

Michael Abel *MUTT*

01.10 – 03.01.2025

The architect and academic Michael Abel brings his artistic practice to YveYANG Gallery this January with *MUTT*, an exhibition of new paintings that showcase his ability to refract the multifarious elements of his persona, weaving intimate significance into his portraits of sea life, and even his still lifes of mystical trinkets found on eBay.

Painted oil-on-linen in his studio atop a skyscraper, Abel's works showcase experimentation. The artist surveys a wide span of art history and renovates techniques from all its different eras. The end results are fresh, profound, and wholly his own.

It begins with hair. The artist's *Mutt* series offers self-portraits from behind that highlight a real genetic anomaly – the thin tuft of fur that extends a short length down the back of his neck. This is rendered even more strange by the artist's decision to depict it upside down, so that it grows up to the base of his nape. Its texture is different from his other hair, an opportunity for painterly improvisation seen too in his play with the color patterns of the skin, which is colder here, warmer there. At times it feels like we may be looking at a cadaver.

"This growth may have resulted from the fact that my hereditary mix is Scottish and Chinese," Abel said, "It's just as likely that it has nothing to do with that, but for me this line of hair has long served as a symbol of mistranslation."

We leap from the body to nothingness, as the artist brings the spikiness of his coding error to large-scale abstract works. These are anemone-like exercises in force capture. One need not be familiar with the artist's self-mythology to admire the pointy language of the brushwork here. In one painting, they intersect at hypnotic angles that suck the viewer in. In the next, their violence is directed upwards, as if it yearns for the night sky.

Figuration arrives alongside a thudding bass in *Lady Liberty Bounce* (2024). At first glance this might be the thumbnail of a YouTube video from the medium's more

benign period, which saw a vogue for "ghost riding" empty cars down suburban streets. Upon closer inspection the whip is just the background, a prop at which Lady Liberty gestures, urging us to ponder its significance. She's scratched faceless, haunted, and pops into the scene on a coiled spring of genie smoke.

The territory becomes only more surreal as we enter the portion of the show dedicated to Bill Zhou, an imaginary childhood cowboy brought to life here through artifacts of dubious origins. Seen in paintings such as *Before Christ 05 (Self Portrait of Bill Zhou)* (2024), Zhou is an homage to the Chinese name of the artist's mother, and to his upbringing in rural Canada, where cowboys weighed on the imagination.

The artist chose his models for Bill Zhou in these paintings in a playful manner. He researched Chinese artifacts not in books or in museums but on auction sites. Bill Zhou is therefore not only a mixed breed but perhaps even counterfeit, his dubious adventures fraught with melodrama and associations. It makes perfect sense, somehow, when he meets Mickey Mouse in the Forbidden City.

Michael Abel (b. 1990, Alberta, Canada) received a BFA from the University of Calgary in 2012 and his Master of Architecture from the University of Toronto in 2016. His art has been shown at the Anonymous Gallery (New York, NY), Amity & Carlyle Packer (Los Angeles, CA), the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art (Toronto, Canada), X Space (Toronto, Canada), Whitehouse (Tokyo, Japan), and the Nickle Arts Museum (Calgary, Canada). Abel lives and works in New York City where he is the co-founder of the architecture practice ANY and the Chief Design Officer at Homer. He has been published in *PIN-UP*, *Flash Art*, *Rumor Review Princeton*, *Disc Journal*, *KALEIDOSCOPE*, and *The Brooklyn Rail*. He is a Graham Foundation grantee and currently guest editing the next issue of *Flash Art* Volumes with Nile Greenberg.