

## Yuan Yuan – Recent Works

## Introduction

When approaching the interior and exterior spaces painted by Yuan Yuan, one has the queer sensation of opening the pages of a treasured storybook. Every detail, rendered minutely in delicate coats of fine paint evokes a sense of ephemerality; a mere blink of the eye and the contents of our visual novella may flutter and disappear. Indeed, one sighting is not sufficient. Yuan Yuan layers his scenes and through his use of perspective and hints of material objects imbues his paintings with a pluralistic vitality that stimulates our viewership and mind. Our gaze bounds from one element to another: past one door, through an archway, down a corridor, progressively wondering how that object found itself there, why that window is left ajar and inevitably what lies beyond the unpainted surface. A master of mystery, Yuan Yuan strays clues across the canvas for us the viewer to construct a narrative around a space, which his artistic mind has conceived.

In creating these rich canvases, Yuan Yuan has always been attuned to the elements of architecture: the fundamental building blocks of his painterly tales. As an artist based in Hangzhou, he has been sensitive to the intimate discourse held between Chinese and Western styles, carefully inserting the latter without pursuing its dominance. *Humid Region* (2011), for example, depicted a fading red and amber entrance hall flanked by two metallic grids, the corridor gateway discreetly ornated by an Italianate lamp, the corridor itself decorated by a European grid ceiling design. These subtle insertions in Yuan Yuan's oeuvres have since evolved, however, and gained in boldness. Indeed, his recent works possess a conviction regards Western elements such that when they are included their participation in the scene is more pronounced and their role in the plot more pivotal.

A greater interest in the subject is undoubtedly attributable. One may also remark, however, that in previous years Yuan Yuan had widely used collected pictures and a vivid imagination to recast and insert Western architectural styles. Those examples that could be encountered, such as along the Bund in Shanghai, were the product of cultural exchange - and while visually important - represent a historically incorrect amalgamation of Gothic, Baroque, Romanesque and Classical styles. In late 2012 though, Yuan Yuan embarked on the first of two residencies: one for a couple of months to Scotland and another for nearly four months to the USA. Vastly different areas of the Western world, the former introduced Yuan Yuan to a landscape replete with decayed buildings, imbued with historicity and folklore, while the latter, with its grand constructions, illustrated the adoption and appropriation - at many times in a more extravagant manner - of architectural styles that had originated in Europe.

Yuan Yuan's new oeuvres undoubtedly reflect these recent exposures while building and maintaining his foundational practice: crucially, his recent paintings remain the creations of a vivid lyrical imagination and invite the viewer to assemble each milieu's individual stories. Where his recent body of work departs is the heightened sense of knowledge and confidence in Western architecture they evince: these elements, now that they are a part of Yuan Yuan and what he has experienced, are permitted to dominate a painting and become the primary focus. A further development in tandem to this architectural accustoming though, is a cultural and societal attunement. Yuan Yuan, adopting the mindset of an anthropologist, has observed how people live and when depicting his most recent scenes, has revealed a wider array of scenarios: the inhabited grand abode, the humble dwelling, the once exquisite residence, the crumbling commercial setting. Yuan Yuan's recent works thus possess a stronger relation with Western styles across manifold periods and manifest a wider repertoire stemming from a great sensibility to how others live or have lived.

## Recent Works

### **Yuan Yuan**

*Single Room in Lavatory, 2013*

Oil on linen

145 x 200 cm

*Single Room in Lavatory* demonstrates Yuan Yuan's accentuated boldness in including elements that are Western in style. The gilded Baroque mirror on the right wall is the viewer's primary point of visual contact, which is then directed past an elaborate tap system towards a sumptuous bathing chamber that is teasingly concealed. Despite the captivating dominance of the mirror, Yuan Yuan has purposely envisioned the tiled room in red, which both reflects empiricism and a colour that symbolises good fortune and joy in Chinese culture. Beyond representing a merging of cultures, this work is an elaborate example of Yuan Yuan's great ability at introducing multiple planes of perspective on a canvas: not only do our eyes follow into the second room, the gilded mirror opens our vision onto a further space with an elaborate chandelier and balustrade. The reflection thus, as well as stimulating our vision, confirms that Yuan Yuan is indeed depicting a scene of opulent wealth, one that is focused on a personal area but hints to an even grander whole.



## Yuan Yuan

*Must Be Ok With Humidity*, 2013

Oil on linen

150 x 190 cm

'*Must Be Ok With Humidity*' exemplifies Yuan Yuan's painterly manner of depicting, with incredible attention to detail, the various individual features of a particular space that contribute to its own narrative. In this scene, we find a single room that evinces a striking passing of time: great layers of paint peel off the central wall - a result of the humidity referred to in the title - while clusters of dark green mold seem to have crept over the remaining areas. The floor tiling, once ornate and a vivid burgundy and turquoise blue, has been discoloured and is visibly chipped in the corners. Despite the detritus, Yuan Yuan sparks our marvel by introducing signs of inhabitation: a laundry line swings from one wall to another, clothes hanging; kitchenware is laid out upon a cabinet, which is protected by plastic cloth. In contrast to *Single Room in Lavatory*, this space, which doubles as a kitchen and a laundry room, is humble: a single light bulb rather than a ravishing chandelier hangs from the ceiling. Upon closer inspection, our curiosity is further sparked: the cabinet is not a simple wooden structure but rather a dainty red baroque piece of furniture with slight gilding. The contrast between this sign of material holdings and the room prompts the questions: what is the story, when did it happen and why.



**Yuan Yuan**

*A Little Bit Lonely I*, 2013

Oil on canvas

190 x 160 cm

The painting *A Little Bit Lonely* presents Yuan Yuan's burgeoning interest in the Renaissance and his ability, through including multiple planes of perspective, to suggest space beyond that which is strictly shown. This interior depicts an entranceway to a multi-story building. Our eye is primarily guided by the left-twisting stairway to the right of the canvas. Lined by a wooden bannister, one follows the structure, wanting to see what is on the next level. Not revealed, one then sees the multiple doors to the left, which lead down a corridor and are nearly concealed by large flaps of wallpaper that have been peeled off. This area does not seem inhabited, but one can imagine it having served a designated purpose. Since abandoned, it has suffered the tests of time and is alone in speaking for what it once was. Yuan thus presents an invitation for our minds to travel into the past and imagine for ourselves the origins of this illusory space. Simultaneously, Yuan introduces his interest in a cultural movement, which although of the past and originating in Italy, has developed into a general style that manifests itself worldwide.



**Yuan Yuan**

*Blues X*, 2013

Oil on linen

158 x 190 cm

This work by Yuan Yuan represents his evolved striking boldness in introducing elements of Western architecture. The painting depicts a detrued interior of what was once a grand abode; from behind an elaborate iron bannister, painted in light turquoise, the viewer looks upon a long turquoise-blue corridor, lined with ajar French windows, some of which have been kept open by encroaching exterior floral overgrowth. To the right of the painting one sees a hall, which leads down to a winding staircase. Aside from elaborate planes of perspective, this painting is strikingly replete with Italianate features: the cast-iron bannister, the Baroque columns with Corinthian detailing and the segmental arches. These elements cumulatively lend themselves to the recurring theme of storytelling: the viewer is prompted to wonder what occurred to a home or space that evinced such wealth and was founded upon such monumentality.



**Yuan Yuan**

*A Little Bit Lonely II*, 2013

Oil on canvas

150 x 210 cm

In this particular painting, Yuan Yuan depicts an interior that exposes a great state of dereliction and by-gone glamour. Remarkably, this work also introduces the eerie possibility of ongoing inhabitation or an alarming vision from the past. The scene depicts large French bay windows, which are spread open unto a long hall. Despite paint chipping off the ceiling in large slabs and the large ornate floral tiles having been damaged by discare, a long table is placed in the middle of the hall and remarkably surrounded by twelve matching chairs. As if frozen in time, a pristine white linen cloth has been laid out, and glassware as well as dainty porcelain has been set on the table. The windows, replete with striking cracks in the glass, are an incongruous sight in juxtaposition with the arrangement as well as each of the chairs, which are also seemingly intact. The entire scene seems to be cast from memory, as if on the one hand Yuan Yuan is depicting what is actually before him, while on the other hand his mind is filling the blanks of what this space once was or indeed could have been.



**Yuan Yuan**

*Museum VI*, 2013

Oil on canvas

150 x 190 cm

This painting demonstrates an elaborate degree of opulence and is based on a vision Yuan Yuan had of what the Metropolitan Museum in New York would resemble, should it be inhabited. A prime example of his visionary flair and storytelling abilities, Yuan Yuan depicts a single room with golden silk material that hugs the walls, its ornate floral pattern glistening in lavish accordance with the Rococo fauteuils as well as the gold leaf and marble cabinet below the window with closed blinds. A primary point of visual contact is the Dutch or Flemish still life painting to the left-most wall, which in a gilded framed depicts a feast brimming with fruit, set against a dark exotic landscape. This first object draws the viewer's gaze throughout the room and to its various ornaments: the wall-mounted chandeliers, the lusciously draping golden curtains. As if plucked from a royal 17<sup>th</sup> century European setting, Yuan Yuan exemplifies through this scene his great ability at imagining and depicting two extremes, from the desolately detrued to the seemingly untouchable and abundant.

