

Not Flat

Sep 9 — Oct 25, 2025 | Shanghai

Almine Rech Shanghai is pleased to present 'Not Flat', a group exhibition on view from September 9 to October 25, 2025. The exhibition features works by Justin Adian, Matthias Bitzer, Johan Creten, Gregor Hildebrandt, Alex Israel, Erik Lindman, Li Qing, Ryan Schneider, and Turi Simeti.

In the mid-twentieth century, American critic Clement Greenberg defined modernist painting by its allegiance to “flatness” [1]. For Greenberg, the medium’s strength lay in the affirmation of its own surface, in the refusal of illusion and the cultivation of a purely optical space. The picture plane was to be an arena for the eye, a zone stripped of sculptural depth, anchored in its two-dimensional nature. His thinking shaped the dominant formalist narrative of painting for decades, even as artists found ways to test its limits.

Today, that legacy can be seen as absorbed into the atmosphere of daily life. Flatness is no longer an aesthetic provocation; it is now almost the default condition of images. The smooth plane is everywhere, from the glow of a phone screen to the facade of an electronic billboard in the subway station. The aesthetic of the screen – which is crisp, immaculate, without friction – has become the banner of “Superflat”. Once a challenge to Western pictorial depth, Superflat has migrated into the mainstream, becoming the visual lingua franca of digital culture. In this context, the radical gesture lies in putting into practice new ways of moving beyond the flat plane.

The artists shown in 'Not Flat' can be seen as responding to our contemporary condition by pushing outward and embracing organic shapes and jagged lines. They insist that surfaces have weight, texture, and resistance. The image is no longer a passive surface for visual projection, but a dynamic presence that can rise, swell, protrude, and extend into the viewer’s space. However, this breaking out of the surface is not a return to Renaissance illusionism. It is an expansion into relief, into the sculptural, into the environmental – what critic and curator Lucy Lippard recognized in the 1960s when she described pop artist James Rosenquist’s “protruding forms” as spatially ambiguous, unsettling the clarity of category between painting and sculpture [2]. In *To the Lighthouse* (2017–2025), Li Qing lets history protrude. Weathered window frames jut and recess, casting shadows across painted surfaces so that the past literally encases the present. The frame becomes a participant rather than a neutral border, carrying its own history of touch, weathering, and architectural use, between the imagined space of the painting and the lived time embedded in the frame’s material memory.

A different form of embedded history appears in Gregor Hildebrandt’s work. Cut vinyl records, their black grooves still visible, are assembled into a floral silhouette mounted on canvas. These records are both surface and memory, carriers of sound now stilled into a visual rhythm. Glossy black petals and stems absorb light unevenly, producing a subtle shimmer as the viewer shifts position. The work invites close looking, as if one might almost hear the ghost of music within its dark, reflective skin. In comparison, Alex Israel’s *Untitled (Flat)* (2013) seems at first to affirm the Greenbergian plane: a smooth expanse of gradated blue acrylic on a shaped panel. Yet its stepped silhouette and architectural proportions push it beyond pure surface. The contour recalls a building profile or a Hollywood stage prop, consistent with Israel’s engagement with set design. This shaped edge transforms the work into an object, while the flawless gradient retains the hypnotic pull of the image, functioning as both backdrop and structure in which viewers find themselves staged.

The confrontation with matter becomes primal and instinctive in Ryan Schneider's totemic sculptures. His process involves cutting, chiseling, and shaping until the wood yields a rhythm of planes and voids. Standing before the work, one can clearly sense both the force that shaped it and the patience in its making. Rising like a totem, it balances between weight and fragility, existing both as a vertical image and as a three-dimensional presence beyond flatness. Erik Lindman's work begins with found and discarded materials, reconfiguring epoxy, urethane resin, plaster gauze, wood, metal, plastic, and enamel paint into sculpture. The surface alternates between smooth passages and rough fissures, retaining traces of handwork and evoking the presence of a fossilized remnant. Here, tactile qualities are inseparable from form, suggesting a fragment of something once living.

Glazed ceramics takes on multiple personalities in Johan Creten's practice. Works like *Point d'Observation n°91* (2022) and *n°97* (2018) are cylindrical and symmetrical, their surfaces coated in luminous, even glaze. In contrast, the figurative *De Pelikaan* (2019–2021) is asymmetrical, its glaze pooling and breaking over curves, the hues shifting from white to olive to yellow. Creten's surfaces resist a single reading, appearing hard and lustrous while suggesting the softness of feathers or clay's yielding state before firing. The viewer is invited to linger on shifting gloss and hue, where light glances off an edge or sinks into matte recesses.

On a large canvas that incorporates ink, acrylic, graphite, pins, and small balls, Matthias Bitzer creates a tension between flat drawing and protruding object. Pins hold spheres at slight distances from the surface, casting shifting shadows, while striped shapes appear to slip behind the painted plane. Meticulous execution meets deliberate interruption, with protrusions and attachments anchoring attention in specific tactile points. And then there is Justin Adian, whose shaped canvases puff outward, stuffed with foam or felt. Their glossy skins shine with the precision of a car's paint job, yet their forms sag with a softness you can almost feel. Is it hard? Is it soft? The mind cannot decide, and in that indecision lies the seduction. But you know you want to press a palm into one, just to know if the softness is real or if it is an illusion as carefully maintained as any brushstroke.

At the heart of the exhibition is Turi Simeti, a master of postwar Italian art and a pioneer in taking painting beyond the flat surface. From the early 1960s onward, he developed a distinctive language of shaped canvas, pressing precise oval forms from behind the plane so that light and shadow became active elements in the work. *8 ovali rossi* (2018) appears at first to be a red monochrome, but closer looking reveals eight ovals gently pushing outward beneath the taut acrylic surface. Over decades, Simeti refined this distilled vocabulary into something timeless, turning painting into a luminous object that holds and shapes the surrounding light. The light that moves across the gentle curves is so subtle it could be missed, yet once seen, the urge to reach out and trace the protrusion is hard to suppress.

The works in 'Not Flat' do not abandon the image, but they refuse to keep it sealed in its frame. They let it bulge, protrude, anchor, and inhabit space and court ambiguity: painting that becomes sculpture, sculpture that remembers its pictorial origins. These works extend beyond flatness toward the viewer, not to replicate the immersive tricks of virtual space, but to reclaim a more primal, human sensibility – reviving our tactile desire for matter. Each work is an invitation for us to slow down, draw closer, and an awareness of the body in relation to the work. Light shifts across surfaces, textures catch the eye, volumes extending into the shared space. The viewer is drawn into an active dialogue, moving around, leaning closer, sensing weight and resistance.

In our culture saturated with images that can be consumed in seconds, these works hold the gaze through material presence. To stand before them is to crave the confirmation of touch, to imagine the temperature of bronze, the grit of wood, the cool gloss of glaze. Even if the hand never meets the surface, the longing for it is part of the work, a sensory ignition that begins with looking but does not end there. It is a reminder that art is never only seen, and that the pleasure of seeing can be deepened by the imagined sensation of touch.

— Athena Chen, art researcher and writer

[1] Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," in *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p.85 - 93.

[2] Lucy R. Lippard, "James Rosenquist: Aspects of a Multiple Art," *Artforum*, December 1965.