figures from the Western canon in archetypal poses: a sunken-eyed gamin impersonates St John baptizing the messiah; a floppy-haired youth bears Christ's stigmata on his palm; and the hallowed infants from Leonardo da Vinci's *Virgin and Child with Saint Anne and Saint John* (c.1499–1500) are reimagined as two long-limbed teens. Futuristic designs eddy into Nguyen's quasi-religious scenes: a metal disk hovers over Christ's *Baptism* (2018) like

Chu, Mimi. "The Gospel According to Julien Nguyen." *Frieze*, May 31, 2018.

Julien Nguyen, *St George & The Dragon*, 2017, oil and tempera on wood panel, 91 x 56 cm. Courtesy: © the artist and Stuart Shave/Modern Art; photograph: Robert Glowacki

a gaming icon; a glowing red grid overhangs the *Flagellation* (2018); and vast sweeps of steel and marble frame the Virgin's *Annunciation* (2017) in an austere architectural setting. In the midst of all this cross-pollination, icons are rendered incomplete: the adolescent figures of Christ and John tail off into rough surface markings, as if their sprouting bodies were outgrowing the narrative.

By subtly warping religious iconography, Nguyen plays with the process by which one thing comes to signify another. This is dramatized in his depiction of the *Annunciation* – the archetypal moment Mary's body is imbued with divine meaning. Depicted at the apex of a monumental enclosure, the Virgin raises a hand to an angel kneeling in the distance. Echoing the smooth geometries of her surroundings, her head is portrayed as a flawless sphere, her face a schema of thick swirls. Deprived of expression, the Virgin almost seems burdened by the rigid pictorial order that's been imposed on her. Other areas of the surface increase this sense of tension. The figures' hands are patches of scratchy markings, the space between them a stretch of empty ground. By leaving portions of the work unfinished, Nguyen unmoors the figures from their places in the biblical narrative and leaves them floating in an ambiguous space. The story once preceded the image; now the image precedes the story.

Slipping out of their conventional meanings, Nguyen's figures seem rebellious. A teenage Christ nods his head and shrugs his hands up

Julien Nguyen, *The Baptism*, 2018, oil on wood panel, 102 x 73 cm. Courtesy: © the artist and Stuart Shave/Modern Art, London; photograph: Robert Glowacki

on a crucifix in the style of an emo rapper greeting his fans on stage ('I can take this'), while an introspective Virgin sheds luminous tears, eyes aglow, as if bemoaning her responsibility in the salvation story. And a melancholic Christ is haunted by a Chinese dragon in the Flagellation – a mise en scène of some inner battle. Androgynous, inflammatory and highly eroticized, Nguyen's figures pick up on the taboo undercurrents of conventional religious depictions.

Kye Semper Solus (2018) is perhaps autobiographical: a long, statuesque figure is depicted sitting dreamily at an easel. White calligraphic markings wind whimsically up his arm and face, which rhyme with a pen portrayed in his hand. In contrast with the works in the rest of the show, the perspective is off-kilter, with the lines of the easel trailing obliquely into a murky background. Isolated in an indefinite space, the figure might be seen as an allegory for Nguyen's own process of skewing conventional forms. Ex Forti Dulcedo. Out of strength, sweetness.

Julien Nguyen: Ex Forti Dulcedo runs at Stuart Shave/Modern Art, London, until 27 June.

Main image: Julien Nguyen, The Annunciation, 2017, oil on aluminium panel, 56 × 183 cm. Courtesy: © the artist and Stuart Shave/Modern Art, London; photograph: Robert Glowacki

Chu, Mimi. "The Gospel According to Julien Nguyen." *Frieze*, May 31, 2018.

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FLASH ART

1 / 6 *Julien Nguyen, "Elementary Dear Watson" (detail) (2016). Courtesy the Artist and Freedman Fitzpatrick, Los Angeles.*

LA Talks / September 16, 2016

Depths Plumbed / *Julien Nguyen*

Julien Nguyen makes paintings that are at once referential and intensely personal, employing subject matter that ranges from Renaissance architecture to artificial intelligence to the films of Kathryn Bigelow. Nguyen's work is of a kind of archeology that is fully cognizant of art history but also driven to disrupt assumed notions of its discourses. Accepting painting's theatricality as a given, he uses knowledge to create fantasy, pitting familiar forms against one another.

Duncan, Thomas. "Depths Plumbed / Julien Nguyen." *Flash Art*, September 16, 2016.

2 / 6 *Julien Nguyen, "Elementary Dear Watson" (detail) (2016). Courtesy the Artist and Freedman Fitzpatrick, Los Angeles.*

3 / 6 *Julien Nguyen, "Elementary Dear Watson" (detail) (2016). Courtesy the Artist and Freedman Fitzpatrick, Los Angeles.*

On the occasion of his West Coast solo debut, *Flash Art* sat down with the artist in his Los Angeles studio.

Your work has a rich, fantastical quality that has recently incorporated Renaissance painting and architectural motifs. What compelled you to employ these elements, particularly the use of perspective?

I think this is largely motivated by a desire to move past the crisis of the nineteenth-century photographic image, which continues to occupy a lot of the discourse around representation, and which for me is based on a fundamental misunderstanding. I work with a lot of early modern idioms that coincide with the establishment of sovereignty and sovereign power, perspective being foremost among them. Perspective is a relatively unencumbered organizing tool for the construction of imaginary worlds: a subject can array a hierarchical system (of its own device!) of recognition and creation. It is also something that does not require an excessive amount of labor specialization.

This said, perspective is also a tool for establishing borders, another early-modern innovation. I think this speaks further to the idea that the development of humanism lay not in the invention of inwardness per se (which can be seen as far back as Augustine's *Confessions*), but in the realization that this same inwardness afforded a means of dissimulation that in turn offered leverage against the world as given.

Humanism as subterfuge allows one to bypass the question of the subject as organizing myth of bourgeois ideology and instead trace a direct line to it as a contemporary vehicle for both encoding and navigating systems in general. The real question becomes how Bronzino established himself in Cosimo I's household despite the purgation of homosexuals from the ducal court.

The figures in your work often have elongated features and mannered poses that seem to be a fusion of disparate approaches toward figuration — ranging from antiquity to contemporary pop culture.

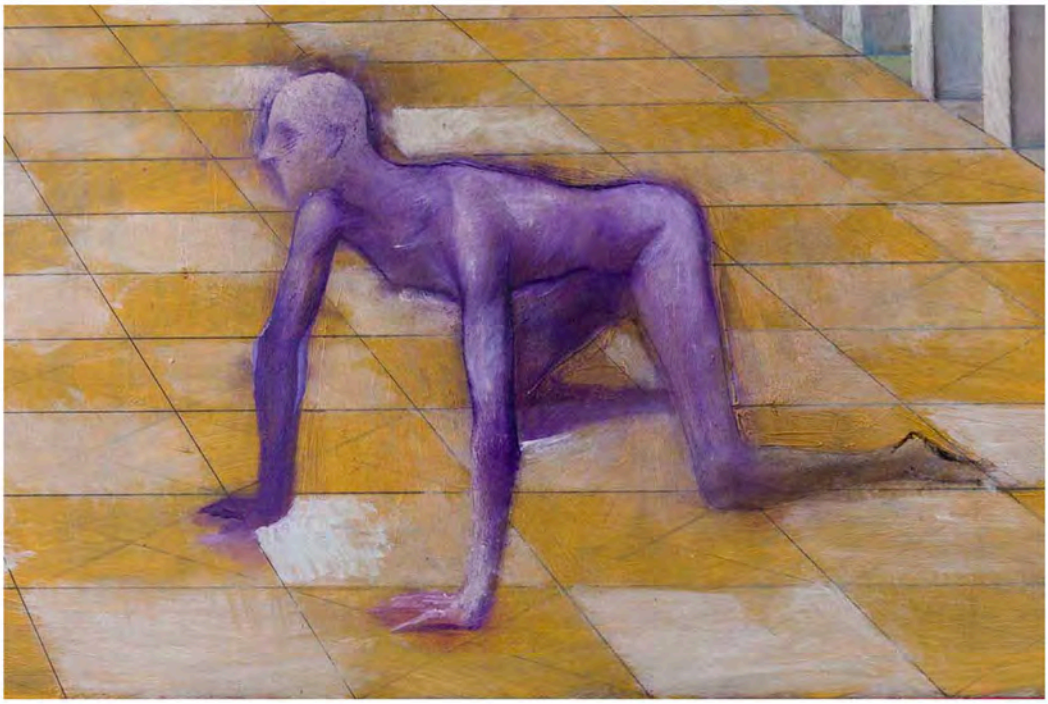
Duncan, Thomas. "Depths Plumbed / Julien Nguyen." *Flash Art*, September 16, 2016.

4 / 6 *Julien Nguyen, "I know why the caged bird sssings" (2016). Courtesy the Artist and Freedman Fitzpatrick, Los Angeles.*

I would hope that this is not understood as style, which would be an essentially formalist reading. The difference between Velazquez and Uccello isn't so much their particular visions of the world, but instead how they successfully interpolated themselves into their respective governing structures. That is to say, that if ideology as "imaginary representation" operates on the level of the unconscious, these distortions are not expressions of my "view of the world" but are resultant from my emergence within it: reenacting the nanosecond in which a camera captures Hillary Clinton's light-sucking eye to reveal a reptilian underneath the human membrane.

5 / 6 *Julien Nguyen, "New World Order"(detail) (2016). Courtesy the Artist and Freedman Fitzpatrick, Los Angeles.*

Duncan, Thomas. "Depths Plumbed / Julien Nguyen." *Flash Art*, September 16, 2016.



6 / 6 *Julien Nguyen, "New World Order"(detail) (2016). Courtesy the Artist and Freedman Fitzpatrick, Los Angeles.*

Filmic references often appear in your paintings, though the titles seem to be the only overt reference to these films — as if they are ciphers and the role-play between title and composition enables a specific kind of dialogue.

Yes. Pictorial composition, in its analytic or constructive capacity, is to my mind analogous to the durational character of film. In other words, the difference between photography or photo-relative art and my work is the same as the difference between making an ugly face and having one.

What affect has moving back to LA had on your painting, if any?

The idea of the sublime in art is often misremembered as a totalitarian phenomenon. Longinus (a Greek from the first century) instead proposes that only democracy can be the "careful nurse" of sublime comprehension, and cites Sapphic poetry as a primary example. Los Angeles (to my mind) is a Bermuda Triangle between the sublime, the picturesque and the uncanny: a place where metropolitan civilization, having strayed so far from home, touches a void. I also don't drive, and I enjoy being a passenger here.

by Thomas Duncan

Duncan, Thomas. "Depths Plumbed / Julien Nguyen." *Flash Art*, September 16, 2016.