

Conversation : Apostolos Georgiou x Wang Zhibo x Owen Duffy

Apostolos Georgiou (Artist) = Georgiou

Wang Zhibo (Artist) = Wang

Owen Duffy (Host) = Duffy

Duffy

I'd like to start with a big-picture question for both of you that might reveal something about your processes. One topic I had in mind was hearing your thoughts on the state of figurative painting today. In painting, there always seem to be cycles of doubt, skepticism, and belief regarding its power and role in society. Recently, at least here in the U.S., there has been a critical eye turned toward figurative painting. So, I'm wondering about your thoughts: what is the state of figurative painting today?

Georgiou



Apostolos Georgiou

Untitled

2017

Acrylic on canvas

280 × 230 cm

© Apostolos Georgiou-

Courtesy of the artist

and gb agency, Paris

Photo Aurélien Mole

Well, first of all, if you ask me why I do figurative painting, I think it's because I can't avoid it. It's not just a choice; it's not an ideological decision. It's more like an accident that happens. I paint figures, I paint people because I want to communicate. And usually, I don't talk; the figures talk.

In general, you know, for years, there has been this saying that painting is dead, that it's finished. But the truth is, painting is alive. It's never finished. What I mean is, we cannot work with quantity. Even if only one is making a painting or figurative painting, it means that it works.

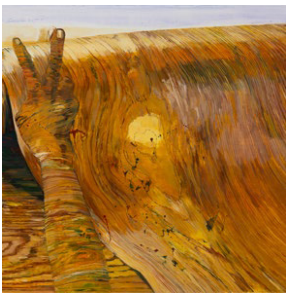
For me, art is abstract anyway. Figurative and abstract are just two words, but in the end, art is abstract. The rules and the needs are nearly the same. I can't say I don't care if I'm out. I have the privilege of being old, so nothing to do. I make figurative paintings because it's

not that I want to be something else. It's simply what I am, and it's the only thing I can do the way I do it. I don't have a choice in the matter, but what I see is, I can tell good painting from bad painting. And as you grow older, it becomes more difficult to understand things. You realize you understand less and less. So, there must be something very strong and clear to grasp.

Wang

From ancient times to the present, people have always been captivated by concrete things. We are surrounded by a dense array of objects—bustling with life. We design these things, we take pleasure in them, and they, in turn, shape us. So, it's only natural that someone must create figurative paintings. We need these tangible forms to convey the richness of our life experiences. As Apostolos mentioned, there needs to be an underlying abstraction or a spiritual dimension for painting to truly hold its ground. It's not just about the literal depiction of subjects.

On another note, I received over 15 years of training in figurative painting. That's why it's so natural for me to use this approach in my work. In China, the reality is that our art education system is heavily focused on figurative painting.



Georgiou

Good painting, as you said, is abstract. A good painting is resolved through abstraction. The solution to a painting, or a good painting, comes from abstract reasoning, not concrete logic. If we rely solely on the logic of figurative painting, then everyone would paint the same thing in the same way. For example, everyone would use the same colors and create the same imagery. But in reality, there are billions of unique versions.

After all these years, I've realized that I don't like coming to conclusions. I prefer not to reach definitive answers because it feels like the end of life itself. Leaving things unresolved keeps them alive and open for exploration. I still feel like there's so much more to learn, even as I get closer to the end of my life.

But there is one small conclusion I've come to.

Wang Zhibo
Optimism
2023
Oil and acrylic on canvas
111 × 106 cm
© Wang Zhibo Courtesy
of the artist and
Kiang Malingue
Photography Andrea
Rossetti

Art, whether it's painting or anything else, is created by the artist but also exists for the viewer. It serves two purposes: to connect and to distance. On one hand, I want to communicate, to feel I'm not alone, and to help others feel they're not alone. On the other hand, I want to maintain a distance, to confuse people, and to preserve my own privacy, I mean, to save myself from this thing.

What makes good art? What is a good painting? It doesn't matter whether it's abstract or figurative. Ultimately, abstraction resolves the problems in painting. It's about how you divide the surface, almost like looking at a map from above. A good painting must be clearly articulated, honest, and at the same time fluid. It has to be there, but at the same time it disappears. These contradictory qualities exist together in great art. A good piece of art is something that is there and at the same time, it escapes.

In your work, Zhibo, I see this. You confuse and provoke people, and I really like that.



Wang

Duffy

Wang Zhibo
Not very Christian even less Catholic
2021
Oil and acrylic on canvas
121 × 86 cm
© Wang Zhibo
Courtesy of the artist
and Kiang Malingue

I like that you mentioned danger in painting. If a painting feels safe, it's boring, right? The moment you capture in your work is full of tension—it's so precarious that it might vanish in the very next instant.

I really loved how Apostolos mentioned the idea of confusion in paintings. There's so much ambiguity in terms of what's actually happening between the figures, and they're interacting.

Similarly, Zhibo, in your recent body of work, the figures are often obscured—they're never fully represented. And then there's the choice of certain subjects, like snowmen, which raises its own questions: why this subject? I'm curious, Zhibo, if you could talk about the role of confusion or, if not confusion, then ambiguity in your work.

Wang

What I'm particularly interested in, much like Apostolos's work, is the predicament of humanity. However,

because my identity differs from his, I need to find a foundation from which to express this sense of confusion. As someone who has migrated from an Eastern context to a Western one, much of my confusion stems from this shift. I feel that what Apostolos paints is a kind of disorientation, and my own confusion also requires a foundation, an image, to express it. This may also reflect a perplexity about the human condition, but it needs a neutral image through which I can project myself, to convey a state of suspension, a sense of distance between individuals, or even the existential doubt about one's own being.

What I want to say is that the subject matter Apostolos and I discuss is essentially the same, but because of my different position, it manifests as the image of a "snowman." Through this image, I can express feelings of being lost and a sense of failure—particularly the failure inherent in communication. At the same time, it embodies a sense of void. In Apostolos's work, there is a stronger sense of narrative, whereas I hope my narrative can be broader, with a longer temporal scope. This is because the scope of my concerns is larger — Apostolos grew up in the West, and while the West has its own issues, his threads are relatively direct. I, on the other hand, am an immigrant, a mover, and identity itself becomes an unavoidable issue.

That said, I'm not particularly interested in identity as a subject. What I'm more interested in, like Apostolos, is exploring the ultimate questions and dilemmas of humanity. Yet the issue of identity cannot be avoided, so I need an image to position myself. This image cannot be an Easterner, nor a Westerner, nor even an ordinary person. So how should the "human dilemma" be addressed? The "snowman" naturally emerged. It is an intermediary figure, carrying this sense of void while also addressing the same fundamental questions as Apostolos.

Duffy

That's really interesting and seems quite contrary to a lot of work being made elsewhere. As an artist, you've made a deliberate choice not to use your identity directly in your painting. Of course, you're addressing issues



Wang Zhibo
Red nightcap (Winter tale)
 2023
 Oil, acrylic and permanent marker on canvas
 100 × 100 cm
 © Wang Zhibo
 Courtesy of the artist
 and Kiang Malingue
 Photography Andrea Rossetti

Georgiou

related to yourself, but you've chosen to represent a figure that feels like a third person — someone who is neither distinctly Western nor Eastern, and who lacks a specific cultural identity.

Building on that, I think this approach also lends itself to a sense of comedy. There's a subtle humor that I've read in the work, particularly because the snowmen remind me so much of an idealized childhood holiday. They're painted in such a direct and authentic way, but there's also an awkwardness to some of the snowmen as well. So I was wondering if both of you could talk about the role of comedy or absurdity in your art? I'm curious to hear your thoughts on this.

Zhibo's work gives me this impression—if it's humorous, it's by coincidence. I mean, her painting moves. It's like a camera moving through a house. Imagine a camera panning through a family's apartment. You look at the floor, the walls, then go into the children's room, then out to the kitchen, and all of this gets into the painting. It's a kind of confusion — you confuse the viewer.

You have this amazing skill. You need that skill as a painter, and I don't have it. You can paint anything — any random, stupid thing—and turn it into a masterpiece. You can move through this imaginary apartment, where you see teddy bears, serious books, a fireplace, or even the garden, and you pull all these things together. You keep going, and somehow, it works.

For me, every painting of yours feels like a moving camera capturing things we don't normally put together. We see these things separately in life, but in your paintings, they come together, creating this sense of confusion. That's what you do—you have this incredible ability to paint the absurd. That's the difference between your work and mine. I can't do that. I don't have the skill, so I focus on making something very concentrated.

But this camera idea—it's something I love about your work. Especially these two paintings with the snowmen.

Wang

I can't focus solely on the relationships between people. I jump a lot. But I see objects and human beings as interconnected — sometimes through emotional connections, and other times through literary associations. There are many layers of connection between them.

What I want to express is actually the same as Apostolos, but I can't articulate it the way he does, which I really admire. Perhaps it's because the shifts in my geographical environment have been so significant that my expression becomes quite fragmented. I believe this kind of geographical movement has an impact on one's mental state. It impacts both my imagination and the way I express myself. In my paintings, I find myself constantly jumping — perhaps jumping too much.

Georgiou

Fortunately, all these thoughts come automatically when you're working — you don't have to think about them. They just flow into your work naturally, like thoughts flying around. And when we finish this conversation, you forget everything you've said. Otherwise, you can't keep painting.

First of all, when it comes to the technical side, I know very few things to do—I don't have many tools, you know. And the truth is, I didn't want to become a painter. I wanted to be an actor. When I was young, my mother and stepfather used to fight a lot at home. I would make comedy to stop them from fighting and make them laugh.

Secondly, I wanted to talk, to express myself. But in order to do that, I realized that I had to make people talk for me. That's what my figures do — they talk for me. At the same time, there's the abstraction in painting, which for me is the core value of art. I combine these two things: abstraction and my need to talk. Through this combination, I hide behind my figures. They allow me to say things through my painting that I wouldn't dare to say directly to others.

About comedy — I think it's tied to guilt. I grew up with guilt, the kind that parents sometimes unintentionally

pass down. So, whenever I take myself too seriously, I instinctively do something to break that seriousness. There's always this "clown" that appears and destroys whatever seriousness I've built up. Even in life, when I'm physically very serious, I feel suffocated and have to destroy that image of myself. It's not ideological; it's just something I feel physically. I think this tendency shows up naturally in my paintings. Don't laugh so much, because you have to cry.

Duffy There's also always a bit of tragedy alongside that comedy.

Georgiou Life is a tragedy. I mean, it's about learning how to live with tragedy. There's a kind of knowledge in being able to stand it, to endure it.

Duffy Apostolos, you've mentioned that your paintings are failed representations. Could you tell us a little bit more about what that means?

Georgiou People hold onto values, but values fail, too. You can win a war, but in the end, you realize you're still a loser.



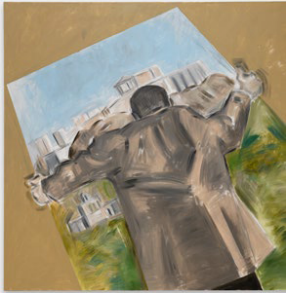
Apostolos Georgiou
Untitled
2018
Acrylic on canvas
130 × 110 cm
© Apostolos Georgiou
Courtesy of the artist
and gb agency, Paris
Photo Aurélien Mole

When you achieve success, there's always this moment where you think, "And so what?" It feels empty. You win a war, and "So what?" It's this constant overvaluing of things, and eventually, you realize they're not as important as you thought.

Wang To me, Apostolos, you've successfully captured that sense of failure.

I really like two of the paintings in your Aranya Art Center show. One is of a man holding a fish out of his vehicle, and the other is of a man holding a painting. For me, they're dangerous paintings.

Georgiou The man holding the painting—it relates to the concept of ancient Greek civilization. This is the Parthenon. It's as if a person today is trying to hold all of this immense cultural weight from the past. But you can't. You can't hold it.



Wang

Duffy

Apostolos Georgiou
Untitled
2022

Acrylic on canvas
170 × 170 cm

© Apostolos Georgiou
Courtesy of the artist
and gb agency, Paris
Photo Aurélien Mole

Georgiou

Yes, the painting is bigger than the man who is holding it! For me, I try to capture something that is absent. Maybe another kind of failure—it's something that cannot be painted directly.

That's an interesting philosophical question — can you depict what is not there? You can never directly represent absence. Ultimately, you can describe it, point to it, or outline it.

Yes, painting is about what you haven't painted. It's not just about the figures or the objects but the shade and space around them, the things left unsaid. What remains unpainted often gives meaning and value to what is painted. In the work of an artist, the true value lies in what you perceive yet isn't explicitly depicted. It's about maintaining that subtle distance.

When I see your paintings, Zhibo, I always think, "She knows how to paint." You really know how to paint the things that cannot be painted. And yet, your paintings are never boring — you escape all the time.

Duffy

Regarding your works, Apostolos, and the ambiguity in the scenes, we as viewers can endlessly act them out, right? There's this constant reinterpretation we can perform of what's being said between the figures — how they arrived at the situation being framed. And then Zhibo, I think your works also invite this never-ending visual excavation. What is the process you use to arrive at the image we see before us? Maybe, Apostolos, you could talk a bit about the mystery you set up for viewers in your scenes? And then Zhibo, perhaps you could share your approach to creating your paintings.



Apostolos Georgiou
Untitled
2019

Acrylic on canvas
230 × 230 cm

© Apostolos Georgiou
Courtesy of the artist
and gb agency, Paris
Photo Aurélien Mole

Georgiou

I think there are two goals. First, you create a kind of insecurity—a sense of "What's going on here? What's happening?" And second, you make them question, "Is he really so foolish as to paint this?" In both cases, it raises a question. Maybe the work is abstract or mysterious—or maybe it's so concrete that it feels absurd. Either way, they don't fully trust what they're seeing. And I don't want to be trusted. I want to play. It's essen-

tial to play. Not in the sense of being dishonest, but if you want to be an honest artist, you must lie. You can't just tell the truth—you circle around it, but you don't state it outright.

Duffy

Those are powerful contradictions. Zhibo, how do you, through your process, either obscure the truth or maybe reject it altogether?

For me, I always have these questions, like, why do museums exist? Why are certain objects chosen for museums while others are not? For example, why can't this everyday glass be in a museum, but a glass from the 19th century can? There are so many "whys."

WANG

I capture those questions for a moment and sketch something based on them—trying to figure out why these questions arise. From there, I can move to a new step, maybe. Like you, Apostolos, you're always thinking honestly about these questions, but you must also be selective about what you choose to focus on. You find the questions, write them down, and then they become part of the paintings. That's the process.

Duffy

Could you both share a bit about how you begin your paintings? Does it start with a specific idea, scene, or composition in mind? Or is it more intuitive, beginning with a general framework?

Wang

For example, I might have some sketches. In this one, there are two people here, standing under the screen, and the colors make them appear more like objects. I think that's the moment when human beings resemble objects more than they resemble humanity. And here is the supermoon behind.

The supermoon is a moment that transcends human cognition. In fact, human cognition is limited, and humans themselves are limited, but there are moments when these things intersect. It's hard to explain. However, I will sketch these moments down, starting with a rough draft. If I have any interesting ideas, I will note them down, but they are usually very rough drafts.



"Super Moon" (in progress) at Wang Zhibo's studio
2025
© Wang Zhibo
Courtesy of the artist

Sometimes an image inspires me, but other times, an idea comes first. For example, this image inspired me, and I think the objects in the painting can be called “ab-normal moments.” When a person is colored by the light of the screen, they no longer appear quite as human. The supermoon, on the other hand, is a very natural phenomenon, but for us, it might seem more like an abnormal moment. So, the relationship between objects and people strikes me as very interesting.

“Screen” refers to those huge screens. When a person stands in front of the screen, their face becomes blue, red, or some other color, and their normal skin tone disappears. In this era, people often define themselves by their skin color, such as which race their skin color belongs to. But in this case, which race does this person belong to? The issue of race no longer exists at this moment.

Duffy

Why does an image like that need to exist for you as an artist?

Georgiou

Because without an image, we’re not artists. I mean, you have to create images that exist. For me, it’s obvious — I should have stopped painting about 50 years ago, but I continue because, as a painter, I have to keep creating.



Wang

Yes, during the process of painting, the idea changes. From the very beginning, even from the sketch, it evolves. That’s what it means to be a painter — to capture those moments. And use all the tips that painting gives, like a drowning man grabs whatever he can.

Apostolos Georgiou
Untitled
2019
Acrylic on canvas
230 × 230 cm
© Apostolos Georgiou
Courtesy of the artist
and gb agency, Paris
Photo Aurélien Mole

Georgiou

And over the years that you’ve made paintings, you might be lucky to create something nice. Eventually, you’ll say, “Yes, this is it.” It starts with something very simple, but sometimes, you get a miracle. But what’s the difference, really? To become a painter, all you need is a piece of paper and a pencil. With those, you can create nothing, or you can create a masterpiece. It’s a kind of challenge.

Wang

Yes, sometimes a painter doesn’t even know when it

happens.

Georgiou

Yes, but these are things you never tell others. We say them to ourselves. We were talking about the composition earlier, about how things start. It comes from both sides: a story and a composition. You have many stories in your mind, and you want to find one that fits the composition you have in mind. You might want a composition that's more vertical or horizontal, or one that's diagonal. You see, a painting is like a map. You divide it into colors and surfaces, cutting it this way or that. For example, if you want something diagonal, you might imagine someone traveling on a ship, and the floor isn't horizontal—it's moving, like the ship. So, the story and the composition come together. You try to find a story that fits with the composition you want to create.

Wang

It's like a chemical reaction. Sometimes even the texture on the painting leads me, giving me clues. Sometimes I use algorithms or 3D modeling. When these things appear on the canvas, they give me a sense of time — a different kind of feeling. It's a virtual feeling, but I need to grasp it, even though I don't know why.



Duffy

Do you think either of you make bad paintings? And I mean that in many senses of the word, do you deliberately create something that could be considered a bad painting? Is that a discourse you're interested in? We've talked about failure, the absurd, and comedy. I'm also wondering about "the bad."

Georgiou

Bad art?

Duffy

Not necessarily bad art. A bad painting can still be great art.

Georgiou

Bad painting is beautiful. I don't think we make bad paintings on purpose. We don't want to make bad paintings because there are certain criteria and aesthetics that continue to cycle. If you look at *The Godfather* by Coppola, for example, it's filled with violence, yet it's a masterpiece. If you tried to do that yourself, you become a monster, but on the screen, it's a masterpiece —

Wang Zhibo
Unmanned 5
2023
Oil and acrylic
on canvas
150 × 115 cm
© Wang Zhibo
Courtesy of the artist
and Kiang Malingue
Photography Andrea
Rossetti

poetic and magical. In badness, there's even more space than in beauty. The more you go deeper into bad, the deeper you go into beauty.

Duffy I'm thinking of artists like Neil Jenny, Robert Nava, or Katherine Bradford — artists in the American context who engage with this topic.

Wang I really like this question. And I love Apostolos's answer! Maybe attempting something "bad" represents a kind of courage for me.

Georgiou I think bad has more of a future. Once something becomes beautiful, you have to push it further to make it bad again. You have to keep digging deeper and deeper.

Zhibo, will you manage to work after the discussion today, or do you need to take a walk afterwards?

Wang I'll go back to work, I guess, there's still some daylight left.

Duffy What are your routines as artists? Do you wake up, make coffee, go to the studio, and clock in nine-to-five every day? Or do you have a different process or behavior that leads you to work in the studio?

Wang At the moment, I'm going through a transitional phase. I really love reading, though it's difficult for me to read in English. I'm trying, but it's challenging to enter a language. I enjoy reading because it offers me new experiences. As for my daily routine, I usually start around 10 a.m. at the studio, and if I'm lucky, I can work until 8 p.m. However, I need to take care of my daughter at 4 or 5 p.m. She's only 10 years old, so I need to spend a lot of time with her.

Georgiou I have a very set routine and enjoy it. I start in the morning, and I stay in my studio, which is also my home. The studio is in the basement, and my apartment is upstairs. My studio is under the sea surface. I have artificial lighting — it's very bad lighting, actually, but I've gotten used to it. I don't change it because if I had good lighting,

I think I'd become a better painter, and I don't want to do that. If I used good lighting, I'd think everything I do is perfect, and that's not helpful. So I stick with these horrible LED lights, though I'm used to them by now.

Wang

I'm also in a basement. In Berlin, by 3 PM, it's already dark, and there's no daylight. I really hope I can visit your studio one day.

Georgiou

If you come, you can stay at my place. I have a small apartment next to mine that's available for you to use whenever you want. After we finish this conversation, I'm going to take a walk by the sea. I walk twice a day, once in the morning and again in the afternoon. I'm not going to paint today.



Photography:
Boris Kirpotin

Apostolos Georgiou

Apostolos Georgiou's work explores themes of man's existence by focusing on the human condition. While making reference to Greece in the 1950s, film, the traditions of Greek painting, and even theatrical scenery, Georgiou highlights profound feelings of alienation, solitude, and humor. While human beings are the main subject of the work, they are portrayed as anonymous figures without any individual characteristics. A desolate alter ego is revealed, portrayed with irony and distance yet also with tenderness and empathy.

Apostolos Georgiou was born in 1952 in Thessaloniki and he lives and works in Athens and Skopelos. Georgiou participated in Documenta 14 in 2017 and his works are in the collection of leading international institutions and museums such as EMST, National Museum of Contemporary Art, Athens and Centre Pompidou, Paris. Solo exhibitions include: Apostolos Georgiou, Aranya Art Center, Qinhuangdao (2023); Hello Dog, Hello Sir!, Passerelle, Centre d'Art Contemporain, Brest (2020); One by One, Rodeo Piraeus, Athens (2020); Nothing Is Old Because We Are Too Young, gb agency, Paris (2019); Situations, 40-year retrospective, (curated by Barry Schwabsky), Frank F. Yang Art and Education Foundation, Shenzhen (2018); Tightrope Walk: Painted Images after Abstraction, (curated by Barry Schwabsky), White Cube, London (2015); Apostolos Georgiou, Macedonian Museum of Contemporary Art, Thessaloniki (2012); Apostolos Georgiou, Paintings, EMST, National Museum of Contemporary Art, Athens (2011), etc.



Wang Zhibo

Born in 1981 in Zhejiang Province, China, Wang Zhibo lives and works between Hangzhou and Berlin.

Her selected solo exhibitions include: Standing Wave, Armory Show, New York (2013); There is a Place with Four Suns in the Sky – Red, White, Blue and Yellow, Edouard Malingue Gallery, Hong Kong (2016); He No Longer Looks Human, Edouard Malingue Gallery, Shanghai (2018); Actor: Talking, Imitating, Teasing and Singing, Gallery Weekend Beijing (2021); Wang Zhibo, Aranya Art Center, Qinhuangdao (2024); and Porous, Christian Andersen Gallery, Copenhagen (2025).

Her works have also been exhibited at Penrith Regional Gallery, Sydney (2014); Villa Vassilieff, Paris (2017); Times Museum, Guangzhou (2017); Times Art Center, Berlin (2019); Schloss Oberdiessbach, Bern (2021); Rolando Anselmi Gallery, Rome (2021); Stevenson Gallery, Amsterdam (2023); Tanya Leighton Gallery, Berlin (2023); UCCA Edge, Shanghai (2023); Tao Art Space, Taipei (2024); and ChertLüdde Gallery, Berlin (2024).



Owen Duffy

Owen Duffy is an art historian, curator, and writer based in Houston. He is the Nancy C. Allen Curator and Director of Exhibitions at Asia Society Texas. His most recent curatorial project is Hung Hsien: Between Worlds, the first retrospective of the pioneering modern ink painter. In 2024, he curated (along with Susan L. Beningson) Xu Bing: Word Alchemy, the largest survey of Xu Bing's use of words and language in his art to date. He earned his PhD in art history from Virginia Commonwealth University, and has published his writing with Momus, e-flux Education, Artforum, and ArtReview, among other outlets.

Photo by
Lora Gettelfinger