Brian Droitcour
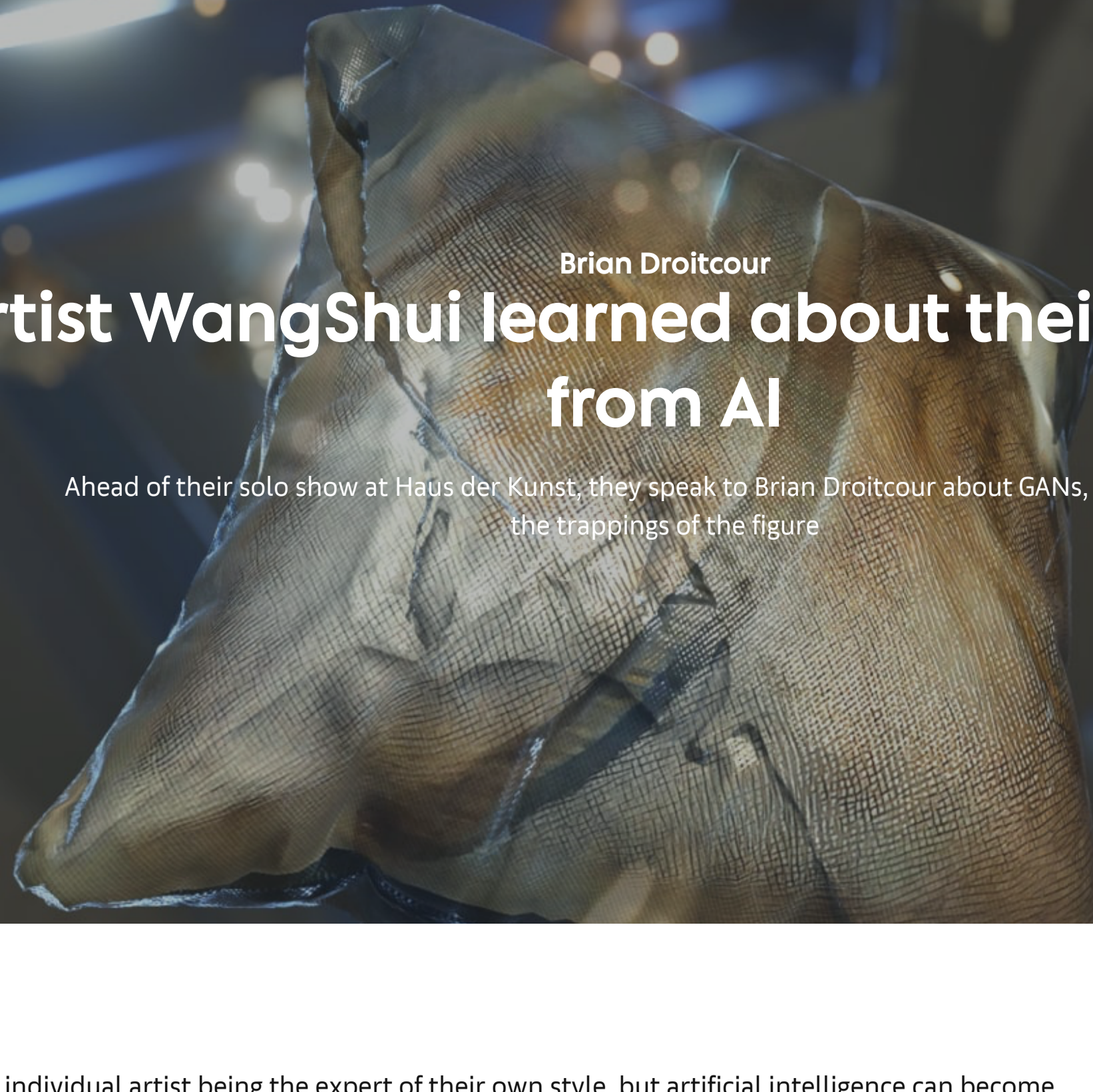
How artist WangShui learned about their own practice from AI

Ahead of their solo show at Haus der Kunst, they speak to Brian Droitcour about GANs, reality TV, and the importance of the gaze

'The history of painting is built on the idea of the individual artist being the expert of their own style, but artificial intelligence can become an expert in your style in a second,' the artist WangShui tells me ahead of their show at Haus der Kunst in Munich, their first solo institutional presentation in Europe. 'I feel like it taught me so much about my own gestures, gave me insights that I would have taken me years to get to.'

In recent years, AI applications have become popular as shortcuts to what we already know. ChatGPT can spit out a boilerplate after-dinner speech, and Midjourney can make a picture of a woman laughing while eating salad as good as any stock photo. Artists like WangShui have harnessed the pattern-identifying capabilities that make AI so good at reproducing banalities to yield surprising and thought-provoking results.

Left: Portrait of WangShui. Photography by Maryam Hoseini. Right: WangShui, Weak Pearl, 2019. Photography by Alwin Lay. Courtesy of the artist and Julia Stoschek Collection.

Trained as a video artist, WangShui has pursued painting and installation over the past few years in order to work with moving images in a more visceral, sculptural way. At the same time, they started working with artificial intelligence, especially generative adversarial networks, or GANs, a type of machine learning model that can take existing images and make new ones based on the patterns in the dataset. Still new to painting, the New York-based artist trained GANs on their own work, searching for an unbiased, outside perspective on their own gestures – a move in line with an artistic practice that aims to understand the human through an exploration of the technological and biological frameworks that often go unperceived, even as they make perception possible. And as part of their show at Haus der Kunst, titled 'Window of Tolerance', they are working with a different type of AI, applying the simulation engines used to motivate characters in video games to create a live reality television show populated by computer-generated beings.
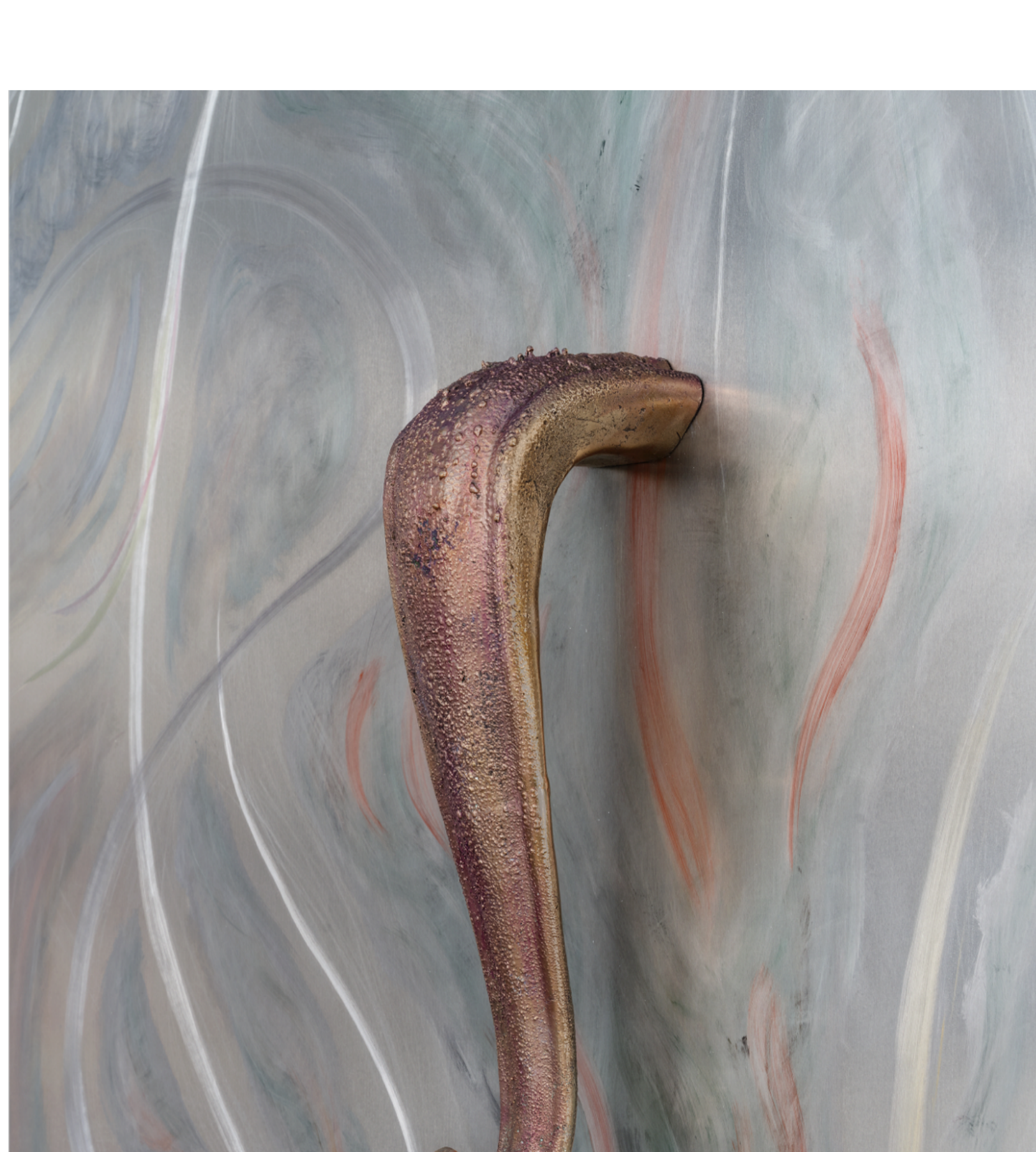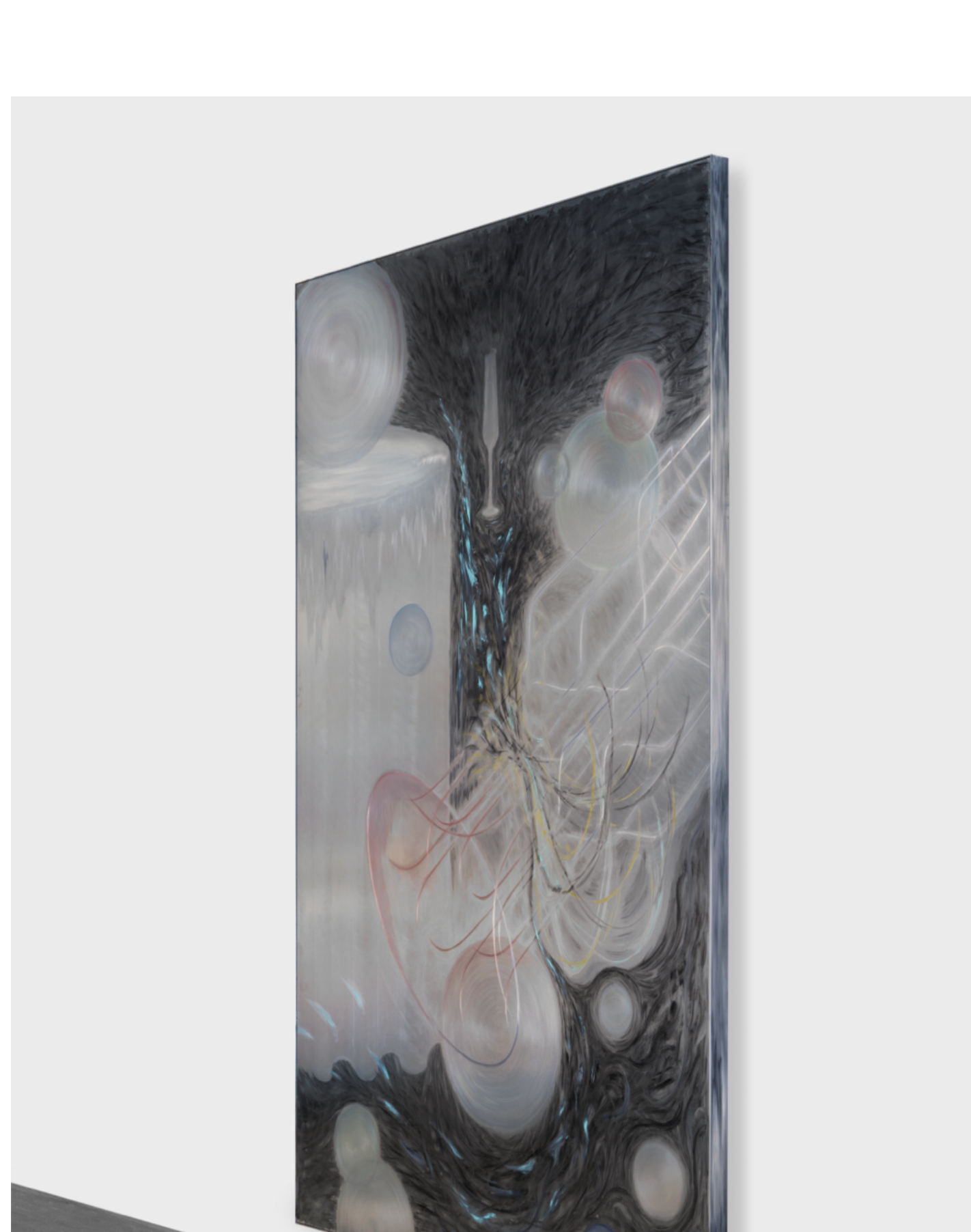
Left: WangShui, Window of Tolerance (side view), 2023. Photography by Cooper Dodds. Courtesy of the artist. Right: WangShui, Cowlick Buzz (detail), 2023. Photography by Cooper Dodds. Courtesy of kurimanzutto.

WangShui has long been fascinated by reality TV shows and, more broadly, the phenomenon of non-actors acting out fantasies of love and heartbreak that bleed into their real identities. Their first paintings were made with motifs from series such as the long-running dating show The Bachelor as well as Unreal, a scripted television series co-created by a former producer of The Bachelor that exposes the mechanics of the genre. The seedy side of the job of producing a reality show can take many forms: Unreal shows the women in a hysterical frenzies, then editing these outbursts to make them seem directed at other contestants rather than at off-camera interlocutors). At the heart of the artist's painting Mindful Witness (2020) merge two of the hulking black vehicles that bring contestants on The Bachelor to the mansion where they live while filming – symbols and agents of the transition from reality to television. The pillows strewn about the set project an atmosphere of luxury and abundance (but that can also become projectiles or security blankets) supply the geometric motifs for El Decorum (2020). A more recent painting, Window of Tolerance (2020), depicts the champagne flutes whose contents amplify drama in Unreal, as we producers ply the women with booze to unhitch their inhibitions.

Left: WangShui, Mindful Witness, 2020. Right: WangShui, El Decorum, 2019. Both courtesy of kurimanzutto and High Art.

Notably, the human figure is absent from WangShui's work. Figurative representation invites projections and assumptions from the viewer, much as the qualities of reality TV contestants – their race, their hair color, their accent – give producers leverage to wedge them into stereotypes. Since beginning a gender transition a few years ago, the artist has also been wary of the ways in which art institutions label queer artists and bind them to ready-made narratives; WangShui's avoidance of figuration is a reaction to that, too. And it is the same position that initially drew them to the use of GANs.

'The AI cuts through fallacies and red herrings,' WangShui says. 'The figure is a red herring. We project all these things onto each character when, in fact, there's an interpersonal structure unfolding that has nothing to do with the persona we are already constructing in our minds.' Artificial intelligence functions in WangShui's studio practice as a kind of oracle, a conduit for ways of seeing and understanding not immediately accessible to the narrative-hungry human gaze.

WangShui calls many of their latest works 'paintings', and indeed they are flat, they hang on walls, and oils are applied to their surfaces. But they are made on sheets of aluminum, not canvas, by abrading the surface with wire brushes and sandpaper. Gradations of color and texture are achieved not only by applying pigment but by revealing levels of luminosity and luster within the metal. The artist produced their first five paintings from their own imagination, drawing on those reality show motifs, but works in the following series, 'Isle of Vitr-ous' (2022), were realized by feeding the earlier ones to a GAN that the artist developed in collaboration with a team of programmers and then working the digital outputs into the physical substrates. Five paintings are a tiny data set by any standard, and especially so in comparison to the millions of images that feed popular generative AI tools like Dall-E and Midjourney. Yet the results still look highly sophisticated – complex compositions of sinuous lines and barely recognizable symbols.

However, artificial intelligence is neither the sole agent nor the theme of WangShui's work. Rather, with paintings that map out the realm between fantasy and reality and the relationships forged there, it is one part of a much larger whole. WangShui's process, they say, is 'about the entanglements between a whole series of agents. The work spans a lot of space, and I'm learning how different pieces fit in the puzzle, in the network.'

Works from 'Isle of Vitr-ous', for example, were shown in the 2022 Whitney Biennial alongside a ceiling work consisting of woven strips taken from LED billboards, glowing with videos whose content is impossible to discern. Transferring the billboards from the scale of the street to the gallery shifts the focus to the negative space between the pixels, instead of the images they constitute. Similarly, the aluminum panels of WangShui's paintings behave like screens: rather than with their own range of luminosity, that glow and shine before pigment is applied externally, as the artist says, they have a 'built-in backlight.'

The installation at the Whitney was titled Scr-pe It (Isle of Vitr-ous) (2022), with 'scrape' referring both to how the artist works with aluminum and how GANs treat data. 'This is what the GAN does,' WangShui says. 'It takes images and generates data between them.' Moreover, vitreous is a gel-like fluid in the eyes that enables vision, and the GANs, too, can expand human perception. This practice finds a further resonance in the making of reality television. The story is generated from the space between what the cameras capture and what the viewers see.
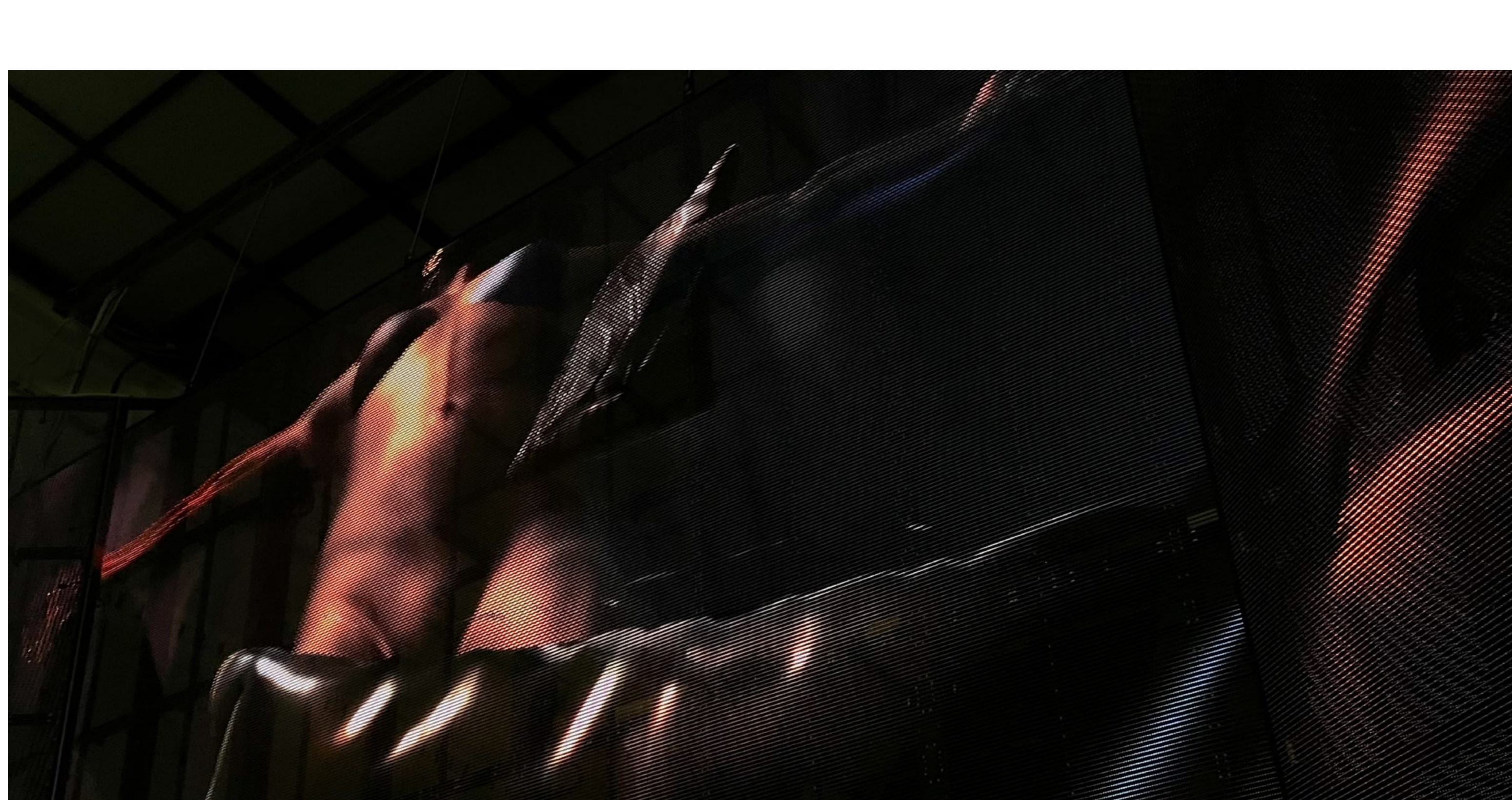
WangShui, Certainty of the Flesh (detail), 2023. Courtesy of the kurimanzutto and High Art.

Titled Certainty of the Flesh (2023), WangShui's simulated reality show at Haus der Kunst features a cast of long-limbed, lustrous, and fluid entities that float over a sinuous, pillow-strewn sectional sofa like the ones seen on Unreal and The Bachelor, communicating among themselves with expressive gestures and unintelligible speech. Their behavior is programmed to model archetypes of reality TV – the villain, the ingenue – merged with archetypes of Chinese elemental philosophy: earth, fire, air, and water. ('The artist chose the name 'Vhui', or water, after the element they identify with most closely.) These personality indices are overlaid on characters from WangShui's social circle, their queer and trans friends. 'It's the data of my life and my world but it doesn't need to be,' they say. 'I'm trying to obscure the categories that people are always trying to attach onto.'

Like many artists, WangShui makes art to explore what it means to be human. But rather than working with the surface level stuff of human life – story, desire, the fleshy body – they operate in configurations of biological, technological, and material conditions that we respond to, even without being fully aware of them. It's art made in the latent space of human life.

Brian Droitcour is editor-in-chief of Outland, an online magazine about digital art.

WangShui's exhibition 'Window of Tolerance' is on view at Haus der Kunst in Munich from September 8, 2023 to March 10, 2024. The artist's paintings will also be on view at the Guggenheim in New York City as part of the group show 'Going Dark: The Contemporary Figure at the Edge of Visibility' from October 20, 2023 to April 7, 2024. They are represented by kurimanzutto (Mexico City, New York City), and High Art (Paris, Arles).

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Captions for full-bleed images, from top to bottom: 1. WangShui, Certainty of the Flesh, 2023. Courtesy the artist and kurimanzutto. 2. Installation view of 'WangShui: potato', 2025. Rockbund Art Museum, Shanghai. Photography by Yan Tao. 3. Installation view of Scr-pe It (Isle of Vitr-ous) (2022) in the 2022 Whitney Biennial. Photography by Alon Koppel Photography.

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