

Take a Perceptual Leap

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Curator: Fiona He

Artists: Wan Yang, Wang Xiaofu and Wang Zhiyuan

Press release

Text by Fiona He

How do we perceive the world around us? Philosophers and scientists such as Immanuel Kant, Martin Heidegger, John Locke, Philip Zimbardo, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Friedrich Hayek, and others have offered a plethora of frameworks and interpretations spanning different disciplines and fields. Whether it's the philosophers' reflections on phenomenology or cognitive scientists' analyses of perception, understanding how we perceive the world has always been central to grasping our sense of self and our relationship to the world. How our bodies orient and dispose of themselves in the world reveals how we sense things, and these subjective experiences continually configure who we are.

In the 21st century, with the rapid development of information technology and digitalization, especially with the support of AI and Internet technology, more and more tools are brought to expand and strengthen the boundaries of perception. Details that the unaided eye cannot see can now be visualized, and sensory experiences beyond human perceptions can be simulated. Technology has introduced unprecedented experiences, but it also prompts us to ponder whether human perceptions may be substituted with the assistance of technology. And when frameworks of past cognitive means are dismantled, can perception take a leap forward? And how would each leap impact humanity's ongoing search for the "truth" about ourselves and the world?

Today, the works on canvas remain a medium through which artists express their understanding of the world. These artists do not necessarily reject technology in their practice but often use it to expand the potential of human perception, which could be translated into painting. As a visual language with thousands of years of history, the painted medium has become heterogeneous with technological advancements and human sciences. With the popularization of television and the rise of conceptual art, Rosalind Krauss coined the term "post-medium condition," suggesting that the medium's purity no longer bound artists' practices but began integrating other disciplines. In the era of AI, can painting still hold its position as the "meta-medium" in contemporary art

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practices? Would there be any potential for a quantum-like leap amid technological advancements, society, thought, and the medium's evolution?

The group exhibition *Take a Perceptual Leap* presents the works of three artists—Wan Yang, Wang Xiaofu, and Wang Zhiyuan, whose primary medium of expression is on painted surfaces. Through a Mobius-ring-like exhibition layout, their works unfold each artist's interest in this era. Although their individual experiences and knowledge structures vary, with interests ranging from literature, technology, literature, and philosophy, each employing entirely distinctive approaches to their practice. Yet, they all employ technological tools to further their exploration and research. As they accumulate knowledge and experiences, these artists deliver their evolving perceptions of the world, balancing personal emotions, imagination, and practice.

Wang Xiaofu attempts to create abstract imageries using recognizable elements that lure viewers into a "deeper reality." Her outward exploration is often through reading, imagination, writing, and drawings. Maurice Blanchot's description in *Thomas the Obscure*—"the surface of the pond opens an eye to me"—resonates deeply with the imagery of the artist's imagination. For her latest works, the artist unfolds her thoughts and observations with the symbolic "eye" before connecting, entwining, and nesting thoughts and inner consciousness with the external world. Moreover, her encounters with the world not only through physical experiences but also deepen through engagements with the infinite and unknown. The artist's dialogue with the painted medium resembles one's quest for the truth into an "abyss." Because the boundaries of perception and thought are often fluid, ambiguous, and even mutually permeating, Wang conceives the path of understanding the world as an endless and ever-expanding process. The artist's use of color, shape, and material undermines the boundary of abstraction and figuration. By reconstructing her observations, understanding, and imagination of the natural world, typically in elements such as water surfaces, ponds, and skies, Wang's painterly practice responds to the objective world while visualizing a subjective one from within. In her attempt to capture the fleeting and elusive moments of perception, Wang highlights the leap in human sensory experiences amid the intersection of self-awareness and the external world.

Imagination and sensibility emerge in the form of "landscapes" in Wang Zhiyuan's work. His exploration of acrylic paints creates accumulated surfaces and fluid colors that evoke the viewer's association with "sceneries." With horizontal or vertical visual structures, his paintings both hold abstract traces of pigments and an unconscious revisit to the traditions of nearly a century of art history. Wang Zhiyuan builds his practice on the academic training he received in China and the U.S. while searches possibilities to expand from this ground. His self-made tools introduce expansive possibilities by integrating body and movement into the creative process. The metallic sheen of his colors builds a sense of spatial depth within the surface and brushstrokes in the most prominent works on view in this exhibition, *City*, whose symmetrical structure and intent for the future are inspired by the works of American conceptual artist Michael Heizer. Like Heizer, Wang's reflections on humanity at present, our time, and our sense of space compel him to integrate these sensibilities into his medium of

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expression through elements such as shape, texture, dimension, structure, and order. These integrations offer a broad sense of urban perception and subtle ways of introducing the impact of our technological present. Wang pays attention to the proliferation of electronic devices in modern life and the industrial revolution sparked by technological production. As such, his painted surfaces reflect the nature of the post-industrial era built on reason. Moreover, the artist's interest in the mask aligner, the most cutting-edge technology indispensable for microchips, highlights the artist's knowledge of a deep connection between the imperceptible to the world's social and political structures and his inclination to visualize what is beyond human perceptions, geared toward an unknowable future.

Technologies such as AI-generated imagery and 3D printing are more subtly yet intimately interwoven into Wan Yang's creative process. His interdisciplinary interests span science fiction, mathematical aesthetics, and cutting-edge scientific theories, ushering a transformation from imagination to visual representation through a balancing act of establishing while breaking self-imposed rules. Texts by authors such as Stanisław Lem and H.P. Lovecraft serve as points of departure in Wan's interests. He attempts to explore the possibility of visualizing human and non-human communication in Lem's sci-fi, conveying emotional responses to futuristic imaginings of rapid technological advancement. Through blurred symbolic constructions, the anti-anthropocentric stance of the Cthulhu Mythos connects with the mystery and unknown of ancient mythological systems. Additionally, Kantian theory on cognition, phase spatial imagery from chaos theory, and C.T.R. Wilson's "cloud chamber" experiments—spanning numerous scientific practice eras—are all areas that captivate Wan's interest. Through his visual systems and color expressions, he seeks to reflect the leap from the limitation of human perception in three-dimensional space to higher-dimensional understanding.

In a modern society veiled by technology-generated images, where the human experience of viewing has long shifted from their appreciation of natural landscapes. Algorithms envelop us in a void. Technology has provided convenient ways to access information but has made it more complex and rife with distractions. For the artists in this exhibition, painting stands at the intersection of perception and cognition. While they engage in deep dialogues with the medium, they also attempt to introduce contemporary sensibilities. In a reality dominated by fragmented data, the painted medium offers an immersive experience that resists scattered attention. The works of these three artists' practices highlight the medium's dynamic evolution with the times, evoking reflections on the present and the future. It reminds us that higher cognitive advancement is necessary to achieve a true leap in perception.

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