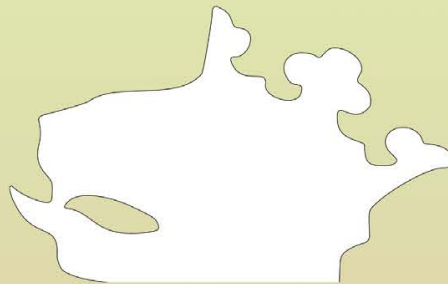


Brook Hsu and Live Drønen: Ecstasy and Agony



Images VINNIE SMITH / COURTESY
OF THE ARTIST

Text BROOK HSU, LIVE DRØNEN

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In Taiwanese American artist Brook Hsu's (b. 1987) current solo exhibition at Sant'Andrea de Scaphis, a new body of artworks wraps the interior of the old oratory in the Trastevere neighborhood in Rome. Hsu's work consists of 24 paintings placed in a row, forming a green line that slithers along the concrete walls showing remains of an altar that has long lost its decorations. Their motifs span skeletons, a portrait, landscapes, and stretched skulls—recurrent subjects in Hsu's painterly practice, which includes a variety of formats, from large-scale portraits of film characters to hand-sized landscapes. Hsu finds her subjects in a variety of cultural production, particularly art historical paintings, films, and books, which she re-works, repeats, and reframes to create her own remarkable imagery.

↗ SHARE ARTICLE

Hsu approaches art making through an ethics of love, encompassing questions of desire and pain, myth and language, representation and composition. She also produces poetic writings on these topics, reflecting on them; weaving fiction into autobiography and vice versa. Having followed Hsu for some time through her academic and writerly endeavors, writer and critic Live Drønen found these texts to be an absorbing entryway into her practice. With this as a prompt, and as a means to spark a conversation that can accommodate both the mystery and irreducibility of her work, she spoke with Hsu for V/A in the context of our ongoing focus theme "↗Fabulating." Their conversation includes both a poetic and factual level, engaging in three headlines or themes: love, representation, and space. The text is accompanied by photos of Hsu and her studio by Vinnie Smith; images of the exhibition at Sant'Andrea de Scaphis courtesy of the artist.



Brook Hsu's work in the current exhibition at *Sant'Andrea de Scaphis*, Rome. Courtesy of the artist, Sant'Andrea de Scaphis and Gladstone Gallery. Photography by Alessandro Cicoria and Valeria Giampietro.

Love

BROOK

When gradients are deceptive, they betray spectrum, rainbow, without hiding or obfuscating, without gradual. To describe to loneliness, I experience it without words. But in their every attempt to return to one, "loneliness" and "despair" never become more or less than two. I can concern myself with self-doubt, the inability to self-actualize, and imprisonment in ideals of freedom, but solitude is my savior, as loneliness and God have nothing to do with it. They shouldn't be because desire is the prerequisite for material existence. To touch material means, to the sower, that he cultivates mortality. Painting, to the painter, is a solitary act.

Desire is promiscuous will; it was never a virgin. It is the dutiful thief who stole away our most coveted forms. Law never was able to understand the future; and although both memory and fear affect imagination, only fear can become a binding contract and divorce us from the living.

Desire is special and painful, being neither want nor need, being capable of complete indifference. I question if there is reason to live without pain and I gather myself in little pebbles, not all of which are round, but of course all are soft round echoes. Desire calls on death's most ambivalent nature – the one that hopes to live forever – and is answered with constant production and reproduction, a prolonged and sophisticated kind of suffering.

LIVE

As all communication includes a level of mirroring, I am attuned to your ambiguity. Compression, compression, compression (– of language). Death and desire's interrelation makes it hard to tell what one would be without the other. Painting and writing are like desires nearing death when they are good. In a way only good nears death which is why comfort is shy.

“Sophisticated suffering” feels good in the mouth, in the brain. The words are both crude and soft, they hurt and sooth. If this is sublimation, a redirection which doesn’t mean control, then it is truly a savior. Something inside redirected. Human minds and bodies redirected or redistributed. Perhaps this is a sort of translation of a feeling, or an affect, created in consuming something of others’ making. In my case, your making. Translating is an archeological process. Textually encompassing something expressed; visual, linguistic, audible. Can one write a feel (not a feeling)? A feel, like intuition but perhaps more gracious. Some words and some images require thought, forcing a writing that is living and not only alive. A gift. Let me choose my words carefully, so careful, and utter only the ones that are faithful.

Care for care for care for care. Die and die again. Words have meaning only when others are complicit. I keep attuning.

LIVE DRÖNEN Hi Brook! Seeing the pictures from your new exhibition at Sant’Andrea de Scaphis in Rome made me think of this sentence that the father of deep ecology, Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess, wrote about the mountain flower *Cassiope Hypnoides*, which I know you’ve been concerned with as well: “Thousands of these tiny plants create a carpet of green with white spots. The flower’s shape is misleading, bending as if unworthy of looking at us. The plant has fragility but no weakness, flowering even in dry summers in spite of its shallow roots and when there is no soil to be seen.”^[1] There is so much loving attention in this description. Your new work also expresses a certain attention to the fragility of tiny things—because of the format of the paintings and the attention to detail in them. What role do care and attention play in your approach to art-making?



Details of Brook Hsu's work at *Sant'Andrea de Scaphis*, Rome. Courtesy of the artist, Sant'Andrea de Scaphis and Gladstone Gallery. Photography by Alessandro Cicoria and Valeria Giampietro

BROOK HSU The tiniest of the works in the Rome show—one measuring 3 cm across and another 5 cm—fit into the corners of the altar. I like to think that these two works empathize with Cassiope Hypnoides. In the cases of both my paintings and Naess' tiny mountain flower, I think time is akin to care and attention. How many summers did Naess sit with the flower before writing a word about it? How much time did it take before realizing there was anything to say? Some paintings sit in my studio for years until they are finished.

LD Time is such a devalued ingredient. It works magic when it comes to writing as well, which is why I found it suitable to do this conversation over a certain timespan. Love has been a central theme in your practice for a long time. Questioning what love is was the starting point of your exhibition *Fictions* at Kraupa Tuskany Zeidler in 2021, and I wonder how your exploration of this theme has changed your perception of it.

BH By the time I finished the work for *Fictions*, I learned that love is action and never aims to dehumanize. For me, a practice based on a love ethic is political. What is my ultimate goal? Spiritual freedom of course. But I'm not prepared to put that into words. Complete annihilation has nothing to do with abuse. Abuse is so normalized that consent and sublimation are now our only outlets for the sublime. How uncreative. How tiring. What a shame! There are parts to being human that are so horrifying that my only way to deal with the reality of it is to vomit. I often wonder what makes humans so cruel? Of course, there is power here.



LD I have so many questions here, but first, power, yes. What you're saying makes me think of bell hooks' definition (through psychiatrist Scott Peck) of love as "the will to extend one's own or another's spiritual growth."^[2]

A love ethic seems to be quite radical today and nowhere to be found within the structures of oppressive power. How do you think art can promote a love ethic? You find inspiration in art made by other humans at different times—from films and books to painting—and I wonder if and how you observe love as action in these.

The art world predominantly disavows spiritual growth. And there certainly is no spiritual freedom!

BH Yes, for certain bell hooks opened my eyes to a new understanding of

love. And Thich Nhat Hahn, to name another. The art world predominantly disavows spiritual growth. And there certainly is no spiritual freedom! Who openly speaks about faith in the art world? I'll name only one artist whom I admire for his radical approach to art making: Andrei Tarkovsky. Books and films aside, painting is a successful medium in its ability to adapt within capitalism, but this is a double-edged sword. Painting suffers under the thumb of commerce. Mystery is dominated by explanation. Confidence by insecurity. It is most certainly oppressive! It's no wonder people say, "I don't know anything about art," or "I don't understand art." Art is reduced to likes and dislikes. That breaks my heart. The works of Tarkovsky create space for interpretation. I think this gives power to the viewer to use their own intelligence. To promote understanding is to promote a love ethic.



LD Returning to what you said before, could you elaborate on what you mean by "complete annihilation"? What would be more creative outlets for the sublime than consent and sublimation?

BH Complete annihilation is my ecstasy and agony. It is a state of complete acceptance. Consent and sublimation are our only outlets for the sublime because we live in an age of choice. We are constantly being asked to make choices. It's maddening because it is false. We aren't actually making our own choices. Our choices are made by corporations, algorithms, government, patriarchy—doctrines. Creation, to work with our hands, to be connected to Earth, this is the sublime. When I am painting, I am here: I am completely annihilated. I feel connected to material and experience to such a degree that I am no longer deceived by choice. There is only a conversation. Call it nothing, call it God, call it what you may.

LD I'm thinking of something you once told me about how you increasingly started to use the color green after seeing your friend throw up bright green puke. You also said in an *A* interview that you "love talking about bodily fluids." I find this interesting in terms of what you said about vomiting as a reaction to humanity's horrifying parts.

There is no division between pleasure and pain. It is a gradient.

BH To speak about green, I have to speak *around green* because I have no real answer for why I use it so much. There is something very fundamental about puking. The moment my friend puked, I felt my body dissolve into that bright green color. I happily lost myself. I felt this same way when I was caring for my mom when she was dying. While changing and wiping her, I definitely threw up. I felt a kind of shame at times, like I wasn't strong enough to overcome my horror. When she died, my mom's pupils opened up so wide that her eyes no longer belonged to her body. Those were death's

eyes. I stared into them and walked along that invisible boundary between the material and immaterial. Bleeding, spitting, crying, cumming, peeing, and pooping. The flesh can rot. Our bodies are maps, guiding us to all of these very pure connections. There is no division between pleasure and pain. It is a gradient.



Brook Hsu (Image: Vinnie Smith)

LD That is truly a strong description—it hits me how rarely death is spoken about in a bodily sense. Touching on the personal, I also want to ask you how you approach the autobiographical in your art making in connection to your interest in fiction and myth?

BH Sure, I do create from my own experience. How could an artist not? To me, life and work have an inseparable bond... I draw the most when I am reading. And I'll read anything. Even a restaurant menu is a story to me, full of myth. When I'm feeling really playful, I pretend that everything is real. Then, everything becomes fiction: mushroom risotto with fennel; meatballs in a red sauce; pea soup; sesame chicken...

REPRESENTATION

BROOK

"Representation" noun: Time, or a human creation. A transgression of appearance. Portent stillness, or a paradox of movement. The swan that dreams of ships. The alphabet. Cuneiform. The earth rotates around the sun.

The argument is to no longer fool myself by images. Painting simply exists to transfer from a dead existence to a living one. Inevitably, I succumb to language and accept I am a liar because I actually worship gravity and chaos, owing to the fact that beginnings are out of our control; and probably this is the source of some of our most abusive tendencies.[3]

The painter, amor fati, knows her life is only material to be used. Now, she is able to find her true self in everything, accepting violence and destruction as her unexpected accomplices.[4] This is the only way to make things beautiful: To eat an orange, first quietly pierce through the skin with your two thumbs and carefully pull the object apart. To make a rock garden, first listen to every stone. [5]

LIVE

"Hsu has previously expressed that she longs to "make love with books" or even "make love with the color green." [6]

A glimpse of very pale green is rising in the horizon. Untouchable pale, looking tasty, tastier than the other colors described. Painted figures appear on my retina when I go to bed. Behind my eyelids: A hypnagogic phenomenon, a hallucination. The eye as a retainer of the brain and vice versa. Inside your paintings there is a world (what is a world).

A world-making as opposed to image-making. A constellation of material from this current world which concludes in another. Otherness is possible, graspable. Representation as something explicable, destructible, reducible. I'm not sure. Doubt is inevitable.

Your paintings have a taste. A smiling blue skeleton reads her favorite books and I can almost touch her.



LD Plato, in *The Republic*, sets the painter and the poet side by side as producers of simulacra. And in his dialogue *Phaedrus*, Plato quotes Socrates saying: "Writing, Phaedrus, has this strange power, quite like painting in fact; for the creatures in paintings stand there like living beings, yet if you ask them anything, they maintain a solemn silence." Your work enhances a deep connection between language, fiction, and painting, and I wonder how you approach these elements as a means for questioning representation?

Painting is in a constant state of formation. It is flux.

BH Painting is the formation of images; it is language forming. This doesn't mean that painting is images or language. Painting is in a constant state of formation. It is flux. And to its benefit, good painting is irreducible in meaning. All paintings are representative of something. Definitions like "abstract" and "figurative" are simply a way for us to talk about what we are looking at. I've thought a lot about it, and haven't arrived at any solid answers to this question: Why do humans love the rectangle so much? Most of our conventions for visual communication rely on its existence. A non-rectangular painting seems always to be a response to our preternatural obsession with surrounding ourselves with this particular shape.

LD Speaking about your current exhibition, you told me that the work has proved tricky in its digital representation. When entering the online realm through pdf, or other forms of distribution, the slim canvases break the format. Could you elaborate on this?

BH The more extreme works in the Rome show measure 5 cm in height and 2,4 meters in length. On the sales pdf, they appear as little lines. Although each work depicts a skull, the figure on screen proves incomprehensible. It's an interesting result, but it was never my intention to get a painting to break the digital viewing room. My intention was to make a green line that wrapped around the interior of the 900-year-old church in Trastevere. Simultaneously, I wanted this line to be composed of discrete paintings (24 in total). This stemmed from studying the tradition of fresco painting in Italian churches. Piero della Francesca's *Legend of the True Cross* at the Basilica of San Francesco in Arezzo provides a good example. Between each section, there are no vertical divisions, no decorative borders. Piero takes nothing for granted. It's very practical to allow the corners of the architecture to be the divisions (and connections) between pictures. Our understanding of how to "read" an image makes the story comprehensible. The eyes follow along and there is no confusion where one picture ends and the other begins. Just as we read the words we are writing, even without spaces, we understand that there are corners.

LD I love that. We understand. How did the skull and skeletons become a subject in your art?

BH Humor is one of the most difficult qualities to achieve in painting. I initially started drawing and painting skeletons when I was caring for my mom. It was a dark time, but it was not without joy. I am grateful I was able to be with her when she died. Skeletons are such a wonderful subject because they are always smiling. How is it that when we die and our flesh finally falls away, we are left with an eternal grin on our face? It's both silly and profound. In the end, we could all use a good laugh.



SPACE

BROOK

I'm a purple that leans sideways. Finally, I'm vast and command the harshness of my hands, to now have complete annihilation, to breathe my fear of any kind of eternal through a need actually realized for the deepest and most excruciating. Not what I live – how and with no doctrine. I think I have thought. I have pain's bitterness that is hiding inside a fruit named sorrow, keeping it there for me, so I am present and mostly absent, having emptied myself again of shame or guilt. Fools look on the past without gratitude and my greedy mind and fantasy of immaculate unions fool me. Every moment lived denying all intention is a subtle destruction! I accept solitude and transgressions, will, night becomes me, and have now have me because there is vibration in my chest. Out of fissures what comes is me and is everything until every lacerated molecule goes outside space and time. Peaks must be broad to rest on something so fierce as roses and roses. There is no other life and here is my heart – to paint is to live.

LIVE

Pasts trapped in futures. Thirsty and desirous. The inside must be turned out if the annihilation of living and painting is to be reached. The inside out, as something wet that can absorb the crisp air. I think words have wet insides. Indoctrinating auras. They're the moist fog that is also found inside bodies. [7]

Am I communicating or absorbing? This is the eternal question. Both come in various forms, but sincerity stays my virtue.

Expansion is an inevitable consequence of healing. Expanding through the fissures! Expanding, and out I go, out I go. Repetition is a gift. And what is a fissure if not an expansion, a latitude, a leeway, an aperture. Words are there and so are your paintings and so are the roses that you speak of. I wouldn't have it any other way. The moist fog seeps slowly out of the hearts' chambers.

LD Thinking of how the architecture of the exhibition space formed the work itself, I wonder if it gave you any new thoughts on art spaces in general? How do you approach the white cube, for example?

BH To me, it's undeniable that the white cube has shaped art. We're in an era that focuses on art as objects and ideas. White walls are to me a great way to focus on trauma. They are anything but neutral and feel especially reactionary in relation to the horrors of two world wars. Sadly, I think gallery spaces are now inhospitable for humans, for example, bright spaces with nowhere to sit. Art for art's sake: What a contradiction! Lacking



permanence, art presentation now relies on a kind of set building. I've come to a precipice and don't entirely understand my motives, but I think what I actually want is a complete overhaul of how we teach art.

LD This makes me think of Brian O'Doherty's description of the white cube in his seminal 1976 essay on this particular space, as "constructed along laws as rigorous as those building a medieval church."^[8] Returning to what you said about humans loving rectangles, I know you don't have any answer to why, but it makes me think of architecture, modernism, Bauhaus—and its aesthetic hegemony. I know that you've been interested in gardening as a field with a richer set of shapes and forms, and I wonder how this informs your practice?

The relationship of painting to architecture, I propose, has correlations to the relationships between people and their gardens. I think my practice as an artist is deeply rooted in this belief.

BH We have someone like Josef Albers and his *Interaction of Color* greatly affecting the intentions of artists working today. Bauhaus influenced art education in major ways and, as far as I understand, garden design was not part of the Bauhaus curriculum. The most significant requirement of landscape architecture is that it must take into account the wellbeing of the whole environment. As my father says, "Landscape architecture is not just about plants." Form follows function. Yes, a garden's design is always a question of ethics. Pedagogically, this concept is a bit lost in art education.

Having grown up in a family of landscape architects, landscape epistemology was present in my life from a very young age. But since pursuing my work as a painter, the subject of garden design and garden history has never been present in my formal education. The relationship of painting to architecture, I propose, has correlations to the relationships between people and their gardens. I think my practice as an artist is deeply rooted in this belief.



LD It is interesting in this regard that painting and architecture is assumed to have a different lifespan than people and gardens—lifeless matter versus life. This drive to make something “immortal” is also part of the prestige of art objects. Then again, just as a garden needs care and attention to stay cultivated so do paintings to survive the passage of time.

Harm is a human construct. Nature has no laws, it just is and does.

BH We’ve come full circle, back to time (care and attention). I heard that the artist Tetsumi Kudo once sold a condom full of cum. He stuck it to a piece of cardstock and signed his name. I wish I knew how much it cost, ha ha. And can you believe that someone out there is taking care of this object? I seek to understand what we value by asking how we value the world. I consider myself a landscape painter, albeit an eccentric one. Landscapes hold records of Nature’s ambivalence. Harm is a human construct. Nature has no laws, it just is and does. And I think this quote from *Tales from Earthsea* answers the question about immortality: “What goes too long unchanged destroys itself. The forest is forever because it dies and dies and so lives.” No painting is forever, but painting as an act is forever because it is self-referential. You can’t reinvent painting. It is ancient. And anyone who claims to have reinvented it is either a really good salesperson or seriously lacking in intelligence. The only thing that can be new is form.

[1] Arne Næss, *Ecology of Wisdom*, ed. Drengson, Alan and Devall, Bill (Penguin Modern Classics, 2016), 49.

[2] bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions*, 765th edition (New York: William Morrow Paperbacks, 2018).

[3] Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 152.

[4] Olivier Berggruen, “The Summons to Living Things to Return Home.” Cy Twombly: Bacchus, Psilax, Mainomenos (New York: Gagosian Gallery, 2005), 5.

[5] Jiro Takei & Marc P. Keane, *Sakuteiki: Visions of the Japanese Garden* (North Clarendon: Tuttle Publishing, 2008), 182.

[6] Amanda Schmitt, 'Anthropomorphic Green II', in *Norwegian Wood* (New York City: American Art Catalogues, 2021).

[7] Clairice Lispector writes: "I am not an intellectual, I write with my body. And what I write is a moist fog." *The Hour of the Star*, trans. Benjamin Moser (Penguin Press, 2014), 8.

[8] Brian O'Dorethy, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (The Lapis Press, 1976, 1986). ●

[6] Amanda Schmitt, 'Anthropomorphic Green II', in *Norwegian Wood* (New York City: American Art Catalogues, 2021).

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