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“Wonton Pleasures with Chang Ya Chin”

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Wonton Pleasures with Chang Ya Chin

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Hong Kong-born artist Chang Ya Chin adds an absurdist twist to still-life painting in this delightfully whimsical and escapist exhibition.



Chang Ya Chin, *Together: Instant Noodles, Sunny-Side-Up (Chicken) Egg, quail eggs* (2024). Oil on linen mounted on dibond. 46.8 x 76.4 cm. Courtesy the artist and Kiang Malingue, Hong Kong.

Food has always been part of the human story, depicted in art spanning cultures. In Chang Ya Chin's first solo exhibition in Hong Kong, *These Things*, at Kiang Malingue, the artist pairs art and food in an exhibition that prompts a smile and spurs an appetite.

Featuring 13 oil-on-linen and dibond paintings, Chang, who was trained in academic and classical traditions in Florence, Paris, and New York, paints a variety of local Hong Kong food in the manner of classical still-life studies, employing chiaroscuro and using a palette of mainly subdued colours.



Chang Ya Chin, *Just One Shot: White Rabbit, Milk, Shot Glass* (2023). Oil on linen. 27.9 x 35.6 cm. Courtesy the artist and Kiang Malingue, Hong Kong.

The paintings depict some of Hong Kong's favourite foods and are infused with nostalgia for the culinary shibboleths embedded in the city's cultural identity, like the beloved White Rabbit candy, sausage buns, bubble milk tea, *har gow* (shrimp dumplings), and *dan ta* (egg tarts).

The paintings recall 17th-century Dutch vanitas painting and 19th-century European still-lives, or *nature morte*, but although each absurd scenario is painted from life, there is nothing still, or *morte* (dead), about Chang's still-lives. The artist poses and plays with her food, injecting humour and whimsy into the works as each snack becomes a character fizzing with life in little action-packed vignettes.



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Chang Ya Chin, *Dive: Dumplings, Black Vinegar* (2024). Oil on linen. 100.5 x 89.5 cm. Courtesy the artist and Kiang Malingue, Hong Kong.

In one of the exhibition's larger paintings, *Dive: Dumplings, Black Vinegar* (2024)—a play on words referencing dumpling dives found across the city—we see several dumplings making their way up a diving ladder, ready to take the plunge into a bowl of dipping sauce. While in *Teamwork: Har Gows Rowing* (2023), three *har gow* dumplings row in a tiny dragon boat set atop a wooden plinth, on a row to nowhere. *Dai Pai Dong, Sauces, Good Friends* (2023) depicts three bottles of sauced sauces as they sit, stand, and drunkenly topple over around a *dai pai dong* (food stall) table littered with tiny beer bottles. *A Lychee on a swing* (2023), its peel unravelling from its flesh in a curlicue, looks almost indecently sensuous.



Chang Ya Chin, *Dai Pai Dong, Sauces, Good Friends* (2023). Oil on linen. 50 x 70 cm. Courtesy the artist and Kiang Malingue, Hong Kong.

In each painting the background is painted in muted colours, and the composition is stripped of the superfluous, accentuating and foregrounding the food as subject. There's a tendency for tonality, a balance and harmony to the compositions, which also nods to Italian 20th-century painter, Giorgio Morandi, which is further underscored by the architectural and geometric compositions of *Mid-Climb: Sausage Bun, Haw Flakes* (2023) and *Bridge: Tea Egg, Suitcase* (2023).

This humorous juxtaposition of animated Hong Kong comfort food, technical rigour, and references to various historical painting techniques and aesthetics, inhibits the works from veering into cutesy territory. What results is a playful celebration of life and culture, and one of life's greatest pleasures: food.—[O]

These Things is on view until 9 March 2024 at Kiang Malingue, 12/F, Blue Box Factory Building, 25 Hing Wo Street, Aberdeen, Hong Kong.

