

Research Summary

Tracing the Absurd: Queer Bodies of a Painted Allegory (Short Form Summary)

Tony Guo

Keywords: Painting; Absurdism; Queer; Body

This practice-led research employs representational painting to narrate a series of paradoxical allegories that reflect my own lived experiences as an Asian gay man. This perspective provides a multifaceted exploration into issues concerning identity and representation such as “coming-out-of-the-closet”, which are carried out through my primary medium of oil painting.

One of the key contextual frameworks in this research is absurdism, an existentialist philosophical notion that refers to the collision of the human condition and an utter indifference towards the world; a paradoxical state; a condition of living amidst irrationality while yearning for reason. I argue that queerness itself is inherently imbued with absurd qualities as my personal experiences grapple with the alienating and nonsensical Westernised notion of “coming-out-of-the-closet”. Within this domain, my central inquiry is to construct a queer absurdist language in representational painting that weaves narratives of complex juxtapositions—humour with discomfort, beauty with grotesqueness, and lyricism with insanity. These dualities are not presented as binary oppositions but rather as elements existing within a continuum or spectrum, reflecting the fluid nature of queer identities.



Figure 1: Tony Guo, *The Puddle*, 2021-22, oil on canvas, 1800x2700mm.

My research queries how absurd narratives in representational painting both project a queer allegory and deconstruct binary thinking. I argue that absurdism reaches beyond the confines of binary thinking, as queerness is fundamentally an outlier of a conventional heteronormative man-woman binary. My research explores the potential of absurdity to inform a deconstructive methodology that confronts a violent externalisation of binarism. Here, this methodology is understood as a fluid spectrum not fixed to the “either/or”, twofold approach to seeing the world. American theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003) argues that “non-dualistic thought and pedagogy” is inherently a queer methodology as queerness is not confined by the sexual or reproductive duality between men and women. By deconstructing how queer identity has been predominantly structured via binary modes of thinking, my project considers an inclusive middle-space of otherness that is more attuned to the arbitrary nature of human experience.

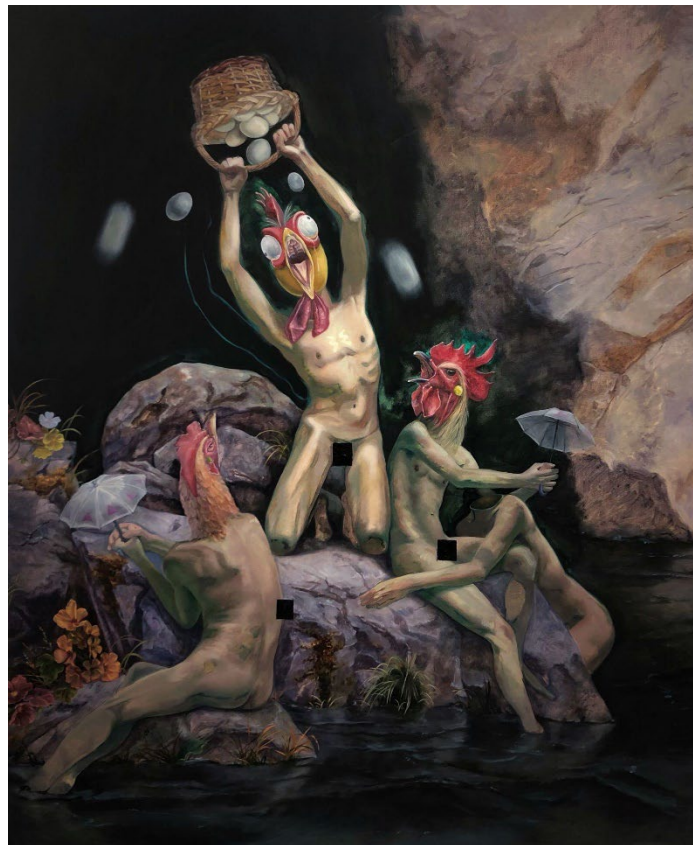


Figure 2: Tony Guo, *The Shape of Our Scar*, 2021, oil on canvas, 1200x1450mm.

My methods of constructing painted narratives draw influence from the ‘Theatre of the Absurd’, as well as painters and printmakers such as Michaël Borremans, Salman Toor, Sasha Gordon, Käthe Kollwitz and Francis Bacon. With reference to these practices, I explore ways to formulate a painted stage that gives form to a queer absurdist language in representational painting. Self-referential naked male bodies form the core of my painted theatre. These figures are used to reclaim an underrepresented subjectivity. I question conventional ideas of “nude” versus “naked” and subjecthood versus objecthood in Western painting history, and how they serve a singular heteronormative masculine gaze. My research seeks to counteract the ostracisation of other subjectivities by centering my own body in a non-exploitative and empowering manner.

Throughout my research I have become increasingly aware of the affective physicality of oil paint, a medium that enacts a tactile connection to human experiences. Through expanded

painting methods, I examine how opaque and translucent layering of oil paint teeters into abstract forms, which contributes to the creation of a tangible emotional states that are recorded on the canvas. These painted marks are charged with qualities beyond their representational capability, revealing potentials for a developing visual language akin to the nonbinary spectrum that is queerness, that is opacity.



Figure 3: Tony Guo, Stars, 2021, oil on linen, 450x600mm.



Figure 4: Tony Guo, Pests, 2022, oil on canvas, 850x850mm.

References

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.

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Biography

Tony Guo (1999) is a painter born in Aotearoa New Zealand who grew up in Northeast China. He migrated to Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland in 2012 by himself, spending his teen years with host families while adapting to multiculturalism. Vested in modes of figurative oil paintings, Guo's work projects queer allegory in a psycho-theatre, as moments of whimsy mask a journey into a captive dilemma.

He completed an MVA at AUT in 2022 and continues to expand his conceptual and technical realms through research and practice.