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“The Essential Mystery of Brook Hsu's Revolving Characters”

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The Essential Mystery of Brook Hsu's Revolving Characters

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Hong Kong
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In Brook Hsu's painting *Pan et son élève* (2022), two skeletons playfully grapple over a flute. Rendered in bright blue streaks against a thicket of green hatches, the tussling figures appear as though they are about to tumble out of the large canvas.



Left to right: Brook Hsu, *Study for Girl* (2022); *Girl* (2022). Exhibition view: *Oranges, Clementines and Tangerines*, Kiang Malingue, Hong Kong (6 October–10 November 2022). Courtesy the artist and Kiang Malingue. Photo: Kwan Sheung Chi.

Just a few steps away, on the same wall, a creased study in pen reveals the rough contours of a bench or boulder—the skeletons are actually seated, one on the other's lap.

Hsu's practice is preoccupied with such tweaks and gaps in translation, with details that surface or fall away across time and mediums. This comes to the fore in *Oranges, Clementines and Tangerines* (6 October–10 November 2022), the artist's inaugural solo exhibition at Kiang



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Malingue's new Hong Kong space in Wan Chai, where her recent canvases are being shown alongside their studies for the first time.



Brook Hsu, *Pan et son élève* (2022). Ink on canvas. 170 x 140 cm. Courtesy the artist and Kiang Malingue. Photo: Kwan Sheung Chi.

Hsu has populated the three-storey gallery with a coterie of skeletons and young women; in her depictions of the latter, the inconsistencies of translation are most potently expressed.

Drawn in blue pen, *Study for Girl* (2022) depicts a nude waif kneeling with her hands behind her back, smiling inquisitively at viewers. In another study traced cleanly in pencil, the subject appears thinner, her arched brows and pursed lips hinting at anxiety. This wariness is magnified on canvas, where she floats as a spectral ink outline amid a pale jade wash, her shoulders drawn closely together in a shy, perhaps defensive, stance.



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Left to right: Brook Hsu, *Girl* (2022); *Science* (2022). Exhibition view: *Oranges, Clementines and Tangerines*, Kiang Malingue, Hong Kong (6 October–10 November 2022). Courtesy the artist and Kiang Malingue. Photo: Kwan Sheung Chi.

Recalling Balthus' paintings of sexualised prepubescents, *Girl* (2022) answers the wanton male voyeurism of the former with an ambiguous female gaze that shifts subtly across iterations. As such, a sense of imperilled womanhood courses throughout the show, even if the works themselves aren't necessarily menacing or without humour.



ARTIST PROFILE

Balthus

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‘This essential mystery of Hsu’s revolving characters and compositions permeates the exhibition.’

The neutral face in *Study for Portrait of a Girl* (2022) is split in two on an adjacent fabric-covered canvas. One side is sketched in faint pencil on mauve cloth, the other in smudged blue ink on yellow-green plaid. The fabric ground resembles two seamlessly sewn-together bedsheets, yet any suggestion of domestic comfort is dispelled by the uncannily bisected visage.



Left to right: Brook Hsu, *Study for Portrait of a Girl* (2022); *Portrait of a Girl* (2022). Exhibition view: *Oranges, Clementines and Tangerines*, Kiang Malingue, Hong Kong (6 October–10 November 2022). Courtesy the artist and Kiang Malingue. Photo: Kwan Sheung Chi.

Another form of disfigurement appears on the opposing wall, where a narrow length of wood bears a hardly-discernible image of a distorted cranium referencing Holbein's anamorphic skull in *The Ambassadors* (1533). It's a clever juxtaposition: Hsu's Death and the Maiden engaged in a staring contest.

Visual twists and intimations give way to free-form chaos on the gallery's top floor, where figures are obliterated beneath layers of abstraction. In *Science* (2022), a smiling female face is marred by aggressive rust and cobalt strokes. At the bottom of the composition, the work's title is spelt out in a looping, almost illegible scrawl among frenzied spirals—a reduction of language to pictorial form that strips the referent of meaning and authority.



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Left to right: Brook Hsu, *Untitled* (2022); *Meet Me at the Library* (2022). Exhibition view: *Oranges, Clementines and Tangerines*, Kiang Malingue, Hong Kong (6 October–10 November 2022). Courtesy the artist and Kiang Malingue. Photo: Kwan Sheung Chi.

As always, death follows Hsu's women. The skeletal flute players in *Pan et son élève* reappear as white palimpsests on a bright green swathe knotted with a striped sheet.

The fabric is draped haphazardly over two different sized canvases—a pale blue gradient juxtaposed with a larger composition of frenetic viridian, and sapphire scribbles that bleed and pool. One is tempted to grasp for structure amid this disorder—to conjure a limb or a ribcage out of black swirls and lines.



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Brook Hsu, *Pan et son élève* (2022). Ink and fabric on canvas. 170 x 280.6 cm. Exhibition view: *Oranges, Clementines and Tangerines*, Kiang Malingue, Hong Kong (6 October–10 November 2022). Courtesy the artist and Kiang Malingue. Photo: Kwan Sheung Chi.

Yet the allure of Hsu's art stems from the constant renegotiation of revelation and obfuscation, of recurrence and transience. Revisiting faces and figures, the artist's depictions of young women expand the interpretive scope to incite renewed perception.

But in other works, translated motifs are deliberately hidden or hardly recognisable, eliciting only déjà vu. This essential mystery of Hsu's revolving characters and compositions permeates the exhibition, which is altered in elusive and alluring ways with each rearticulation. —[O]