

Li Wang
“Fiends and Friends”
May 26–July 2, 2023

Li Wang’s paintings are charged with the particular sense of longing that emerges from a lack of belonging. Moving to New York from Beijing in 2021, Wang became deeply familiar with the feelings of displacement, loneliness and cultural shock shared by many Chinese immigrants. Painting became a way of making himself at home, creating intimate compositions in which figures quietly occupy domestic spaces.

Working primarily in oil on canvas, Wang has been greatly informed in his visual strategies by artists such as Pierre Bonnard, Henri Matisse, and Georges Seurat. This is reflected in his pictorial and perceptual painterly gestures, as well as the ways in which he occasionally separates color from its representational purpose. Yet Wang’s paintings center a subject that has been largely omitted from Western art history: the Asian male, whose body has been continuously desexualized within heteronormative culture, and fetishized within queer culture. By exclusively representing male bodies that are queer and Chinese, including his own, Wang imagines a safe space that exists outside of the white, heteronormative realm. Queer Chinese men inhabit rooms of their own.

In many of the works, the figure is placed in a comfortable home setting, where the body is permitted to be at rest, and mundane activities become sacred rituals. Seemingly lost in his thoughts, a man seated on a desk is casually holding a cup of coffee. The rays of sunshine seeping in from the window bring light and warmth to his slender body, nearly nude except for a pair of shorts. Time has been slowed down... there is no rush to get dressed. Reclined on an office chair, another man is leafing through a book, potentially while taking a break from posing for the artist. His genital area is exposed by his white briefs, matched by tall white socks and white sneakers. In Chinese culture, the latter combination is a coded signifier of queerness. Working against projections of shame in relation to queer identity, Wang decidedly imbues many of his paintings with subtle references to queer kinks.

Part of a larger revival in queer figurative painting, Wang’s work exists in visual dialogue with contemporaries such as Kyle Dunn, Louis Fratino, Salman Toor, and Doron Langberg. This revival, in turn, builds on queer figurative practices pursued at the height of the AIDS epidemic. Active in the late 1980s and early ‘90s, artists such as Hugh Steers and Patrick Angus have only started to receive their long overdue recognition relatively recently.

Every now and then, Wang abandons the domestic space to dip into the outside world. In an orange-hued painting titled “Oliver in Italian restaurant”, a man seated in a restaurant gazes directly at the viewer, as if he has just turned around his chair to face whoever is watching him. While the figures moving through Wang’s domestic environments seem unaware of the artist’s presence, or perhaps are entirely unbothered by the act of being observed, the subject here appears significantly less at ease and more guarded now that he finds himself in a public space.

There is one instance in which Wang allows himself to let loose beyond the comfort of home. Depicting himself riding a carousel in Bryant Park, the painting is marked by longer brushstrokes and a more vibrant color palette. Eagerly clasping the pole, Wang’s facial expression reveals sincere excitement and a new awareness of his environment. He is holding on, while at the same releasing a sense of (be)longing.

Ksenia M. Soboleva

* The exhibition’s title draws inspiration from the Chinese idiom “魑魅魍魎,” which traditionally refers to demons and monsters in mythical stories. However, in the modern Chinese context, this phrase has come to symbolize the marginalized members of society. The gay community in China, for instance, has long faced stigma and deliberate concealment due to prevailing mainstream ideologies. Through the use of litotes, the artist ingeniously appropriates this idiom. Rather than portraying bad people, their works showcase extraordinary individuals who courageously pursue their ideals and embrace their preferred lifestyles despite all obstacles.

Li Wang (b. 1995) is a New York based painter, born in Beijing, China. Li holds a Bachelor of Art from The Central Academy of Drama in Beijing, where he studied Stage Design. Li graduated from Columbia University School of the Arts’ MFA program in 2022. His works are mainly about how queer male bodies inhabit domestic spaces. By rendering figures within a realistic atmosphere, he interrogates the concept of masculinity.