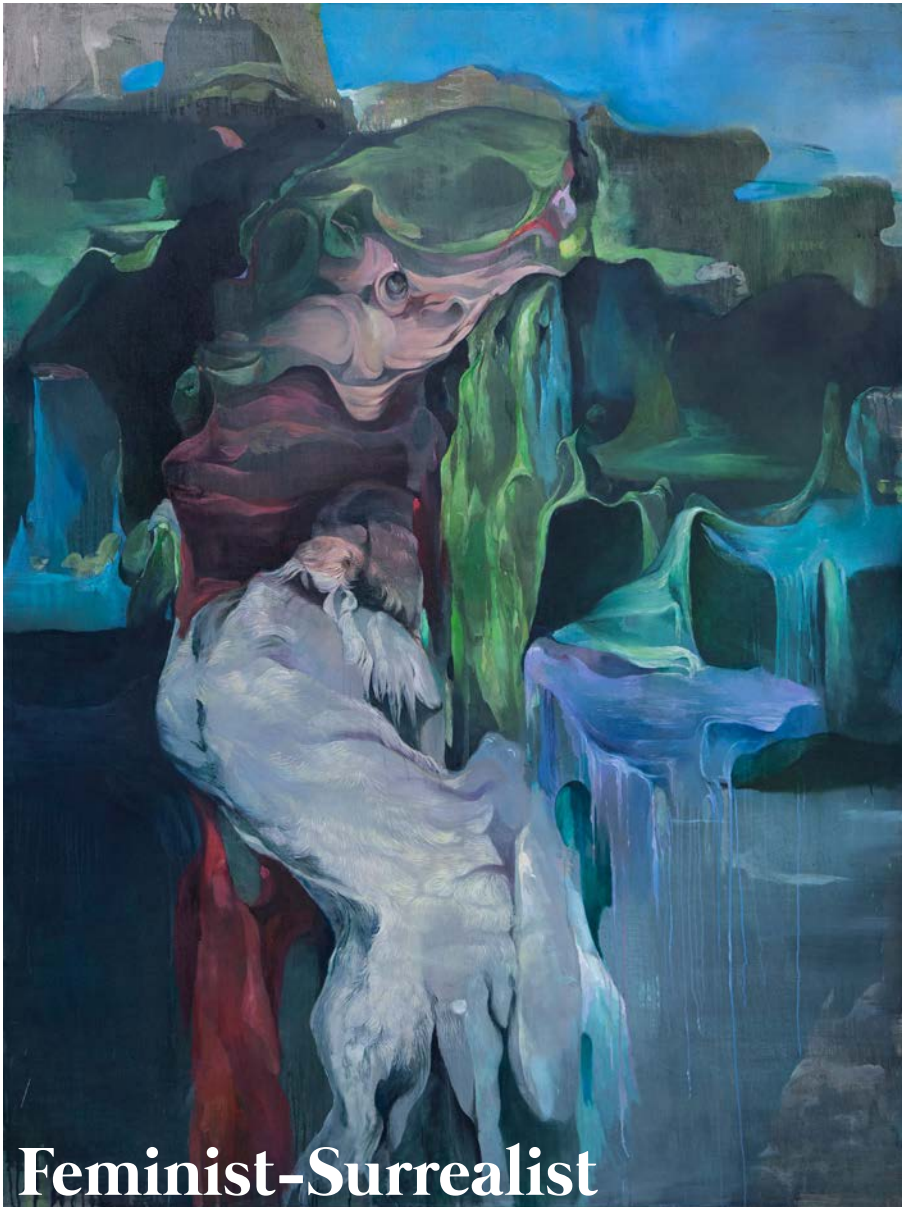


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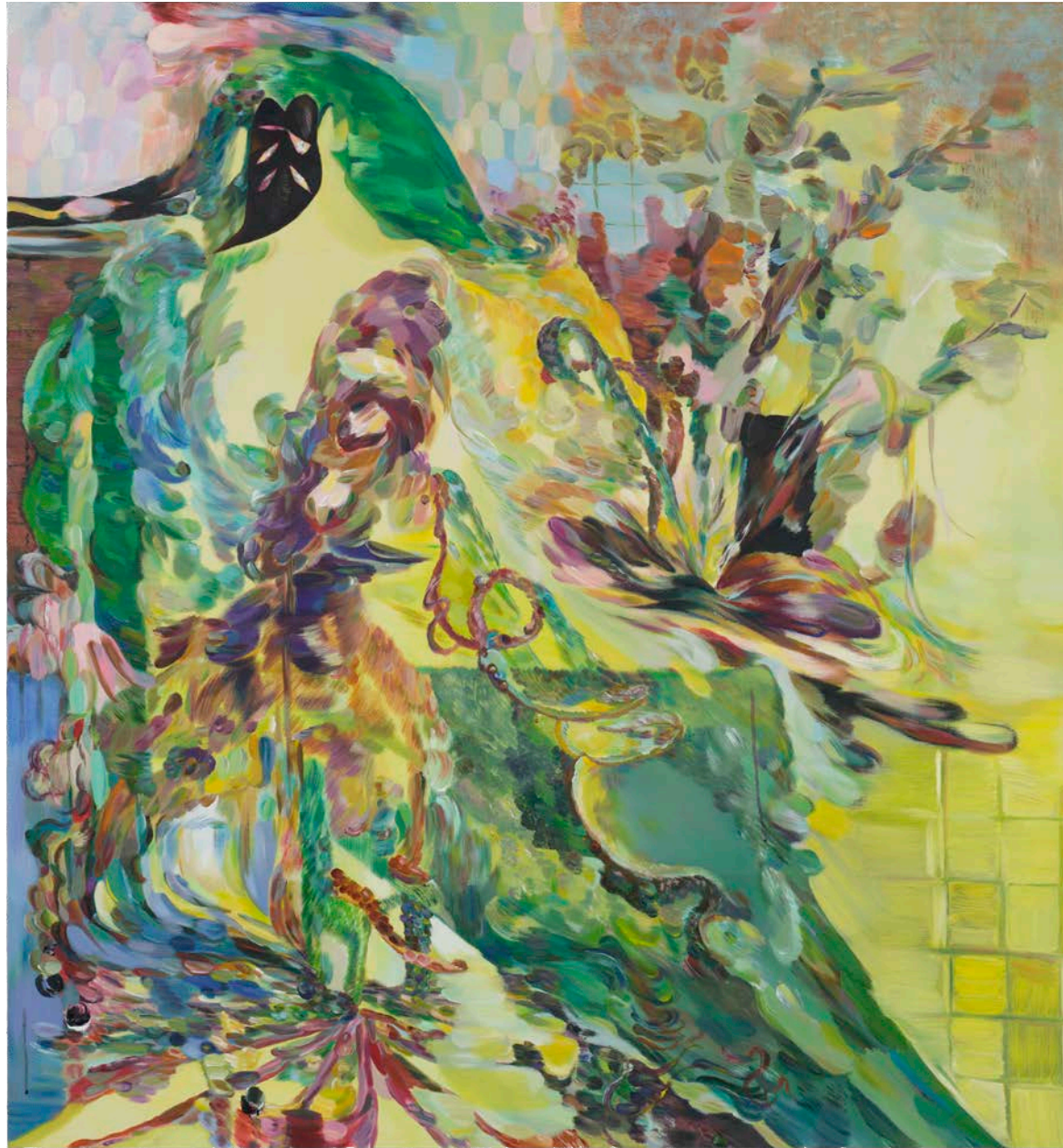


**Feminist-Surrealist
Desire**

REVIEW

YaYa Yajie Liang Dreams of an Interconnected World

By c.f. prior



In my search for you, I've made my new home in the eyes of a bird, often staring at the passing wind, 2023. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 137 x 127 cm (54 x 50 in). © the artist courtesy of Cob Gallery.

In YaYa Yajie Liang's *He sinks into the summer, slowly sinking towards the trembling, pulsating, wet green chessboard under the sun's turbines* (2023), repetitive dabbing brushwork and an exuberant use of colour produces great, psychedelic swirls across the canvas. The effect suggests forms from the natural world that never fully resolve, as if snail shells, butterfly wings, elongated beaks, as well as waterfalls and ravines, three fingers and two overseeing eyes are arrested in the moment of slipping out of one form and into the next. In another of the works upstairs, *In my search for you, I've made my new home in the eyes of a bird, often staring at the passing wind* (2023), plant leaves, branches, and tentacles effloresce from chartreuse, Pepto-Bismol pink, and high-vis-yellow paint that eddies and whirls. These canvases are two of ten acrylic and oil paintings that, along with four smaller watercolour and ink works, comprise 'Summer Palace', the artist's first solo exhibition at Cob Gallery in London.

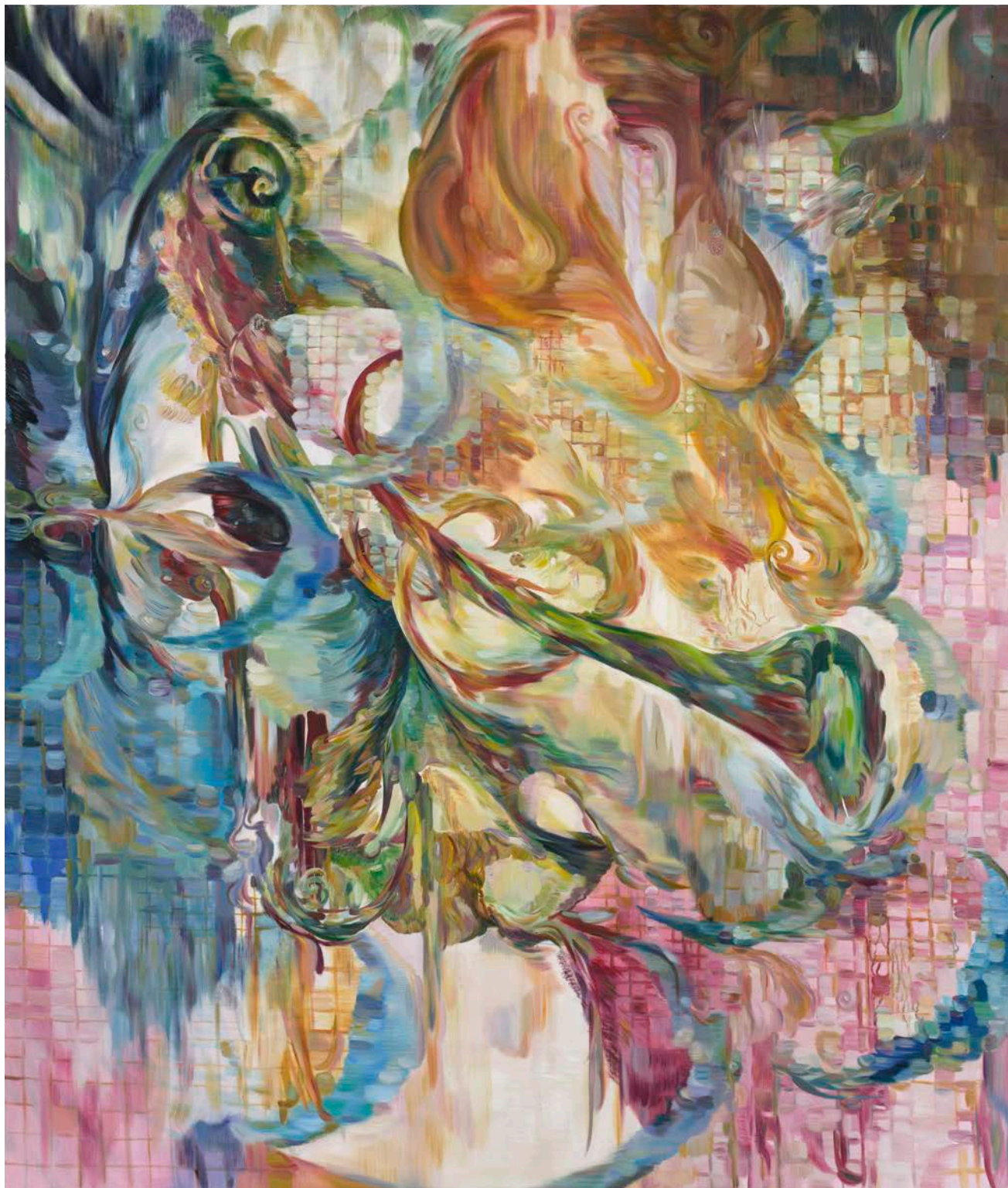
All the paintings, made largely over 2023, hover at the boundary of abstraction and figuration, not quite alighting at either. The oil and acrylic paintings in particular aim, without adopting the visual language of either the 19th-century woodland scene or the mythological landscapes of the 17th-

and 18th-centuries, to replicate the sensation of walking beneath a verdant forest canopy. The objects in the large landscape *Prelude* (2023), for example, shapeshift, but the underpinning sensibility is more mycological than it is mythological. It's concerned with the cycles of decay and renewal that play out with dramatic effect on the forest floor. Nacre snail slime intermingles with pink, umbilical ribbons, pink, umbilical ribbons intermingle with a shining, jet black phallus, and the shining, jet black phallus with an unfurling fern. *Prelude* tests not just formal boundaries, like abstraction and figuration, but ontological ones that appear to separate the vegetal from the animal, the natural from the human. It is emblematic of the interrelated but distinct bodies of work in oil and acrylic.

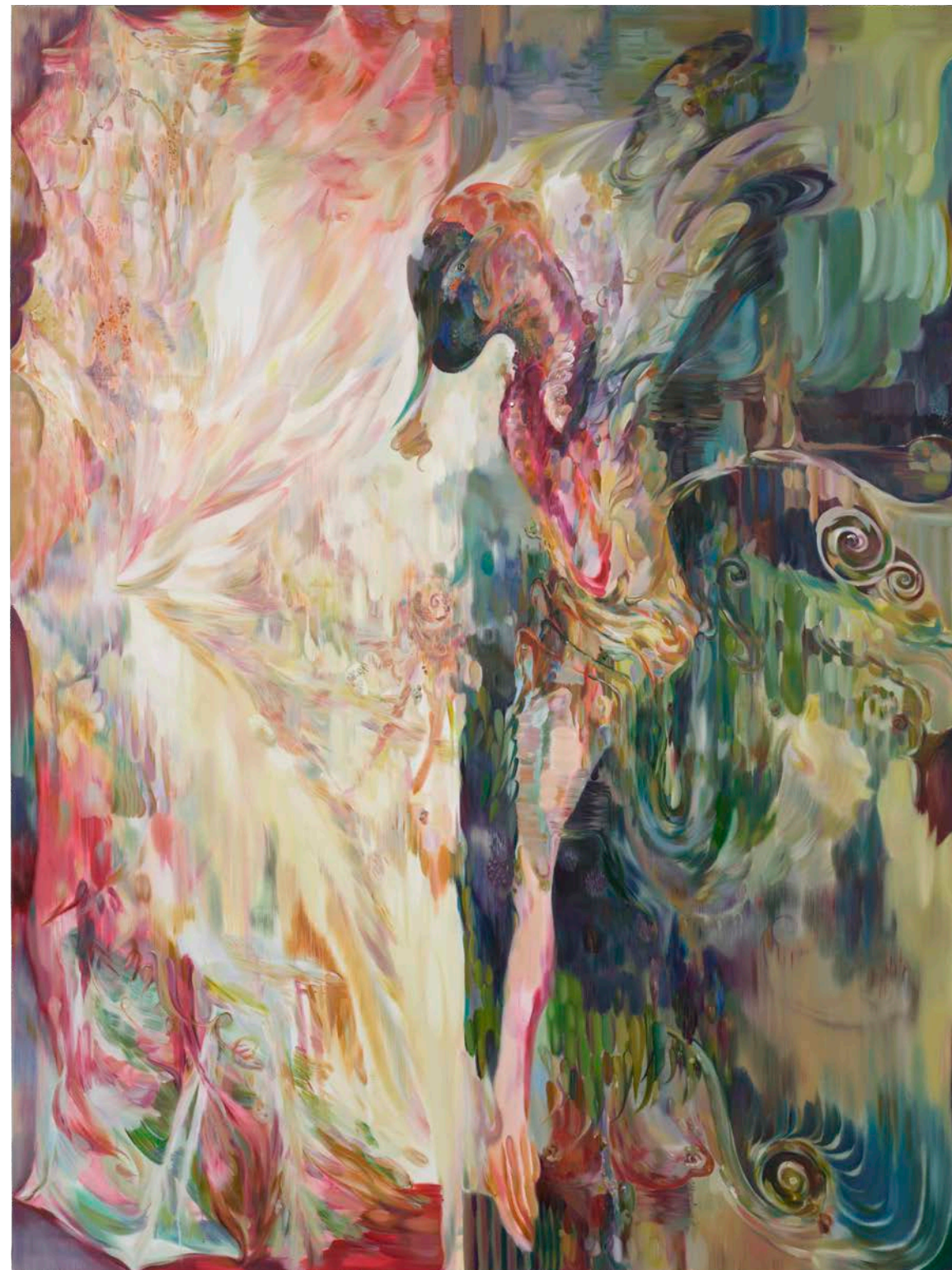
The essential interconnectivity of all things, the Cob documentation explains, is one of Liang's abiding interests. The text also mentions that the paintings are "to be experienced like an axis mundi", and invokes Kafka, Deleuze and Guattari, and Fra Angelico as the show's guiding lights. Meanwhile, the titles draw on poems by Tranströmer, the diaries of Pessoa, and dialogue from Bi Gan's 2015 film *Kaili Blues*. It's hardly any wonder then, that, at times, the paintings seem overburdened by their supporting material. Works like *I carry the universe with me*



I carry the universe with me, 2023. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 170 x 200 cm (66 7/8 x 78 3/4 in). © the artist courtesy of Cob Gallery.



Moonlight, 2023. Oil on canvas, 200 x 170 cm (78 ¾ x 66 7/8 in). © the artist courtesy of Cob Gallery.



No night can lull me into slumber, no dawn can wake me up, 2023. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 200 x 150 cm (78 ¾ x 59 in). © the artist courtesy of Cob Gallery.

(2023) – which depicts a book splayed open at its middle, its once legible surface smudged with intense blues, greens, and yellows, and populated by grasshoppers, flies, eggs, spiders, ammonite, and plant tendrils – *Moonlight* (2023), and *No night can lull me into slumber, no dawn can wake me up* (2023), contain objects and references that vie for the viewer's recognition in a way that forecloses contemplation. Looking at them, I remember the artist Tai Shani discussing how she wanted to resist the impetus to make “researched based” art both because, in its attempt to flatten and quantify the creative process, the research-based approach threatens so much of what's transformative about making art and also because the practice often produces work that's more compelling on the page than it is in person. I felt that something similar had happened with these three works: that whatever the artist had first found powerful, affective, or potentially transformational about her subject was beginning to collapse under the pressure to justify, with all these references, something as rare, mysterious, and as delicate as genuine interest.

The most compelling works in the exhibition, and my favourites, were four watercolour landscapes on Chinese rice paper tucked in the dark back room. While the watercolours share motifs with the oil and acrylic paintings – water pooling, mycelium, ferns, and other objects that evoke the understory's heady scents of leafmould and chlorophyll – they hold their ideas lightly. Like the rest of the works in the show, these explore and articulate the relationship between different organisms but, not unlike Cy Twombly's lithographic portfolio *Natural History Part 1, Mushrooms* (1974), each object is given more space. So too is the viewer.

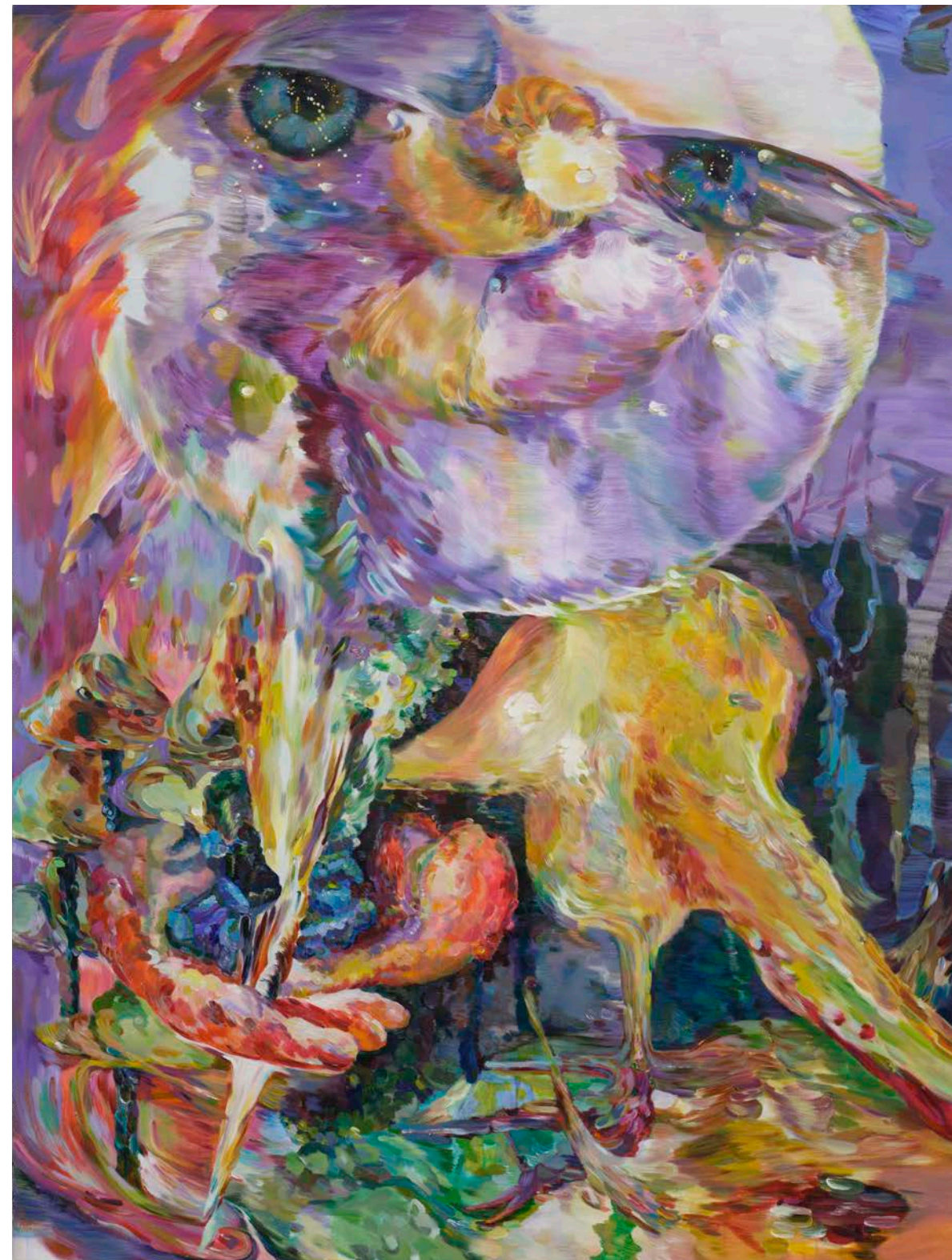
Also successful is the oil painting *In my hands* (2023), a riff on Francesco del Cossa's well-known painting of Saint Lucy in which she's depicted holding the martyr's palm leaf in one hand and gazing down at the other, in which she is clasping a pair of eyes flowering from a single stem. In later versions of Saint Lucy's martyrdom story, the Roman emperor Diocletian's guards remove her eyes prior to her execution but, while they are preparing her body for burial, her family find that her eyes have miraculously been restored. Extracted from their religious setting, Liang's eyes float freely against a dappled pink surface. More like the confrontational, unblinking eye at the centre of the round of ham in René Magritte's *The Portrait* (1935) than 15th-century iconography, the eyes reverse the landscape painter's gaze. Nature is looking back.

The art world so often speaks of ecology, especially amidst the effects of capital accumulation on the climate, often with the intention of inspiring a renewed relationship with the natural world. Like the work included in recent exhibitions 'Dear Earth: Art and Hope in a Time of Crisis' at the Hayward Gallery, 'letter like shapes word like sequences' at Amanda Wilkinson, and Serpentine's ongoing 'Back to Earth' programme, 'Summer Palace' imagines a more harmonious interplay between organisms



In my hands, 2023. Oil on canvas, 40 x 20 cm (15 3/4 x 7 7/8 in). © the artist courtesy of Cob Gallery.

and their environments. Without making any overt statement about the threats to or future of these relationships, it's clear that the works dream of a more transparently interconnected world, but it's not always clear if the dream mode is nostalgic – harking back to an untamed, Edenic 'before' – if it's post-apocalyptic or if it's proposing some other transformation altogether.



He sinks into the summer, slowly sinking towards the trembling, pulsating, wet green chessboard under the sun's turbines, 2023. Acrylic on canvas, 177 x 134 cm (69 3/4 x 52 3/4 in). © the artist courtesy of Cob Gallery.



Prelude, 2023. Oil on canvas, 90 x 260 cm (35 ⁷/₁₆ x 102 ²³/₆₄ in). © the artist courtesy of Cob Gallery.



Echoes from a distant land III, 2023. Watercolour, ink, acrylic and oil on Chinese rice paper, framed: 74.5 x 142 cm (29 ³/₈ x 55 ⁷/₈ in). © the artist courtesy of Cob Gallery.



Echoes from a distant land I, 2022. Watercolour, ink, acrylic and oil on Chinese rice paper, framed: 74.5 x 142 cm (29 ³/₈ x 55 ⁷/₈ in). © the artist courtesy of Cob Gallery.

References

Tai Shani post on Twitter, 2 October 2022, https://twitter.com/Tai_Shani/status/157661525365556097?t=9Ek2sjvxTm9bKpl378qZVQ&s=19.