



THE ASIAN AMERICAN DREAM: IN CONVERSATION WITH YAN WEN CHANG

By Angel Callander

YAN WEN CHANG IS AN ARTIST IN TORONTO from Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, whose work—influenced by her experience of moving to Canada alone at age 17—takes a critical look at the concept of the American Dream and its two-fold hopefulness and disillusionment. Her paintings use limited colour palettes and hard-edge techniques to explore autobiographical experiences of translocating to the West from Southeast Asia, parsing the many factors that make up the immigrant experience within a complex matrix of Western culture—including survival, success, belonging, and family histories.

In addition to her practice as a painter, Chang's artistic output has taken many forms, from mixed-media installation to video and fashion (such as *Yan's Revenge*, 2020, ongoing), she emphasizes her materials in relation to commodity, "authenticity," and capital circulation. Chang's recent exhibition at Toronto's the plumb titled "The size of a credit card" features replicas of Marcel Breuer's "Wassily" chair, a customized Hennessy bottle filled with motor oil and a white rose, and a text-based mural. These works seem disparate but are united in their reference points through various aspects of American culture and Chang's own personal life.

In this conversation, we discuss Chang's new body of paintings, *A. Dream*, produced during her MFA; some of her art historical influences; the concept of the Asian American Dream; the importance of ancestral narratives; her love of the replica; and how her "outsider" perspective on American culture is ripe for producing "mismatched" assemblages that speak to the ways information is disseminated throughout the world.

ANGEL CALLANDER: You came to Toronto from Malaysia by yourself at 17, and it seems like this experience of coming to North America informs a lot of the larger concepts that you work with. What led you to making such a huge move?

YAN WEN CHANG: I came to North America specifically because Malaysia was very patriarchal, and very dangerous for a young woman growing up. As long as I can remember, I had the intuition to go somewhere else.

pg. 30: Yan Wen Chang, *Pair of replica customized Wassily Chairs*, 2022.

Chair No. 1: Marcel Breuer Model B3 Wassily Chair replica steel chrome frame purchased on Kijiji in 2018 for \$99CAN, then electroplated with 24 Karat Gold in 2022. The seat is made of five unstretched paintings by Chang. The paintings are titled as follows: *Portrait of Self in Passenger Seat No. 1*, 2022, oil on canvas; *Big Dreams*, 2020, gouache on denim; *Take Away My Pain, I Regret I Told Mama Life Would Change*, 2018, mixed media on canvas; *Home, Exile, and Return*, 2018, mixed media on canvas; *You Can't Play God Without Being Acquainted With The Devil*, 2017, mixed media on canvas. All parts of the seat were hand-stitched with a black cotton embroidery thread.

Chair No. 2: Black leather seat Marcel Breuer Model B3 Wassily Chair replica chair stolen from Chang's ex-boyfriend in 2018. Installation documentation of "The size of the credit card" group exhibition curated by Daniel Griffin Hunt at the plumb (Toronto) from April 1 to April 29, 2022. Image courtesy of the artist and the plumb. Photo by Laura Findlay Documentation.

AC: Did you have any notions of becoming an artist?

YWC: I didn't have any major art education in high school and never thought about being an artist. But I knew I wanted to be free to do something that I wasn't necessarily supposed to be doing. I got into OCADU, and I worked for Robert Fones from 2014. His practice was formally very influential on me.

This dream of immigration and translocation to the West, or to North America, informs why I paint. I talk about my mother being back home while I'm here; finding the meaning of home; and asking myself, where do I actually belong in this city? I have a very deep, disciplined work ethic. There's no option but to succeed.

Coming here by myself was really hard. I struggled with addiction up until my MFA, which was because of this experience of coming to a new place alone, not feeling like you belong, and the pockets of people that do accept you are not always the right ones. You try to be free and think everything is going to be great, but it's not what you expected. That's the dark part of the American Dream—thinking things are gonna open up for you, and sometimes it's so disappointing.

AC: Coming to Toronto, instead of somewhere like New York, is interesting in terms of working so heavily with the American Dream. It's assumed to be a US-centric concept, but it's not: it's actually completely North American.

YWC: Exactly. And I think of it more like the Asian American Dream. I feel like when we talk about the traditional American Dream—"life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness"—everybody does have a right to those things. Survival is guaranteed, and it's more about how you thrive. Whereas for me, the Asian American Dream is about pursuing survival first. Finding a level of prosperity and success that you can't achieve at home is secondary.

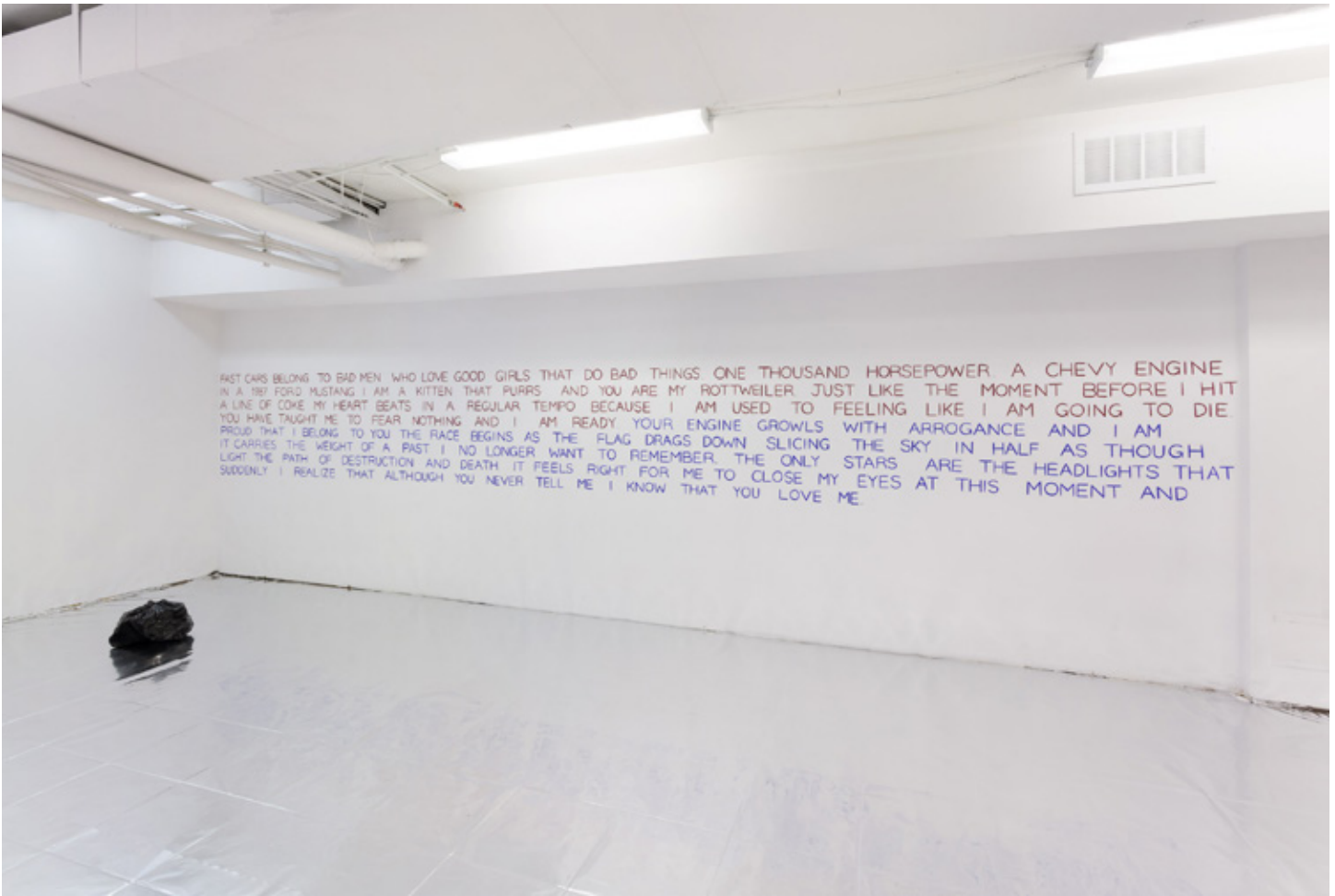
AC: You do have this acknowledgement, in your work, that the American Dream is a double-edged sword, being aspirational but ultimately disappointing.

YWC: Yes, and it is true. But at the end of the day, I'm still really hopeful because I feel like everything points to me not [making art]. There are stories in my family of girls being unwanted because they were born into ultra-traditional families that disregarded females. Perhaps that could've been me! So there are certain historical factors that suggest my life should've been different, but I choose to pursue being an artist.

I always say my next painting is my best painting. I really want to be great, and I feel like that word can be misinterpreted, especially over the last couple of years, but I'm talking about great as in Muhammad Ali—"I'm the greatest, prettiest fighter out there"—this notion that you're overcoming everything life has used to discourage you. Helen Frankenthaler said that you judge a painting when you put it up on the wall with other people's paintings around it. That's really when you see if it's good or not.



Yan Wen Chang, *Untitled*, 2019-2022, white rose originally purchased at Rabba™ grocery and convenience store in a Yannessey bottle made by Chang's ex-best friend in 2019, filled with Mobil 0W-40 Full Synthetic Engine Oil made for European Cars™, dimensions varied. Installation documentation of "The size of the credit card" group exhibition curated by Daniel Griffin Hunt at the plumb (Toronto) from April 1 to April 29, 2022. Image courtesy of the artist and the plumb. Photo by Laura Findlay Documentation.



Yan Wen Chang, *Untitled*, 2022, hand-painted blue and red gouache on wall, dimensions variable. Installation documentation of "The size of the credit card" group exhibition curated by Daniel Griffin Hunt at the plumb (Toronto) from April 1 to April 29, 2022. Image courtesy of the artist and the plumb. Photo by Laura Findlay Documentation.

AC: You mostly use black and white in your paintings, and sometimes reds and blues. What makes this colour palette significant for you?

YWC: Using black and white resonated with me because I wasn't all that interested in colour, honestly. I liked the formal aspects and contrast of hard-edge painting more than I cared about the colours.

I also thought it was a good stand-in for the two opposing realities of the American Dream—one hopeful and defiant, the other hopeless and desperate. I work with a lot of grays now, and I mix some red and blue into those grays. Gray for me means living in the in-between space held by that opposition.

AC: Your current body of paintings is called "A. Dream," where "A." stands for American. How are these works formulated?

YWC: The body of work takes three forms. One is small works in gouache, usually with very saturated colors, that take less than two days to complete. Those are more about my lived experiences of coming here.

The second type of work is the self-portraits in the passenger seat. These are representations of the slant of my eyes and the grin, the reflections in the side- and rear-view mirrors of a car—I'm always in the passenger seat, I'm never the one driving. These are about learning that, particularly as an immigrant, you aren't as in control of your destiny as you'd like to be, and you never know what the destination might be, based on other factors bearing down on you.

The third form is a series of star paintings that test my endurance and perseverance. Content-wise, I'm sensitive to these traditional icons of the five-pointed star, the car, text, and the self. These are such loaded things to paint, but I'm trying to recast them. I'm trying to get to the purity of what these things mean, especially through the language of painting. I'm very interested in a combination of these iconic symbols and their materiality. With these works I'm trying to achieve both process and impulse at once.

AC: Quite often you reference other artists, like Abstract Expressionists, even though these references probably aren't as obvious as people might expect. Which artists do you find yourself thinking about most when you're working?

YWC: I think and talk a lot about Abstract Expressionists because they were coming up with new ways of painting. It's such a cliché, this idealized group in New York City after WWII, who came together and made big paintings because their studio spaces allowed for that. I like them because, when I look at the work, it feels free and brave, unafraid and intuitive. Those are qualities that make a great painting, to me. That's what I like about Frankenthaler, Robert Rauschenberg, Philip Guston, Jasper Johns, all of them.

In my current paintings, I usually think about Edward Ruscha. While the art scene was focused on New York, looking wide-eyed at the Abstract Expressionists like they were geniuses, Ruscha, John Baldessari, and Raymond Pettibon were their antiheroes in L.A. doing completely different things. My appreciation of text stems from those three artists. Ruscha has a particularly great way of talking about art. I love his colour palette and scale—he's so sensitive to mediums. The drawings using gunpowder instead of graphite are beautiful. The way I think about space in my paintings comes from Ruscha.

AC: It's fun to talk about painting again. Having studied art history, I got so tired of being taught about all of the same artists over and

over, and I haven't thought about painters in such a long time because of that.

YWC: I get that feedback from people all the time. They find it strange that I love to talk about such played-out artists, but it's a genuine feeling. When I look at their work, I just think, "That's a great painting!"

AC: You do consider yourself a painter, though it seems like making multimedia works and installations also comes very naturally to you. How would you describe your relationship to materials, which draws you to work with these different forms?

YWC: "The size of a credit card" at the plumb gave me a chance to work with replicas, which I truly love. On my 16th birthday, my dad gave me a Chanel bag—one of those classic quilted bags with the chain and the gold "CC" logo. At first I felt embarrassed, because I knew he couldn't afford it. It was perfectly wrapped in a dust bag, held in the watermarked Chanel tissue paper. When I looked inside at the authenticity card, it all hit me, because it said "Channel."

I asked my dad if it was real and he got so upset. He said, "Real and fake are the same thing. I worked really hard for this, so that's all that matters." That experience had a long-lasting effect. It's also a Hollywood-style underdog story of a father working really hard to buy an extravagant gift for his daughter—the luxury bag symbolizing his aspirations and goals for her to be successful.

If it had been "real," it would've stayed on a shelf so it didn't get ruined, but I wore the fake bag everywhere, because it was psychologically able to suit my needs. I still have it, too, so I think about "knockoffs" a lot. For "The size of the credit card," I used a customized Hennessy bottle, and personalized replicas of Marcel Breuer's Wassily chair. The chairs also have a connection to [the film] *American Psycho*, because Paul Allen is sitting in Breuer's white Barcelona chair in the scene where Patrick Bateman kills him.

Everybody wants a Wassily chair, but there were only a hundred ever made. When I got a replica on Kijiji, the leather seat was white, but it was never made in white. I love something that is so fake to the point of hardly trying to be the original.

AC: I completely agree with the idea that the real thing and the fake thing are the same. The whole reason the fake thing exists in the first place is because the real thing is an aspirational status symbol. Without that inverse relationship, there would be no replica, or need for one. The Wassily chairs were very interesting to me because they were loaded with references, both personal and from pop culture, like *American Psycho*.

YWC: For me, it's an iconic movie of America. Aspiration, luxury, power, petty jealousy, murder—pure capitalism. How could I not refer to it?

AC: I think you've indirectly answered this already, but I'm guessing it was intentional to use knockoffs of the Jacquemus mini handbag for *Yan's Revenge*.

YWC: Of course. In fact I get the ones without the logo, but everybody knows what the reference is from the shape of it. Me customizing it is really like a Honda Civic being modified for a street race. It is funny that those bags are only a few years old, but they were instantly iconic the second they came out. If everyone knows it, then it's an easy entry point to play with people's heads, especially those who are invested in the real thing.



AC: I also think a lot about the trend of luxury designers who were using the aesthetics of bootlegs in their own collections not too long ago. I remember the Gucci Fall 2020 runway had a briefcase covered in the iconic Gucci print, with the red and green stripes, but with “FAKE” in big yellow letters on it. Now these boutique designers making limited collections using bootleg aesthetics, creating garments out of a host of different references plastered together, such as Boot Boyz, are very popular.

YWC: I think it really has to do with the dissemination of information, too. I imagine a 17-year-old little Yan in Malaysia, waking up to Tumblr with all this culture pushed into my face. What am I going to do? I’m just going to mismatch everything!

AC: The text piece you painted on the wall, in the show, struck me as a mashup of movie scripts the first time I read it, as though an AI had taken bits and pieces of quintessential American films and put them together. It felt almost like the way David Lynch would treat it, like an uncanny, rusted-over Americana. Could you talk about that piece?

YWC: Yes, I love that. I really like movies, and I wrote the text for that piece like a screenplay, so I was trying to describe that feeling of something cinematic or oddly melodramatic. When I came here and started consuming North American culture, it was a mixture of everything. I was always “behind,” so my consumption of culture here has always been accelerated and hybridized. I’m not surprised this piece reflects that. All those references are my outsider’s take.

AC: The other pieces from the plumb show are listed by their materials rather than having titles, and they’re very specific. A lot of it is rather personal, like the “Yannessy” bottle made by someone you’re no longer friends with, and one of the chairs taken from an ex-boyfriend. There’s a real coming together in your work of personal themes, like family and relationships, and all of these concepts from film or art history. Is it just intuitive for you to work like that?

YWC: I list those things because I want to be honest. Perhaps it’s the same as specifying that a canvas is raw rather than gessoed. Listing the materials out was like a conversation with my connections to them. I feel like they do allude to personal relationships, but they don’t indulge too much. I have always been resistant to making things through self-indulgence or pure self-expression, but sometimes it’s inevitable.

AC: I also saw the video installation you did for The Shell Projects in 2018, which was about your dad. It seems like there is an impulse for you to return to family in your work.


YWC: Yeah, for the work I’ve been doing with the American Dream, so much is related to generations that have come before me and how I exist today. It’d be wrong if I didn’t talk about that. My family’s desires for me to do well, their sacrifices and work ethic, me being first generation here—it all has to do with family, first and foremost.

AC: The narration of the video also sounds filmic, almost like this personal history is woven through a type of film work as a way of keeping a bit of a distance.



YWC: The most impactful director for me is Wong Kar Wai. I recently read an essay on him that said if you look at pieces from all of his films, sometimes you can't remember which is which, and that's the point of it. They imitate life so much, but what's really going on is very hazy.

AC: What's coming up next for you?

YWC: *same problem my father had and what he dreamed*, which is a text-based public billboard I made for the Cannon Project Wall at Hamilton Artists Inc. will be up from June 30th until May 29th, 2023. My MFA thesis exhibition, "A. Dream," will be at General Hardware Contemporary in Toronto from June 23rd to July 16th. After this I will have a solo exhibition at XiR in Toronto from August 27th to September 17th. Next year, I am exhibiting alongside Katie Bethune-Leamen at Susan Hobbs Gallery in Toronto, which will run from January 19th to February 25th, 2023. 

Angel Callander is a writer and editor in Toronto, currently Assistant Editor of Peripheral Review. Her work can be found in publications such as Canadian Art, C Magazine, Public Parking, and Cornelia, as well as in Interface Critique I (Kulturverlag Kadmos, 2016) and Architecture and the Smart City (Routledge, 2019).

Pg. 36: Yan Wen Chang, *Untitled with Bouquet of Roses*, 2021, oil on canvas, 102cm × 71cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

Yan Wen Chang, *Portrait of Self in Passenger Seat No. 14 with Pair of Dice*, 2021, Oil on canvas, 142cm × 97cm; *Welcome Home*, 2021, gouache on canvas, 28cm × 36cm; *Two dragonflies as mother and daughter forever flying in circles around the only rose in Kuala Lumpur*, 2021, gouache on denim, 28cm × 36cm (installation view). Image courtesy of the artist.