

Interview with Owen Fu and Juliana Halpert, Fall 2021

Juliana Halpert: What's so ordinary about *Ordinary Things*?

Owen Fu: The inspiration for all of the works in the show comes from normal, everyday life—everything is based on a true story.

JH: Does that mean there is one particular, overarching story that ties all the works together?

OF: No, it's not just about 'telling stories' or building larger narratives with my work. I just hope to provide glimpses into an imagination. And yes, many of these scenes are based on aspects of my life, but I would never want to give away all the answers.

JH: If much of the work is in fact grounded in personal experience, would you consider that to be a form of self-portraiture?

OF: Not necessarily. Many of the figures in my work are embodiments of the self, of *my* self, but they do not necessarily focus on one single idea of *me*. When I began to insert myself into my paintings, I considered it a breakthrough. For years I was focusing purely on abstraction. But, I grew tired of only painting my face, so I began to give myself more identities. That way, I inhabit different characters.

JH: There is an assortment of smaller figurines and objects (and text) in this show. How do they relate to your paintings, and are they, too, avatars of yourself?

OF: I made these objects during the pandemic. I've kept them and moved them around with me in both my house and my studio. They've slowly integrated themselves into my daily life. I don't think of them as avatars of myself; they're more like imaginary friends, who are always there. They keep me company. They are a part of me but are not simply *me*.

JH: The way you've installed this show, with paintings on walls and on shelves—and figurines stationed and cached nearby—has a very nestled-in feeling. What was behind that decision? Is this an emulation of how these objects populated your life?

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OF: Yes. I wanted to kind of reproduce the feeling of my daily life. I live with these paintings and objects as companions. Showing them together in this way is almost an outward projection of my inner world. I do have favorites, but then our relationships change and so do my favorites.

JH: All of your paintings and objects alike are so saturated with emotion. It's all affect, and it's all in the face. It's often said that what Abstract Expressionism did, chiefly, was abolish the face. What's your relationship to abstraction now? So many of these paintings feature large expanses of flat, milky color, but there is always an emphasis on these simple eyes and mouths. The face always has primacy.

OF: I often think that my work is still fairly abstract. I often like to toe the line. Figurative work can use abstraction and abstract work can use figuration. Abstraction and figuration don't necessarily have to be in opposition. Not always.

JH: I think you're quite talented at that slippage. Your gestures are so minimal — a line for a mouth, a dark circle for an eye — and yet they are so potent and emotive.

OF: I find the face very difficult to paint. If a mark is slightly off, it doesn't convey the right expression. I often paint facial features over and over. I guess it's important to me that all the 'holes' look toward the viewer. They're always the final touch of my paintings.

JH: I'm noticing a lot of electrical cords and outlets, also rendered in simple lines and circles, which I haven't really seen in such abundance in your work before.

OF: They've always been there. They come from the idea of the 'hole'. All of the black circles in my paintings are holes that are also eyes, or maybe holes that eyes are looking through. There are always multiple meanings. Outlets are not so far off from buttholes either...

I used to only paint candles, but now I also paint electric light fixtures. For me, in my work, light is the only thing with only one meaning. It always signifies happiness. A match can bring

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you a little spark of joy in the dark.

JH: I see a small candle flame in *Out of the Dark*—wait, are those two more candles in the top left corner? And these glowing, yellow light bulbs. It's such a black painting otherwise. What is happening here?

OF: The darkness here can represent loneliness, something that comes to the surface from the black depths of the painting. A man is holding a bundle of candles in the corner—the candles could signify the penis, but they are also a source of light, and then of hope. So ultimately, the painting depicts desire. Me and my different desires.

JH: Do these symbols and characters always assemble as a metaphor for sexual desire?

OF: It's not just sex—often these works can channel a deeper kind of yearning. Sex is something that never brings total satisfaction. The 'holes' always want more. Sex can bring more loneliness. This dilemma, I find, can be expressed through representations of my own body.

JH: Have loneliness and longing become more robust under—or over—tones within your work?

OF: I don't think it's merely loneliness. That's important. I am really more interested in communicating and expressing an elevated sense of self-awareness that I have been feeling. I don't really feel lonely all the time. Being alone, however, makes me much more sensitive and receptive to everything around me. I live alone and that can enable me to focus more on my own emotions and feelings. It's kind of like, if the morning is a little cold, and I wake up a bit chilly, I become very sensitive to my emotions. I can notice all the little actions and reactions I wouldn't ordinarily attend to. Maybe this is also because I have had too much time during the pandemic, but I do feel hyper-attuned.

JH: You've instilled so much of this sentiment and sensitivity in your work, in a very classically Expressionist way. You undoubtedly 'paint from the soul,' as Edvard Munch was once instructed to do. But you're assembling more than a metaphor for despair and longing;

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there are also touches of irony and self-parody.

OF: Maybe my paintings have always been a bit sad - but I *always* try to give them at least a little humor. I want to use cuteness and humor to attract people first. Sometimes discomfort is a little funny, but which can, in turn, bring comfort in the end.

JH: There is definitely an air of discomfort in *Good for You*.

OF: Ha! Yes! In this painting, I might be the little doll. And if you look closely, the pubic hair might look like horns.

JH: So you're depicting a large man holding a doll version of you up to his penis?

OF: Maybe it's about the doll's desire to see something beautiful? Someone is presenting something that is supposed to be beautiful.

JH: He—or, you?—looks rather reluctant.

OF: It's nothing forced. The experience of this work is a little confusing on purpose. The man is like, 'try it, it tastes good.' It's about trying to gratify yourself in different ways, but without success. Nothing truly satisfies. Haven't we all felt that way?