

# Skyler Chen

## How far I would have to go to become myself

27.06.2024

23.08.2024

**MASSIMODECARLO is delighted to announce *How far I would have to go to become myself*, Taiwanese-born and Rotterdam-based artist Skyler Chen's second exhibition with the gallery. In *How far I would have to go to become myself*, Chen narrates a lifetime, recounting, unfolding, and summarising the challenges inherent in self-discovery and acceptance. The exhibition progresses like a story, with each piece unveiling a stage in this intimate and biographical exploration. Without the punctuation of a question mark, Chen's title serves as both inquiry and assertion, suggesting that the answer lies within the journey itself.**

Chen, born in Kaohsiung City, Taiwan, in 1982, grew up in a country steeped in decades of dictatorship. This regime, marked by its authoritarian grip, fueled local unrest and fostered a progressively conservative society. In the midst of this environment, the Taiwanese artist faced undiagnosed dyslexia and grappled with his queer identity, ultimately finding his voice through art. In the early 2000s, Chen moved to the US to continue his studies, beginning a balancing act between his roots and self-acceptance.

The exhibition, a collection of paintings, watercolours, and woodcuts unveils Chen's narrative spotlighting his intricate family bonds - particularly with his parents - and his interactions within society. Themes of navigating traditional Asian values and embracing the queer community emerge, showcasing the profound journey the artist undertook to define his unique trajectory.

In *Mothers and Sons*, Chen depicts the intimate relationship between a parent and their queer child. "*Mothers and Sons* is a deeply personal exploration of the complex interactions between queer individuals and their mothers, drawing from my own relationship with my mother," Chen shares. The painting encapsulates the emotional hurdles LGBTQ+ individuals encounter while reconciling their identity with familial expectations. As the mother clutches a book on Confucianism, she walks through a street alley with a gay sauna looming in the background, displaying her internal battle between tradition and acceptance and evoking a scene filled with tension and division.

In a contemporary take on a Renaissance diptych, *To Leave It Behind* and *Can I Be Close to U* illustrate the Taiwanese artist's experience: leaving home, grappling with illegal work permits, and battling homesickness in pursuit of his queer identity abroad. Chinese magazines entitled "Mu Qin" ("Mother") and "Fu Qin" ("Father") reflect parental influence, transcending geographical boundaries. A green card boldly declares "Dream Big or Go Home", symbolising the allure of the American dream and the emotional weight of leaving loved ones behind. These works set against the backdrop of a Chinese restaurant, explore the juxtaposition of cultures and personal liberation.

Chen skilfully navigates the intersection of his diverse geographical experiences - Taiwan, America, and his current home in Europe - while portraying inhibited characters on canvas, whether fully clothed, partially dressed, or completely naked. His work consistently achieves a harmonious synthesis. In his large-scale work *Finding Myself*, Chen explores the coexistence of East and West, merging Asian folklore with the fearless expression of his characters' sexual tensions and desires. Reinterpreting Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*, the artist draws on influences from Daoist art and Japanese Noh Theater's storytelling. The inclusion of the Rabbit, symbolising the Queer Deity Tu'er Shen, signifies the transcendence of societal barriers.

Chen's narrative is both deeply personal and universally resonant. Through his art, he finds strength and healing, crafting a unique visual language that captures the complexity of human experience. Blending family bonds, cultural roots, and a pursuit of authenticity, Chen candidly and generously showcases his journey toward self-acceptance, inviting viewers to reflect on how far one must go to truly become themselves.

### **Skyler Chen**

Skyler Chen was born in 1982 in Kaohsiung City, Taiwan. He graduated from the University of Utah with a degree in Fine Arts in 2006. Currently, he lives and works in Rotterdam, Netherlands.

Chen's work seamlessly blends classicism and modernity, creating intimate and occasionally provocative scenes that juxtapose contemporary desires with a classical aesthetic.

Struggling with undiagnosed dyslexia, Chen turned to painting as a means of communication. His art explores his queer Asian identity and conveys the experience of being a queer person in a conservative culture.

Drawing from his personal life experiences, Chen incorporates a blend of languages and cultures in his work, from traditional Taiwanese iconography to American commercial imagery. His paintings focus on details that highlight the symbolic power of objects and memories. In Chen's compositions, symbolic elements such as erotic magazines, dumplings, fresh fruit, and birds find their place on the canvas. Through his art, he finds healing, embracing his queerness while navigating the challenges of dyslexia. Painting serves as his medium of communication, enabling deeper connections with himself and others.

Earthy tones, warm shades, isolated characters, and allegorical objects inhabit Chen's work, providing a visual representation of the human experience. His works feature enigmatic figures in familiar settings, projecting their queerness onto the objects around them. The detached and static figures in Chen's paintings are specific to our time, yet they can also be perceived as timeless, conveying one of the greatest contemporary feelings: aloneness.