Firenze Lai
North and True North
13 October – 14 November 2026
White Cube Mason's Yard

The work of Firenze Lai (b. 1984, Hong Kong) explores the social, political and spatial subtexts that shape individual and collective psyches across both physical and virtual worlds. Bringing together a new series of paintings and works on paper made in her London studio, 'North and True North' is the artist's first solo exhibition in the UK. The figures that populate Lai's canvases are often anonymous – sometimes even faceless – and situated within indeterminate environments that speak to the formless expanses of online existence. These bodies appear to merge with themselves or one another, become absorbed into larger systems or circuits, fragment, duplicate and drift between realms. Eschewing individual facial expressions in favour of symbolic, recognisable gestures, Lai seeks to understand her subjects' realities through posture and movement, tracing how body language continually evolves in relation to how we live.

Although Lai's paintings often address the digital condition, she avoids depicting technology directly, turning instead to its impact on human emotion and behaviour. 'In the physical world, a chair, a room or tunnel holds your body and defines your space, guiding you and helping to maintain your balance', she has remarked. 'In the virtual realm, there are also structures and infrastructures that serve similar purposes'.[1] In *The True North* (2024) this is evident in the figure's grotesquely enlarged hand, which it uses to try and swivel its own body, recalling the familiar touch control used to rotate a smartphone map. The crouched, faceless figure reaches blindly for guidance, embodying a collective sense of disorientation in the face of perpetual, and often conflicting, online data. The title references the direction of the geographic North Pole, where the Earth's axis of rotation meets the Northern Hemisphere: a fixed direction by which the lost can regain their bearings. Meanwhile, the exhibition title, 'North and True North', pits this against the ever-changing location of magnetic north. Here, certainty is both fixed and unfixed, caught between the search for a single source of 'truth' and the impossibility of finding one in the digital era.

The advent of artificial intelligence has shaped Lai's recent work as a condition rather than a subject, a lens through which longstanding social and political concerns may be considered anew. In observing people 'effectively living between the analogue and the digital world',[2] the artist increasingly sees 'truth, or authenticity, as located within the body'.[3] As a result, the backgrounds of her paintings have grown more abstract or schematic, with her compositions dictated by the exaggerated placement of her figures. In *Grey Matter* (2026), for example, a figure is seen hunched over a loosely defined desk, head bent, their back forming a pronounced curve. Their arms and hands seem to disappear into their surroundings, leaving the clasped object – which many viewers will recognise as a smartphone, given the cramped posture and single-minded absorption – barely discernible. The title's reference to the region of the brain that supports thought, movement and memory contrasts with the figure's supposedly mindless activity. As the artist notes, grey matter is 'essential to what it means to be human, intellectually and psychologically', but since the proliferation of AI, 'our thinking process is no longer happening entirely in our head. It is taking place somewhere outside of us, perhaps in the space between our eyes and our hands'.[4] Where the digital era altered bodies visibly, as with so-called 'tech neck', Lai's recent work explores the more intangible, and at times irreversible, changes wrought by AI – a reshaping of cognition, intellectual capacity, and reality itself.

Lai's figures serve as archetypes for collective psychological and physical states: 'Each figure that I paint is the same person. It is you and I. A universal character taken at different moments'.[5] Identity, she says, 'is not a stable thing; I believe that it's a trap most of the time'.[6] This is most directly expressed in works on paper such as *Vortex* (2024), where a host of divergent, inchoate forms rise from the ground, distinct yet bound together, and in paintings such as *Metamorphosis* (2025) and *Versions* (2026). In the latter, a host of interlocking figures seem to converge around a circular void. Some heads and limbs overlap, while others conjoin or blur, as though a single figure were captured at successive moments in time. Here, identity is a constant negotiation: forever being reconciled and reconfigured. Similarly, in *Metamorphosis*, a body appears to replicate, shapeshifting into increasingly fragmented versions of itself until it resembles a glitch-like pattern indistinguishable from its surroundings.

This instability carries over into how Lai's figures relate to one another in each composition, a dynamic the artist first works out on paper, testing how bodies 'behave within the image', before exploring through painting.[7] In *Counter-current* (2026), a group is viewed from a dramatically low angle, their legs stretched and gigantic while their heads shrink into the distance. Strands of neon yellow, red and green paint surround them, at once acting as a kind of force field and binding their limbs together. On the right side of the canvas one figure's arm lifts as though it is being pulled away by a magnet, disrupting the group's cohesion, a disturbance

that is reflected in the work's title. The scene speaks to a life spent on online platforms, where users learn, debate, and form opinions on the basis of misinformation as much as on information. These figures are bound together within the same system, even as it pulls them in different directions and sets them against one another.

Throughout her work, Lai explores how people switch between these systems, 'how they live within them, and how sometimes they fall through the cracks', examining socio-political and displacement-related concerns that long predate contemporary technologies.[8] In *The Match Man* (2022), made in Hong Kong shortly before Lai's move to London, a bent figure with oversized hands emerges from a bruised purple ground, accepting a gift or bowing to shield the body from an unseen benefactor, or foe. While her figures may at times appear lost, disoriented or threatened, the artist often identifies in them strategies for coping and self-protection. 'I am aware that our reality is bending, but I'm quite optimistic, nevertheless', she notes.[9] 'I tend to see the strength in people, and it is their will to survive that I want to paint. I'd like to think that the figures in my works are managing just fine'.[10]

Firenze Lai (b. 1984, Hong Kong) lives and works in London. She studied at the Hong Kong Art School from 2004 to 2006. Solo exhibitions of her work have been held at MAMC+, Saint-Étienne, France (2019) and Mirrored Gardens, Guangzhou, China (2015). Lai's work has been featured in group exhibitions including Louisiana Museum of Modern Art (2025); The Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney (2025); Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin (2025); M+, Hong Kong (2024); Centre Pompidou Málaga, Andalusia, Spain (2023); Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, UK (2022); Kadist, San Francisco, California (2020); BWA Wrocław, Poland (2020); Centre Pompidou, Paris (2020); Tai Kwun Contemporary, Hong Kong (2019); 57th Venice Biennale, Italy (2017); New Museum Triennial, New York (2015); 10th Shanghai Biennale, Power Station of Art, Shanghai, China (2014) and Para Site, Hong Kong (2013).

1 Firenze Lai in conversation with Isabelle Graw, *Survival Coordinates*, White Cube, 2026, p.59
2 *Survival Coordinates*, 2026, p.36
3 *Survival Coordinates*, 2026, p.35
4 Notes from the artist, August 2026
5 Firenze Lai interviewed by Judith Benhamou, 'Before Art Basel. An exclusive visit to meet one of Hong Kong's young high-profile artists: Firenze Lai', *Judith Benhamou Reports*, 2018, judithbenhamou.com/before-art-basel-an-exclusive-visit-to-meet-one-of-hong-kongs-young-high-profile-artists-firenze-lai/
6 *Survival Coordinates*, 2026, p.6
7 Firenze Lai, 'In The Studio: Firenze Lai', White Cube, 16 August 2026
8 *Survival Coordinates*, 2026, p.62
9 *Survival Coordinates*, 2026, p.89
10 *Survival Coordinates*, 2026, p.7

White Cube Mason's Yard is open
Tuesday – Saturday, 10am – 6pm
Admission is free

For further information, please contact
enquiries@whitecube.com
or +44 (0)20 7930 5373

25 – 26 Mason's Yard
St James's
London SW1Y 6BU
+44 (0)20 7930 5373
whitecube.com

Follow us
X: @_whitecube
Instagram: @whitecube
Facebook: White Cube

GROUND FLOOR

1 *Slow Sand*
2025
Oil on canvas
128 × 170 cm | 50 ⅜ × 66 ¹⁵⁄₁₆ in.

2 *Acid Dream*
2025
Oil on canvas
73 × 91 cm | 28 ¾ × 35 ¹³⁄₁₆ in.

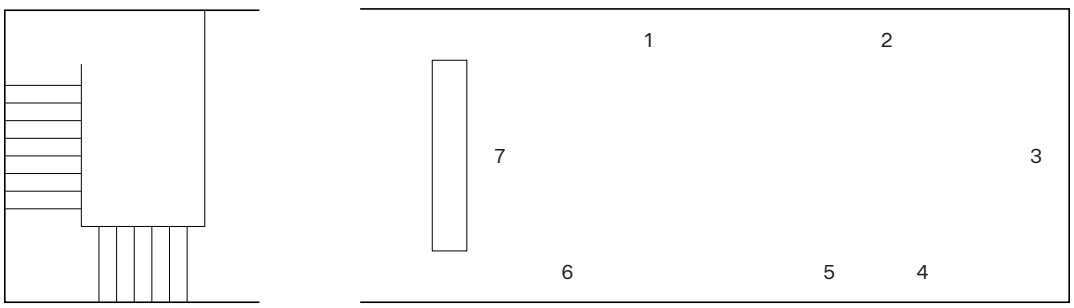
3 *Versions*
2026
Oil on canvas
200 × 160 cm | 78 ¾ × 63 in.

4 *Angled Dance*
2025
Oil on canvas
150 × 150 cm | 59 ⅛ × 59 ⅛ in.

5 *Topographer*
2025
Oil on canvas
91 × 73 cm | 35 ¹³⁄₁₆ × 28 ¾ in.

6 *Grey Matter*
2026
Oil on canvas
125 × 100 cm | 49 ¼ × 39 ¼ in.

7 *Warp and Weft*
2025
Oil on canvas
145.5 × 116 cm | 57 ⁵⁄₁₆ × 45 ¹¹⁄₁₆ in.



LOWER GROUND FLOOR

8 *The Match Man*
2022
Watercolour on paper
43 × 53 × 3.8 cm | 17 × 20 ¾ × 1 ½ in.

9 *Trinity*
2025
Oil on canvas
160 × 125 cm | 63 × 49 ¼ in.

10 *Möbius Band*
2026
Oil on canvas
160 × 128 cm | 63 × 50 ½ in.

11 *Metamorphosis*
2025
Oil on canvas
150 × 150 cm | 59 1/16 × 59 1/16 in.

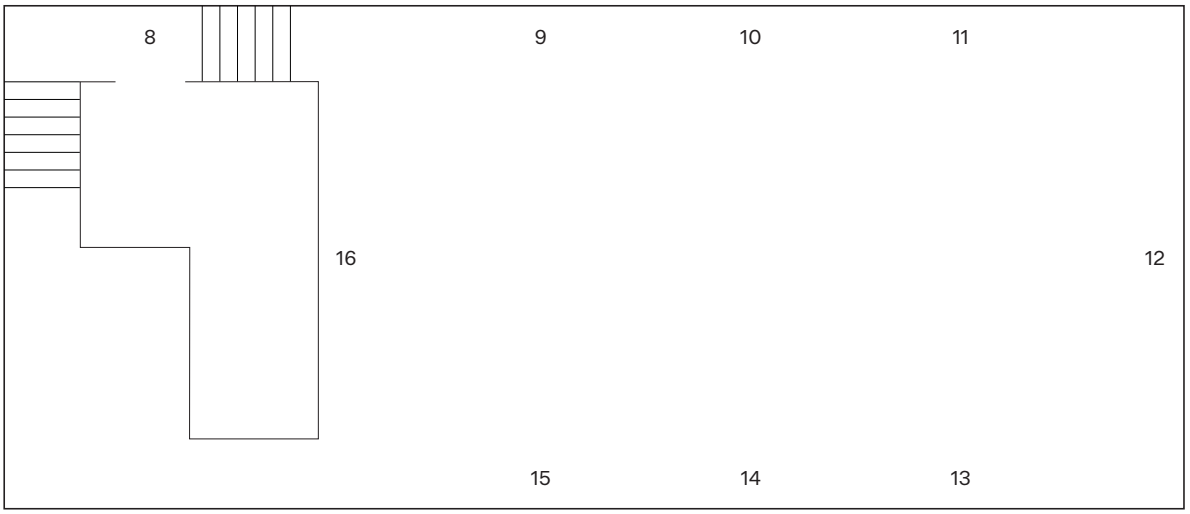
12 *Countercurrent*
2026
Oil on canvas
160 × 240 cm | 63 × 94 ½ in.

13 *Moonbow*
2024
Oil on canvas
145 × 116 cm | 57 1/16 × 45 11/16 in.

14 *A Second Storm*
2025
Oil on canvas
150 × 150 cm | 59 1/16 × 59 1/16 in.

15 *Capsule*
2025
Oil on canvas
135 × 170 cm | 53 1/8 × 66 15/16 in.

16 *The True North*
2024
Oil on canvas
165 × 130 cm | 64 15/16 × 51 3/16 in.



LIFT LOBBY

17 *Vortex*
2024
Watercolour on paper
53 × 43 × 3.8 cm | 20 ¾ × 17 × 1 ½ in.

18 *Passage*
2021
Watercolour on paper
53 × 43 × 3.8 cm | 20 ¾ × 17 × 1 ½ in.

19 *Time-lapse*
2026
Charcoal on paper
41.6 × 33 × 3.8 cm | 16 ½ × 13 × 1 ½ in.

20 *Stormgazer*
2026
Charcoal on paper
41.6 × 33 × 3.8 cm | 16 ½ × 13 × 1 ½ in.

21 *Free-floating*
2026
Graphite on paper
38.9 × 33 × 3.8 cm | 15 ¼ × 13 × 1 ½ in.

22 *Rotating Device*
2026
Watercolour and graphite on paper
38 × 48 × 3.8 cm | 15 × 19 × 1 ½ in.

23 *Marble Garden*
2023
Watercolour on paper
40.2 × 40.2 × 3.8 cm | 15 ¾ × 15 ¾ × 1 ½ in.

24 *Hostages*
2025
Ink on paper
41.6 × 33 × 3.8 cm | 16 ½ × 13 × 1 ½ in.

25 *Underground Chamber*
2024
Watercolour on paper
33.2 × 33.2 × 3.8 cm | 13 × 13 × 1 ½ in.

26 *Swirls*
2026
Watercolour, ink and graphite on paper
41.6 × 33 × 3.8 cm | 16 ½ × 13 × 1 ½ in.

27 *A Waking Dream*
2026
Watercolour on paper
38 × 48 × 3.8 cm | 15 × 19 × 1 ½ in.

