

# WU JIARU

## The Assembly of Mythos

BY FLYNN FONG

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INSIDE BURGER COLLECTION

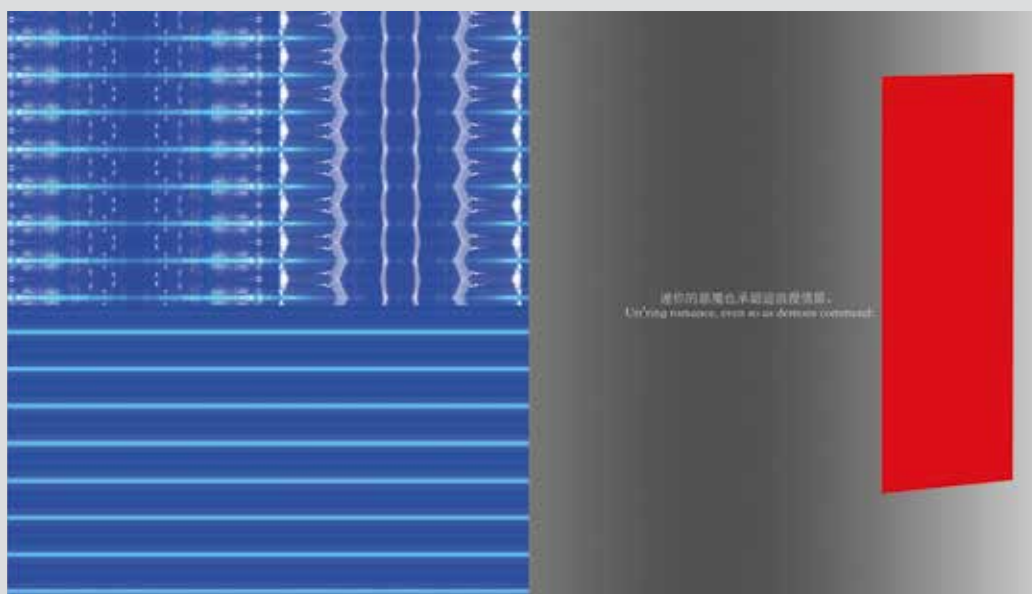
Installation view of WU JIARU's  
*C Bacon*, 2016, kinetic installation,  
at "Ambient Occlusion," Run Run  
Shaw Creative Media Center, Hong  
Kong, 2016. Courtesy the artist.

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To engage with Wu Jiaru's practice is to be struck by the disparate media she employs—from early explorations in digital media, video, and 16mm film to more recent sculptures, readymades, and paintings. Wu repeatedly returns to historical and social moments that have contributed to the formation of her identity, and through utilizing various tools she has created an imaginary and compassionate world that speaks to the entanglements between humans and machines.

In an early kinetic installation, titled *C Bacon* (2016), Wu used algorithms to deconstruct well-known triptychs by the late British painter Francis Bacon. Triptychs and polyptychs were often used in Christian art to tell religious stories; here Wu created a digital triptych in an attempt to engage the audience with more immediacy, as well as raise certain questions. Bacon's twisted figures respond as viewers move in front of them, altering their shape and their structure. By doing so, Wu wanted to question whether the "logic of sense" (to quote a term coined by the late French theorist Gilles Deleuze) in Bacon's paintings can, using contemporary technology, be extended from two dimensions to three dimensions. At the same time, she explores whether the loneliness, vulnerability, and suffering depicted in such paintings can be transformed through technologically engendered kinesis and interaction.

The 2019 social movements in Hong Kong and the pandemic that followed soon after were watershed moments in Wu's practice, a time during which she began to question whether



WU JIARU, *beige\_jelly\_projection*, 2021, single-channel video, silence: 8 min 41 sec. Courtesy the artist.

the employment of artificial intelligence in a turbulent society is at all effective. And so she started to focus on painting as the primary medium in which to record and contemplate the notion of "identity" in her work, as well as its social and historical context. As such, her paintings from the last five years have often featured distorted figures with unrecognizable faces, or simply isolated body parts, in front of solid-colored backgrounds, representing the combination of humans and machines in postapocalyptic (or even post-protest) landscapes. The images evoke fear, a fear brought about by existing, and surviving, in a threatening environment. When we discussed her choice of medium and how it has shifted over the years, she stressed that painting is an embodied medium. "During the social unrest of 2019, I returned to the studio every night after the clashes and became overwhelmed by a deep sense of powerlessness. I am an artist, and painting the emotions that had accumulated over the day was the only way out." By connecting her hands and heart, Wu was able to convey in paint how she felt. *untitled\_excesstears* (2019), for example, is a



WU JIARU, *Door Gods i & ii*, 2020, oil on wood, 240×60 cm. Courtesy the artist.

representative work from that period. In flat light, unrecognizable fragments—broken bodies or the remnants of objects left in the street after chaos and conflict—float on a silver background. When photographed with a remote flash, the use of reflective paint creates a different dynamic. Illuminated by the glare of the light, the painting almost ignites, bringing to mind a street engulfed in flames. Meanwhile, the later diptych, *Door Gods i & ii* (2020), borrows the form of traditional Chinese door gods. Presented as two vertical abstract paintings, they differ from traditional door gods who tend to convey a fiercer, more murderous power. In Wu's paintings, they are blurred but solid bodies, somewhere between

human, god, and machine, a reminder for us to reconsider what we think those who hide behind tools of violence should look like. During this period, Wu also created a series of readymade sculptures, spraying objects she found on the street with reflective paint and reassembling them into various shapes as an alternative means of documenting this critical period in Hong Kong's contemporary history.

In her first solo exhibition, "To the Naiad's House" (转转潇湘馆, 2022), at Flowers Gallery in Hong Kong, Wu provided a glimpse into the broader constellation of media and identity that engages with questions of what defines a "Hong Konger." Wu arrived in



Hong Kong in 2014 to study and has since become a member of the city's "new immigrant" community. She has witnessed and experienced the decade-long battle for personal and societal identity. Instead of relying on personal experience to describe how someone could become a Hong Konger, she draws on the familiar visual aesthetics of her childhood in Guangdong to reflect the decline of Hong Kong's influence in the Pearl River Delta region over the past 30 years.

"I grew up in my mother's workplace. It was around 2000 when 'reform and opening up' was taking place in Guangdong, which offered people opportunities. My mom ran a three-story restaurant at that time, a complex that incorporated catering and entertainment. She said she learned a lot of visual elements of interior design from some Hong Kong magazines, which could only be found in China Grand Hotel's lobby in Guangzhou. As a kid, I saw a fascinating playground and I felt that the place was very similar to the Hong Kong on TV. It had been almost ten years since I came to study in 2014; I saw a very different Hong Kong, participating in a civil society that was unimaginable on the mainland. Hong Kong is not as glamorous as it looks on TV, it's full of wounds and unfolding stories. For this project (*To the Naiad's House*), I hope to integrate the 'Hong Kong' of my childhood memories with my current feelings toward Hong Kong through different visual layers."

The "Naiad's house" referenced in the title is a translation of "House of the Xiao and Xiang [Rivers]," the name of Lin Daiyu's residence in the novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* by Cao Xueqin. Wu's mother also referenced this masterpiece of 18th-century Chinese romantic literature in naming one of the private rooms in her *jau lau*. The artist spent most of her after-school hours as a child in this room. More than just a Cantonese restaurant, a *jau lau* is a distinctive, multifaceted entertainment venue. After the economic liberalization of the 1990s, Guangdong's restaurants were heavily influenced by the entertainment and consumption patterns that filtered into the mainland via Hong Kong. In Wu's depictions, the interior decorations of *jau lau* are full of colorful and aesthetically pleasing visual tension; the faux-Roman architecture of the doorway contrasts with the Chinese-style carved window frames inspired by *Dream of the Red Chamber*. The private rooms offered a range of entertainment options, including karaoke, mahjong, food, and tea.

By incorporating aesthetic elements from her childhood, Wu intertwines memories of the *jau lau* with desires fueled by an expanding economy as well as yearnings for personal freedoms sparked by the societal transition from collectivism to free-market capitalism. The work entitled *dayCare\_ma\_Diana* (2022) reflects on the years when Princess Diana was a fashion icon, and her wavy hairstyle was particularly popular. *dayCare\_hairDye\_theMoon* (2022), meanwhile, is a humorous work that engages with the collective memory of that era. Wu used reflective material as the base and painted an abstract portrait of a man with long hair. When a strong light shines on the canvas, the silver hair turns black. Cantonese people familiar with Bigen hair dye (美源发彩) may recognize the reference to the classic advertisement from the 1980s featuring actor Kenneth Tsang Kong promoting the hair coloring cream. The ad played on Hong Kong TV for almost 40 years and remains popular to this day.

The *jau lau* might be considered what the late French theorist Michel Foucault called a "heterotopia," a heterogenous cultural space filled with unspoken rules and information exchanges. The space reflects the range of social relations in the Pearl River Delta during the economic transformation from "reform and opening" in the 1980s to 2008. It was a place where individuals from various backgrounds, including civil servants, laborers, Hong Kong businesspeople, entrepreneurs, and restaurant owners exchanged information, sought commercial opportunities, and altered their

WU JIARU, *dayCare\_ma\_Diana*, 2022, oil on linen, 40 × 30 cm. Courtesy the artist and Flowers Gallery, Hong Kong.



destinies. Wu has transformed the *jau lau* from her childhood memories into an imaginary, mythological place in these paintings and objects. For her, the *jau lau* is the setting for a mythical creation tale: a new narrative of China's Reform and Opening that rose from turmoil.

In *Unknown Tales ii* (2022), another work in "To the Naiad's House," human beings, gods, animals, or human-machine hybrids are combined, sitting in a space reminiscent of *shan shui*, or Chinese landscape painting, that borrows from the decorative composition of the Dunhuang mural paintings of flying *apsaras*—female spirits akin to nymphs in Buddhist art. The composition frees the subjects from time and space constraints, arranging them in an orderly yet unrestricted manner, and connects multiple paintings into a seamless reading experience. One of the entwined subjects in *Unknown Tales i* seems to become an *apsara* in *Unknown Tales ii*, and the animals on which the figures ride also seem to leap out of the image. *Unknown Tales ii* (2022) rests on four wheels, so that viewers can change the order of the two paintings and imagine another kind of relationship between the two images and their subjects, breaking with the set narrative structure of a single painting or set of paintings.

In fact, viewers can move the three groups of works in the project around as they see fit. In the third movable work, *The Creation of Space* (2022), two main figures sit in a cave or mountain range in a version of the legend of Pangu splitting open heaven and earth to create mankind. Wu once said that the

inspiration for turning the paintings into movable installations came from the Chinese standing screens used in the *jau lau*, where each private room had a screen to separate the eating area from the karaoke space. Some of the motifs on the screens were from Grand View Garden in *Dream of the Red Chamber*, while others depicted flying *apsaras* from the Dunhuang murals.

"To the Naiad's House" also showcases several sculptures made by assembling everyday objects, such as McDonald's Happy Meal toys, Apple keyboards, and dental molds, from her ongoing *beige\_objects* series (2020- ). Wu covered these readymades with a special silver powder, making them look like objects found in an archaeological dig that aims to uncover the mysteries of modern Hong Kong. When I asked what role Hong Kong plays in her creations, Wu replied:

"Memory is not that solid and believable. For example, we all experienced the Hong Kong handover in 1997, and my memory of it is of a mother sitting on a sofa holding a child, so I drew *familyTime\_97\_liveStream* (2022). I remember the chair better, with its ostentatious decorations, but I knew that the Hong Kong handover was being shown on the television outside the frame, and perhaps this memory was mixed with the visual memories I had of the *jau lau*. As a child born and raised in Guangdong, until I came to live in Hong Kong, Hong Kong was a symbol mediated through various mediums: the television, the McDonald's Happy Meal, the space of the *jau lau*. These were all mediums that shaped Hong Kong [for me]."



Installation view of WU JIARU's *familyTime\_97\_liveStream*, 2022, oil and acrylic on linen, 120×90 cm, at "To the Naiad's House," Flowers Gallery, Hong Kong, 2022. Courtesy the artist and Flowers Gallery.

WU JIARU, *Foreign Lines I*, 2023, oil on linen, 158 × 210 cm, at "très sauvage: Secrets with an Abundance of Foreign Lines," Flowers Gallery, New York, 2023. Courtesy the artist and Flowers Gallery, Hong Kong.



In thinking about identity through painting, Wu also interrogates what "traditional" art is and takes steps to "unlearn" the art education she received in mainland China. In her recent projects, *très sauvage* (2023) and *Emotional Device* (2023- ), Wu has begun to reflect on the impact of her traditional training in painting. A graduate of the printmaking department at the Tsinghua Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, Wu received a rigorous Soviet-style art education in a system that emphasizes painting as a technique and focuses on the physical structure of the object, with a strict, uniform standard of realism. Emotional expression is deliberately avoided. The unified, holistic, rational, and collectivist approach advocated by this kind of training profoundly affected Wu's painting style. Her early paintings bear the historical imprint of socialist realism. After living in various places, she realized that other ideas had gradually relaxed her painting methods. As a starting point for unlearning, Wu traces the history of technology's influence on creators and practices auto-painting. In this approach to painting, the artist aims to paint as rapidly as possible without consciously intervening to guide the hand. Artists such as Joan Miró, André Masson, and Max Ernst developed various forms of automatic drawing and painting. She practices automatism to curb the mechanical side to her traditional art training and bring her paintings back to a more human state.

*Foreign Lines*, made during her New York Asian Cultural Council residency in 2022, and her subsequent *Emotional Device* series are both attempts at automatic painting in which Wu, in an almost meditative state, does not presuppose the overall composition of

the picture or its end result. With its loose structure, soft colors, and tight rhythms, the mythological content of her past work gradually transforms into flowing lines and faintly discernible figures that seem to be heading toward some metamorphosis, even if its direction is unpredictable. It feels as if a breeze is blowing through the paintings but taking the focal points of the works with it.

The threads that make up Wu's practice are multifaceted and complex. She is concerned with the predicaments of people, particularly artists and creatives, in a time of technological acceleration, and her work often delves into the collaborative possibilities between painter and machine. As she goes along, Wu attempts to construct a mythical space in her work, interweaving both social and personal history within it. Mythos is a linguistic structure that can be rewoven and reimagined. As she has argued: "God created mankind in his own image (Genesis 1:27). Today, mankind has created the machine in its own image."

Flynn Fong is a writer and curator based in Hong Kong.

Wu Jiaru is a multimedia artist who works in installation, readymades, painting, and moving image, exploring issues of identity, boundaries, and the individualization of history from the perspectives of mythology, literature, and intimate relationships. Her recent exhibitions include solo show "Emotional Device" at P21, Seoul (2023), "très sauvage: Secrets with an Abundance of Foreign Lines" at Flowers Gallery, New York (2023), and the group exhibition "Myth Makers—Spectrosynthesis III" at Tai Kwun, Hong Kong (2023). Wu was awarded the Asian Cultural Council New York Fellowship in 2022. Her works are in the Burger Collection, the collection of M+, and other institutions.