

C r i t i c s ' G u i d e s /

With Shanghai's Busiest Art Month Underway, Highlights of the Best Exhibitions in Town

M A Y A K R A M E R
6 N O V 2 0 1 8

From the opening of the 12th Shanghai Biennale to Miao Ying's explorations into the 'Chinternet', a rundown of the best shows in town



'Progress' 12th Shanghai Biennale

[The Power Station of Art](#)

10 November, 2018 – 10 March, 2019

Particularly for those who live here, the Shanghai Biennale is required viewing. Founded more than 20 years ago, and now in its 12th iteration, it has grown remarkably and serves as a portal for works that, due to their less commercial nature, have a hard time being seen in Shanghai otherwise. This year's iteration curated by Cuauhtémoc Medina, borrows a word construction from the poet E.E. Cummings, 'Progress' as its title. The theme seems prescient in its exploration of how advancements today seemingly instantaneously trigger antithetical responses, leading to an increasingly polarized social fabric and a growing sense of powerlessness and ambivalence. Against this backdrop, Medina's strategy is to further probe ambivalence as a way to disavow, 'idealized narratives' in order to build a poetic, flexible space that dispenses with binaries and can sustain contradictions. Though an excellent premise keyed to the tenor of the times, the current short roster of artists and artworks – tasked with fleshing out the theme – may be unequal to the task. At the time of writing, the Biennale was more than a week away from opening, and it remains to be seen whether this year's iteration will live up to its promise or not.



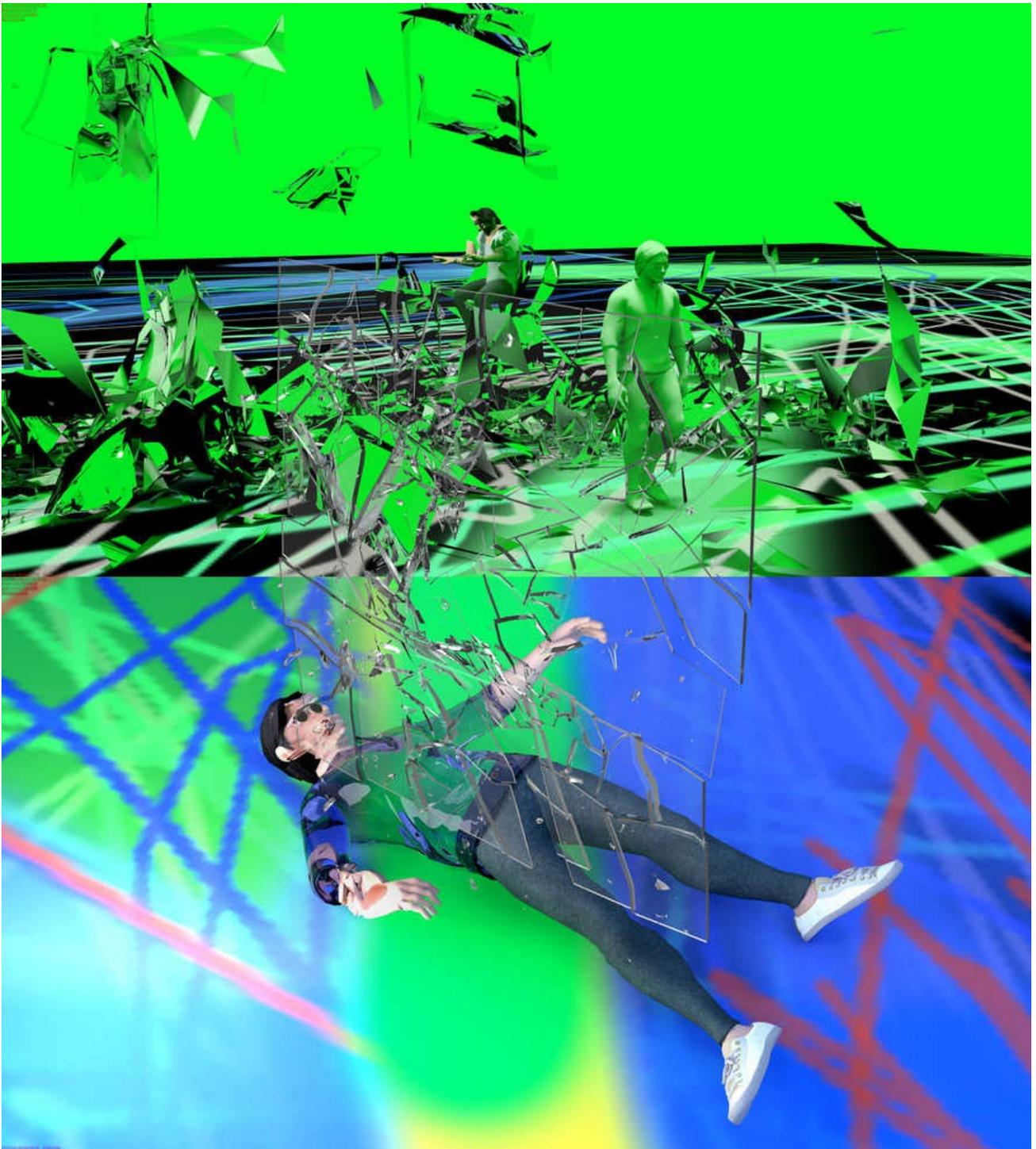
Chen Fei, *Well Wishes*, 2018, oil on canvas. Courtesy: Vacancy Gallery, Shanghai

'Well-Wishes'

[Gallery Vacancy](#)

9 November, 2018 – 5 January, 2019

Tucked away down a Shanghai lane, Vacancy is hard to find. Yet the paths that lead to it are brimming with local character – a quality that curator Sun Dongdong folds into the gallery's first-year anniversary exhibition. Bringing together works by 11 artists, the pieces on view offer up a charming mirror of the quotidian drawn from the social and material fabric of the gallery location itself. The show spills into its surroundings by temporarily displaying work in the short-term rental rooms across the alley – spaces typically occupied by out-of-towners visiting patients at the adjacent hospital or students seeking admission to nearby colleges. Whether it is Li Ming's delightful video *Movements* (2014) showing the artist powering, riding or transferring between low-fi transportation means characteristic in China such as tractors, bicycles and covered scooters; Chen Fei's meticulous acrylic painting *Well-Wishes* (2018) of an abundant, kitsch fruit basket – a common gift item; or Tao Hui's videos of women spinning discursive tales; the works amplify and focus the textures of the city such that they come into view.



Samson Young, *The Highway is Like a Lion's Mouth*, 2018, 4k video still. Courtesy: Edouard Malingue Gallery, Shanghai

Samson Young, 'The Highway is Like a Lion's Mouth'

Edouard Malingue Gallery

6 November – 23 December

Trained as a composer, Hong Kong based artist Samson Young works in the interstice between acoustic, visual and physical experience and social space, translating between these realms to uncover ways in which they operate and inflect one another. The title of the exhibition, 'The Highway is like a Lion's Mouth', recalls a '90s Hong Kong public safety campaign and its attendant jingle, which warned citizens of the importance of traffic safety. Through his drawings, videos and sculptural installations, Young mines this theme and the symbolism of cars, with their contradictory associations: freedom, affluence, control; danger and accident. Both 'lemons' (slang for a car with quality control issues) and Porches are analyzed through the artist's playful sound drawings, where the defective noises of the former (read: unnerving), and the heavy closed-door sound of the latter (read: reassuring) are visually

and verbally mapped out. The videos feature a mash up of safety messages, luxury advertising, and auspicious symbols characteristic of the region, along with digital human figures distorted and dismembered in disturbing ways. The space also includes a large-scale lion's backside protruding from a wall and early advertisements extolling the virtues of automobiles; taken as a whole it is a road map to the subliminal cues that shape our behaviour.



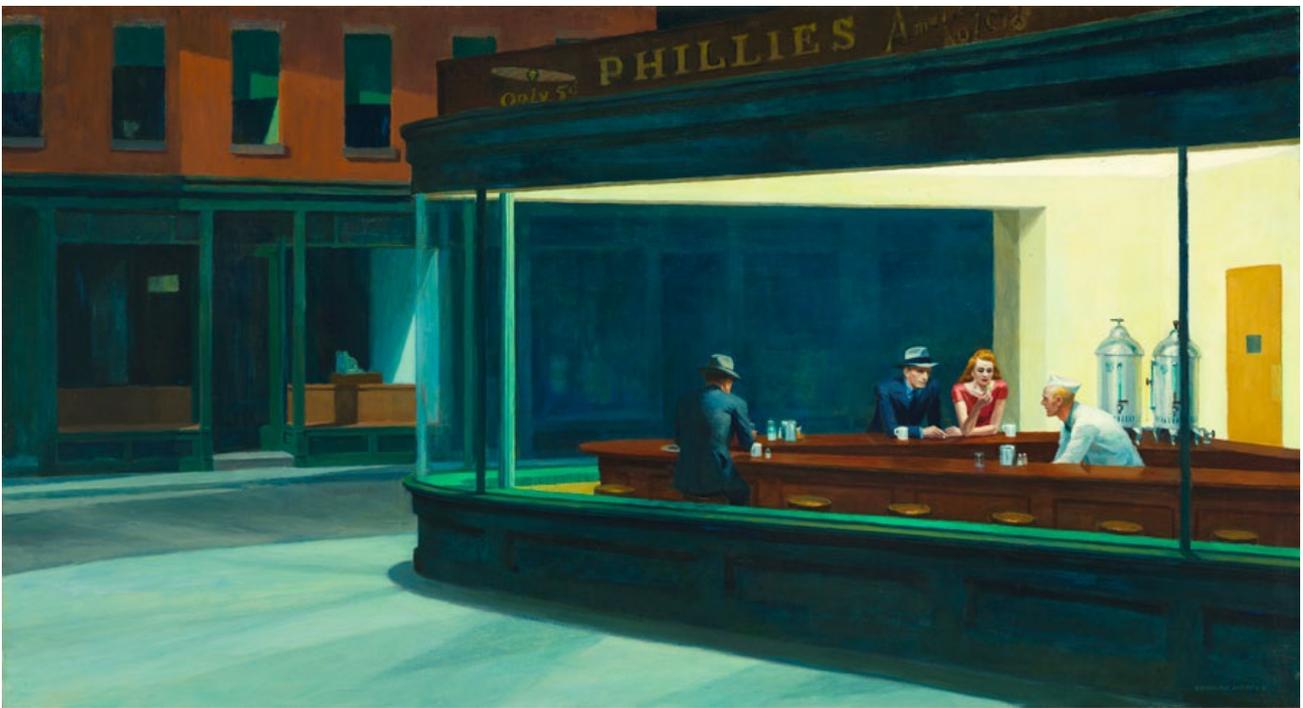
Nalini Malani, 'Can You Hear Me?', 2018, installation view, Arario Gallery, Shanghai. Courtesy: Arario Gallery, Seoul / Shanghai

Nalini Malani, 'Can You Hear Me?'

Arario

6 November, 2018 – 17 February, 2019

November is Shanghai's busiest art month, with the city hosting two international art fairs, a Biennale along with requisite talks and celebrations. This year, the alarming number of Western blue-chip artists with solo shows at local institutions illustrates China's myopic focus on Europe, America, and the Mainland. Thus, Arario gallery's small survey of the Indian artist Nalini Malani's work, showcasing pieces from the late '60s to the present, offers a welcome change. Though Malani began her career exploring geometric forms in a modernist vein with subtle monochrome photographs and richly coloured animations, later her oeuvre evolved into raucous and raw narratives focused on the dispossessed. Melding myth, history, injustice, everyday humans and heroism she orchestrates these themes through drawings, videos, projections and shadow play. Creating installations that often engulf the audience in a swirl of light, shadow, and graphic images, she almost transforms the viewer into a palimpsest in the process. That Malani, now in her 70s, creates animations such as *Can You Hear Me?* (2018) and posts them on social media to reach a larger audience, testifies to her restless need to experiment and her tireless advocacy for the voiceless.



Edward Hopper, *Nighthawks*, 1942, oil on canvas, 84 x 152 cm. Courtesy: The Art Institute of Chicago

'Paths to Modernism: 1865 – 1945'

The Shanghai Museum

28 September, 2018 – 6 January, 2019

The Art Institute of Chicago and the Terra Foundation teamed up for this tightly curated show, drawn from the collections of both institutions, that focuses on the 80 years leading up to America's postwar period. Together these pictures provide a glimpse into the social forces, significant events and artistic developments that the nation underwent before its ascendancy on the world stage. Most viewers will come to snap pictures of icons such as Edward Hopper's *Nighthawks* (1942) and Whistler's *Nocturne: Blue and Gold—Southampton Water* (1872), but there are a host of lesser-known canvases worth discovering. David Blythe's picture of a former slave's migration after emancipation in *The Old Virginia Home* (1863) and George Luks's painting showing the gritty urbanism at the start of the 20th century in *The Butcher Cart* (1901), reveal some of the brutalities and complexities of the American condition. Also startling is how the exhibition opener, Fredric Edwin Church's saccharine yet charged, *Our Banner in the Sky* (1861) which was painted in support of northern troops at the outset of the civil war, is painfully relevant to the current state of the union.



Allison Katz, *Cock, Interrupted*, 2017, oil and rice on canvas, 2 x 1.8 m. Courtesy: The Approach, London

Allison Katz, 'Muse with a Short Fuse'

Antenna Space

6 November, 2018 – 9 January, 2019

It's hard to recall a recent exhibition title that's catchier than Allison Katz's, 'Muse with a Short Fuse', but its playful mix of camp combined with an engagement with the language and history of painting is apt to the works on view. By augmenting the conventional method of display, moving the paintings from a sequential hang on the surrounding walls to stand alone supports in the middle of the gallery, the artist shifts perspectives and subtly destabilize the seer/seen dichotomy. It's a theme taken up within the canvases themselves, where the point of view is pushed, prodded, blocked and doubled. In *pb* (2018) the painting within the painting refers to a motif in an adjacent painting within the space, and in *Café Man Ray at the Copley Gallery, LA 1949* (2018) we are looking through the interior of a mouth back into an exhibition space, that simultaneously references the gallery in the title and the one the viewer inhabits. By chipping away at stable reference points, gender associations, and by grounding these canvases in a banality that is simultaneously dumb, smart and mildly fantastical, Katz disperses the notion of

the muse and updates its relevance for the digital age.



Miao Ying, *God, Bear and Unicorn*, 2016, print on fabric and metal, 305 x 240 x 35 cm. Courtesy: Madeln Gallery, Shanghai

Miao Ying, 'Stones from Other Hills'

[Madeln Gallery](#)

6 November – 30 December

Miao Ying's interest in charting the borders of the world wide web began over a decade ago when she discovered that the Chinese internet was censored. Instead of decrying this restriction the artist embraced the creative game of cat and mouse it engenders and has since made what she has dubbed the 'Chinternet' her subject. Her current exhibition 'Stones from Other Hills', relates to her web commission by M+, *Hardcore Digital Detox* (2018) which humorously touts the virtues of the great firewall by showing how its limitations offer opportunities for less screen time. She invites viewers to set their VPN's to China and to see first-hand how Baidu maps, in its inaccuracy, may lead you astray from your destination and thus prompt you to ask another human for directions. At first this same lighthearted spirit seems to be at play in her video *the formalized abridgment of the rational truth* (2018) but over time a more sinister vibe emerges. Here Miao grafts the language of luxury advertising, self-help, interactivity, data collection and political ideology into a funny, uncannily-familiar play of images, music, and voiceovers. Though her focus seems squarely directed at 'Chinternet' through her inquiry the subtexts of convenience, control, and manipulation that lie below the surface of the web the world over, becomes clear.

Main image: 'Eclipses', 2018, Power Station of Art, Shanghai. Courtesy: Power Station of Art, Shanghai; photograph: Jiang Wenyi

M A Y A K R A M E R

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