

Visions of Fading

Clémentine Bruno, Chiki, Zhi Ding & Maren Karlson

Mar 15 — Apr 12, 2025

This morning, as I was scrolling through the news, one of the headlines in *Libération* grabbed my attention. A panel of US citizens had shared their views on the situation in their country. The headline was: “It Doesn’t Feel Real, It Feels Like a Simulation.” Indeed, in recent months, I have often heard people around me say that they feel that what is happening can’t be true. The shape of recent events, and not just in the USA, is reminiscent of plots in numerous films that we’ve seen, stories that have served as the basis for dystopian fiction. But this might be too simple as an explanation: the mutual influence between mainstream politics and the dream factory. It can’t be the only reason why, in my insomnia, I am feeling invaded by thoughts that I don’t want to have. While the physical borders in the world are closing, those between reality and fiction seem to dissolve; what I’m seeing, then, is something like an invisible dam flooded by a storm of simulacra. And when I am finally falling asleep, images of destruction come again and visit me in dreams. Mark Fisher said that what is called the real world is a form of collective dreaming. I am still trying to understand what that means. Did he, in the 2010s and with the help of sci-fi writers that he loved, anticipate the anxiety dream that we are currently experiencing? Or is it that the simulation became reality and Fisher’s statement kind of reversed? Many things we thought only possible in fiction turn out to be happening in real life. Even dreams are endangered. I am wondering what kind of technology could oppose these forces. Art, perhaps.

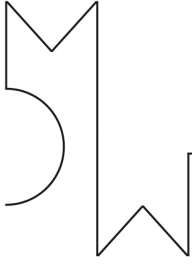
Visions of Fading, a group show held at Mendes Wood DM in Brussels, is an interesting example of how visual arts can respond to the current unsettling wave of fictionalized reality pouring in from the matrix. The exhibition features Clémentine Bruno (b. 1994, Paris, France), Chiki (b. 1997, Mexico City, Mexico), Zhi Ding (b. 1992, Jiujiang, China), and Maren Karlson (b. 1988, Rostock, Germany). The artists, born between the end of the ’80s and the middle of the ’90s, all employ painting as a primary medium. They were born in Europe, the Americas, and Asia. Two of them now live and work in the USA. Although all their practices are anchored in everyday life – from diaristic evocations and daily materialities to archival materials – they allow their subjects to blur, drift, and grow estranged through the pictorial medium. Image opacity – other realities unfold. The real trembles and other dreams seem to be entering the stage: emergence of phantom images, shadows enveloping, opening onto an abyss, uncommon characters appearing like alien presences. Maren Karlson’s paintings, in particular, serve as *conduits* between different moments in time, much like dreams do. In these oneiric scenes, places are *unmapped* and, as in Zhi Ding’s works, geographies recompose through the night. *Ghosts* reveal themselves, like in Clémentine Bruno’s layered compositions. Past utopias receive new visitors, imaginations act from within the painting, guiding the works toward a form of indefiniteness, as in Chiki’s paintings, like *dreams within dreams*.

Conduits

Maren Karlson’s *Staub (Holes)* (2024 & 2025) is a series of slim, elongated dark paintings of sites presenting connecting devices like tubes, networks, and ducting material. Crafted in oil, with

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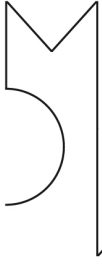
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great attention to detail, the works of the German-born, Los Angeles-based artist have a haunting presence. In these compositions, holes seem to be opening on enigmatic voids, painted over canvases of various unusual proportions. They seem to be made in a way that makes it difficult to determine whether they are depicting some underground technological network, or a series of organic systems, if we are facing an inanimate, mechanical object, or some radiography of the inside of an unidentifiable living thing. In these penumbral scenes, cables look like body parts. The scale of the work is also puzzling. Some pieces fit within architectural details of the exhibition space, producing black holes, negative spaces in the gallery. They neutralize representation while acting as conduits themselves, zooming into the materiality of the image. It is then hard to know whether we are navigating a microscopic or a macroscopic field: rendered with care, the grain and dust of the source picture acts as noise, as cosmic particles. For sure, what is at stake there is a conversation with the threshold of visibility.

For the *Staub (Holes) Series* (2025), Maren Karlson used archival footage – specifically, one singular photograph taken in 1975 by the Stasi documenting an explosion at an East German nuclear plant (the now-decommissioned site of Greifswald-Lubmin). Since the inception of this project, in Summer 2024, the artist transformed this picture, found in the Stasi archives, in various ways: cutting it up, zeroing in on details, contorting, rearranging, abstracting and obstructing the material... *Staub (Holes) #10* (2025) and *Staub (Holes) #11* (2025), the two paintings that are on view at the gallery, translate the forensic survey of sabotage into a speculative and sensorial journey. To the explosion on site, the artist responds with painted openings – revealing glimpses into the mechanics of a tentacular power structure. To the fire that broke out, she responds with ashes, mixed into the oil – a material that is, at once, a metaphor, and perhaps even magic. These visual sabotages reveal a menacing set of connecting devices, something like the bowels of a technological monster. One can feel the sensation of looking at a system from within and getting lost: there is neither up nor down, cables and holes lead in all directions at the same time. The perspective is vertiginous. Using the historical detour of the archive as a backdoor to re-enter our present times, Maren Karlson invites us to walk in the path of an anonymous agent, reporting an incident. The original photograph, loaded with suspicion by the controlling entity (the Stasi) is the output of a very much charged process of fabrication of objective truth. It can lead to the observation that there has actually been an accident, and to the accusation of the subjects the entity controls (the workers of the power plant). But something remains unclear: had the fire been an accident, or an act of sabotage? This ambivalence creates an opening, a moment of possibility. What if the investigator was in fact a saboteur, looking for passages, scouting the State's undergrounds, searching for alternative routes outside of this controlled zone...? Planning, perhaps, what allowed us to see inside today, this error that occurred then. The structures we are contained by are not as solid, smooth, and stable as they seem.

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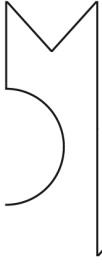
Unmapping

While Maren Karlson scratches the surface of reality to unearth deviations, Zhi Ding operates on other levels. The Chinese artist, now based in New York, produces modest-sized paintings – glimpses of a nocturnal world that invite the viewer to enter oneiric, quasi-cinematic situations. In the *Lurking Series* (2024), characters hide in the dark, looking out, searching for something – a thing that remains unknown to the viewer. If one never sees what the observer is looking at, one never gets to see the full story from which the scene appears to be taken. The atmosphere is unsettling: are they spying? Is there a danger? Are they hunting, are they chased? Is it a game? This suspended meaning is reinforced by the fact that the protagonists are also ambiguous: they're neither male nor female, and they are of almost no defined age (they could be children or young adults). And they, as well, have no face. There is a feeling that a story is being played out without really knowing what it is about. Its meaning evades interpretation, like with the people represented in the *Hide & Seek Series* (2024 & 2025). In each scene, a potential threat emanates from a game that used to be played innocently – a character hides in the dark, another is about to fall from a tree, while in another painting someone hiding is about to attack.

Nighttime brings mystery and tension to Zhi Ding's paintings. In the dark, like in dreams, things are not what they seem, they don't mean what they're supposed to. In *Chana Star II* (2025), for example, a mysterious lamp on which a forest is painted hangs on top of a waterfall. The figure in the painting is lost in the illusion, unable to realize that the glowing enchanted forest they are rushing into is merely a painting on a lamp. Obscurity, which bathes her scenarios in strangeness, comes with the artist's personal memories. Zhi Ding grew up in a small town in Southern China. There, at night, the interiors very often remained dark. It is only when she arrived in the USA that she experienced, with surprise, bright interiors at night. In her hometown, dusk meant darkness, and when night fell over the city, houses welcomed this obscurity with their walls. In Zhi Ding's paintings, night connects two places. Two continents that connect in imagination, like locations merging in a dream. The format of the artist's paintings is close to the dimensions of books. It invites a similar intimate experience, as if the artist attempts to start stories, that we're invited to continue, imagine, or even dream of. In another series, *Secret Manual* (2024 & 2025), books glow. They are sometimes larger than usual, so large that the character can almost hide behind them. They are, at times, so tiny that they seem impossible to read. What one sees, then, is the reader's face, exposed to the luminosity of the open object. Zhi Ding's paintings, are, in fact, images of these radiating books: they're like riddles without words, emanating emotions, fears, pleasures, sensations, memories, things that can't be described but only felt through the colors, the design, and the experience of painting.

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Ghosts

In dreams, we can do things that we wouldn't be able to do in wakefulness. The night allows these places where we can meet individuals that we wouldn't be able to interact with in other ways: distant people, imaginary characters, and the dead. Born out of a long process of layering, Clémentine Bruno's paintings are made of strata of matter and historical data. When Zhi Ding paints suggestive narrations, like picture books glowing in the dark, the French artist, buries images under a patient sedimentation of layers of gesso. Working with reference pictures and paintings from art history, Clémentine Bruno observes, studies, copies, and encloses them in the painted geology. She composes with multiple temporalities: the time she spends with the painting as it is formed; the time of other paintings invited to enter the very substance of the object, sometimes disappearing, hidden between the layers of matter; and the time of the gestures that may, perhaps, partly reveal this image by digging, erasing, and excavating the strata to stage a combination of these different textures of time. Talking about this almost archaeological practice, the artist refers to *pentimento*, an Italian term that describes the changes made by artists during the painting process. Changes of mind are then repainted, hidden under layers of oil that can, after a certain period of time, fade and create transparencies. Exposed to light or heat, changes of the air, movements of the atmosphere, painting's composition transforms and reveals, at some point, other states: alternate stories, overlays, ghosts... From multiple images partly seen in perspective, painting, exactly like in "dreamtime," multiplies and blends times, generating a form of recomposed temporality.

Through layering and erosion, time becomes space and leads to a sort of hybrid object that one could call a timescape painting. In *Landscape black stain* (2025), pictures vanish, in a sort of iconoclastic gesture or erasing, and can only be imagined, lying somewhere under the dark layers of paint. Clémentine Bruno's work invites an act of active viewing; in *Landscape green circles* (2025), the geometric composition masking the surface sparks interpretation and a temporal navigation: where do these circles come from the past, the present or the future; were they under, or above, seen through which layer? In *Landscape green bricks* (2025), a more figurative motif appears, in the shape of small bricks, suggesting an act of construction, of elaboration and labor. Indeed, in the artist's work, language is placed at the same level as image. Made out of details, of fragments coming from different places and times, the paintings are, in themselves, fictions. Installed like constellations in space, they're forming non-verbal diagrams. We have been told that in dreams, images are presented to us through another logic, in a way that we're tempted to create meaning out of the intervals between them, in order to understand the agency of our past experiences, of our repressed desires. The artist's compositions reveal how specters of painting can also play the role close to the one of a contemporary oracle, in the present. And by placing the ghosts behind us, they invite us to turn our gaze forward and orient toward the future.

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Dreams Within Dreams

Chiki's first solo exhibition, which took place at Útil Mx, in Mexico City in March 2023, was, also, literally and symbolically, an act of orientation. Each of the four paintings that were presented corresponded to a cardinal point of the city. The landscapes that the artist painted evoked familiar places. Represented at four different times of the day, they all together recreated the passage of time, simultaneously experienced from a single point of view. It offered the experience of being situated within a (subjectively) defined center of the earth, while sensing the cosmic experience of the changing effects of the lights and colors over the landscape, produced by the rotating movements of celestial bodies around each other. If the Mexican artist's technical language is rooted in the practice of egg tempera and oil on canvas, in the most traditional way, the subjects are very much anchored in the present. Chiki always starts from a particular memory or feeling that is associated with a photograph, kept in the phone's storage: the picture, selected from the digital diary, often refers to a moment when the artist felt a sense of belonging, a sense of place, community. It translates the digital, fleeting essence of the image into the ongoing process of reproduction through painting. Additionally, it transforms an inner landscape into an outer one, converting an intimate climate into a communal atmosphere. The tension between these two spaces, these two temporalities, gives Chiki's paintings an undecidable quality: their meticulous precision is matched only by their evocative atmospheric power. Something acts within the viewer's mind that lies between the familiarity of the scene, like a feeling of déjà vu, and the crystalline presence of the picture, between the emotion that is carried by their luminous colors and the radical silence of these images.

The artist's most recent paintings are staged in a series of specific locations in Mexico City. Each place refers to a vision of the future once imagined by artists of the past – historical figures of the avant-garde who dreamed of, and through their practice, manifested society's transformation. One site that Chiki chose is Isamu Noguchi's mural for Abelardo L. Rodríguez Market from 1936, *Mural de Noguchi* (2025), in which the Japanese American artist and designer encompassed a social critique of industrialization, the role of science in humanity's progresses and the resistance to the rise of fascism. Another one is Calakmul Corporate Building, designed by artist and architect Agustín Hernández Navarro in 1997. In *Conjunto Calakmul* (2025), this retro-futurist construction is conceived as an homage to Mayan culture, presented as a monumental Neo-modernist ensemble in the form of a geometric device connecting the earth and the sky. In these decors, that evoke speculative fiction film sets, Chiki shot different people wearing clothes and accessories made by fashion designer friends. These characters, whose gender remains undefined, identity mysterious, wear clothes like costumes from another world and seem to refer to both folklore and science-fiction. In these sites that materialized dreams that were never realized, the artist embodied other visions and staged other dreams. The characters are always two people, connected through their futurist accessories that act as body extensions: some prolong their arms and allow a connection at a distance; others look like

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very long and almost liquid hands or fingers that suggest new feelings, others exhibit tactile and sensorial abilities. The figures are bodies within empty sites. They incarnate the present and carry with them something like the power of imagining, once again, another narrative. They're images of otherness: dual, androgynous, masked. They connect histories and seem to be there in order to test these arrested projects, these latent utopian visions. As if these old dreams were waiting for a sign, Chiki's characters pass from one dream to another, appearing with the aim to dream these old dreams again. But differently, this time. They're dreams within dreams – perhaps the only way, today, for dreams to be dreamed.

— Yann Chateigné Tytelman

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