

CRITICS' PICKS ROME

Brook Hsu

Sant'Andrea de Scaphis | Via dei Vascellari 69

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By Ana Vukadin



View of "Brook Hsu," 2022–23. Photo: Alessandro Cicoria and Valeria Giampietro.

A painted wood stripe runs along the perimeter of the interior walls of the deconsecrated ninth-century church of Sant'Andrea De Scaphis. Like the river Tiber lying a stone's throw away, the band ebbs and flows, shades of greens and blues unfurling into each other, its smooth, bright surface contrasting with the dilapidated chapel walls.

The band is in fact an artwork titled *Pale Green*, 2022, comprised of twenty-four oil paintings on hard maple created by the Taiwanese American artist Brook Hsu especially for this former oratory. The spectrum of lagoonal hues induces a dreamlike state, as abstract brushstrokes give way to anamorphic figures: At a certain angle, from a certain distance, there emerge eerily distorted images of skulls, jolting one's sense of perception.

A series of minutely detailed figurative paintings—Romantic idylls with neo-gothic undertones—are concentrated around the altar, a testament to Hsu’s painterly skills as she shifts from abstraction to figuration effortlessly. In one, a pair of skeletons lie in a loving embrace against a backdrop of verdant foliage, a sunset glowing in the distance. In another, a downcast face of a young woman small enough to rest in a palm evokes Piero della Francesca’s *Madonna del Parto*, ca. 1455, famously depicting a pregnant Virgin Mary. Hsu’s Madonna makes a veiled reference to the exhibition text, which excerpts dialogue from Soviet filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky’s 1983 masterpiece *Nostalghia*, a profound allegory on the grief of exile that opens with a visit to Piero’s painting. The quotes in the leaflet are in fact from another crucial scene in the film, shot in the flooded church of Santa Maria in San Vittorino, in which the protagonist recounts a Russian joke in which a well-intentioned passerby saves a man from a bog full of feces, only to discover that it was the man’s home he was dragging him from.

Hsu arranges another meeting of the sacred and the profane in the Sant’Andrea paintings, with their engrossing beauty and indelible longing. At each turn, they seem to mourn the disenchantment of the world, even as they commune with the spiritual history of the site they encircle. “‘God’ is definitely a word I have a huge aversion to,” the artist told an interviewer in 2020, “But it’s almost impossible to not believe in something.”