

Esther Schipper

Sun Yitian

Romantic Room

May 2 – May 31, 2025

Esther Schipper, Berlin



Sun Yitian, **Shelter VI**, 2024, acrylic on canvas, 57,1 x 57,2 cm (22 1/2 x 22 1/2 in) (unframed), 59,4 x 59,4 x 7 cm (23 3/8 x 23 3/8 x 2 3/4 in) (framed) (SY 039). © the artist

Esther Schipper is pleased to announce **Romantic Room**, an exhibition by Sun Yitian with all new paintings. This is Sun's third project with the gallery, following her exhibition in Paris and a presentation at Berlin's Niche space, both in 2023, the year she joined the program.

Sun Yitian is best known for her paintings of monumentally enlarged mass-produced objects: Generally based on staged photographs taken by the artist herself, inflatable toys or severed doll heads—both frequent motifs—are lovingly rendered in colorful acrylic paint. **Romantic Room** continues Sun Yitian's multi-layered approach to understanding what an image is and can be in contemporary painting. The paintings explore her personal history, intertwined with cultural and societal changes in China, through the country's image worlds, as well as by how Western culture has been depicted in Chinese everyday life. For this exhibition, the artist draws on imagery from art history, mass-produced consumer objects and toys, amusement parks, but also on childhood memories and observations from daily urban life.

A particular focus of **Romantic Room** is on images that draw on religious iconography and motifs from art history that feature in ambitious compositions that hold suspended multiple perspectives, cultures, and even temporal associations. Full of mysterious beauty, the works count on a certain familiarity with the imagery. A cherubic child holding a pomegranate twig or a hooded figure holding an iPhone looking at a Madonna-like statue may evoke Christian associations yet at the root of these paintings is the artist's grappling with any inherent meaning images may have. The small child reads as angel but also echoes posters from the era of China's one-child policy, incantatory images of prayer and propaganda; the Madonna may in fact be a mass-produced object doubling as Buddhist Guanyin, while the painting's complex composition contains nods to Diego Velasquez' *Las Meninas*, via Edouard Manet and Jeff Wall.

An important touchstone is the notion of "Shanzai," a transformation that is itself a creative act of appropriation, what the Korean philosopher Byung-Chul Han has called "Chinese deconstruction": a notion of originality that is markedly different from Western traditions. In this context, Sun Yitian's fearless eclecticism is an integral function of her work: Constructing elaborate visual puzzles, the artist may pair an architectural setting from an Italian Renaissance masterwork with a vividly painted doll's head in one work; in another she focuses on a similarity of a children's animation, depicted on the screen of a TV set her parents owned, to Henri Matisse's **Dance**. Exploring Eastern and Western iconography through the ages, adapting, rearranging and reconfiguring—taking possession—Sun Yitian wields a multifaceted vocabulary to formulate her own narratives, confidently and unafraid.

Sun Yitian's experiences of Chinese representations of Western fairy tales in theme parks become charged images that highlight the transformation that visual culture and narratives undergo in a globalized world. Personal recollections are embedded in the larger cultural and political history of China, in particular the economic boom of Sun Yitian's youth in the province of Wenzhou, a major hub of industrial manufacturing known for inexpensive consumer objects, toys, and reproductions of branded goods. Looming large in her memory, inflatable fortresses or small bright toys recall moments of empowerment and wonder but also speak to consumerism and obsolescence fueling China's wealth with far-reaching repercussions for the global economy. This tension is presented in the combination of specific objects in landscapes that, with their subtly exotic flora, connote foreignness. Dramatic skies—deep blue, purple or rose-colored, with lightning bolts or hazy moon, just after sunset or before sunrise—set an impassionate mood, perhaps anticipating change.

The beauty and accentuated charm of Sun Yitian's work are deliberate strategies to pull us into hyperreal world of pleasurable artifice. Thus, the painting of a sleeping woman which gives the exhibition its name, **Romantic Room**, has an exaggerated artificiality, invoking a fairy-tale like scenario with a menacing demon crouching next to the slumbering princess figure. An ominous note mingles with the picture's ostensible sweetness. To the artist, the motif is both personal in its reference to the romantic narratives communicated to young women, as well as a comment about a broader phenomenon, namely being caught in a dream-like world of objects and all-encompassing narratives that mediate experiences. It is impossible to differentiate between the real and the artificial, Sun Yitian's work suggests but the artist wants (us) to wake up to true reality—even if she isn't so sure such a thing still exists or can exist.

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 at the School of Humanities at Tsinghua University, Beijing with a thesis preliminary entitled "Material and Symbolic Dimensions of Objects Depicted in Western Painting, 17th-20th Century." The artist lives and works in Beijing.

Sun Yitian had her first solo exhibition titled **Portrait** at the gallery on occasion of Gallery Weekend Berlin 2023. In the same year she presented her solo exhibition **Once Upon a Time** in Esther Schipper, Paris.

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 Yitian was selected for the **Influential 2023: Forbes China Contemporary Young Artists** and **Forbes 30 Under 30 Asia Class of 2019**.

Recent exhibitions include: **The Life of Things**, Museum Voorlinden, The Hague (2025); **A Cloud in Trousers: Painting Today**, West Bund Museum, Shanghai (2024), **Boundless Reverie: Chinese Savoir-Faire and Contemporary Art**, K11 MUSEA, Hong Kong (2024); **One and All: New Artistic Styles of Contemporary Painting**, National Art Museum of China, Beijing (2024); **Journey Through Chinese Craftsmanship & Contemporary Art**, K11, Hong Kong (2024); **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); **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: The Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles; Hort Family Collection, New York; White Rabbit Gallery, Sydney; Museum Voorlinden, Wassenaar; By Art Matters, Hangzhou; Longlati Foundation, Shanghai; Pond Society, Shanghai; M WOODS, Beijing; Yuz Museum, Shanghai; Sifang Art Museum, Nanjing and Long Museum, Shanghai.