

Mao Yan: New Paintings

19 January – 9 March 2024
Pace Gallery
5 Hanover Square

Opening Reception: Thursday 18 January, 6-8pm



From left, Mao Yan, *Broken Teeth No. 7*, 2022 © Mao Yan; Mao Yan, *Young Man with a Hat No. 2*, 2021 © Mao Yan

"One of the responsibilities of an artist is to convey their ideas through the artistic language. Even in abstract paintings, the artist's subjective consciousness has a clear intention, which is the code of the language chosen by the artist and the strength found in his painting lexicon."¹

London—Pace is pleased to present an exhibition of new paintings by Mao Yan (b. 1968), on view from 19 January to 9 March 2024. Marking his first solo presentation in the UK, the forthcoming show in London follows Mao's large-scale survey at the Song Art Museum in Beijing, which provided a panoramic view of his in-depth explorations and experiments with artistic language. At Pace, Mao's most recent representative portraits and abstractions will be brought together in dialogue, exemplifying the artist's latest investigations into media, practice, and dynamic stylistic and pictorial relationships.

As one of the most influential figures of contemporary art in China, Mao has established a reputation for his spectral portraits of friends, hazily rendered in blue grey *sfumato*—a compositional device that he deems a subject in itself. Over the past decade, he has continued to delve into the expressive depth of classical painterly process, alongside technical innovation, as tools to explore the relationship between art and life.

Mao's portraits, rigorously constructed and refined in private from photographs taken by the artist, rarely derive from live sketches of his subjects. The artist's recent experiments, however, have introduced a looser and richer approach to this structure. For two years, Mao engaged only sparingly in oil painting on canvas. Instead, he focused on explorations on paper, involving a multitude of ink experiments and continuous poetry writing. This 'pause' from canvas work proved to be invaluable. In 2021, upon returning to oil painting, Mao found new opportunities for meaning in the medium. At the same time, Mao's recent theoretical interest in abstraction and his signature figuration have been steadily converging. These two artistic languages, each possessing different intensities within Mao's work, intersect in *Mao Yan: New Paintings*.

The spatial dimensions of the portraits in the forthcoming exhibition, as a result of the artist's recent inward self-conversations, have become substantially richer. Figures emerge from areas of overlap and intersection—richly textured compositions of fluid boundaries in which time, context, light, and shadow interrelate. Just as traces of classical European painting can be found in Mao's handling of brush and light, the artist's likening of his visual practice to poetic writing imbues his work with the history of Chinese art and its traditional emphasis on writing and painting as likewise art forms.

*"Now I am gradually adding something to my works. What exactly should I add? In fact, it is similar to the process of writing poetry, deciding which words to use, what concepts to borrow, and what tone to use to implement the expression [...], I leave enough time to wait for the accumulation of this process."*²

Mao's latest abstract paintings—evolving from both the artist's intuition and empirical study—will also feature in the exhibition in London. The adoption of a new, personal language of abstraction has profoundly transformed Mao's overall expressive approach. Throughout several years of exploratory experiments with ink and watercolor on paper, the artist developed new methods to incorporate this language into his work on canvas. As a result, Mao approaches his production with greater patience; gradually constructing a field of fluid energy flow. In his Broken Teeth series (2021–present), carefully depicted circles are repeatedly cut and layered with new brushstrokes to create distinctive 'teeth marks'. These irregular motifs flow in the direction of the artist's thoughts, expanding at random to create new nodes and fracture the surface texture. The new series, Condensed or Adrift (2022–present), emerges from this foundation. Within this body of work, an ambiguous and illusory space envelops delicate geometric forms created by brushstrokes reminiscent of Chinese painting techniques, creating rhythmic tension between ground and object.

Mao now blurs the boundaries between abstract and figurative creations. What holds significance for him is the adept conveyance of pure emotions through mastery of diverse artistic languages and the creation of substantial content on the canvas.

Mao Yan (b. 1968, Xiangtan, Hunan Province, China) is recognized as a key figure of contemporary art in China, with a practice focusing on the essence of painting and portraiture rather than strict representation. His exploration of painting proposes stylistic and technical innovations while drawing on the tropes of European painting. Mao's portraits eschew specific cultural or temporal signifiers, and his reduced palette of cool gray and blue tones is used as a compositional device, and which he deems a subject of his work in itself.

Mao's work is held in numerous private and public collections, including the Dong Yu Art Museum, Shanghai; Feng Pingshan Museum, Hong Kong University; Shanghai Art Museum; Shenzhen Art Museum; Upriver Gallery, Chengdu; and the Yuz Foundation, Jakarta, Indonesia.

Pace is a leading international art gallery representing some of the most influential contemporary artists and estates from the past century, holding decades-long relationships with Alexander Calder, Jean Dubuffet, Barbara Hepworth, Agnes Martin, Louise Nevelson, and Mark Rothko. Pace enjoys a unique U.S. heritage spanning East and West coasts through its early support of artists central to the Abstract Expressionist and Light and Space movements.

Since its founding by Arne Glimcher in 1960, Pace has developed a distinguished legacy as an artist-first gallery that mounts seminal historical and contemporary exhibitions. Under the current leadership of CEO Marc Glimcher, Pace continues to support its artists and share their visionary work with audiences worldwide by remaining at the forefront of innovation. Now in its seventh decade, the gallery advances its mission through a robust global program—comprising exhibitions, artist projects, public installations, institutional collaborations, performances, and interdisciplinary projects. Pace has a legacy in art bookmaking and has published over five hundred titles in close collaboration with artists, with a focus on original scholarship and on introducing new voices to the art historical canon.

Today, Pace has seven locations worldwide, including European footholds in London and Geneva as well as Berlin, where the gallery established an office in 2023. Pace maintains two galleries in New York—its headquarters at 540 West 25th Street, which welcomed almost 120,000 visitors and programmed 20 shows in its first six months, and an adjacent 8,000 sq. ft. exhibition space at 510 West 25th Street. Pace’s long and pioneering history in California includes a gallery in Palo Alto, which was open from 2016 to 2022. Pace’s engagement with Silicon Valley’s technology industry has had a lasting impact on the gallery at a global level, accelerating its initiatives connecting art and technology as well as its work with experiential artists. Pace consolidated its West Coast activity through its flagship in Los Angeles, which opened in 2022. Pace was one of the first international galleries to establish outposts in Asia, where it operates permanent gallery spaces in Hong Kong and Seoul, along with an office and viewing room in Beijing. In 2024, Pace will open its first gallery space in Japan in Tokyo’s new Azabudai Hills development.

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¹ Mao Yan interviewed by Mo Ran in “Mao Yan: I hope my paintings will become more and more depressed” *ARTDBL*, 6 October 2023.

² Mao Yan in “Mao Yan: Painting and poetry-writing have reduced a bit more of the barrenness in my life” text by Mengxi, trans. and ed. by CAFA ART INFO, Central Academy of Fine Arts, *Cafa.com.cn*, 11 October 2023. <https://www.cafa.com.cn/en/news/details/8332301>