

Interview with
Xu Yang

許陽專訪



About the Artist

關於藝術家

許陽（生於 1996 年，中國山東）在以繪畫為中心的實踐中，將幻想、表演和身份建構交織在一起。她從歐洲藝術史、時尚、童話和變裝表演中汲取靈感，以精巧的繪畫技術和洛可可風格的創造了奇異而夢幻的世界。當中，人物、物件和風景被描繪得溫柔而堅定，甜蜜而強大。許陽將自己的大部分畫作都當作「自畫像」，以一種批判性的方法來探尋和追問身份議題。她結合了錯綜複雜的鏡像畫面，在她的畫布上製造出引人入勝的空間，目光在那裏匯聚和對抗，推翻了限制女性特質定義的意識形態。

許陽於 2018 年獲倫敦藝術大學溫布頓藝術學院甲等榮譽繪畫文學士學位，2020 年獲英國皇家藝術學院繪畫文學碩士學位。她是 2019 年 Barbican Arts Group Trust 主辦的 ArtWorks Open 的獲獎者，並於 2020 年入圍 The Biscuit Factory 主辦的 Contemporary Young Artist Prize。2023 年，她接受了 Tate Collective 主辦的 LGBTQIA+ History Month Social Commission。她的作品曾在世界各地展出，包括香港、倫敦、上海、威尼斯、雅典和紐約。

藝術家目前生活和工作的英國倫敦。

Xu Yang (b. 1996, Shandong, China) interweaves fantasies, performativity, as well as the construction of identity in her painting-centered practice. Drawing inspirations from European art history, fashion, fairytales, and drag performances, her meticulous techniques and Rococo-influenced style yield fantastic worlds where figures, objects, and scenery are perceived as tender yet assertive, sweet yet powerful. Considering most of her paintings "self-portraits," Xu assumes a critical approach to interrogating the questions of identity. Incorporating the intricacies of mirror images, she creates intriguing spaces on her canvases where gazes converge and antagonize, overthrowing ideologies that confine the definition of femininity.

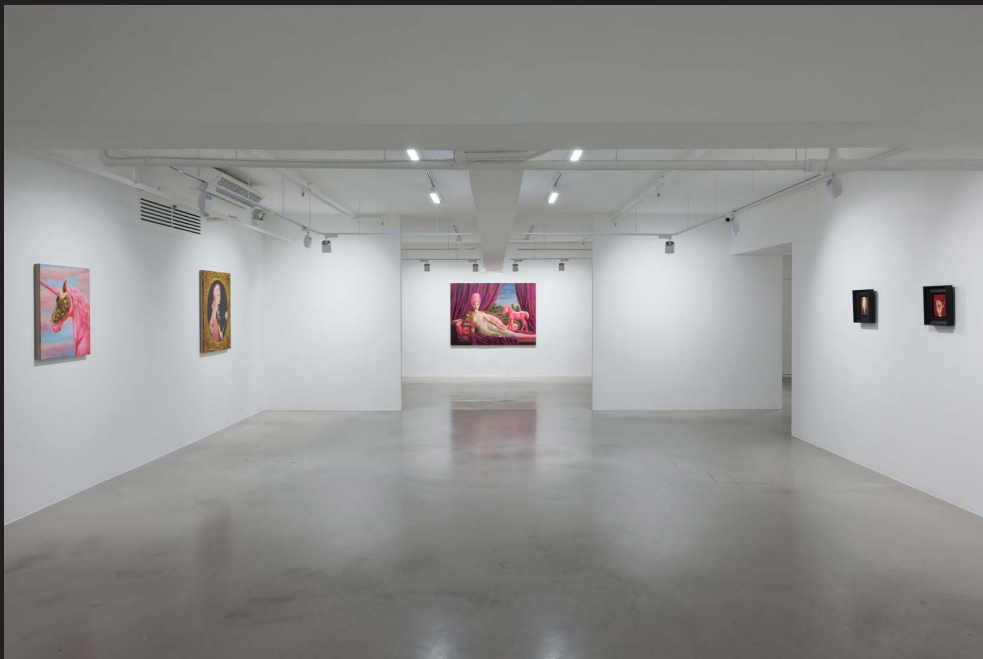
Xu obtained her BA in Painting with First-Class Honours from Wimbledon College of Arts, University of the Arts London in 2018 and her MA in Painting from the Royal College of Art in 2020. She was the winner of ArtWorks Open awards by Barbican Arts Group Trust in 2019 and was shortlisted for the Contemporary Young Artist Prize by The Biscuit Factory in 2020. In 2023, she received LGBTQIA+ History Month Social Commission by Tate Collective. Her works have been showcased worldwide, including in Hong Kong, London, Shanghai, Venice, Athens, and New York.

The artist currently lives and works in London, UK.



Xu Yang in her studio

許陽在工作室



"Imagine Yourself a Warrior" installation view

「把自己當作戰士」現場圖

On the occasion of Xu Yang's solo exhibition "Imagine Yourself a Warrior," the gallery team had an in-depth discussion with the artist, highlighting the thoughts and concepts behind her creative practice. The exhibition opened at MOU PROJECTS in Hong Kong on February 11, 2023, bringing together a new body of paintings centered around an armored, pink-haired, and valiant-appearing heroine—a mesmerizing persona of the artist that aims to challenge the norms and politics revolving around gender, power, and representation.

值許陽個展「把自己當作戰士」之際，畫廊團隊與藝術家進行了一次深入的探討，談及了藝術家的創作理念以及創作過程中的所見所想。展覽於2023年2月11日在MOU PROJECTS香港空間開幕，展出一系列全新畫作，圍繞着一位身穿盔甲、英姿颯爽、粉色頭髮的女主人公展開。作為藝術家以自身為原型而創造出的角色，這位主人公的誕生旨在質疑與顛覆圍繞着性別、權力和表徵而建構的規範與政治。

MOU PROJECTS (MP):

In this exhibition, a female warrior in metal armor and a pink wig is portrayed as the central character throughout many of the works. Could you talk a little bit about the motivation behind this and your overall idea of the exhibition?

Xu Yang (Xu):

Actually, the whole series is related to the concept of identity politics and is closely related to my recent personal experience. As a Chinese artist living and working in London, the racial conflicts triggered by the pandemic in recent years have prompted me to think about the problems behind this phenomenon, and given me greater pressure, which makes me feel that I need to protect myself, which is one of the meanings of armor in my paintings.

For me, the other implication is gender. I think there is a wonderful sense of collision between armor and the female body, because traditionally, women are considered to be vulnerable minorities, and there are always people saying that we can't do this or that. And I think, as women, we must speak up and keep defending ourselves. In the art world, few female artists have a clear and promising prospect right after graduation, and part of the reason is due to the constraints of family. Many parents think that girls don't need to spend a lot of money to go to school, and there is no way they can inherit the family business, so we must work hard to win something from childhood, even the trust of the people closest to us.

The character in my work is not fully clad in armor because I don't want her to look too masculine. In the paintings, I try to depict some delicate skin and soft cloth, revealing the fragile side and showing a powerful persona at the same time.

MP:

I've noticed that your work tends to engage with the masterpieces in European art history. For example, in the exhibition's centerpiece, *It Is So Much Simpler to Bury*

MOU PROJECTS (MP):

這次展覽中，一位身披金屬盔甲、頭戴粉色假髮的女戰士作為畫面中的核心角色貫穿了眾多展出作品。想問可否淺談一下這背後的動機和你對展覽的整體想法？

許陽 (許):

其實整個系列作品都與身份政治這一概念有關，也與我最近的個人經歷有緊密的聯繫。作為生活和工作於倫敦的中國藝術家，這些年由於疫情而激發的種族矛盾促使我去思考這種現象背後的問題，也給予我更大的壓力，這讓我覺得我需要穿一層盔甲來保護自己，這是盔甲在我畫作中的其中一層含義。

對我而言，另一層含義是跟性別有關的。我認為盔甲與女性身體之間能產生一種很奇妙的碰撞感，因為傳統意義中，女生往往被認為是弱勢群體，總有人在說我們這做不到，那也做不到，而我認為作為女性，我們更要不斷發聲，不斷去捍衛自己。在藝術圈中，很少有女性藝術家剛剛畢業就有很清晰、很好的發展前景，而這其中一部分原因也來自家庭的束縛。很多父母會認為女生不必花很多錢讀書，也沒有辦法繼承家業，所以我們從小到大需要很努力才能去爭取一些東西，甚至是最親近的人的信任。

我畫中的人物形象並沒有全身都穿着盔甲，因為我不想讓人覺得她過於陽剛。在作品中，我嘗試刻畫一些細膩的皮膚和柔軟的布料，表達脆弱一面的同時也在展現一種強大的力量。

MP:

我注意到你的作品往往會與歐洲藝術史上的名作產生一種對話關係。例如在此次展覽的核心作品《*It Is So Much Simpler to Bury Reality than It Is to Dispose of Dreams*》(2022)中，側躺的人物及她腳邊的獨角獸讓人不自覺地聯想起意大利文藝復興畫家提香的作品《烏爾比諾的維納斯》(1534)。但與提香作品不同的是，你的畫面中，主角的「她」一個人靜坐在房間裏，並未赤裸全身，且望向觀眾的眼神也沒有任何嫵媚、反



It Is So Much Simpler to Bury Reality than It Is to Dispose of Dreams,
2022
Oil on linen
135 × 185 cm

It Is So Much Simpler to Bury Reality than It Is to Dispose of Dreams,
2022
亞麻布面油畫
135 × 185 cm



Aspiration, 2022
Oil on linen
95 x 80 cm

《Aspiration》· 2022
亞麻布面油畫
95 x 80 cm

Reality than It Is to Dispose of Dreams (2022), the reclining female figure and the unicorn at her feet unconsciously remind us of *Venus of Urbino* (1534) by Italian Renaissance painter Titian. However, different from Titian's work, in your painting, the protagonist sits alone in a room, not naked, and her eyes express strong determination instead of compliance. Could you explain the connection?

Xu:

The idea of gaze is very important to my works, and it is also a concept that runs through European art history. In many classical and modern works, women or female bodies are the "depicted" characters, like "vases." In my paintings, the female warrior is staring at the audience because she knows the audience is staring at her. In fact, my original idea was that she was looking in the mirror, and what was depicted in the picture was a mirrored representation of herself, which hints at a double-layered connotation. First, the audience was actually the mirror, and second, she was also staring at the audience. I hope to give more initiative to the heroine in the paintings—she is a girl who lives in her own space; her focus is only on herself; she doesn't care whether the audience is watching her body or not; and she doesn't feel like a vase.

MP:

All the portraits in the exhibition are based on yourself, and that's why they can be interpreted as "self-portraits." How do you view self-portraits as a form of painting and as a concept in the process of art practice?

Xu:

Actually, for me, all my works are my self-portraits. In this exhibition, the self-portraits carry some conceptual ideas that I want to deliver. In *Ambition* and *Aspiration* (both 2022), the "I" in the portraits holds a paintbrush and a palette. I think "armor" is a concept itself because no one would literally wear them in this way, and as an artist, my brush is my weapon. If I wanted to have

而異常篤定。能否請你講一下這其中的聯繫？

許:

在我的作品中，凝視 (gaze) 是一個很重要的元素，而這也是貫穿了歐洲藝術史的一個概念。在許多古典及近代作品中，女性或女性身體一直是被「畫」的角色，彷彿一尊尊「花瓶」。我的畫中，這位女戰士是盯着觀眾的，因為她知道觀眾在凝視着她。其實我原本的想法是她在照鏡子，而畫面上描繪出的是鏡子裏的她，這其中包含了一種雙重含義，一是觀眾其實就是鏡子，二是她也在凝視觀眾。我希望在畫面中將更多的主動權給到這個主人公，從而把觀眾「女要化」。她是一個生活在自己的空間裏的人物，她關注的焦點只在自己，渾然不在意觀眾是否在注視她的身體，也不覺得自己是個花瓶。

MP:

展覽中，所有的人物肖像都是以你自身為原型的，那麼它們其實也可以被理解為「自畫像」。在創作過程中，你是怎麼看待「自畫像」作為一種繪畫形式以及一種概念的呢？

許:

其實對我來說，我的所有作品都是我的自畫像。而在這次展覽中，自畫像承載了一些我想要表達的概念性的東西。在《Ambition》和《Aspiration》(均 2022) 中，肖像中的「我」手中拿着畫筆和調色盤。我認為「盔甲」是一個概念化的東西，因為沒有人會字面含義上去這樣武裝自己，而作為一個藝術家，我的畫筆就是我的武器。如果我想要發表自己的聲音和觀點或事表達自己言論，我不會去打仗，而是會去作畫。

我去年偶然間讀到了一篇報告文章，裏面說到，在二級藝術市場中，女性藝術家在畫上簽名時，拍賣的價格會下降，而男性簽名，價格則會上升。我認為這種性別歧視和不公平潛移默化地影響着我們並體現在這些數據上。歷史上其實有很多女性藝術家，她們畫完畫會選擇不簽名，或者簽上她們丈夫的名字，因為只有這樣，她們的作

a voice, an opinion, or something to say, I wouldn't go to war, I would go paint.

I came across a report last year that said that, in the secondary art market, when a female artist signs a painting, the price at auction goes down, but when a male artist signs, the price goes up. And I think that kind of sexism and unfairness creeps into us, and it shows up in these statistics. In fact, there are many female artists in history, who would choose not to sign their paintings, or sign their husbands' names, because only in this way, their works will be accepted. I wanted to challenge this phenomenon, so in *Ambition* and *Aspiration*, I signed my name at the bottom.

MP:

Another theme that runs through the exhibition is unicorns, which you depict as having pink hair and wearing armor, as if to form a visual interrelation with the female warriors in the paintings. As a magical creature that does not exist in reality, symbolizing purity and beauty, does the inclusion of the unicorn bring a new layer of meaning to the exhibition?

Xu:

To me, everyone living in this world is like a unicorn, because I believe that human nature is beautiful in its deepest and most essential part. When you believe in the beauty of the world, try to radiate good energy, and constantly explore new things, I think you are a unicorn. In my works, unicorns put on armor, because while human nature is good, in society, we are always forced to arm ourselves in the face of war, dispute, or discrimination. At the same time, unicorns themselves represent hope, just like in the fictional fairy tales we believe in as children—they are gentle and strong and represent my sincere hope for the world.

MP:

The exhibition also features still lifes that you don't usually tackle, in which you depict

品才會被人接受。我想要挑戰這件事情，所以在《Ambition》和《Aspiration》中，我在畫面上簽上了自己的名字。

MP:

另一個貫穿整個展覽的繪畫主題便是獨角獸了，它們被你描繪成有着粉色毛髮、身披盔甲的樣子，與畫中的女戰士彷彿形成了一種視覺互文。作為一種並不存在於現實中、象徵着純潔和美好的魔法生物，獨角獸被加入作品中，是否為展覽帶來了一層新的含義呢？

許:

對我來說，每個生活在這個世界上的人都像是一個獨角獸，因為我相信人性最深處、最本質的一面都是美好的。當你相信這個世界的美好，嘗試去散髮好的能量，不斷探索新的事物，我會覺得你就是一個獨角獸。在我的作品中，獨角獸被戴上了盔甲，因為雖然人性本善，但在社會中，面對戰火、糾紛或歧視，我們總會被迫武裝自己。與此同時，獨角獸本身也代表着希望，就如同我們小時候會相信的虛構的童話故事——它們溫柔與堅強並存，代表着我對於這個世界的一種小小的期許。

MP:

這次展覽也呈現了你並不常觸及的靜物作品，其中，你描繪了一系列實際或想象中的物件，包括匕首（《A Wish Fulfilment》，2022）及金屬手套（《An Ultimate Refuge》，2022）。它們對你來說，意味着什麼？

許:

這兩件作品是我這次展覽中最後完成的，我其實是把其他作品裏面的一些元素摘要出來，拼湊在一起，組合成的。我從小在藝術培訓班裏上課的時候，老師就總是讓我們畫靜物，但是我小時候一直都沒有很感興趣，因為我當時覺得那不是我想畫的題材。而最近我又重新開始了這種藝術實



A Wish Fulfilment, 2022
Oil on linen
95 × 85 cm

《A Wish Fulfilment》 · 2022
亞麻布面油畫
95 × 85 cm



Masked Warrior, 2022
Oil on linen
50 × 45 cm

《Masked Warrior》· 2022
亞麻布面油畫
50 × 45 cm



Endeavour, 2022
Oil on linen
70 × 60 cm

《Endeavour》· 2022
亞麻布面油畫
70 × 60 cm

a range of practical and imagined objects, including a dagger (*A Wish Fulfillment*, 2022) and a metal glove (*An Ultimate Refuge*, 2022). What do they mean to you?

Xu:

These two works are the last ones I finished painting for this exhibition. I actually selected some elements from other works and put them together. When I was a child in art class, the teacher always asked us to draw still life, but I was never very interested in the medium as a child, because I didn't think it was what I wanted to paint. Recently, I have taken up art form again, hoping to get some new inspiration. For me, these still lifes are also my self-portraits. I put together objects that I love, and they are all related to me and represent my identity. With still life, I'm also exploring another way of constructing identity.

MP:

In the small-format painting series *Touch* (2022), you focus on the depiction of delicate hands. In several of the works, fingers are covered with nail guards, which often appear in Qing Dynasty dramas. What prompted you to create this series?

Xu:

Nail guards were very popular in ancient China, especially in the court of the Qing Dynasty. They were very elegant ornaments and symbolized the status of the court ladies. To me, these nail guards are not only decorative objects but also armor for the fingers. The metal material makes them very hard and dangerous. It is interesting to think that women were given such a "weapon" in the feudal society of ancient China where the status of women was low.

MP:

The show can be seen as a continuation of your Rococo-inspired style of painting, as well as your experience of performing in

踐，想要從中汲取一些新的靈感。對我來說，這些靜物也是我的自畫像。我把我自己喜歡的、能代表我身份的物件聚集在一起，它們都與我息息相關。通過靜物，我也在探索另一種構建身份的方式。

MP:

在小幅畫作《Touch》系列（2022）中，你專注描繪了纖細而精緻的手。其中幾幅作品裏，手指被戴上了常出現於清宮劇中的指甲套。想問這個意象背後有着怎樣的思索呢？

許:

指甲套這個物件在中國古代，尤其是清朝的宮廷裏十分流行，它們象徵着宮裏娘娘的身份地位，是一種非常優雅的飾品。對我來說，這些指甲套不僅起到裝飾的作用，從另一方面去想，還是為手指打造的盔甲，金屬的材料使它們非常堅硬，也讓它們看起來非常危險。在女性地位並不高的中國古代封建社會中，女人們卻被給予了這樣一種「武器」，想一想其實是很奇妙的。

MP:

此次展覽其實延續了你一貫的、受洛可可啟發的繪畫風格，也與你變裝表演的經歷息息相關。可以展開講講其中的聯繫嗎？

許:

在十八世紀的歐洲，洛可可其實是一種圍繞着女性品味和女性氣質展開的藝術形式，那個時代的畫作中，奢華、優雅而誇張的服飾和造型深深吸引着我。我從小在一個比較傳統的環境中長大，家長總是不讓我穿我喜歡的衣服，但因為我當時很喜歡 cosplay，所以我把自己攢的零花錢都用來買衣服和假髮。雖然我父母很反感這些，覺得我很不倫不類，但我當時就覺得 cosplay 時的自己更自信，更喜歡那種「不穿普通衣服」的感覺。

後來當我來到英國求學的時候，我瞭解到了變裝表演，認識了很多新朋友。我感覺變裝表演者不

drag. Can you expand on the connection?

Xu:

In 18th-century Europe, Rococo was actually an art form centered on women's taste and femininity. I was deeply attracted by the luxurious, elegant, and exaggerated clothes and shapes in the paintings of that time. I grew up in a more traditional environment where my parents wouldn't let me wear what I liked, but because I was into cosplay at the time, I spent all my pocket money on costumes and wigs. Although my parents hated it and thought I was improper, I felt more confident and liked the feeling of "not wearing normal clothes" when I was cosplaying.

Later when I came to the UK to study, I learned about drag performance and met a lot of new people. I feel that drag performers are not like cosplayers who have to portray another person. In a way, drag is a kind of armor. Every time I cross-dress, I don't feel like I'm changing into another person or persona. It's just that the process brings out something deep inside of me that makes me less wary.

MP:

In the innermost room of the exhibition, two works named *Untitled* (both 2022) depict the magnificent clouds in the sky at sunrise or sunset. How do these two paintings relate to the other works in the exhibition?

Xu:

These two works are respectively painted in the UK and Italy, two different places, but they are, in actuality, the same sky. In the painting process, when I looked up at the sky, I felt that "the universe is very big, but we are very small." At the same time, I also had a very naive hope: we obviously live on the same planet, but the world is still at war, why can't we work together for a better future?

The time depicted in the paintings can be either early morning or dusk. I chose to paint

像 cosplay 需要去扮演另外一個人格，而是展現一種從容自在的狀態。從某種程度上來說，變裝表演也是一種盔甲。我每次變裝的時候，並不會覺得自己變成了另外一個人或人格，只是這個過程煥發及揭示出了我內心深處的一些東西，使我不再那麼小心翼翼。

MP:

在展覽最裏側的房間內，有兩幅名為《Untitled》（均 2022）的作品描繪了日出或日落時分天邊壯麗絢爛的雲彩。想問這兩幅畫與展覽其他的作品有什麼關聯呢？

許:

這兩幅作品分別繪制於英國和意大利，兩個不同的地方，但卻是同一片天空。在創作過程中，我抬頭看天，當時的感受是「宇宙很大，我們很小」，同時我也會有一種非常天真的希冀：我們明明同樣生活在同一個地球上，但是這個世界卻依舊戰火紛飛，為什麼我們不能向一個更美好的方向共同努力呢？

畫中的時間點既可以是清晨，也可以是黃昏。選擇這個時間是因為那個時候的雲是彩色的、很夢幻。我相信生活中細節的是很美好的，每天經歷的事物是很美好的，我們應該去珍惜生活中的點點滴滴。

MP:

可以分享一下近期的計劃和對於自己藝術創作的展望嗎？

許:

我近期會投入其他作品的創作，包括一副為歐洲私人基金會創作的作品，等合適的時間會分享給大家。未來創作我希望繼續探索人像和靜物在現代文化語境中的不同可能性，我很欣賞 Elizabeth le Brun、Rembrandt 還有當代畫家 Kehinde Wiley 的作品，希望在接下來的創作中，有更多嘗試。



"Imagine Yourself a Warrior" installation view

「把自己當作戰士」現場圖



the sky around these times because the clouds were colorful and dreamy. I believe that the little things in life are beautiful, the things we experience every day are beautiful, and we should cherish everything in life.

MP:

Can you share your recent plans and prospects for your artistic creation?

Xu:

I will devote myself to other recent works, including one for a private European foundation. I hope to continue to explore the different possibilities of portrait and still life in the context of modern culture. I appreciate the works of Elizabeth le Brun, Rembrandt, and Kehinde Wiley, and I hope to try more things in my future works.



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MOU PROJECTS

202, The Factory, 1 Yip Fat Street,
Wong Chuk Hang, Hong Kong
mouprojects.com

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