

TOMORROW WILL BE THE MOST BEAUTIFUL DAY OF YOUR LIFE

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ESSAY BY JOHN SLYCE

I want to posit—with complete respect for the work and person of Xu Yang, in fact, at times this stretches to awe even—that central to Yang’s approach, to making in general and painting in particular, is a reverent irreverence passionately embraced and at all times thoroughly performed. Performativity runs through all she does in art and life. This is perhaps most immediately felt, or surmised through her photographic works, on velvet, aluminium or as projections, that is if one is not fortunate enough to directly experience her person and personality. I would suggest one brings a similar appreciation to the works in painting as well, for these hold the clearest and most condensed expression of her project and expansive practice.

“Where painting is, love is not far away,” begins Isabelle Graw’s *The Love of Painting: Genealogy of a Success Medium*. This has perhaps never been truer than in the works across painting and photography on display here that share space with the paintings by Victoria Cantons. Xu and Victoria share a studio and their lives together. Love is the collaboration par excellence and these two are partners and collaborators showing together finally here for the first time. These days, one feels, are most beautiful.

Xu Yang’s paintings explore fantasy, desire and a late Baroque opulence thrust into the lurid glare of our late-capitalist times. I see her work as both a product of our moment—perhaps even a symptomatic expression of it—and also an interruption in its otherwise seamlessly electronic total flow. Xu Yang, b. 1996 in Shangdong—China’s second largest province located in the east of the country and situated on the Yellow River—has lived and worked in London, studying painting first at Wimbledon and then the RCA, since 2014. I should add, as a disclaimer to objectivity rather than an appeal to authority (Xu doesn’t really do authority) that I had the privilege and, at times, softly irritating pleasure of being her tutor for her MA both before and during the pandemic. Xu’s direct manner and unfiltered, though always reflective approach permeates her person and animates the work. This I find exciting and almost always a worthy challenge for a viewer and interlocutor alike.

In some early and still inchoate writing on Chardin and Rembrandt and well in advance of *In Search of Lost Time*, though still a prescient indication of themes he would later explore, Marcel Proust positions painting as offering a kind of extraction, or elevation of objects and figures beyond time. The subject of a painting is “detached from the moment, deepened, eternalised” and the painter gives life to that portrayed and allows a subject to be alive and thus speak. This is an important and somewhat indelible aspect of painting’s ‘liveliness’ whatever the century, moment, or moments when it comes forward and perhaps useful as an entry into Xu’s works. The hands of the suite *Touch* from 2021—in oil on panel—are those of French Royalty culled from details of 17th and 18th century portraits, here embellished and set into artist’s frames that magnify the courtly gesture of touch, body and pose that runs across her works in painting and photography. Striking is the isolated gaze onto the right eye of Victoria framed by a brooch fondly surfing while online. The painting follows a 17th c. genre form of the ‘lover’s eye’. Victoria is as well set in diamonds in a brooch that belonged to Marie Antoinette and perhaps carried a miniature of Louis XVI. *The Day Runs in a Gilded Frame* is one of my favourite paintings I have seen Xu Yang make for not only its surreal construction, but so too allowing the linen to breathe. The performative photographic works—exploring the birth of Venus, a composite of Jessica Rabbit, Marilyn Monroe and Roxxy from the musical *Chicago*, or Frida Kahlo—are at once Xu and her other reverently embodied with irreverence to any and all deferential conventions, other than love.

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