

JULIEN NGUYEN Returns

Described as "eternally a student, a self-taught apprentice" of masters that precede him by centuries, Julien Nguyen surveys muses, mythologies, and unresolved questions that resonate from the 15th century to the present. From a one-bedroom Los Angeles apartment in which life and art are invariably intertwined, across a pan-historical library that spans Giorgio Vasari, WIRED, and The Washington Post, "It is my strong belief,"he posits, "that from the 17th century onwards much of western art slowly transforms into (bad) apologetics for imperialismbut not before! It is from before where we might still learn, if we could only remember." His work proposes a redress to this shared fugue, circulating somewhere between archaeology and phantasmagoria as Nguyen traces articulations of power and transgression as spoken through the epoch-spanning language of art. From decorative flourishes of imperial Byzantium and the Renaissance's construction of rational perspective, to the stylized artifice

of French Mannerism, the biomorphic reverie of Japanese manga, and the unnerving theatre of politics today, he enters a dialogue of Masters artistic, governmental and mass media – to audit the life of archetypes. And, while he remains reverential to the histories of art as an oracle of both aesthetic and philosophical inspiration, Nguyen resolutely disrupts the assumed notions of its discourse - collapsing a variety of visual languages to conjure preternatural stages for hybrid protagonists to play. Through a combinatory lens that incorporates 21st century elements of science fiction, fantasy, soft porn, anime, and a coterie of friends, lovers and otherworldly chimera, he orchestrates evocative tableaux where legacies are played through the lens of today. This is neither appropriation nor critique, as writer Franklin Melendez reiterates, but rather a "re-staging that seeks to bring into relief these lingering structures as they inflect our current socio-political realities."

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Top: *Executive Solutions*, 2017, Oil and Encaustic on Linen-mounted Panel, Collection of the Whitney Museum of Art

Right: *The Annunciation*, 2017, Oil on Aluminum Panel, Private Collection, The Bahamas









As seen in work like Faust II (2017), Nguyen draws most frequently, and fundamentally, upon the Early Renaissance of the 15th century, which retains an aura as one of the noblest traditions human civilization has borne. Italy was at the forefront of this encompassing movement as it complicated the singular orbit of the Church – marrying Classical tenets with scientific methods and ascendant humanism across a wide swath of society. In this paradigmatic campaign of enduring cultural currency, visual art became the most prominent flagbearer - propagating an image culture transmitted via the esteemed brushes of artists such as Piero della Francesca (1415-1492), Fra Angelico (1395-1455), Masaccio (1401-1428) and Donatello (1386-1466). Flexing the dogma of devotional assignment, their work expressed a seemingly emancipatory shift in the relationship between man and the universe where more realistic, empowered subjects populate Biblical tableaux, as well as an expanded spectrum of mythological scenes, portraits, battles, landscapes and depictions of the everyday. Pushing the previously impervious jurisdiction of piety, these paintings imagine subjects repatriating their agency (or at

least a fraction of it) from the exclusive domain of the divine. The purported liberation of subject and author was, however, underpinned by a lexicon of scientific devices and pictorial order that included one-point perspective, foreshortening, proportion, anatomical detail and low, flat relief carving called relieve schiacciato. Thereby grafting one dialect of power with another, the employment of perspective in painting ever since has, for Nguyen, coincided with exercises of sovereignty and the construction of frames that span actual and imaginary. Such borders, niches, columns, and framing devices appear frequently in Nguyen's work, as in Executive Solutions (2017) and Homestead (2016-18), serving as much to organize compositions and bodies as they do to play the protagonist. Moving from object to subject, as well as the constructed spaces of art to the solidity of bricks and mortar, he considers how the architectural manifestations of ideology shape our ways of seeing and being. And it is here, where presiding ideals of allegiance and order meet the inevitable deviations of human imperfections, emotions and parallax, that Nguyen locates libidinous interventions in the shadows of the Renaissance.





In Nguyen's return to Biblical scenes reformulated through the aspirations of the Early Renaissance [i.e. The Flagellation (2018)], to the place where many foundational narratives of Western mythology radiate, he locates a sensual constellation of power, desire, fantasy and spiritual pursuits. And while the erotic pulse of many purportedly ecclesiastical artworks remained implicit at the time, the camouflaged mobilization of salacious content became an increasingly potent means of motivation. What is faith, one must ask, if not impassioned belief in deferred gratification? The relatively common Renaissance custom of the painter incorporating his young assistants (often lovers), as characters within these scenes heightens the sexual charge of the composition all the more - carving out intimate niches in the most grandiose of stages to entwine the personal and divine. Centuries later, the eros of Nguyen's

Above: Faust II, 2017, Oil on Panel, Collection of David Hoberman

Opposite: *Noli me tangere, Caesaris Sum,* 2018, Tempera and Oil on Panel, Private Collection, Germany

paintings in this ongoing tradition smolder quietly, but feverishly as he "queers" his mythical evocations with the sinuous bodies and stoic visages of friends and lovers. In a discourse where the quest for heavenly embrace is an exercise in both stimulation and denial, arousal and decorum, writer Mimi Chu highlights the ways in which Nguyen's "androgynous, inflammatory and highly eroticized...figures pick up on the taboo of undercurrents of conventional religious depictions." By "subtly warping sacred iconography," and amalgamating hallowed veneration with what friend and curator Jenny Borland labels our "perversity and imperfections," he forges "a gateway," in her appraisal, "to consume the elusive ideal." In this hybridized, anachronistic arena, Chu calls attention to the way "dainty millennials" play "sacred figures from the Western canon"- inhabiting various states of wakefulness, dress and animus "in archetypal poses." And it is here, in works like Noli me tangere, Caesaris Sum (2018), where Nguyen refashions the figure as a liminal, transgressive mutation (akin to the Late Renaissance style of Mannerism) – bending the space around his bodies to unhinge the presiding pictorial rule.



Above: *Kye, Semper Solus,* 2017, Oil and Tempera on Wood Panel, Domus Collection

Opposite: *The Flagellation*, 2018, Oil on Aluminum Panel, Collection of Patrick and Lindsey Collins

The serpentine twist of lithe bodies undulating between agony and ecstasy become guerilla agents in Nguyen's operatic constellation of history, humanism and speculation. Stretching the body beyond the normative ideals of Classical proportion (both literally and figuratively), he pushes the human frame into an amorphous, virtual frontier where attendant codes are rendered askew. As a case in point, the subject of Good Sweet Night Prince (2018) writhes in a state of becoming, eyes closed and legs flung open, lost in a somnambulant simper. Space and subjectivity are negotiated rather than given, as composite creatures proliferate in the guise of timeless statuary, "like exquisite corpses," according to academic Jeanne Dreskin, "absurdly suspended in temporal limbo."Adhering to no one era or aesthetic in a slurry of cross-pollination, icons are very purposefully "rendered incomplete" according to Chu, who underscores the way Nguyen attenuates his virtuosic technique to provide foils rather than finish. Despite the capacity to craft subjects and spaces with the same immaculate lacquer of his Early Renaissance mentors, his paintings feature a spectrum of stages from pristine polish to barely formed. And, while our eye is instinctually drawn to the peaks of Nguyen's technical prowess, it is in the seemingly unfinished zones resembling historical under-painting - where limbs and walls slide into limbo - that our gaze ultimately lingers. This is where the supernormal pantheon of Nguyen's intervention gathers, and where surrogates ponderously, if only partially, coalesce. In this light, in a half-formed space with its perspective subtly, but noticeably off-kilter, the long, statuesque figure sitting dreamily at an easel in Kye,

Semper Solus (2017) is arguably autobiographical. As the lines of his easel trail into a hazy background, the geometry of the dividing screen dissipates in/ to brushy suggestion, and white calligraphic filigree winds up and down his arm, this pensive painter directs his brush/pen towards an indefinite composition.

Swimming through the surreal worlds Nguyen conjures with age-old materials and youthful restlessness, we enter a place where the histories that paintings once told fray, and "the image," in the words of Chu, "precedes the story." These scenes and stories live at the intersection of "the sublime, the picturesque, and the uncanny" – which is how Nguyen describes the city in which he lives and works, Los Angeles, as a hyperreal paradise drifting along a precipice. "Empty and full in equal measure," according to Borland, Nguyen's work manifests the suburb in which he grew up in - South Bay - which she describes, much like his paintings, as "a cozy, yet unsettling place to return to." And while Nguyen is by no means tethered to his biography, and explores a breadth of history, politics, art and visual cultures with relish, he admits that his Vietnamese heritage – and its fraught relationship with the United States – informs his vocation. In a diaspora that oscillates between subjectivities, state, and how the histories of art speak to those inside and outside the canon, Nguyen aspires to be a hopeful, if no less infectious virus in his adopted country. From one of the West's bastard sons, propelled by geopolitics into a place of adaptation and translation, this strain of cellular realignment is, like him, "forever fueled by an intensity," in the words of Borland, "that oscillates wildly between fear, desire, confidence and sadness." Measured in its extremes and melancholic in its majesty, the work of Julien Nguyen is forever torn between desire and disruption – contributing lovingly to the history and visual language he aspires to interrupt. In this evolving displacement, in the in-between where he and his protagonists float, we find an equivocal oasis, a curious refuge, an inner sanctum where something above, beyond, and yet part of us hovers, almost within reach.

SM 2019





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February 8 through June 16, 2019 Curated by Steven Matijcio

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Julien Nguyen (b. 1990) is an artist of Vietnamese heritage who was born in Washington, DC and currently lives and works in Los Angeles. He completed his undergraduate degree at Rhode Island School of Design, Providence (2012), and received his Meisterschulle from Staatliche Hochschule für Bildende Künste, Städelschule, Frankfurt (2015). His work has been the subject of a solo exhibition at the Swiss Institute, New York (2018), Freedman Fitzpatrick, Los Angeles (2016); and Kunstverein Munich, Munich (2014); and has been included in group exhibitions such as the 2017 Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, (2017); Parked like serious oysters, MMK, Frankfurt (2015); and Lost Boys, Glucksman Gallery, Cork, Ireland (2013).

Exhibition Checklist

- Homestead, 2016 2018, Oil on Panel, Private Collection, Germany
- Executive Function, 2017, Oil and Encaustic on Linen-mounted Panel, Courtesy of Stuart Shave/Modern Art, London
- Executive Solutions, 2017, Oil and Encaustic on Linen-mounted Panel, Collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art
- Faust II, 2017, Oil on Panel, Collection of David Hoberman
- Julian the Apostate, 2017, Oil on Wood Panel, Domus Collection
- Kye, Semper Solus, 2017, Oil and Tempera on Wood Panel, Domus Collection
- The Annunciation, 2017, Oil on Aluminum Panel, Private Collection, The Bahamas
- Good Sweet Night Prince, 2018, Tempera and Oil on Panel, Private Collection, Germany
- Noli me tangere, Caesaris Sum, 2018, Tempera and Oil on Panel, Private Collection, Germany
- **Spiritus Mundi,** 2018, HD Video, Courtesy of the Artist
- The Flagellation, 2018, Oil on Aluminum Panel, Collection of Patrick and Lindsey Collins

Cover: Julian the Apostate [detail], 2017, Oil on Wood Panel, Domus Collection

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