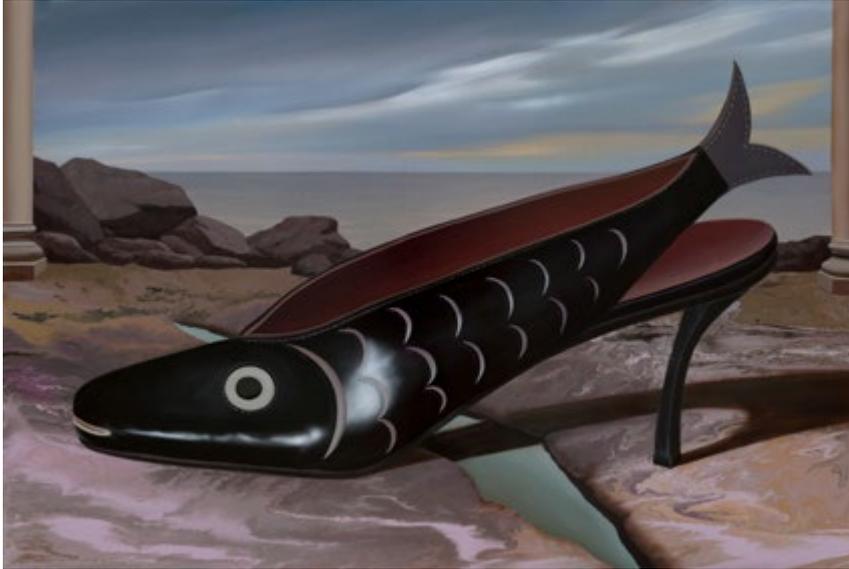


# Esther Schipper

Sun Yitian

**Once Upon a Time**

October 18 – November 24, 2023



Sun Yitian, **Cruising Creatures**, 2023, acrylic on canvas, 60 x 90 cm

Esther Schipper is pleased to present **Once Upon a Time**, Sun Yitian's first solo exhibition with the gallery. On view at Esther Schipper Paris, the exhibition will include ten new paintings.

Sun Yitian is best known for her paintings of monumentally enlarged mass-produced objects. Based on staged photographs taken by the artist herself and lovingly rendered in colorful acrylic paint, this series of works, known as **Artificial Objects**, depict the surfaces of inflatable toys or severed dolls' heads—both frequent motifs—often with flecks of reflecting camera lights visible.

**Once Upon a Time** premieres a new suite of paintings that bring closer together two bodies of work the artist had long kept separate: artificial objects and natural objects. To the artist the two series represent distinct approaches and emotional temperatures. Artificial objects focused on the depiction of the aura of objects produced under the assembly line, such as inflatable toys or doll's heads, their settings generally refusing any narrative associations. Natural objects, a series the artist has not widely exhibited before, focused more on the reorganization and reformulation of landscape motifs.

The new works combine aspects of these two series. The human figures we encounter in the new paintings have the generalized smoothness reminiscent of Sun Yitian's paintings of doll's heads: friendly and full of guileless beauty, with full lips and slightly vacuous gazes. With these depictions of Greek mythological figures, among them Medusa and Dionysus, Sun Yitian explores her vision and own life, shaped by globalization, and classical motifs. Her **Medusa**, for example, ties together a childhood memory of seeing a Versace logo on a backpack with her study of Western art history and iconography and explores the transformation of commodity symbols into cultural symbols. But even as elements, such as **Dionysus'** vines and grapes or **Medusa's** snake-hair are highly graphical, the paintings refuse the expression of cultural and historical connotations, rather giving a material sense of the 'characters' in the painting. The figures' detached sidelong glances retain a sense of detachment from modern society.

**Cruising Creatures**, a painting of an iconic shoe by the French avant-garde shoe designer André Perugia (1893-1977) is another example of Sun Yitian's multi-layered approach to meaning. The shoe, produced in

1955, was itself designed in reference to a series of still-lives, **Black Fish**, the French artist George Braque painted in the 1940s. Sun Yitian places this recreated artificial object in a landscape based on a photo taken by her parents on a trip to the East China Sea. Personal associations, art historical references and fashion fuse in a beautifully rendered, lively “portrait” of this object, as if on a strange desert island.

Objects of religious adoration become embedded in similarly multi-layered understanding of an image. In **Porcelain Mother** a small figure can be read as Catholic Madonna or Buddhist Guanyin. Does the painting depict a mass-produced object or a museum’s precious unique work. The ambiguity is intentional and its underlying question at the core of Sun Yitian’s practice: Does the source of the motif matter? Her work suggests a carnival-like emulation behind the imitation industry or a playful deconstruction of tradition.

The artist’s new works then continue to explore differing notions of originality in Chinese and Western European culture. Understanding art works to exist without a fixed meaning, her **You Hold My Heart Tightly** takes a motif from an early 20th century Brazilian artist, Ismael Nery (1900-1934) and reimagines it from a contemporary perspective. The painting is an homage across time and culture: the little-known surrealist painter died at 33 years old, close to the age Sun Yitian is now.

Yet, Sun Yitian’s knowing use of painterly signs employs both iconography and technique. **Once Upon a Time**, depicts a young woman, with long Botticelli-like hair, set against a nocturnal scene of silhouetted trees. Yet, while ostensibly drawing on a historically Western style of portraiture, for painting the figure’s flowing hair Sun Yitian employed a technique that draws on Ma Yuan’s **Water Studies**, a work by the famous Chinese painter from the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279). For **Castle**, which depicts the surroundings of Warwick Castle, a Norman structure in England, Sun Yitian used an early 18th century painting as source for the landscape but replaced the building with an inflatable toy castle. And, further adding to the cultural amalgamation, the artist based the trees in the foreground on Chinese set motifs, instead of the traditional volumetric depiction of light and shade in Western painting.

Perhaps suggesting an analogy to the singularity her works drew from depictions of mass-produced toys, Sun Yitian boldly ventures into iconography that could be considered a tired trope—the moonlit sky. The artist claims the freedom to paint this motif anew, and her **Moonlit Night** combines this sense of familiarity and freshness, of being, as the sky, ancient and always in the present.

Sun Yitian was born in Zhejiang, China in 1991. She studied painting at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in China, graduating in 2015 and obtaining an MFA in 2018. Sun Yitian is now completing her doctorate in literature at the School of Humanities at Tsinghua University, Beijing. The artist lives and works in Beijing.

In 2023 Sun Yitian received the WSJ China’s ON THE FIELD Creator of the Year Award and “BOB Best of the Best” 2022 Young Artist Award. Sun was selected for the Influential 2023: Forbes China Contemporary Young Artists and Forbes 30 Under 30 Asia Class of 2019. Recent exhibitions include **Bordercrossing: Possibilities and Interactions**, Yuz Museum, Shanghai (2023); **Projection**, Sifang Art Museum, Nanjing (2023); **Nián Nián: The Power and Agency of Animal Forms**, Deji Art Museum, Nanjing (2023); **The Infinite Conversation: 2022 Beijing Biennial “Symbiosis”**, National Base for International Cultural Trade, Beijing (2022); **Summer ‘22**, Esther Schipper, Berlin (2022); **The Pieces I Am**, Shanghai, UCCA Edge (2022); **Art’s Language**, Artists’ Game, OCAT Shenzhen, Shenzhen (2022); **The Disconnected Generation**, Song Art Museum, Beijing (2022). Sun Yitian’s work is held in the following collections: Hort Family Collection, New York; White Rabbit Gallery, Sydney; Museum Voorlinden, Wassenaar; By Art Matters, Hangzhou; Longlati Foundation, Shanghai; M WOODS, Beijing; Yuz Museum, Shanghai; Sifang Art Museum, Nanjing and Long Museum, Shanghai. The artist is jointly represented by BANK, Shanghai.

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