

ARTS

Michael Ho's Cultural Rediscovery Through Liminal Spaces

"I don't want my art to exist in a vacuum. It exists to be in dialogue with others."

By Elaine Zhao · 01/01/24 9:00am



Michael Ho in his studio. Elaine Zhao

At 31 years old, the Chinese-German artist Michael Ho is a regular at his favorite lunch spot: a casual community center dedicated to the East and South East Asian diaspora, next to his studio in the heart of East London's creative district. He comes partly for the lunch club serving traditional Cantonese dishes but also to support the hub of intergenerational activity, where the young and elderly mix over meals, mahjong and karaoke. It's a comforting ritual that weaves into Michael's larger desire to rediscover his Chinese heritage in adult life after growing up in Germany, where to assimilate he largely "rejected his Asian identity".

As 2023 draws to a close, Michael has finished his busiest year yet, with solo shows in Paris and Shanghai, as well as group shows in Hong Kong, Tokyo and Los Angeles.

"Most people know me as a painter because that's how they were introduced to my work, but I have a very non-traditional approach to painting," he tells Observer. "For me, it's a way to think through things that often lead to other projects. Having trained as an architect, you have to think through concepts, make renders, films, photography... it means I don't shy away from working across different mediums if there's a better way to express an idea."

After graduating from London's Architectural Association in 2019, Michael rented a studio with his best friend and fellow AA graduate Chiyan Ho. While they had few long-term plans, the main thing they were drawn to was experimentation. "I love collaboration," Michael explains, "Because I've always felt that something magical can happen in the process."



'I Owe You Everything', 2022. Theo Christelis

The pair would scavenge in flea markets and use found objects to make sculptures before the pandemic hit in early 2020. At that point, all they had was some cheap fabric and paint in the studio, which led to them developing their shared process.

"Usually when you paint, you first prime the canvas to seal it off, otherwise the paint will leak through. Neither of us knew this, so we started painting directly onto the fabric, without priming it. That first painting was really bad," Michael laughed.

But when they turned the canvas around to cover it up, they saw the paint had bled through the back in interesting shapes and patterns. From there, they started creating paintings in reverse. One artist would start by painting on the back of the piece, pushing the paint through in a physical exercise and layering it into different patterns, until it formed certain images on the front. The other would flip the canvas over and collage on top of the seeped patterns, painting a more defined and rendered image over them.

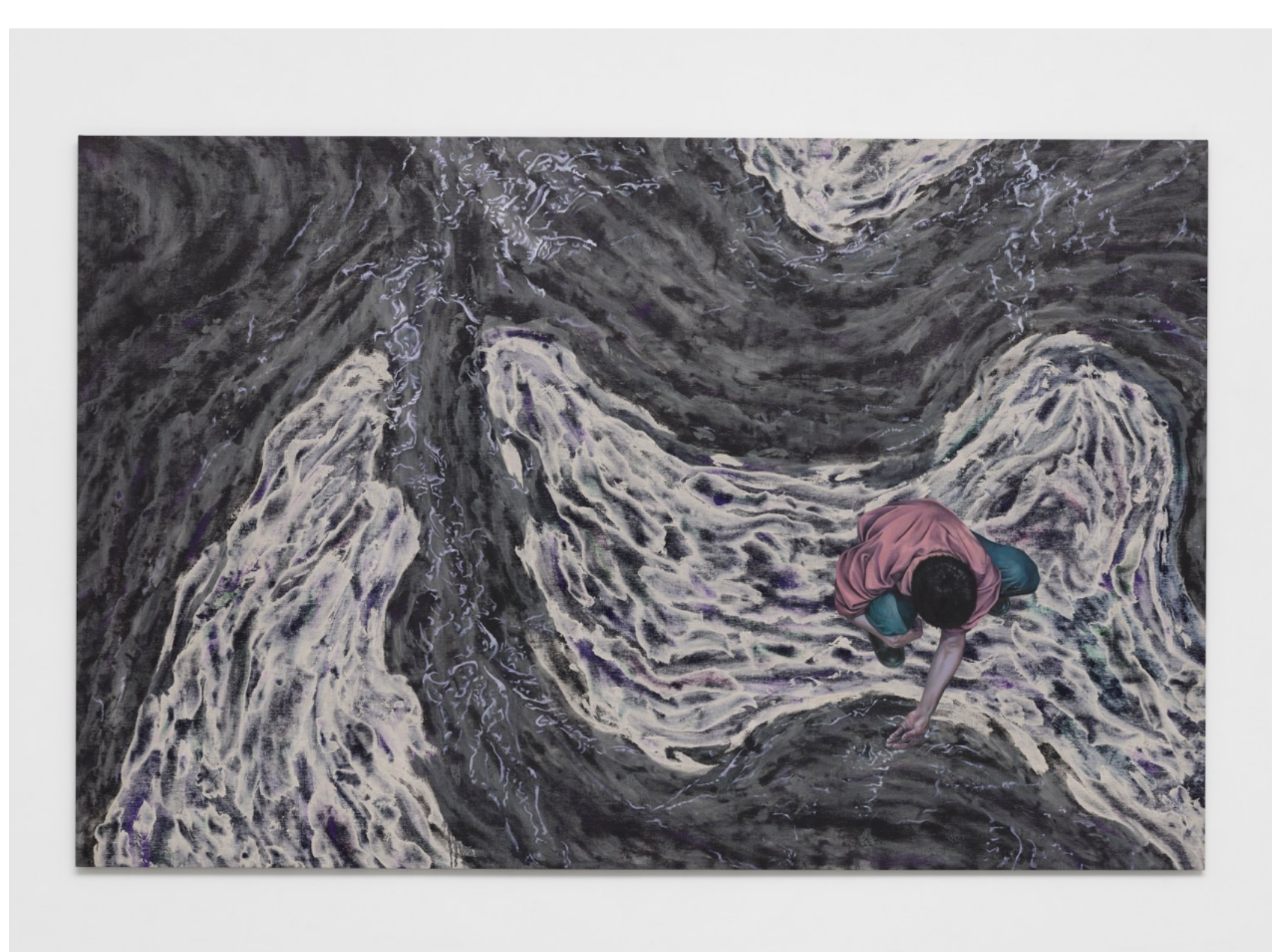


Michael Ho at work. Elaine Zhao

Along with the unique approach, they're known for depicting striking imagery in haunting gray and purple shades that reflect a sense of liminal space and surrealness. "Raised by Chinese immigrants in a predominantly white culture, learning about Chinese history and reinterpreting it through my art feels like I'm reconnecting with that part of my identity," Michael explains.

Inspiration also came from Chinese cowboy Bruce Wang, a student who moved to Texas and adopted a cowboy lifestyle, complete with an accented Southern drawl. "This image of a Chinese face presented as an all-American symbol resonated with my own feelings of being caught between East and West," Michael says, adding that Dr. Fu Manchu was yet another muse. This 'supervillain' character in a series of novels by English author Sax Rohmer was the personification of the rise of Asian power in the West and the prevalence of 'yellow peril'—a concept that resurfaced due to increasing Sinophobia around the pandemic.

When Chiyan unexpectedly passed away in 2022, shortly before the pair's work was accepted to Frieze London, Michael was determined to carry on their shared practice as a solo artist. "Because we started the practice together, there will always be some part of him that remains in the conversation," he says. "My dialogue with Chiyan continues, only it's more internal now."



'River Gestures Before Dawn', 2023. Theo Christelis

Michael still finds himself looking for the critical eye Chiyan used to provide, and he misses the playfulness of having a collaborator. He doesn't want his art to exist in a vacuum but instead to be part of a conversation. When asked who he admires that does this well, Michael references the queer Chinese-American artist Martin Wong, who he described as a "sponge of his surroundings, who absorbed everything he saw and presented it in a new light".

In 2024, Michael plans to take a step back to focus on the research and development of new projects beyond painting. "Ultimately, that's why I prefer art to architecture... architecture seeks for a solution, whereas art allows me to pose a question," he muses. "It's not there to solve anything; it's just about making people feel something, to reflect. If I've done that, I think I'll have done a good job."