



Art

Lily Wong's Cinematic Paintings Are Filled with Suspense and Longing

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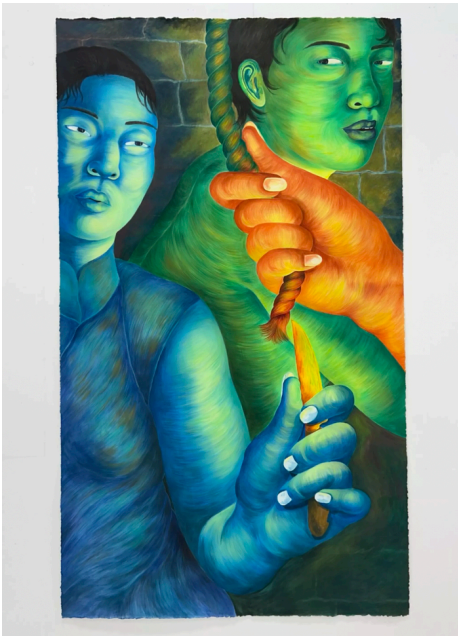
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Lily Wong, *Threshold*, 2022. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie LJ.

Taped on the walls of Lily Wong's Brooklyn studio are black-and-white reproductions of Martin Wong's *My Secret World, 1978–1981* (1984); a Betye Saar phrenology assemblage; and performance stills of Patty Chang's *Fountain* (1999) inked on printer paper. These wide-ranging references share in common a sense of mirroring or doubling of subjects, which can also be found in Wong's newest work.

In her debut solo exhibition in Europe, "[The Beginning Place](#)," on view through June 18th at Galerie LJ in Paris, figures sprout a second head or appear twice in a single work, conveying a sense of motion like consecutive shots from a film strip overlaid on top of each other. In this latest body of work, Wong ventures away from her previous scenes of solitude rendered in limited color palettes, and dives into cinematic compositions, collapsing time in vividly hued acrylics on paper.



Lily Wong, *Soft Cut*, 2022. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie LJ.



Lily Wong, *Great Illusion*, 2022. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie LJ.

Originally trained as a printmaker, Wong received a MFA from Hunter College in 2020. That same year, she had her debut solo exhibition, “Built for Love,” at Kapp Kapp in New York. The show introduced Wong’s black-and-white works featuring bulbous women sporting plaited pigtails and ponytails, or buns. Though Wong has introduced color to her paintings, the flesh of her figures are still carefully rendered through thin, curving lines.

Wong painted her new works during a time when she was particularly interested in films from Hong Kong, like *A Moment of Romance* (1990) directed by Benny Chan and the work of filmmaker Fruit Chan. The suspense and longing of those films seeped into her paintings. In *Soft Cut* (2022), a woman uses a glowing blade to sever a rope hanging from an unknown source, while another figure turns in preparation for what’s to come. Elsewhere, in *A Moment of Romance* (2022), a trio gazes off in different directions at something outside of the frame; look closely and you can see in their eyes the reflections of distant galaxies.



Lily Wong, *A Moment of Romance*, 2022. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie LJ.

“I started looking a lot more at cinematography, the way that color and off-screen lighting is used as a narrative tool,” Wong said in an interview with Artsy. While in her past works Wong often emphasized one or two particular colors that felt most relevant to her subject matter, in “The Beginning Place,” various contrasting colors share equal prominence and importance.

When considering lunar mythologies for her 2021 two-person show “Lunations” with Ian Faden at Harper’s in New York, Wong gravitated towards shades of blue and green. Meanwhile, yellow dominated the space in her

2021 solo exhibition “I Wasn’t There” at Kapp Kapp in Philadelphia. “I feel like I was using yellow symbolically as this racially charged color,” Wong recalled. “I wasn’t trying to reclaim yellow, maybe recontextualize it or reexamine it.”



Lily Wong
Contact, 2021
Kapp Kapp
Sold

Two paintings from “I Wasn’t There” appear to be set in the Old West. In *The Sun Doesn’t Set* (2020), a yellow woman wearing only a sole cowboy boot sticks her head and foot out from behind a wooden saloon door. Wong more overtly evokes the history of Chinese people in the United States in *Contact* (2021). In the sun-soaked scene, a yellow woman wearing a cowboy hat rests against a bundled bag. In her hand is a gold coin engraved with a bird silhouette that parallels the flock flying across the picture plane, alluding to the migration of Chinese miners during the California Gold Rush in the mid-1800s. The woman’s feet are propped on top of railroad tracks, recalling the thousands of Chinese workers killed during the construction of the First Continental Railroad and the countless others exploited in the process.

Yellow skin first appeared in Wong’s work in 2017. One untitled work from this period depicts two women in a face off, their purple complexion resembling bruises. Superimposed on top is a line of four smaller yellow women who tug on each other’s long, braided ponytails; two of them drop their hats which resemble headwear from the Qing dynasty. The yellow woman in the front carries scissors and cuts the end of one of the purple women’s plaited ponytail. The scene engages with the iconography of 19th-century anti-Chinese propaganda, such as Louis Dalrymple’s 1899 illustration of a woman acting as an allegory for civilization snipping off a Chinese man’s queue; or Thomas Nash’s 1869 drawing of a Californian man wielding a whip while yanking the queue of a fleeing Chinese man.



Lily Wong, *Passage*, 2022. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie LJ.

Though a few figures in Wong's latest body of work wear their hair in plaited ponytails and pigtails, it's braided rope that is slashed in *Soft Cut* and pulled in *Passage* (2022). If the motif is meant to evoke the tugging of queues like rope—as depicted in Otto Bettmann's circa 1880 political cartoon of the lynching of a Chinese man with his queue—it's left ambiguous in Wong's works. "I realized I was less interested in the historical unfolding of events and more interested in the emotional inheritance that permeates through our culture," Wong said. "There is always this persistent longing. This is something that we live with and inherit from our families." The history of racialized violence is visually absent in "The Beginning Place." Instead, there's an atmosphere of longing for people, places, or ideas just out of reach.

Say Something (2022) depicts a woman reaching out towards a figure separated by space, perhaps her own reflection in a mirror or someone in a window. Wong's use of color in the closely cropped scene emphasizes the woman's expression of yearning, reminiscent of the moody lighting masterfully handled by Hong Kong film director Wong Kar-wai. "I have a strong sense of nostalgia when I watch these films and so much of that is my own personal projection. I have this deep curiosity for this place, but the [phases in time] in which I'm curious about no longer exist," said Wong, whose father grew up in Hong Kong when it was under British rule. "I feel like my roots are in this city that I actually don't really know anything about."



Lily Wong, *Say Something*, 2022. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie LJ.

She refers to the changes Hong Kong has undergone in recent decades with the awareness that the way her father experienced the city, and the environment the films captured, are not the same today. This longing for something both intangible and ephemeral can be felt in the way Wong's figures gaze off into the distance, a space outside the picture plane that remains unknowable to the viewer.

While Wong's 2020 paintings were filled with disquieting shadows and spotlights—as seen in *Lurkers, I Wasn't There*, and *Diligence*—"The Beginning Place" finds solace in transitory moments. "The anxiety [of the earlier works] came out of this desire to satiate nostalgia or resolve this missing piece in life," Wong said. "With the work right now, it's more about creating space for that feeling. It's not meant to be resolved."