

MICHAEL HO

*As Feelings Burn Their Way*

19.10.2023 – 02.12.2023

It's the little things that linger: the ripe scent of summer sweat, moonlight glinting off black leather, a susurrus through the leaves. Memory casts the warmth of its flame on sensory experiences that only intensify each time we return to them. Michael Ho aptly calls this kind of recollection "cinematic," each instance crystallized in a vignette or frame. We are all our own main characters, after all, even when we try our best to forget ourselves. In Ho's exhibition, "As Feelings Burn Their Way", memories spark up, paradoxically, from the places where bodies forget namelessly together: public parks and cruising sites where men feel their way through the dark in search of sex. Sometimes a glimpse, a touch, are all you get. Ho holds up these moments for us, exposing them like negatives, though his voyeuristic gaze never grants us the whole picture. We see hands and napes but never full faces. In a culture which seeks to institutionalize queerness, this kind of intimacy still has no name.

Ho's unique process involves producing negatives, or perhaps more accurately, making tableaux from stains. He begins by pushing paint through the back of an unprimed canvas in mostly abstract patterns which harden to an unabsorbent ground. Once the canvas is reversed, these forms act as a kind of stencil, occluding figures which the artist first renders digitally and then onto the front of the painting in oils applied by hand. Each work is thus partially a mirror image, imbued with the same-but-different quality which characterizes gay desire. The abstract patterns, meanwhile, which are often composed of lozenges, resemble rustling leaves or writhing microorganisms, summoning the threat of contagion that has long hung over cruising sites while imagining queer new forms of life being born and bred there.

But these are not just Ho's memories. They are fragments of a shared heritage, reflected back at us. The two men barely visible through dense foliage in *What is left unsaid*, dressed in what seem like matching denim jackets, are the lovers from Gregg Araki's full-throttle film *The Living End* (1993). A moment of romantic, mutual annihilation in the face of a life-threatening disease has been recast here as one of quiet tenderness. The cropped mouth sucking on a set of knuckles in *Purple bruised afterthoughts* was borrowed from the cover of *Crush* (2004), a collection by poet Richard Siken. "It's not like a tree where the roots have to end somewhere, it's more like a song on a policeman's radio," Siken writes of love's promise in the book's opening poem, "Scheherazade." You can almost hear the cop scanner crackling over *Oft in Tiefen Winternachten* (Often in the Dead of Winter), the leather kit in a tangle of roots perhaps a sign of love's promise having just been abandoned. And then there is the remarkable *Thick with silence*, with its tendrils curling from the end of a lit cigarette passed between two outstretched hands. It's a moment of pleasure that foregrounds its evanescence, and a potent symbol of *petit mort*. A shadow of Jean Genet's only film, *Un chant d'amour* (1950), rises from the painting's exchange of vapors through the orifice of a tree hollow – but then identity in Ho's work is always a matter of smoke and mirrors.

The white and purple in these paintings, while redolent of moonlight, reproduces the effect of eyes adjusting to the dark. But just as soon, what comes to light will almost surely vanish again. The thing that matters most is the memory of love's burn. As Siken puts it, "The light is no mystery, the mystery is that there is something to keep the light from passing through."

- Evan Moffitt

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1. *Oft in tiefen Winternächten*, 2023  
Oil and acrylic on canvas  
180 × 170 cm  
70 7/8 × 66 7/8 in

2. *History Will Wait for Us*, 2023  
Oil and acrylic on canvas  
295 × 225 cm  
116 1/8 × 88 5/8 in

3. *Because You See Right Through Me*, 2023  
Oil and acrylic on canvas  
25 × 30 cm  
9 7/8 × 11 3/4 in

4. *Feeling for Answers*, 2023  
Oil and acrylic on canvas  
30 × 20 cm  
11 3/4 × 7 7/8 in

5. *Not All is Lost*, 2023  
Oil and acrylic on canvas  
20 × 15 cm  
7 7/8 × 5 7/8 in

6. *What Was Left Unsaid*, 2023  
Oil and acrylic on canvas  
170 × 180 cm  
66 7/8 × 70 7/8 in

7. *You Who Are All My Nights*, 2023  
Oil and acrylic on canvas  
35 × 40 cm  
13 3/4 × 15 3/4 in

8. *Purple Bruised Afterthoughts*, 2023  
Oil and acrylic on canvas  
65 × 55 cm  
25 5/8 × 21 5/8 in

9. *Kindred Spirits*, 2023  
Oil and acrylic on canvas  
85 × 225 cm  
33 1/2 × 88 5/8 in

10. *Before You Decided That I Am a Saint*, 2023  
Oil and acrylic on canvas  
50 × 35 cm  
19 3/4 × 13 3/4 in

11. *Thick With Silences*, 2023  
Oil and acrylic on canvas  
165 × 145 cm  
65 × 57 1/8 in

12. *Too Small to Hold Any Promises*, 2023  
Oil and acrylic on canvas  
20 × 30 cm  
7 7/8 × 11 3/4 in