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Huang Yuxing: Curiosity and Panic Towards the Unknown World

Article by Li Jiali
November 21, 2022



Installation views of *An Absolute Power We Cannot Find*, November 3 - December 17, 2022, Almine Rech New York / © Huang Yuxing
- Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech - Photo: Dan Bradica

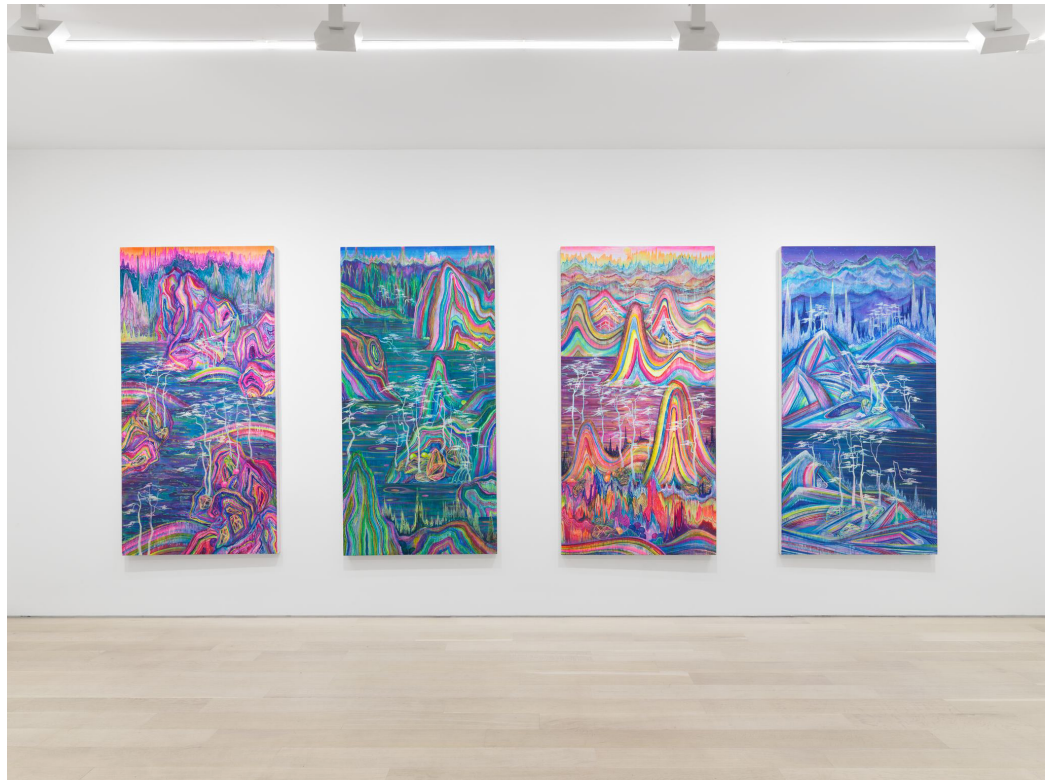
Introduction

From November 4 to December 3, 2022, Almine Rech Shanghai presented a special project by Huang Yuxing, showcasing his latest drawings of the *Pine* series. The artist's second solo exhibition with the gallery was simultaneously on view at Almine Rech New York, comprising eleven paintings completed over the past four years. These paintings maintained the brilliant fluorescent color scheme of Huang's previous work while creating new development in the treatment of lines and shapes. Meandering lines of energy that recall electric waves, a cascade of human heads and skeletons, and spheres radiating dazzling light and force, all contribute to the construction of a swirling galaxy, full of science-fiction-like absurdity. In these new works, Huang Yuxing portrays his reflections on the universe and the reality of life.

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“I believe that I should trust in my own knowledge; I should trust in the feelings from my own situations and life experiences; and I believe in my truth.” This was Huang’s realization after his journeys to Tibet and his exploration of Tibetan Buddhism during his college graduation. It also became a foundation to his artistic development.



Portrait of Huang Yuxing / © Huang Yuxing - Courtesy of the Artist

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The Shadow and Darkness of Youth

Although Huang Yuxing arose with the identity of “cartoon painter” at the beginning of his artistic career, he did not stay on this subject for long. Soon, in his thirties, he began to observe inward, focusing on sexual orientation and erotic expression. In 2007, Huang Yuxing employed printing ink and spray paint to complete his series *When I Need Love Most* on the back of the 25cm-diameter glass panel of IKEA wall clock. In this series, he offers a glimpse into the secret garden of hunting desires, where the brutality of the body, the play, the pain and loneliness of the self are expressed in tangled lines and dark tones. The clock running endlessly behind the picture serves as a metaphor for the constantly anxious and struggling emotions.



Huang Yuxing, *I Don't Play With You*, 2005 - Oil on canvas - 150 × 230 cm / © Huang Yuxing

Based on this technique, Huang Yuxing created the series *Portrait of Physiologist*. He called the physiologists “changers for the history of life.” “Every individual human, as a living creature, has ceaselessly evolved since birth through aging, puberty, disease, desire, and the great forces of social and natural changes. Yet we still hold the tenacity of life.” He then expanded from this to create series such as *You Hurt Me*, *Finding Self* and *Life History in Change*. In 2008, he held a solo exhibition with the same title *Life History in Change*, at Shanghai Hongqiao Gallery.

Whether as the expression of inner love or the transformation of biological life, Huang Yuxing's works during this period undoubtedly carry a sense of pure bleakness and delicacy. The dark tones also reveal the “coldness of industrial age,” resembling Marlene Dumas' works. Dark yet transparent oil paint or ink, together with dazzling fluorescent acrylic, as well as the synthetic canvas with silver background, all suggest the artist's wandering pain and sensitive spiritual world.

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Huang Yuxing, *Life History in Changing*, 2008 - Acrylic on canvas, industrial ink - 230 x 152 cm / © Huang Yuxing

Huang Yuxing later said in recalling his experience of this period: “There is like a chasm between your internal world and the external world, unable to communicate with each other. All kinds of deep-rooted stereotypes pervade our lives. All types of problems cannot be solved despite knowing the solutions. The real psychological relief is after the Internet. But it all came too late. I once thought of a subject that would be perfect for my biography -- I had a fantasy of a waterfall with a long bridge underneath it. My life feels like a walk across this bridge.”

At that moment, Huang Yuxing was like a man in a tunnel, looking for a bright exit from the long “monochrome period.”

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Huang Yuxing, *Who am I?*, 2008 - Acrylic on canvas, industrial ink - 150 x 160 cm / © Huang Yuxing

Ethereal Fluorescent Color

In 2009, when China's fast-moving contemporary art market took a sharp turn and his gallery contract expired, Huang became an outsider, even unable to support himself sometimes. The blow of reality, as well as the stagnation of his creative career, made Huang Yuxing bear great mental pressure at that time. By the end of the year, after a long trip in the Himalayas, color came fluttering down to him like a beam of light slowing shining into his heart, and then illuminating his canvas. This light into the darkness, to some extent, is also the beginning of his search for self-salvation and spiritual comfort.

With the exploration of color, the ethereal fluorescent color and the highly saturated tonal contrast become the visual symbols of Huang Yuxing's work. "Just as mineral color belongs to Dunhuang, fluorescent color belongs to our time. It is an independent color system that stimulates the senses. When I started to use fluorescent color in the painting, I hoped that it can shine into everyone's life."

From 2009 to 2010, *LIGHT* and *HABITAT* series were born successively; and the color in Huang Yuxing's work was increasingly unleashed, showing a sense of power that broke through obstacles and burst out strongly. "The *LIGHT* series is my deeper understanding of life as light gives people hope. For me, light is a desire for and an explosion of color after a particular experience." However, darkness and light are still in an exciting confrontation for Huang's work during this period. The sense of "collision"

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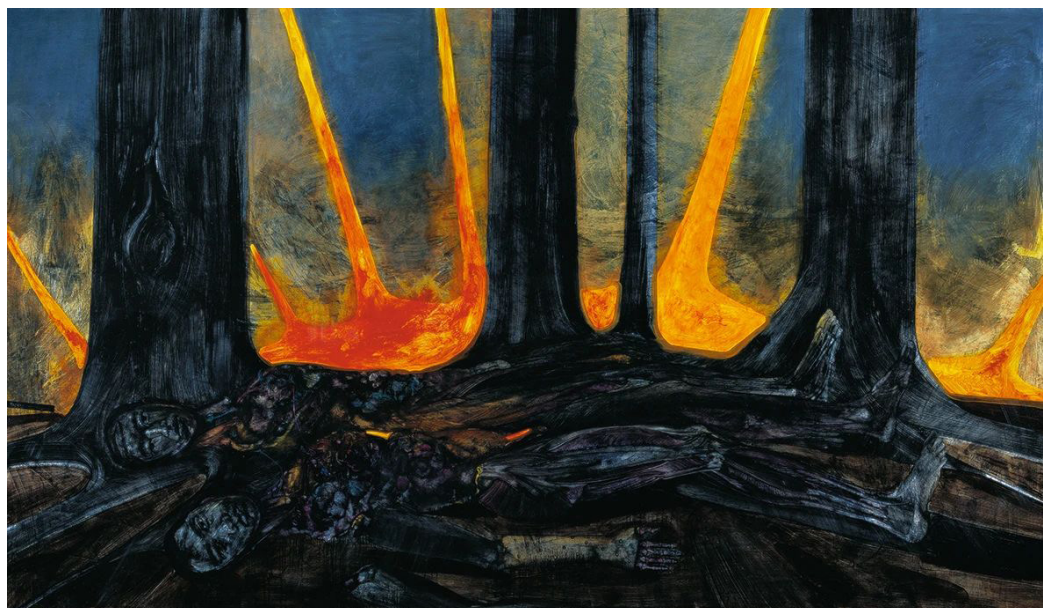
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is ubiquitous on the canvas, manifesting in visual, physical and emotional aspects. In short, color has arrived, but darkness has not yet faded.



Huang Yuxing, *Light*, 2010 - Oil on canvas - 356 x 209 cm / © Huang Yuxing

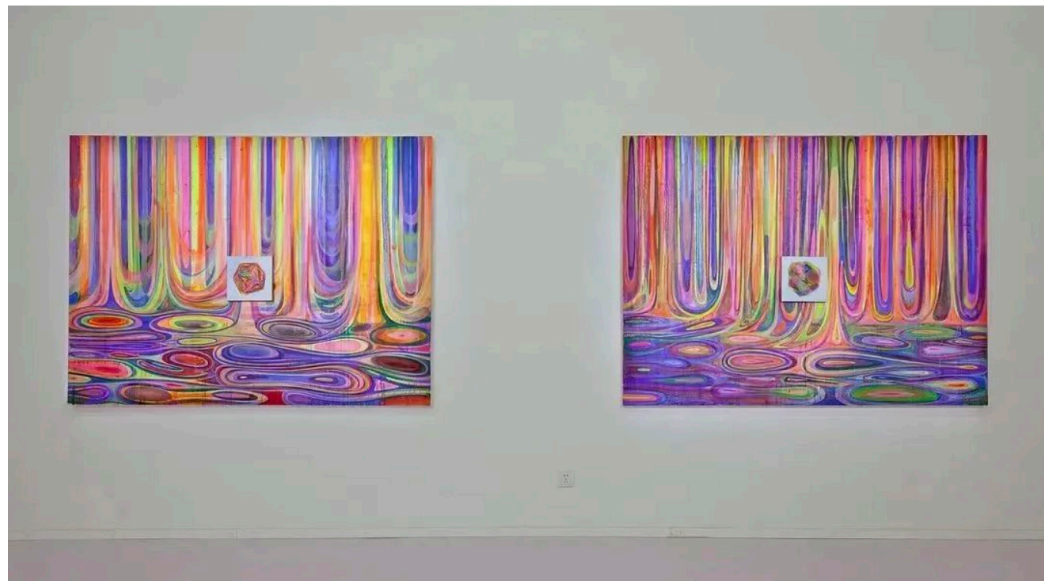


Huang Yuxing, *Light*, 2010 - Oil on canvas - 356 x 209 cm / © Huang Yuxing

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Installation views of *THE RIVER'S GOBBLED UP TREES AND HE'LL SWALLOW YOU NEXT*, 2014, ANTENNA SPACE, Shanghai, China / © Huang Yuxing

Following this search for light in two years, Huang Yuxing's private side receded into the background, and the subject of his work gradually expanded into the experience of public space, creating works such as *Trees*, *Trap* and *MELTING POINT*. He alternates between acrylic and oil paint to play with the depth of the image, amplifying the haptic and physical perception, as well as emotional expression. Through the evolution of imagery and the change of techniques, an ambiguous state of value behind the dazzling fluorescent color has replaced the straightforward message in Huang Yuxing's earlier work.

Since then, the removal of figuration continues, and color is further liberated. Through employing a contrast or collision of fluorescent color, Huang Yuxing has constructed an array of "whirlpools," flowing together into the themes of *River* and *Bubbles*. "Whirlpools represent the trials and adversities of life; the river represents time and the journey of life; and bubbles represent the connection between living individuals and the universe. As my understandings of life are condensed and refined into painterly elements, a mutually inclusive relationship exists between the two, each echoing the other."

The river has a special meaning for Huang. He once said that "the river defines the shape of time in my mind," and he repeatedly asserted in interviews that "Everything is about time." The artist claimed that the experience of living in Tibet has always influenced his work, and more importantly, his view of time. The relativity of time and space has an even greater impact on his latest works. "Rivers have directions – this is my first idea of time. As we learn more about this, we realize that time in our universe doesn't always point into one direction. Sometimes time can flow back to a random point like water in the river."

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Huang Yuxing on his way from Yadong to Shigatse to sketch, 1997 / © Huang Yuxing



Huang Yuxing, *Starry Night*, 2018 - Acrylic on canvas - 115 x 170 cm / © Huang

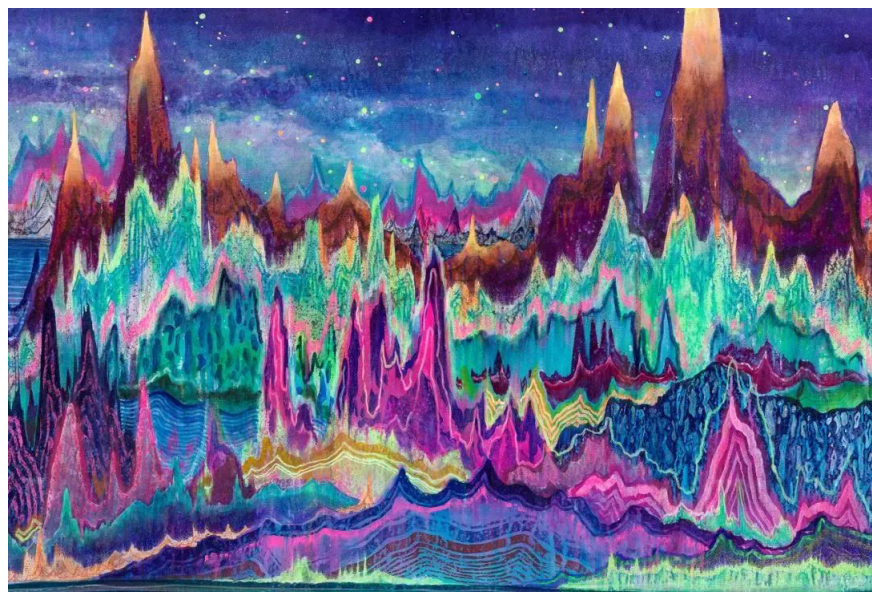
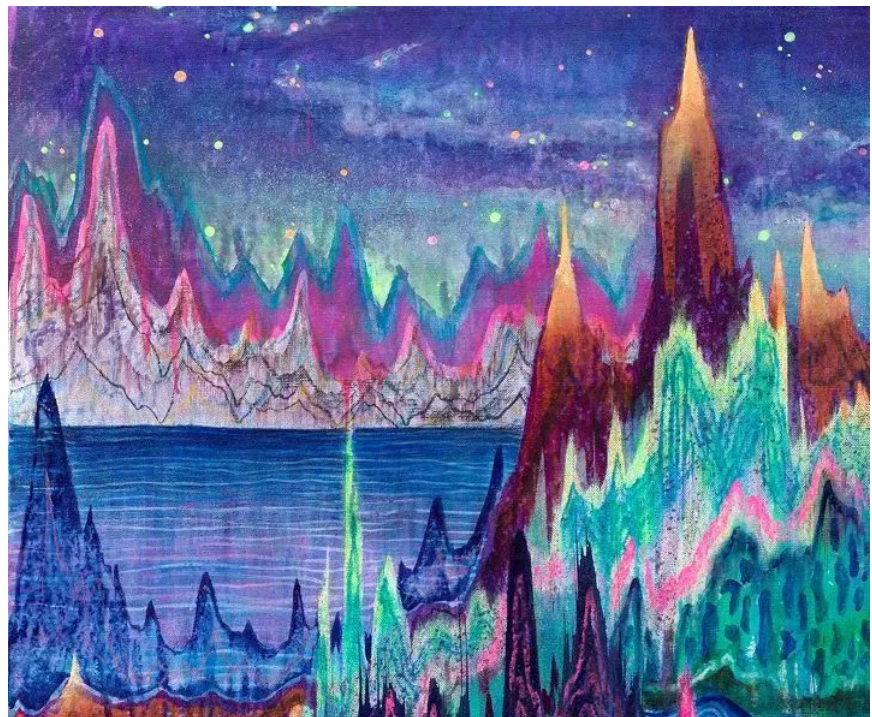
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Paradise from 2015 and *Starry Night* from 2018 are two particularly important pieces from this period. The former epitomizes Huang Yuxing's transformation in color and shape structure. The painting consists of overlapping geometric shapes such as cones, cuboids and ellipsoids, creating a virtual architectural scene with brilliant colors and exaggerated brushstrokes. In *Starry Night*, we can once again see Huang Yuxing's deep and enduring thinking about the river, night sky and blood. He quotes a passage from Immanuel Kant to explain his creative concepts: "Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the more often and steadily we reflect upon them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me."

"Color" and "time" have eventually become two inescapable keywords in Huang's work.



Huang Yuxing, *Starry Night*, 2018 - Acrylic on canvas - 115 x 170 cm / © Huang Yuxing

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Painting Landscapes

Huang Yuxing, who is extremely “restless” with his works, does not dwell too long on the success of *River*, *Bubbles* and *Whirlpool* series. He soon disrupted and reconstructed all the colors and boundaries. Huang believes that the vibrant crystals in the *Treasure* series are reflections on “wisdom”, “civilization” and “energy”. *Sunrise and Sunset* presents another materialization of time, with strong influences from ukiyo-e. Therefore, since the early animated figures to the later self-analysis and expression, as well as the observation of the social state, Huang Yuxing’s focus has moved to another stage -- the exploration of profound issues for grand civilizations beyond societies and people.



Installation views of *An Absolute Power We Cannot Find*, November 3 - December 17, 2022, Almine Rech New York / © Huang Yuxing - Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech - Photo: Dan Bradica

In 2019, Huang Yuxing painted *A Flourishing City Near the Yellow River Source*. On the bank of a brightly colored river, stand the fluorescent geometric masses, recalling the rocks in Chinese classical painting or the grotesque style of modern architecture, disclosing an ambiguous conflict between ancient civilization and modern society.

In the same year, Huang Yuxing merged the traditions from Chinese classical art with British scenery painting to create landscape paintings. Previously independent elements are integrated together as Huang Yuxing’s iconic visual features such as rivers and bubbles are combined with traditional Chinese imageries such as broken rocks and pines. In these paintings, vibrant fluorescent hues reveal unique and wonderful textures of the mountains, rendering a seemingly familiar landscape of unfamiliar world.

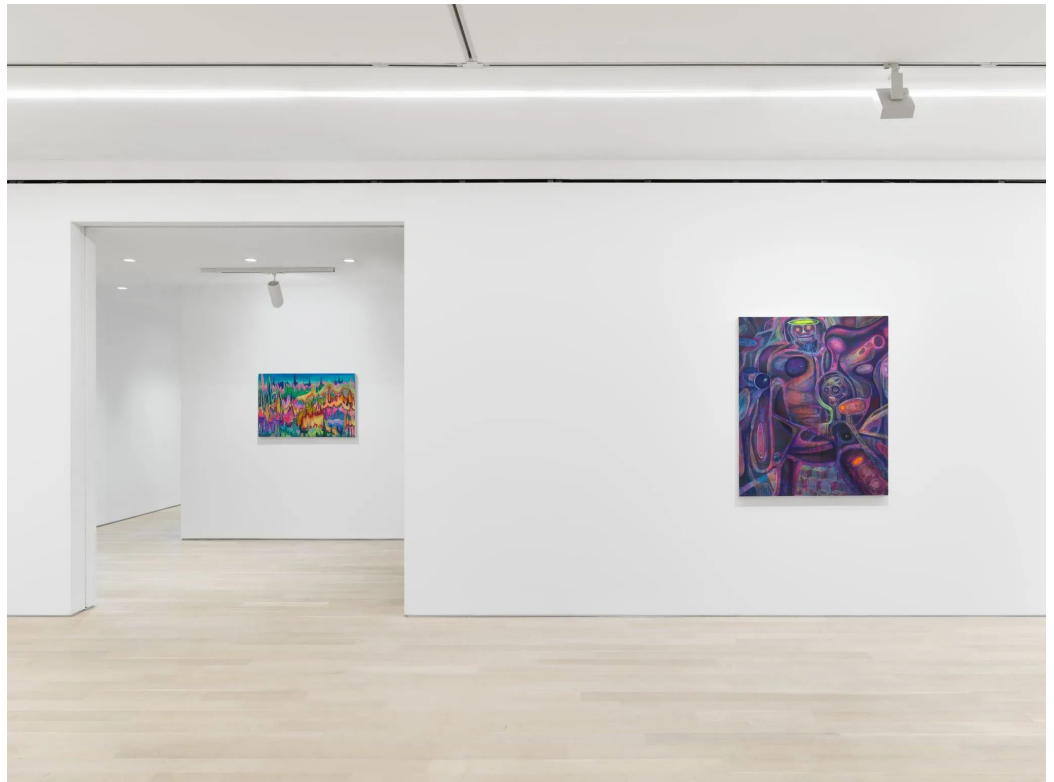
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Huang Yuxing, *A Flourishing City Near the Yellow River Source*, 2019 - Acrylic on canvas - 200 x 300 cm / © Huang Yuxing

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Huang Yuxing, Almine Rech Shanghai, November 4 - December 3, 2022 / © Huang Yuxing - Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech - Photo: Alessandro Wang

Huang's latest *Pine* series on view in New York and Shanghai has built upon these concepts. The paintings displayed in New York demonstrate the artist's usual treatment of the image with brilliant fluorescent tones. However, the charcoal drawings on paper showed in Shanghai are in black and white. "A complementary relation exists between the black and white and the color as they provide different visual experiences -- monochrome resembles the philosophy of classical Chinese painting, while color denotes self-expression. In this sense, the exhibitions of *Pine* series in the two metropolises across the east and west side of the ocean rendered separate experiences. The color added some personal language and touch, highlighting the contemporary nature of painting."



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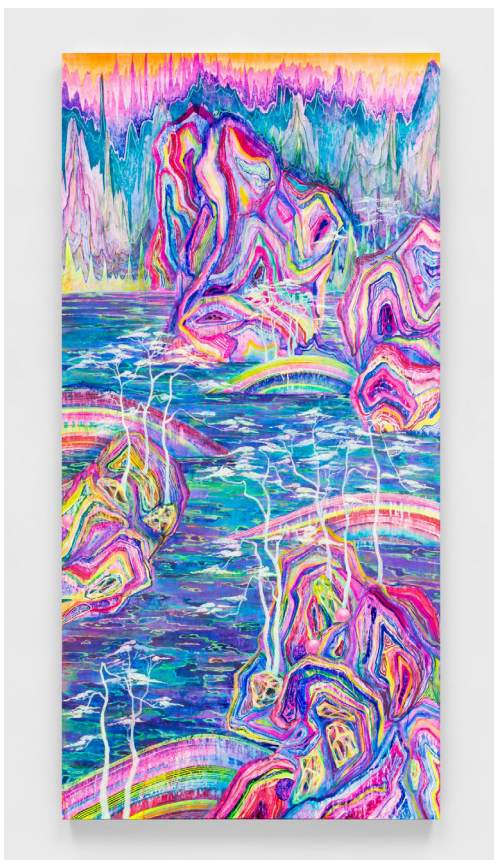
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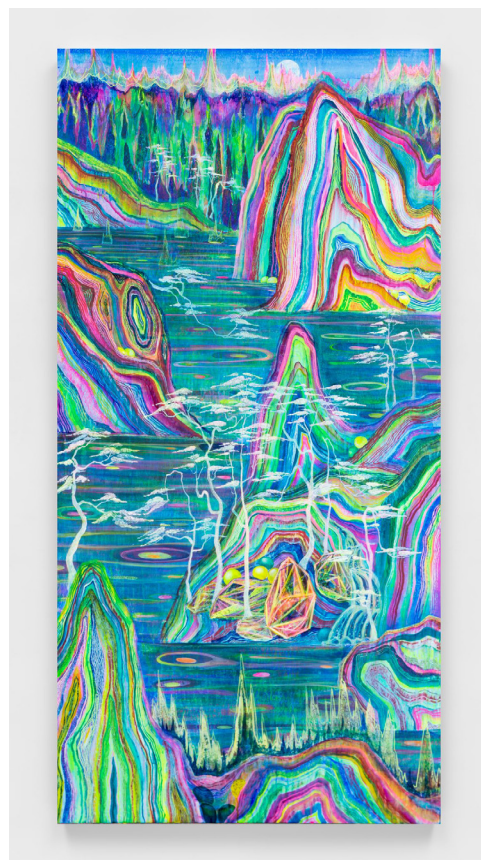
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Huang Yuxing, *Pine – Spring*, 2019-2022 - Oil and acrylic on canvas - 200 x 99.7 x 5.1 cm/ 78 3/4 x 39 1/4 x 2 in / © Huang Yuxing - Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech - Photo: Dan Bradica

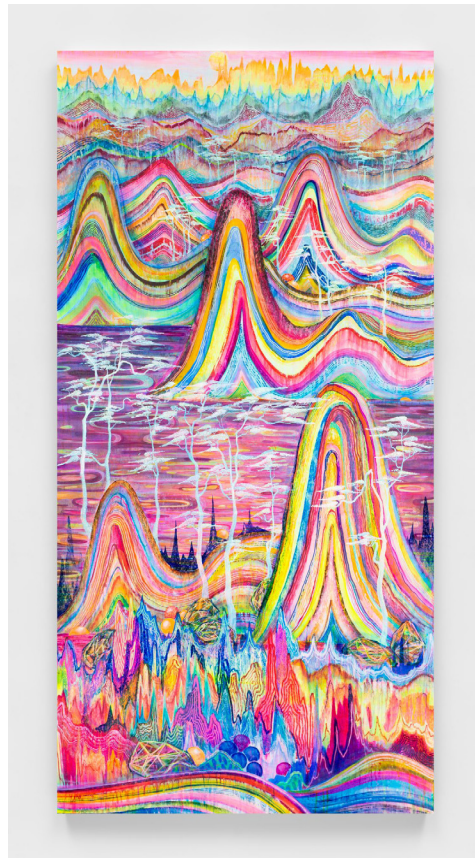


Huang Yuxing, *Pine – Summer*, 2019-2022 - Oil and acrylic on canvas - 200 x 99.7 x 5.1 cm/ 78 3/4 x 39 1/4 x 2 in / © Huang Yuxing - Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech - Photo: Dan Bradica

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Huang Yuxing, *Pine – Fall*, 2019-2022 - Oil and acrylic on canvas - 200 x 99.7 x 5.1 cm/ 78 3/4 x 39 1/4 x 2 in / © Huang Yuxing - Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech - Photo: Dan Bradica



Huang Yuxing, *Pine – Winter*, 2019-2022 - Oil and acrylic on canvas - 200 x 99.7 x 5.1 cm/ 78 3/4 x 39 1/4 x 2 in / © Huang Yuxing - Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech - Photo: Dan Bradica

In these images, the pine trees in spring, summer, autumn and winter unfold according to the logic of time and space. “In spring, the mountains are covered with smoke and clouds; in summer, the mountains are covered with trees; in autumn, the mountains are clean and shaken; and in winter, the mountains are hazy and shaded.” Described by Guo Xi from the Northern Song Dynasty, this poetic feeling has been brilliantly interpreted by Huang Yuxing in a contemporary style using color. Yet behind this fascinating exterior lies a more profound perception. “China’s urban landscape is becoming increasingly homogeneous, and many cities are losing traces of their history, leaving us with melancholy sentiments about the transience of life. All the spaces, perspectives, and geometric forms that make up a city are disrupted and then reorganized and superimposed, while the pine tree stands as a witness from the urban history.”

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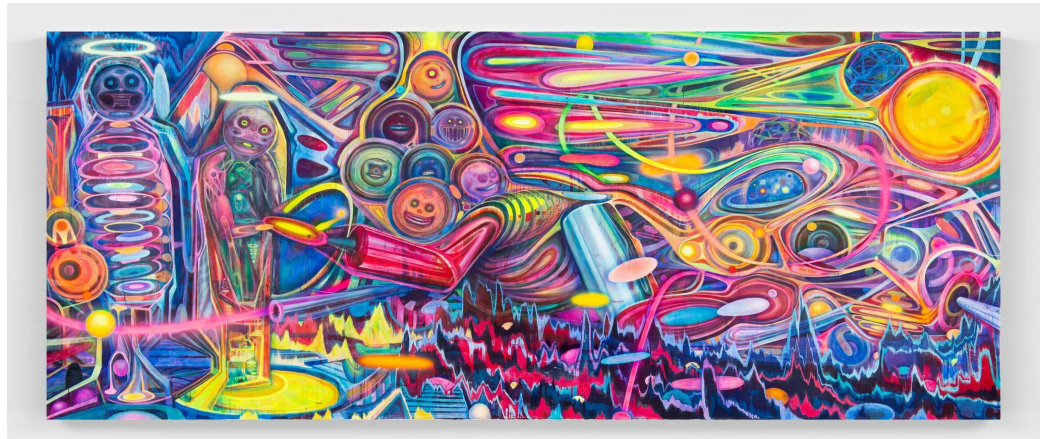
The inspiration to Huang Yuxing’s latest works can be traced back to the aforementioned paintings *Paradise* and *Starry Night*. Overlapping geometric forms reconstruct a virtual scene, with iconic fluorescent colors flowing through the canvas, deepening the view while eventually breaking through to the unreachable outer space.

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Huang Yuxing, *Enslaved Universe*, 2019-2022 - Oil and acrylic on canvas - 200 x 99.7 x 5.1 cm / 78 3/4 x 39 1/4 x 2 in / © Huang Yuxing - Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech - Photo: Dan Bradica

In *The Three-Body Problem*, Liu Cixin describes the universe as a 'dark forest', where every single planet is a hunter with a shooting gun. Within this 6-meter-wide painting *Enslaved Universe*, we encounter meandering lines of energy, multiple human heads and skeletons, and spheres radiating dazzling light and force. All contribute to the construction of a swirling galaxy, full of futuristic absurdity. When the interviewer asked Huang Yuxing to separate masters and slaves in this painting, Huang's answer was surprisingly astute: "I actually think the whole universe is a slave." The deeper Huang explores the universes, the more he discovers its mysteries, and the more difficult it is to understand who or what absolute force is dominating everything.



Huang Yuxing, *Enslaved Universe*, 2019-2022 - Oil and acrylic on canvas - 200 x 99.7 x 5.1 cm / 78 3/4 x 39 1/4 x 2 in / © Huang Yuxing - Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech - Photo: Dan Bradica

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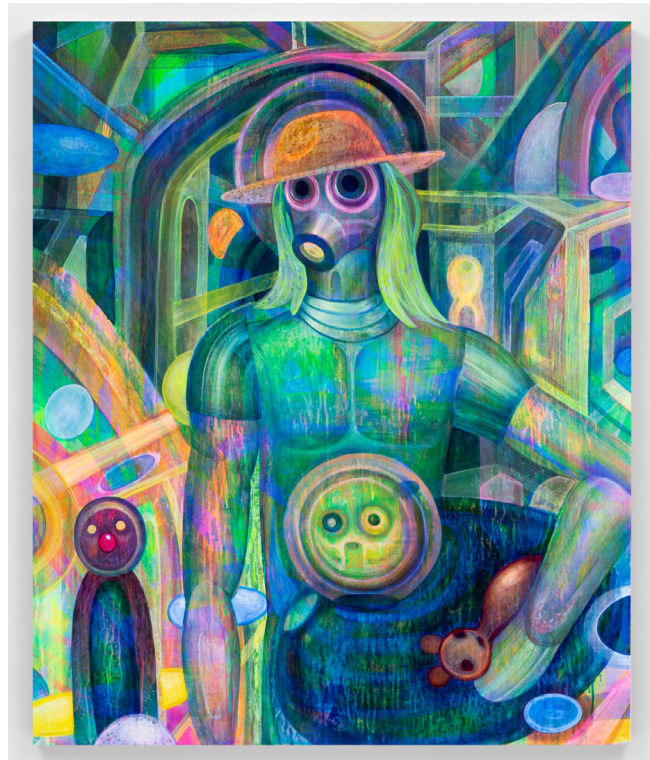
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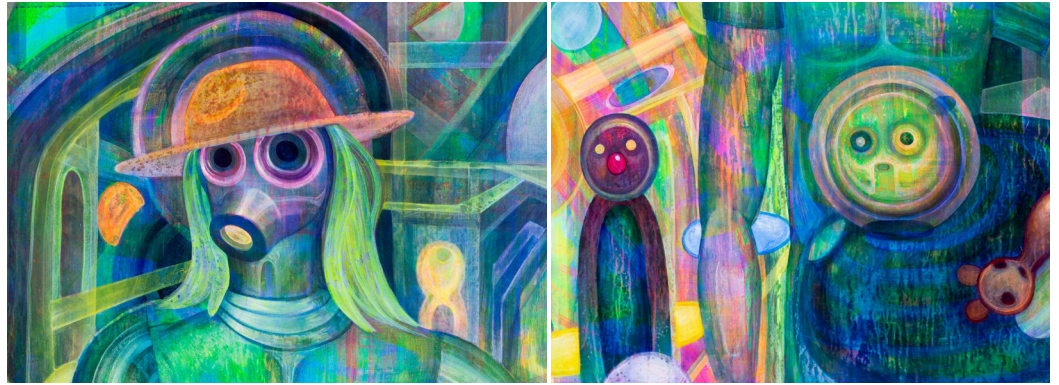
Huang Yuxing, *Excellent Han's live streaming studio*, 2022 - Oil and acrylic on canvas - 120.3 x 90.2 x 5.1 cm / 47 3/8 x 35 1/2 x 2 in / © Huang Yuxing - Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech - Photo: Dan Bradica



Huang Yuxing, *Ukrainian Mother*, 2022 - Oil and acrylic on canvas - 120.7 x 100 x 5.1 cm / 47 1/2 x 39 3/8 x 2 in / © Huang Yuxing - Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech - Photo: Dan Bradica

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Huang Yuxing, *Ukrainian Mother*, 2022 - Oil and acrylic on canvas - 120.7 x 100 x 5.1 cm / 47 1/2 x 39 3/8 x 2 in
/ © Huang Yuxing - Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech - Photo: Dan Bradica

Enslaved Universe signifies the next stage of Huang Yuxing's work – In order to express the permeable spiritual world of himself, there are Chinese, Western, color and lines on the canvas and all of these elements break through the boundaries of his paintings and merge into one. If *Enslaved Universe* is a supra-temporal explanation of exploring unknown world, then *Sacra Famiglia*, *Ukrainian Mother* and *Excellent Han's Live Streaming Studio* are the result of perceiving the humanity through digital screens.

The absurdity in *Sacra Famiglia* and the mechanical, sense of war from painting *Ukrainian Mother* brought Huang Yuxing's work into another stage – a perfect fusion of the seriousness in earlier artistic styles with industrial-era coldness and eyes catching colors, forming a higher dimensional cosmos that transcends time, space and color. *Sacra Famiglia* depicts God; *Nikola Tesla* portrays the person perceived as closest to God; *Excellent Han's Live Streaming Studio* shows ordinary citizens in urban life; and *Ukrainian Mother* reveals the people closest to death. This sequence from God to human discloses the profundity of the universe while contrasting the transition from divinity to mortal beings. It draws the macroscopical thinking closer into the expression of reality. "This transformation is based on the experience of the epidemic over three years as it drives each individual back to the reality and away from their mythical ideals.

A recurring visual symbol appear in this new series of works -- – fluorescent colors light up the eyes that are looking straight out of the painting, revealing the terror from darkness. "This comes from a sense of fear and suspicion of the unknown", says Huang Yuxing when discussing how this symbol was created.

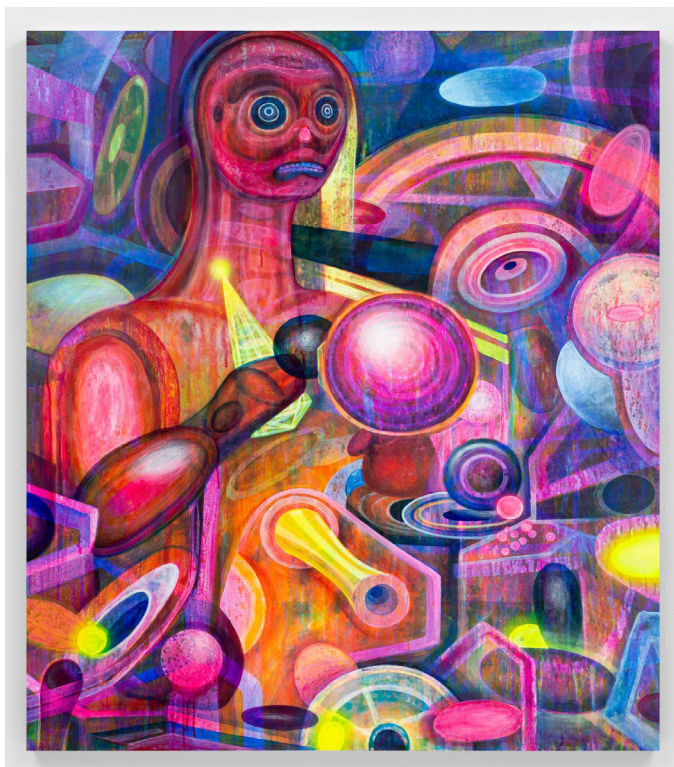
Interestingly, displaying *Pine* and *Sacra Famiglia* together generates a strange effect. Back in 2007, Huang Yuxing was reconstructing classical Western religious motifs. In his work *Dust* from *The Life History in Change* series, he used oil and spray paint to portray the Virgin and the Child on the back of a 25cm-diameter IKEA wall clock with glass panel. "The subject matter of *Sacra Famiglia* follows the tradition of Western painting, which can be traced back to the periods before Renaissance. The scrolls of landscape painting run through Chinese history as the main form of Chinese art. My intention is to sort out and contrast the two different forms on humanism and nature." The juxtaposition between the pictorial styles of Chinese and Western painting alludes to the two distinct streams of Eastern and Western cultures in the long river of history.

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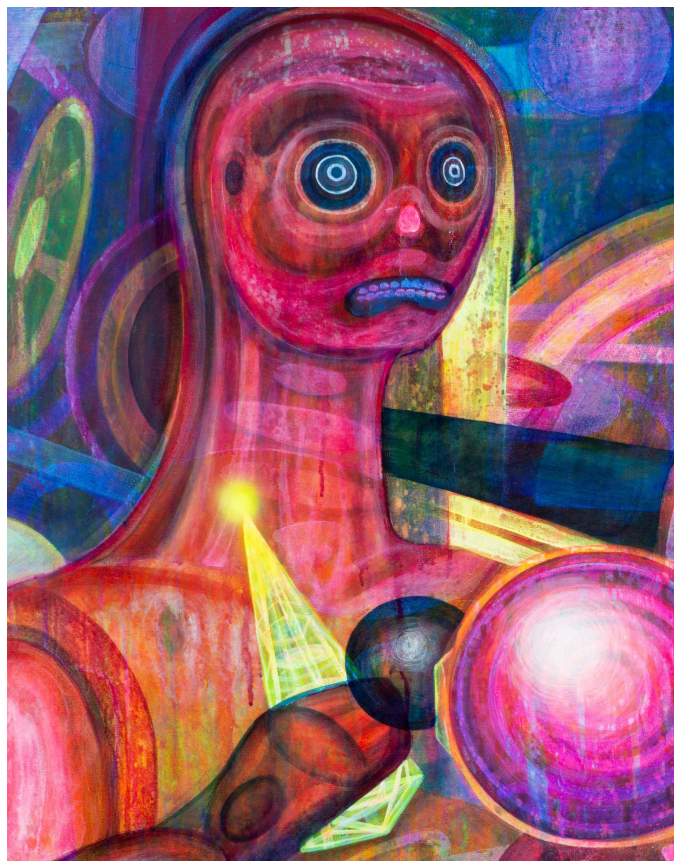
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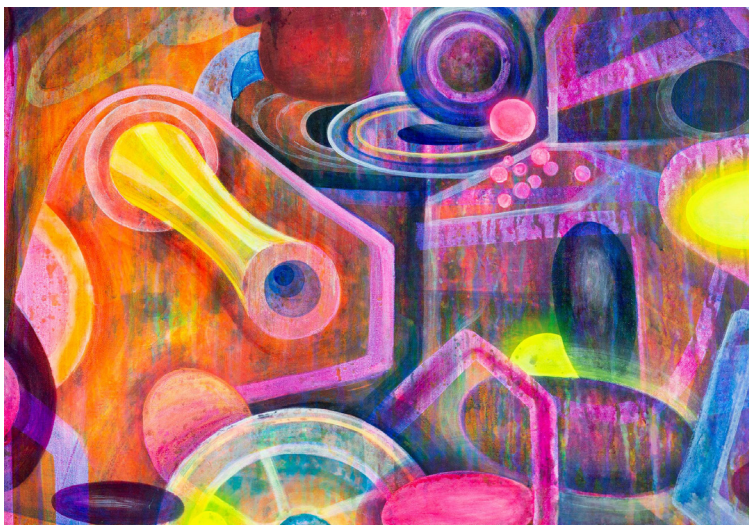
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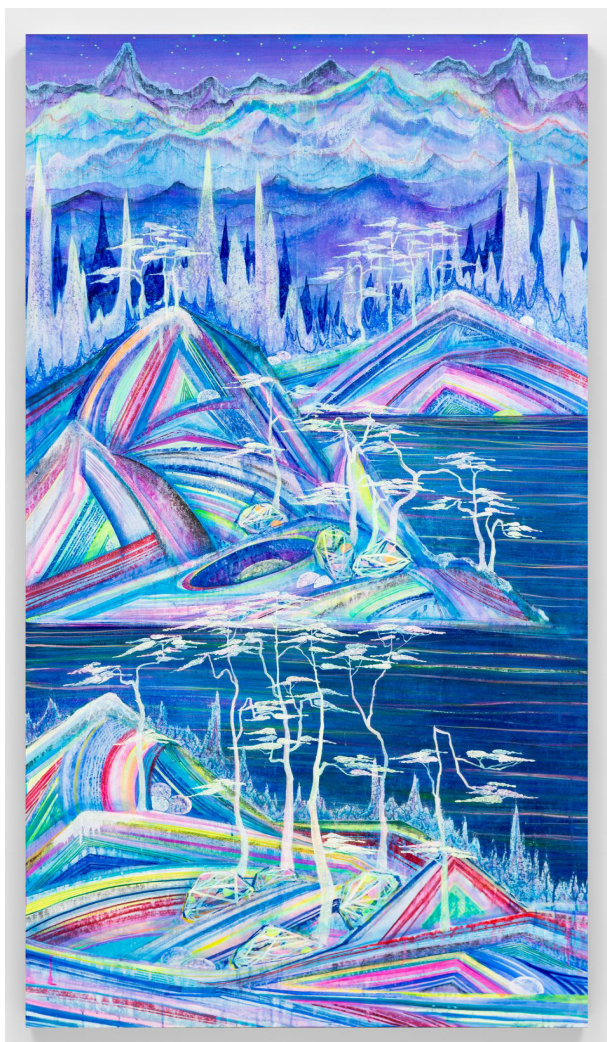
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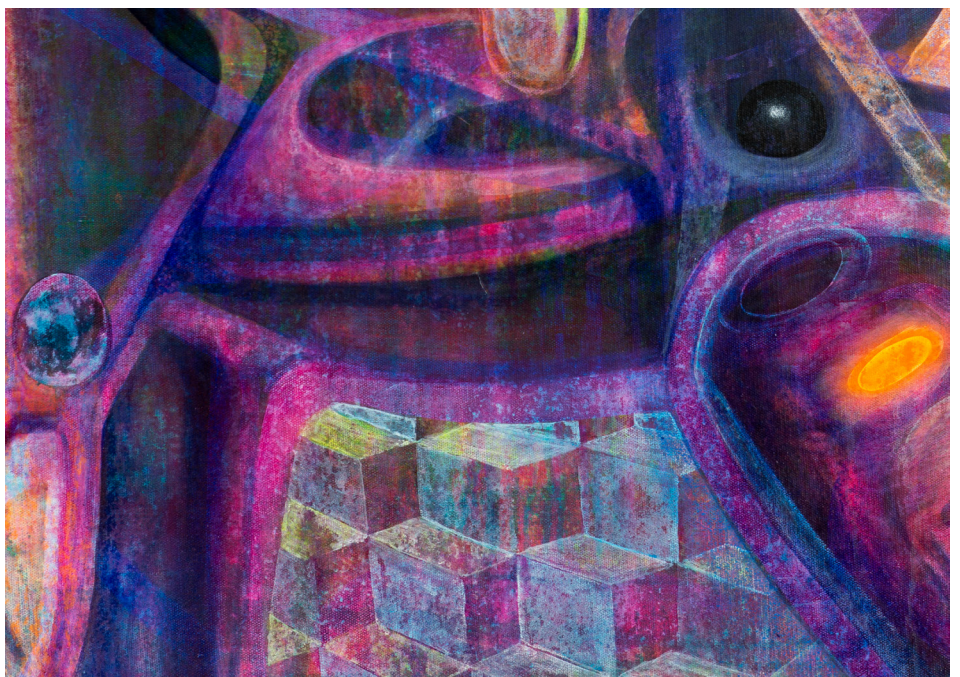
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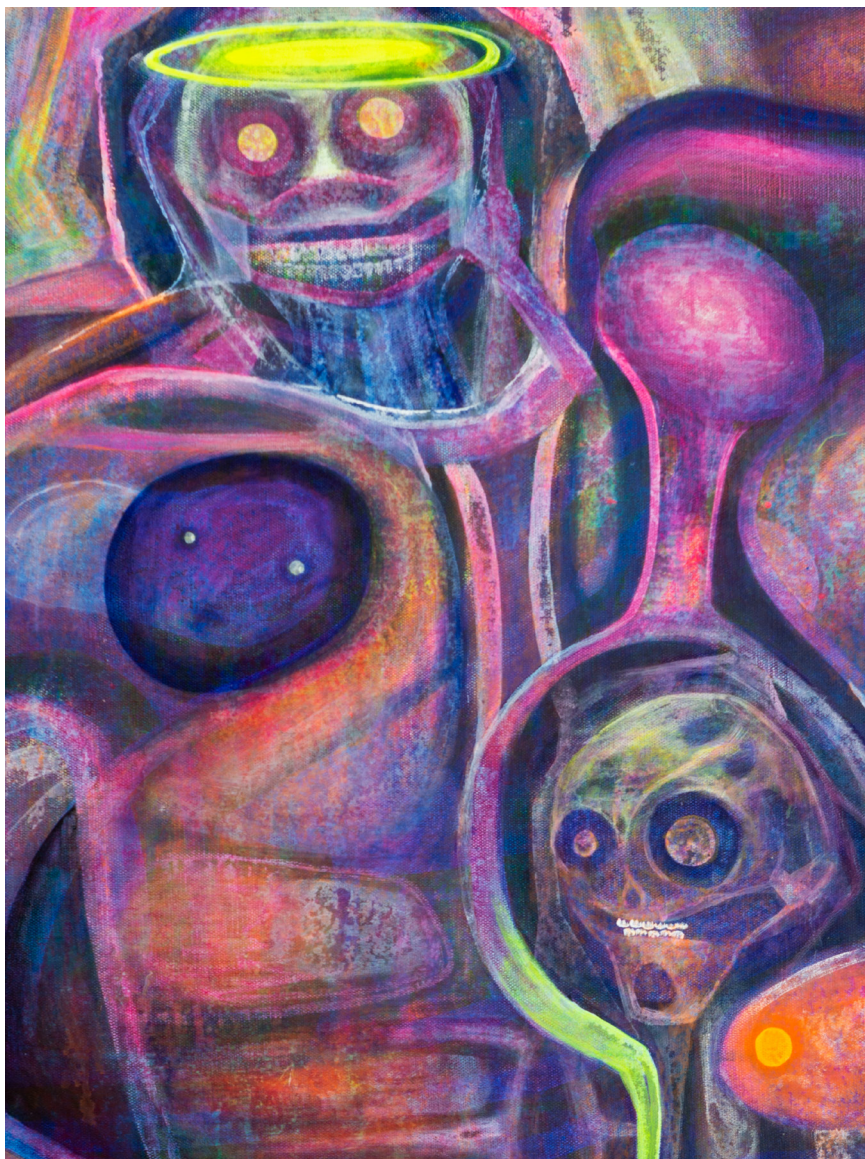
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Dan Bradica

Epilogue

In Huang Yuxing's early 40s, his artistic passion still originates from life itself instead of ideology. "My work is based on my faith towards life. I am glad to use art as a documentation to express my concepts of life no matter which stage I am facing. This is my one and only way of expression."