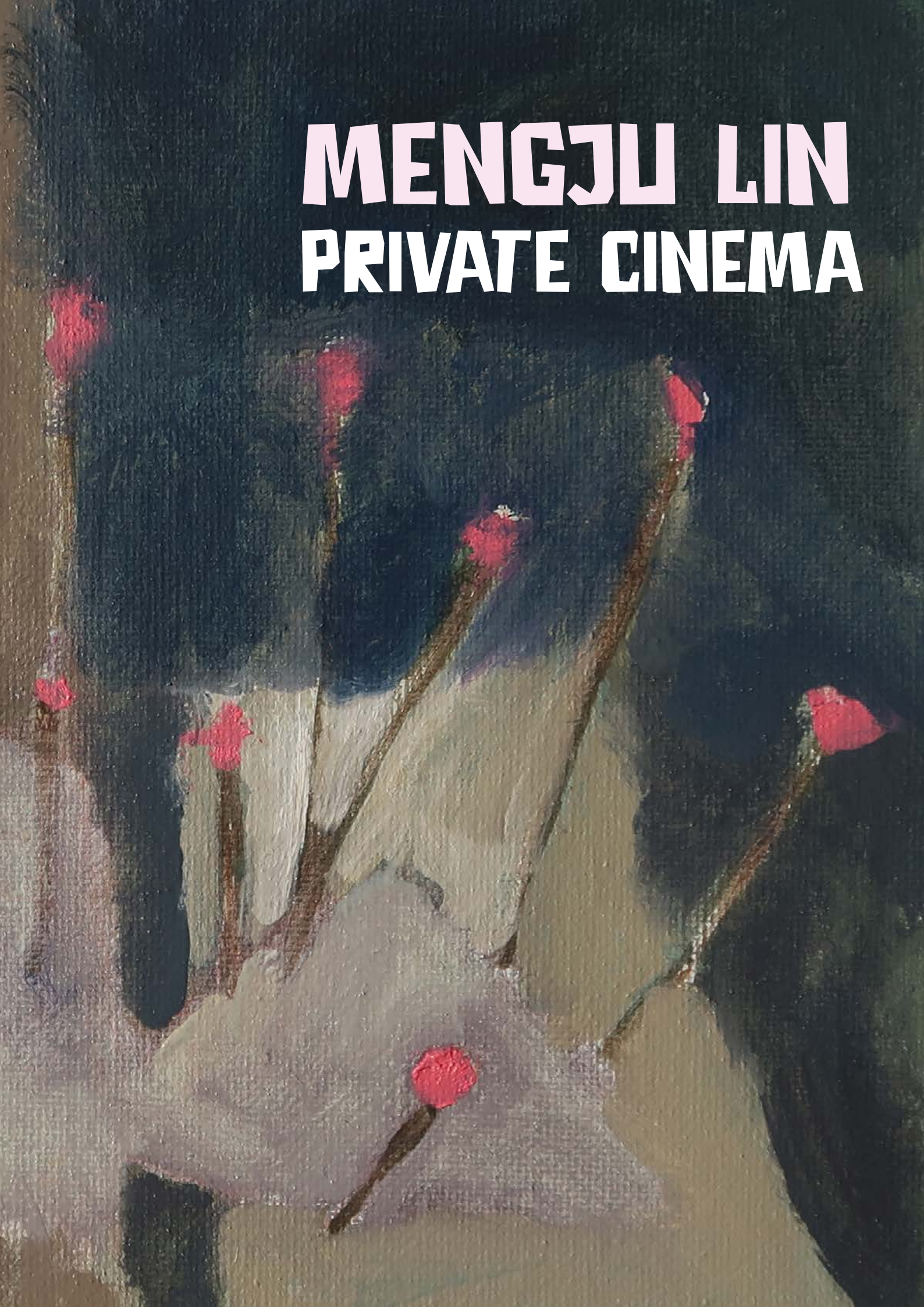


# MENGJU LIN PRIVATE CINEMA



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20.04 - 18.05. 2024



Installation view of *Private Cinema*, 20 April - 18 May 2024,  
Richard Koh Fine Art, Gillman Barracks, Singapore

# *MILKY PORTALS*

by Samantha Yap

“If, one day, a milky portal had opened up in your bedroom and an older version of yourself had stepped out and told you what you know now, would you have listened?”<sup>1</sup>

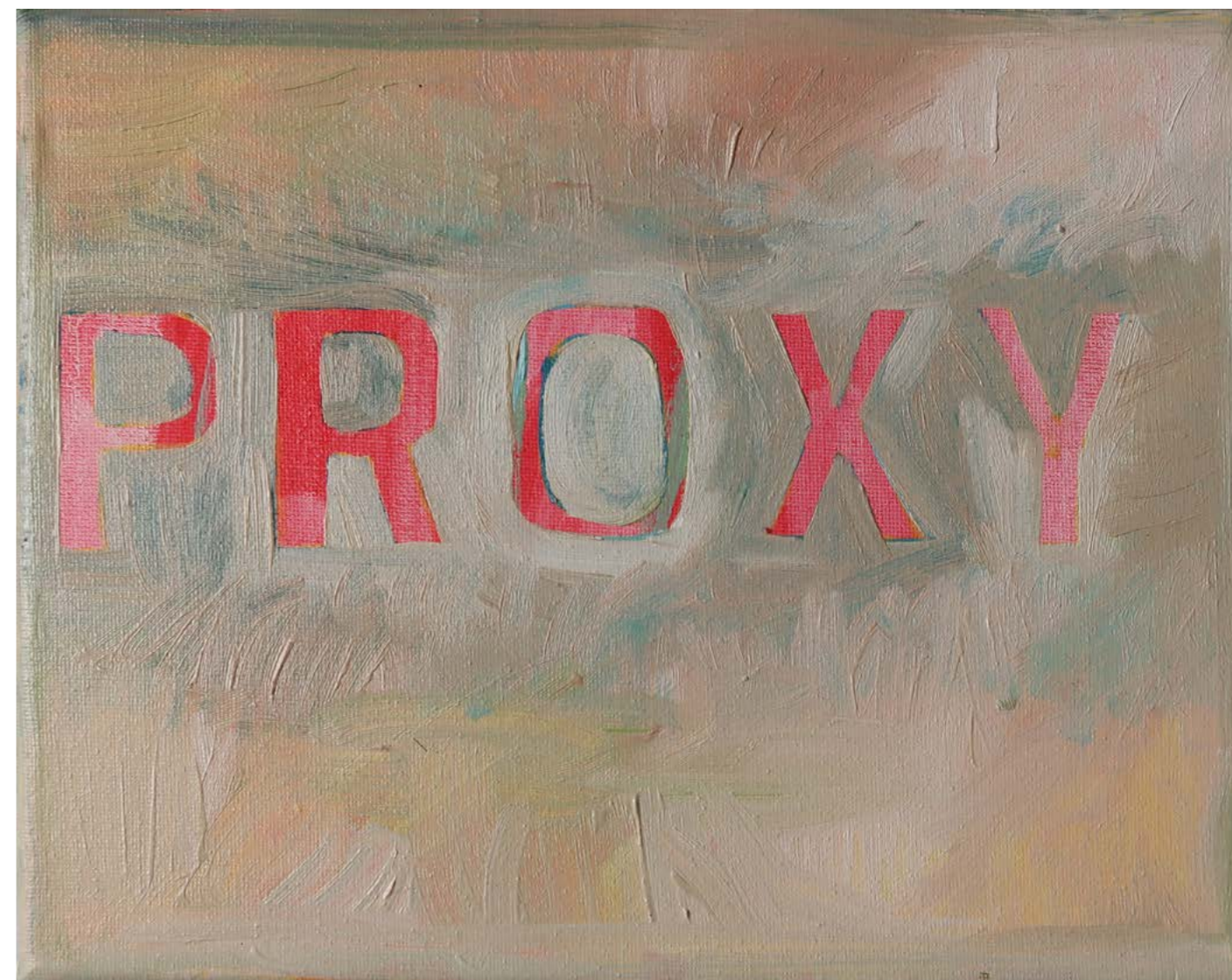
-Carmen Maria Machado,  
*In the Dream House*

<sup>1</sup> Carmen Maria Machado, *In the Dream House: A Memoir* (United Kingdom: Serpent's Tail, 2020), 271.

It is 4:03 pm on a Friday when I start writing. The sky is so decisively blue that the weather forecast may hold. I feel the bright heat of sunlight filtering through my window. It is warm and reassuring. The trees outside my room gently sway to the music of a breeze only they can hear. For me, the telling of time, as in the evocation of clock time, is not the same as keeping time. Telling time states a setting that feels inevitably lockstep and orderly whereas timekeeping considers time an organic experience of an ongoing passage. It looks at the experience of time as the continuous experience of life; time passes as every breath exits my body, and time passes as interruptions come and go and disrupt my writing. Paintings keep time, too, because they are sedimentary, a result of active layering. To fill a surface with marks begets other marks, sparking a chain of related responses that come together across days, seasons, and years. To render the likeness of an image or phenomenon in paint requires the kind of intimate knowledge achieved through prolonged looking so the painter returns, whether the weather forecast holds.

Told through a new body of paintings, Mengju Lin's *Private Cinema* is a passage in time that charts her journey at arriving still at her language of abstraction. She stretches past ways of painting that have previously served her to find other ways of casting the same spell. These invocations conjure a dynamic repetition of different marks that engulf or illuminate, sibling works that share the genetics of common palettes, traces of words carried over from her earlier series, lingering figures that are bright yet uncertain, and permeable shapes that lay gentle claim to the canvas. It is a coming-of-age sequence or, rather, a coming-of-abstraction sequence. The ways painting and girlhood echo each other have been a persistent thought for Lin. Both experiences are constituted by doubt, a gap between the known coordinates of our predecessors and the unknown future destination. In *Saving Time: Discovering a Life Beyond the Clock*, Jenny Odell conceives of doubt as a crack of possibility within a dichotomous worldview. For her, doubt can be the "emergency exit" that asks us to consider another path and explore the "gap in the known...that leads somewhere else."<sup>2</sup> This emergency exit offers a crossing from the general scripts of what painting and girlhood should do to how a painter and a girl can possess, shape, forget, recall, and ultimately express her art and life.

<sup>2</sup> Jenny Odell, *Saving Time: Discovering a Life Beyond the Clock* (United Kingdom: Random House, 2023), xxvii.

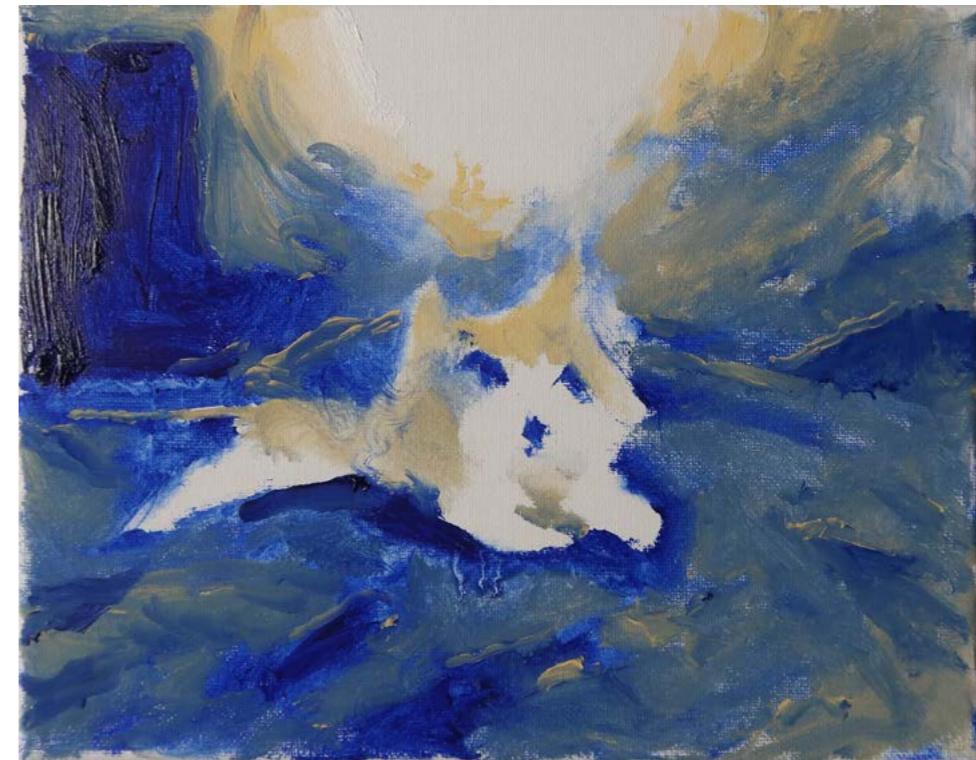


*Proxy*, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm

Habits are crutches, Lin tells me. She refers to her older works, like in *New Radio*, that take text as a focal point. Words hold meaning; for Lin, these vessels are also a study in form. *New Radio* started an ongoing exploration into the visual character of words and other approaches to reading a word orphaned from the sentence. P-R-O-X-Y. The string of alphabets dwells within a painted space with a litany of marks that vary in color, texture, and opacity. Proxy – to closely resemble, substitute, mediate, and come close. The painting stands in for the painter’s vision, stands before the viewer, and comes somewhat close. In Proxy, the text easily commands attention because words come with preset definitions in the way painterly marks do not easily possess. There remains a transparency to words that persists even as we try to divert our attention to the shapeliness of their forms, like how “Y” emulates merging twin roads or “X” brings to mind an intersection. The familiarity of words may be a crutch, supporting both the viewer trying to access the painting and the painter relying on the comforts of a well-treaded starting point. Pushing the boundaries of one’s craft is a common refrain in artistic production. After all, moving away from a habituated place is part of the developing relationship between an artist and her medium of choice and not just keeling over to the pressure of constantly breaking new ground. So, it is less about trading familiarity for novelty, surrendering one crutch for another.

Familiarity instead endures in the form of a lingering affinity that intuitively knits bodies of work together across time. Paying close attention to words and the ligaments of alphabets, reading them as gestural shapes and not solely as bearers of predetermined meaning, is one spell amidst many others Lin casts from her grimoire of abstraction. Words are abstract vessels that hold intangible ideas even if they lack a tangible body, but Lin’s exploration of the shapeliness of their forms comes close to giving them flesh. Returning to *Proxy*, a flesh-toned layer peeks out from alphabet-shaped openings. It was there before the words. Layer by layer, a painting is a passage, gaining its contours and public character through time.

The luminous eyes of *Sixteenth chapel*’s feline figure regard us with fuzzy longing. Longing is a passage composed of distance and duration, bridging but keeping the lover and the beloved apart. Longing says, you’re there, but I am here, and the painted cat seems aglow with that



(Above) *Sixteenth chapel*, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm

(Bottom) *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, dir. Michel Gondry, 2004.

knowledge. In Michel Gondry's mesmerizing film *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, Joel chooses to wipe his ex-girlfriend from his memories after discovering she had already excised him from hers. The film charts Joel's journey of forgetting Clementine, but the work of forgetting requires the stark grief of total remembrance. Recalling their relationship, he loses his resolve to erase his memories of Clementine because even in the stinging hurt of their worst quarrels, their shared moments of tenderness were uniquely theirs. In one pivotal dream memory sequence, the pair plot to outrun the memory erasure procedure by attempting to smuggle Clementine within the plain sight of a memory in which she has no part; his childhood would be the perfect hiding spot for her. Joel conjures the rainy currents of his youth, and it starts raining in their sheltered living room.<sup>3</sup> The film captures memory as an accommodating and mercurial medium that moves to the tempo of one's longing. In that way, memory shares an affinity with painting, which keeps asynchronous time mark by mark, layer by layer, moving to the rhythm of the painter's hand that is guided too by her compasses of feeling.

*Sixteenth chapel* could be read as a memory painting, tinged with the hue of longing and fuzzy because all memories are abstractions of the originating instance and have permeable outlines. The painting's perceived viscosity lends it a quality like melted wax, gleaned from the streaky sea of blue and the soft patches of blended paint that make up the cat's body. Like memory, paint feels malleable yet constant, taking well to fickle hands and capricious hearts and their twin needs for change and intervention. Locking eyes with the feline protagonist comfortably marooned within the painting, I cannot decide if he says, "Don't go" or "Please stay." Gondry's film seems to move from the former to the latter confession through the evolved understanding that separation may be inevitable, but showing up, returning to your side of the bed, and remaining even when it is challenging is a promise to persist together in time, in love, and in life. In the choppy currents of streaked blue, the touches of yellow that warm the back of the cat's head and graze his body reach forward like a warm hand, an invitation. Don't go; please stay.

Like most of the paintings in this show, *Butters* has siblings. The bright yellow understory shares the same palette as *Bring the sun* and *Remedy*. *Butters* is composed of the interloping energies of different wings of color. A painting is never a lonely subject. It is always read in

<sup>3</sup> Michel Gondry, dir. *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Focus Features, 2004), Amazon Prime, 1:00:19.



*Butters*, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm



*Bring the sun*, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm



*Remedy*, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm

companionship, sometimes in snug association with another painting, or loosely connected to all that has been floating in the viewer's orbit - an unresolved feeling from a film, a sticky line from a book, or just the well of affection that you feel for the person you had dinner with last night. The spatial arrangements of color on canvas are lively and expectant, caught amid a sweeping conversation with its various counterparts. Like close friends from different walks of life, these spreads of colors harmonize lovingly in their discordance.

There is also truth to the confidence that the painting exudes. Lin shares how the painting feels like an "honest" expression and likens it to a kind of disclosure, "the most honest I have ever been." I recall a friend's wisdom about how our performance of ourselves can only be enacted and reinforced through the changing company of others. In the presence of someone lovely and loving, a performance of myself that feels so different that it risks being untrue rushes forward. Drawn out from this performance is an esoteric knowledge activated in the brave space opened by another's warm regard. Parts of me belatedly arriving on the scene after being in rehearsal for a long, long time. The bright flush of yellow in *Butters* arrives first at the dinner party and maintains quiet priority even as bands of purples, reds, and greens gradually populate the scene. It is a kind of performance, a dance of different personalities, a showing of all the various iterations of the self that one can inhabit, even if, at our core, we will always have our yellow lodestone. When spreading a slab of butter, the knife meets some resistance first before the butter melts into the embrace of the hard toast. Lin's paintings always feel compassionate; her hand is disciplined and tender, earnestly guiding weighted things into a material reality.

A confrontation or celebration is taking place within *Ten of swords*. The flesh-toned bud atop each pin gives the impression of lit candle sticks on a birthday cake or the burning wooden wick of a candle. Affixed by little torches, the central winged creature is held in place, surrendering to the moment. The painting takes its name from the minor arcana tarot card, symbolizing endings, surrender, and resolution. In common visual representations of this card, a suite of ten swords pins the protagonist to the ground in what appears to be a last act of deathly resignation, safe for the persistent optimism of a bright horizon enduring under the cover of dark clouds. We have our crosses and swords to bear, but we also



(Above) *Ten of swords*, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm

(Bottom) Ten of Swords tarot card from the popular Rider-Waite Smith deck.



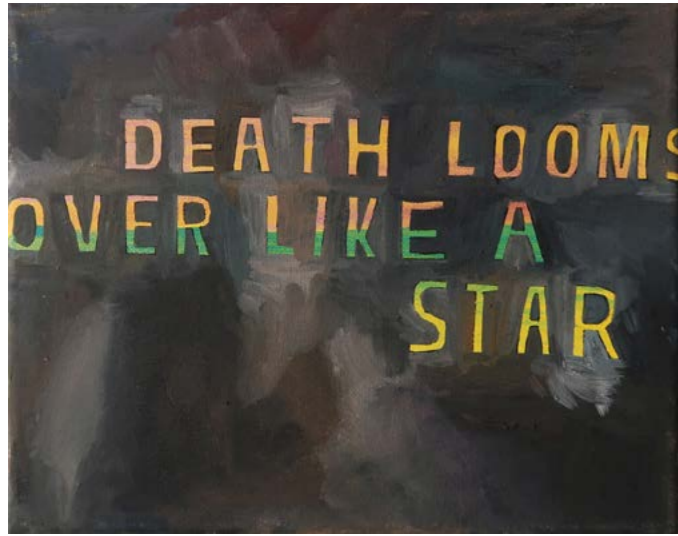
carry the sun and the promise of tomorrow, a bright and milky portal that opens and closes, then opens again. An earthy skylight cuts a gentle path through the dense swirling bog in the painting. This vertical axis marks a possible trajectory for the winged being. It could be a dream path, or it could be the path embarked on in the future. Stepping through this milky portal with our own symbolic stakes and physical limitations, we endeavor to extend beyond the circumscribed outlines of our past and inherited circumstances. We imagine ourselves as winged creatures with the enhanced mobility of flight. Within the space of the canvas, an area that closes in on itself like a screen, we may see our series of surrenders as constantly emerging from the chrysalis of the old into the new; I am arriving, arriving, at these versions of myself.

Abstraction is a process shared across painting and living. As a subjective mediation of the originating event or image, it is the gradual and inevitable processing of what the painter and person find significant as they return to the subject of their fixation. In *In The Dreamhouse*, a memoir imaginatively narrating the author's troubled relationship, Carmen Maria Machado suggests that we are rarely one-time tourists in our pain. The experience of pain is not a brief sojourn on life's itinerary, but our hurts stay and age with us. She writes, "Just because the sharpness of sadness has faded does not mean that it was not, once, terrible."<sup>4</sup> Instead, what happens as we go on is that "time and space, creatures of infinite girth and tenderness, have stepped between the two of you, and they are keeping you safe as they were once unable to." Time and space also step between the painter and the stimuli. This intervention unsettles the linear relationship of art as a definitive representation of *something* and how painting then serves as a direct portal to that thing. Rather than a door that connects the viewer from one destination to another and subsequently ascribes a linear understanding, abstraction as a process of processing dilutes this false clarity and opens up milky portals that lead you elsewhere. *Private Cinema* conjures a series of milky portals that speak to the feeling experience of time, the ways we are always arriving at our destinations, how we live to try, and how we try to live.

<sup>4</sup> Carmen Maria Machado, *In the Dream House: A Memoir* (United Kingdom: Serpent's Tail, 2020), 271.



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(Top left) *Death looms over like a star (Elizabeth)*, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm

(Top right) *Blinker*, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm

(Bottom left) *Evergreen*, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm

(Bottom right) *Stinky*, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm

*Song*, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm



(Top left) *Song*, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm

(Top right) *Men over 40*, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm

(Bottom left) *Making a baby*, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm

(Bottom right) *Janni*, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm

(Top left) *Without bite*, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm

(Top right) *Rain song*, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm

(Bottom left) *Minnow*, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm

(Bottom right) *Kathleen*, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm



(Top) *Only*, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm

(Bottom) *Go and come back*, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm

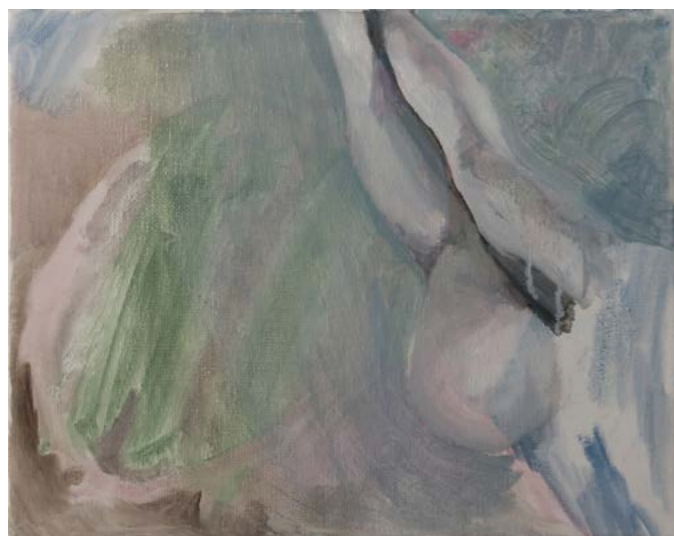
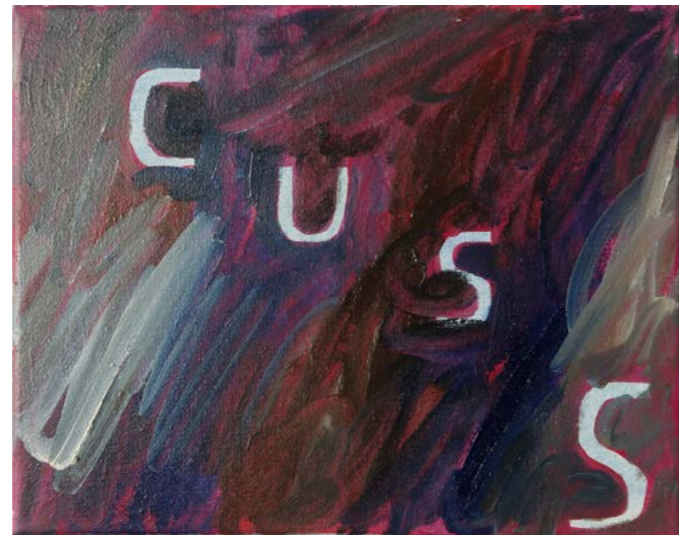


(Top left) *High Priestess*, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm

(Top right) *Call the midwife*, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm

(Bottom left) *Lily*, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm

(Bottom right) *Out partying*, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm



(Top left) *Marla*, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm

(Top right) *Cuss*, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm

(Bottom left) *National manners*, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm

(Bottom right) *Hitting disgusting*, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm

(Top left) *Denise I*, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm

(Top right) *Skye*, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm

(Bottom left) *Modern girl*, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm

(Bottom right) *Nightcap*, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm



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Never home, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm



(Top left) Shaman, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm



(Top right) Careless, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm

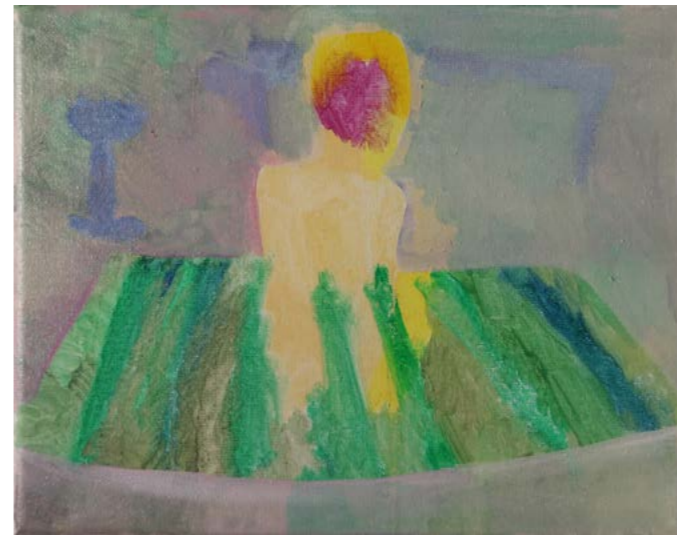


(Bottom left) Spine, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm



(Bottom right) Molotov, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm





(Top left) *Time allows*, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm

(Top right) *Learning to love you more*, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm

(Bottom left) *Female idol*, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm

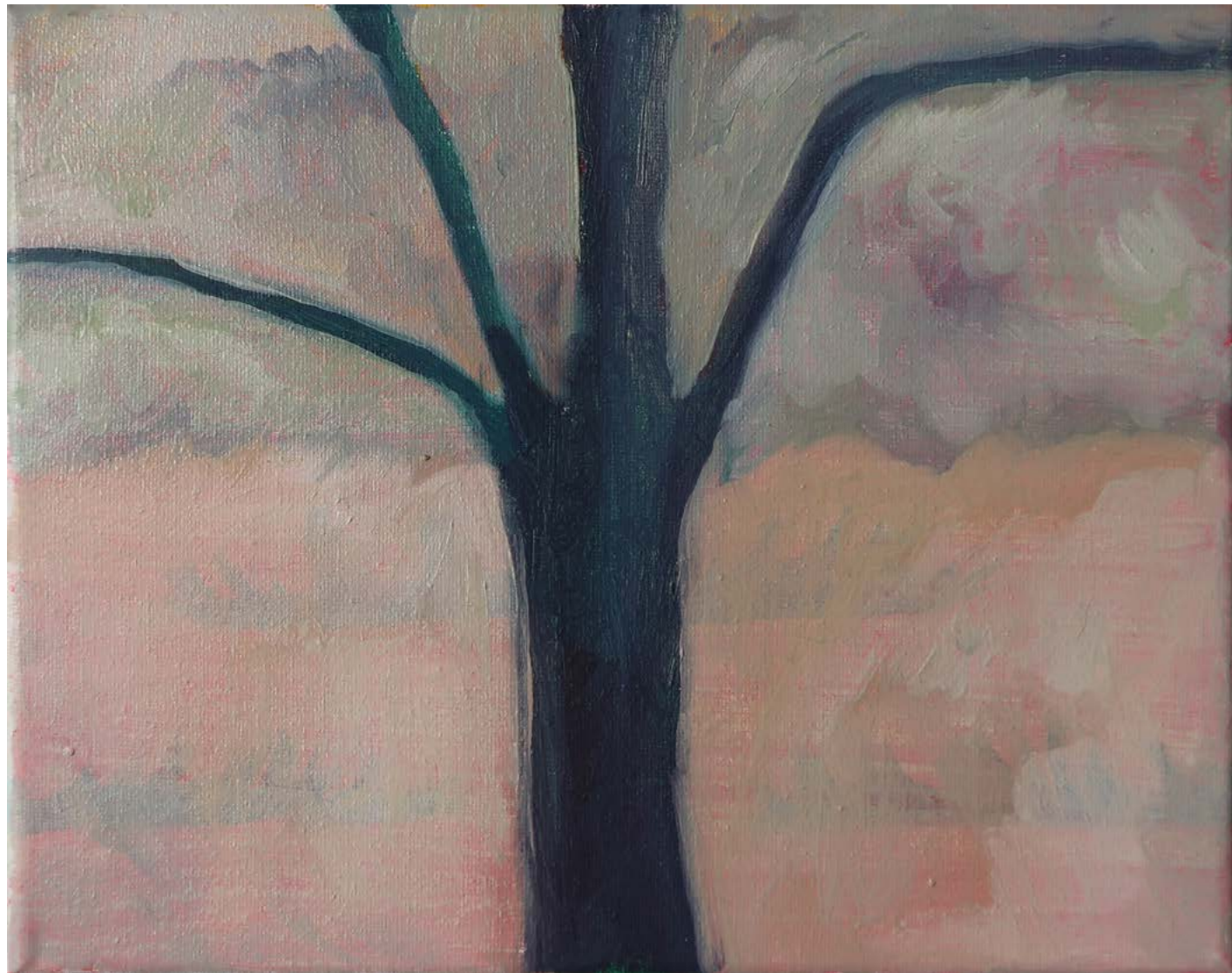
(Bottom right) *Witless*, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm

(Top left) *Rosa Parks doing yoga*, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm

(Top right) *Hoth*, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm

(Bottom left) *Moral person*, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm

(Bottom right) *Resolution*, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm



*Thrust*, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm



(Top left) *Weft*, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm



(Top right) *Petra*, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm



(Bottom left) *Privileged, bratty, entitled*, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm



(Bottom right) *Kilter*, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm



(Top left) *Difficulty*, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm

(Top right) *Allegedly, or*, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm

(Bottom left) *Leisure class*, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm

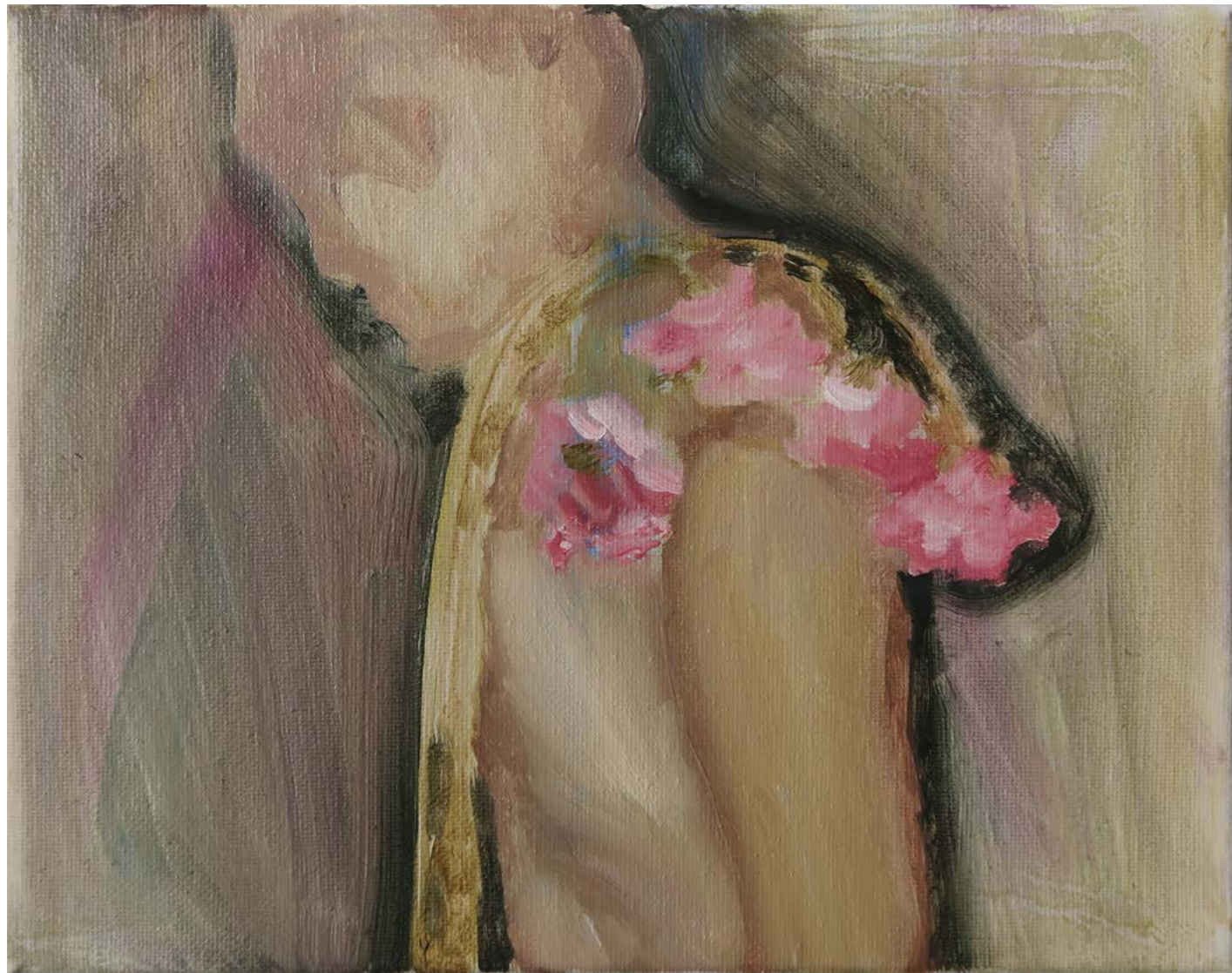
(Bottom right) *Tiffany Diggs, down the toilet*, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm

(Top left) *I love her so much*, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm

(Top right) *Carribbean sweet*, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm

(Bottom left) *Gloria*, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm

(Bottom right) *T4*, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm



Ren, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm



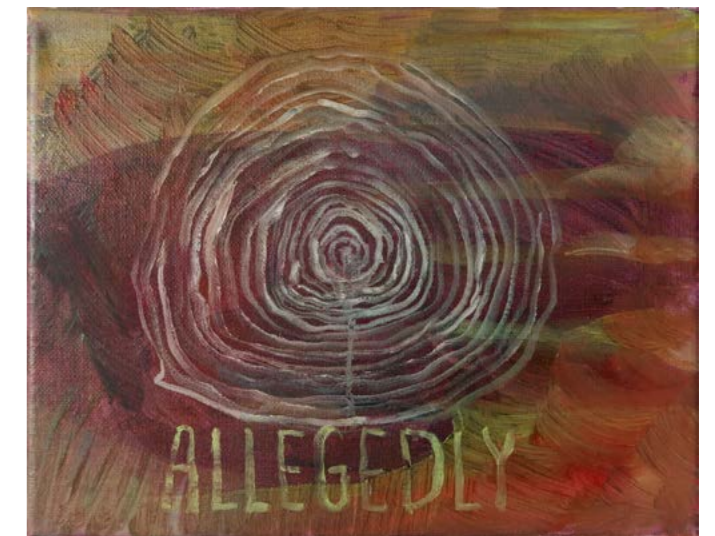
(Top left) Denise 2, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm



(Top right) Decorum, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm



(Bottom left) Tuesday (without Lexapro), 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm



(Bottom right) Allegedly, 2, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm



(Top) *Ballast*, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm

(Bottom) *One more hour*, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm



(Top left) *Autopsy*, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm

(Top right) *Franke*, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm

(Bottom left) *Gingest*, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm

(Bottom right) *The girl project*, 2024, Oil on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm





Installation view of *Private Cinema*, 20 April - 18 May 2024,  
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# Mengju Lin

Artist



Mengju Lin (b.1996, Singapore)'s artistic practice revolves around the agency of non-human things and how they persist. She works with found material to make images, sound, text objects and zines.

She is a co-conspirator of radioriotgrrrl with Nadhirah Khalid and plays in a band called Terrapin with Jeremy Sharma and Lai Yu Tong.

## Education

2017- BA (Hons) Fine Arts (1<sup>st</sup>), McNally School of Fine Arts, LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore

2010- GCE A Levels, Dunman High School, 2015

## Solo Exhibitions

2024 *Private Cinema*, Richard Koh Fine Art, Gillman Barracks, Singapore

2021 *Deeply Softly Gently Tenderly*, Richard Koh Fine Art, Gillman Barracks, Singapore

## Selected Group Exhibitions

2023 *Diverse Visions*, Richard Koh Fine Art, Gillman Barracks, Singapore

*Late night bookstore*, starch, Singapore

2022 *RESS Midterms*, SMU de Suantio Gallery, Singapore

*State of Play*, Richard Koh Fine Art, Gillman Barracks, Singapore

2021 *dis/content*, starch, Singapore

2020 *In Our Own Frame, RKFA SG 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Show*, Richard Koh Fine Art, Gillman Barracks, Singapore

*Time Passes*, Singtel Special Exhibition Gallery B, National Gallery Singapore, Singapore

*A DECADE APART / TOGETHER*, Richard Koh Fine Art, Gillman Barracks, Singapore

*Fluidity: BA(Hons) Fine Arts work-in-progress exhibition*, Praxis Space and Project Space, Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore, Singapore

2019 *One Night Only*, Winstedt campus, LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore

*Minimalism/Maximalism*, Praxis Space and Project Space, Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore, Singapore

*Tracking Status: Expedited | A work-in-progress show*, Alliance Française de Singapour

2018 *One Night Only*, Winstedt campus, LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore

## Activities / Work Experiences

2022 Researcher for the Visual Arts Project, Oral History Centre, National Archives Singapore, National Library Board, Singapore

Jewellery designer for feelers, caterfeelers Singapore Art Book Fair, Exhibitor for rrg x friends

2021 Chief editor, bulanujung

Contributor, artist assistant for Jeremy Sharma, Superstar

Cast member, Live Creatives Show, Silly Goose Studios, Singapore

Curatorial audio-tour guide, *State of Motion 2021: [Alternate / Opt] Realities*, voice actor for Divaagar Asian Film Archive, Marina One, Singapore

Project manager for Jeremy Sharma, PSHKR

2020 Contributing artist-musician for artist Yeyoon Avis Ann's residency project, *R@pt*, Hothouse, Aliwal Arts Centre, Singapore

2020- current Contributing editor, Big Duck Pte Ltd Livestream moderator/contributor, *Experimental Encounters: Bakes with Chand and Mengju*

Artist assistant, Jeremy Sharma Studio

Co-conspirator and organiser of riot grrrl chapters with Nadhirah Khalid, @ *radioriotgrrrl*

2019 Student editor, Praxis Press, McNally School of Fine Arts, LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore

Artist-musician, performing with Lai Yu Tong and Jeremy Sharma, *TAAC: Live*, Telok Ayer Arts Club, Singapore

Project manager for Jeremy Sharma, *Say Ocean*, Esplanade Tunnel, Esplanade Theatres on the Bay Singapore

Student artist for Whispers by Pamela Cevallos, *Lost and found: imagining new worlds*, Gallery 1, Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore

2018 Photographer for Priyageetha Dia for Birth Grey Projects Gender Hierarchy, Singapore

Artist assistant and performer for Tang Da Wu, *Letters to Theo*, Outdoor Theatre, Esplanade Theatres on the Bay Singapore

Contributing artist for The Artists Company, *Got Your Name Or Not?*, The Artists Village (TAV), Your Mother Gallery, Singapore

2017 Performer, *Hak Tai's Bow, Brother's Pool and Our Children: Tang Da Wu*, The Ngee Ann Kongsi Galleries 1 & 2, NAFA Campus 1, Singapore

2016- current Children's art instructor and core team member, Artify Studio

2014- 2019 Percussionist, Philharmonic Youth Winds



# Samantha Yap

Writer



Samantha Yap (b. 1993, Singapore) practices in the intertwined capacities of a writer, curator, and arts administrator. In her work, she is interested in forms of reciprocity, such as the ethics of care, love, and vulnerability, as well as the exploration of feminist perspectives across writing and visual culture. Her recent exhibitions include *Ongoingness* (2022), Gillman Barracks, and *Time Passes* (2020), National Gallery Singapore. Her writing can be found in various exhibition catalogs and the poetry anthology *My Lot is a Sky*. She graduated with a BA (Hons) in English Literature and Art History from the Nanyang Technological University of Singapore and works at the NUS Libraries Writers' Centre.



## References

Gondry, Michel, director. *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. Focus Features, 2004. 1 hr., 43 min. [https://www.primevideo.com/detail/0FH2D94YJR532178A4RBSNDLBN/ref=atv\\_dp\\_share\\_cu\\_r](https://www.primevideo.com/detail/0FH2D94YJR532178A4RBSNDLBN/ref=atv_dp_share_cu_r).

Machado, Carmen Maria. *In the Dream House: A Memoir*. United Kingdom: Serpent's Tail, 2020.

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Essay by Samantha Yap  
Design by Nor Harith

A digital catalogue for "*Private Cinema*",  
A solo exhibition by Mengju Lin

Richard Koh Fine Art, Blk 47 Malan Road,  
#01-26 Gillman Barracks, Singapore 109444

20 April - 18 May 2024

Cover: Detail of *Ten of swords*, 2024

Founded in 2005, with spaces in Singapore, Bangkok, and Kuala Lumpur, Richard Koh Fine Art is committed to the promotion of Southeast Asian contemporary art on regional and international platforms. Centred around a core belief in developing an artist's career, the gallery looks to identify understated, albeit promising practices and provide it opportunities to flourish. Through its regular exhibition cycles, print & digital publications and cross-border gallery collaborations, Richard Koh Fine Art engages the art community with the aim of developing regional and intercultural dialogue.

In addition to its physical galleries across the 3 locations, the gallery maintains a strong online presence as well through its Artsy and Artling pages.

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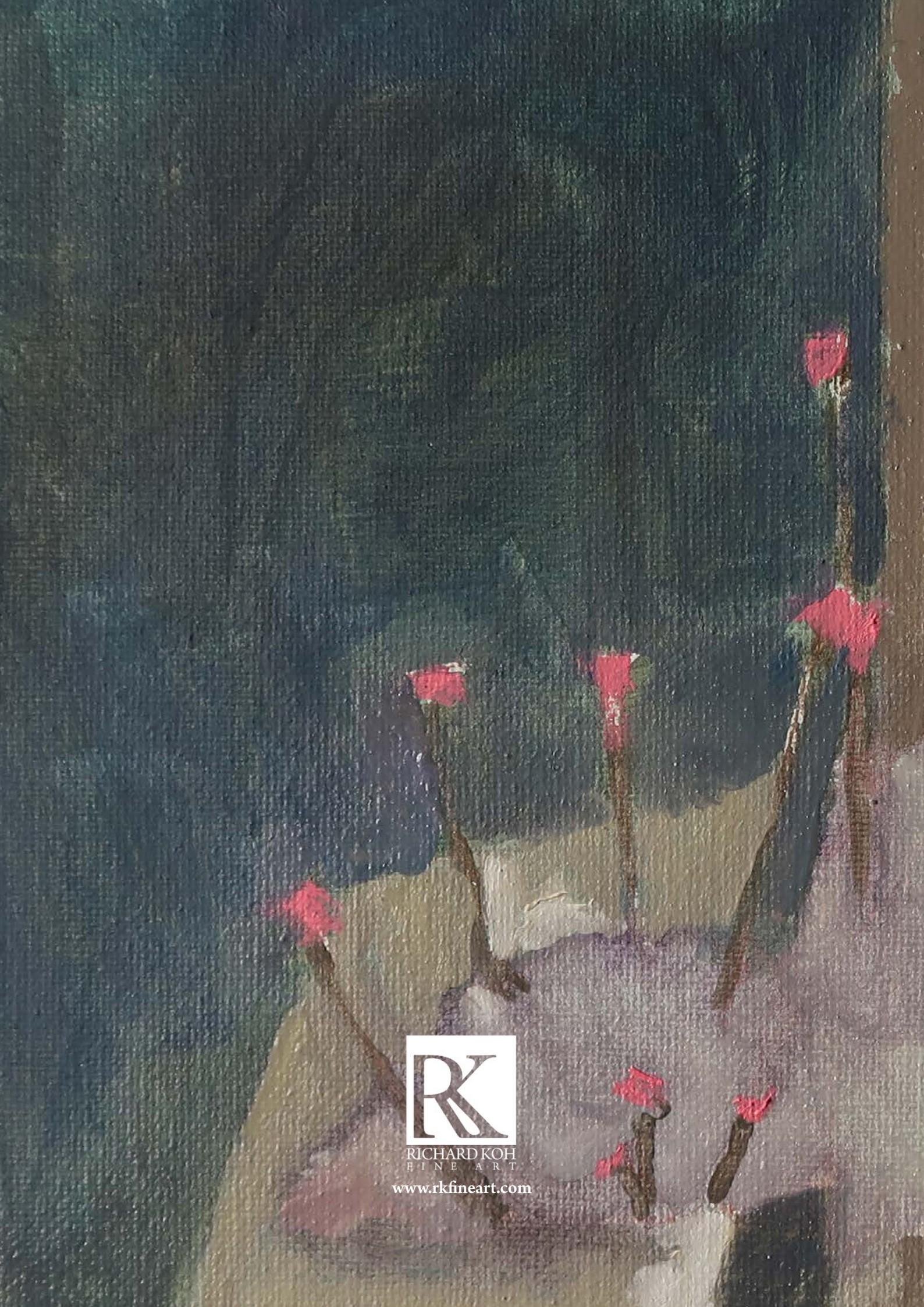
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