Yan Bingqing: The Universal Man, the Universal Experience
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Yan Bingqing's latest paintings reveal two distinct shifts. First, the selection and application of color have become more somber. Second, the visual information is no longer anchored in specific settings; instead, the human figure becomes the sole subject. Both shifts reveal a tendency of refinement in Yan Bingqing's painting practice. The former approach to color can be viewed as the artist's internal choice of presenting a personal state of mind or emotion. The latter represents a diminishing of specific and concrete details. External elements are stripped away, leaving only the body, expression, and posture through which viewers can obtain information. By employing seemingly discordant methods, such as low saturation and unpleasant hues, murky brushstrokes that emphasize texture, matte surfaces, and elongated limbs, Yan Bingqing sheds the realism and attached meanings in his earlier works. Instead, he turns to a sharper focus on allowing emotions to naturally spill over at the perceptual level. These works reveal a strong sense of confinement and a melancholic temperament.

In Yan Bingqing's early paintings, the environment and figures together form the scenes within the frame. The characters are often situated in specific spaces, such as streets, swimming pools, and classrooms, which make their social identities or roles clearly recognizable. While the environment is depicted with three-dimensional, perspectival spatial relationships, the figures and their interactions are often surreal, appearing with exaggerated proportions and postures. However, because the external environments, narrative content, and social identities are so explicitly defined, the works from this period often carried a realistic criticality. In particular, through works featuring themes such as dormitories, parks, voyeurism in public restrooms, Young Pioneers, and delinquent youths, his painting practice extends the lineage of Socialist Realism. This is achieved by employing a sarcastic approach to China's social reality and mobilizing collective memory.

Since 2016, Yan Bingqing has gradually reduced the environmental elements in his paintings, compressing the pictorial space. Details about specific events have been gradually stripped away, often leaving only mountains, skies, and horizons as the backdrop. There is no longer a specific time, place, or narrative arc. Instead, there are simply naked figures against an empty background. These paintings do not presuppose a fixed meaning. Rather, they present a complex blend of emotions that cannot be simplified as "happy" or "unhappy", nor reduced to irony or resignation. The colors have deepened, the sheen has vanished, and the background has emptied, allowing human postures to occupy viewers' full attention with increasing clarity. Humans have become the sole subjects on the canvases, conveying emotion through body language rather than revealing identity through clothing. During this stage, the figural forms in Yan Bingqing's paintings began to take shape. Bodies are deliberately elongated but not distorted. These slender figures seem to leap from the ground and float against the sky. Facial expressions reveal joy and contemplation in subtle, restrained ways.

In his works from the past two years, instead of being a burden, space serves to affirm emotion. Remnants of abandoned spaces can be seen on the canvas: horizons that were once present but later erased into undulating curves and objects that were painted over. All that remains is a solitary individual, along with the entirety of their emotions. While this shift aligns with Surrealism in terms of figural form and visual expression, I prefer to recognize Yan Bingqing's pictorial language with Existentialistic core. He adheres to a certain logic of classical art history, gradually establishing the "state of being" as his primary subject. These figures are no longer defined by singular roles or social distinctions. Rather, they represent a more universal humanity, stripped of the costumes of performed responsibilities.

In this series of works, we encounter two pieces with a distinct "classical style": one depicts a man kneeling on both knees, his hands are bound behind his back, his body is bundled up with light strips (*Fairy Lights*, 2025, tempera on wood, 90 × 60 cm); the other depicts a swan's neck encircling the head, wings enveloping the figure, and hair wrapped around the hands (*Choked*, 2025, tempera on wood, 60 × 60 cm). The forms and elements in these two works inevitably evoke images from many classic paintings. Here, we can discern Yan Bingqing's attitude towards the "classical": he does not view it as a constraint to be deliberately avoided, but rather to mobilize universal visual experiences—

not as an academic reference, but as an emphasis on intuitive resonance. It is precisely this exploration of a shared consensus of sensory experience that serves as a pathway for us to understand Yan Bingqing's painting.

Starting from this point, we find that these works all seem to reveal emotional states through the body: a bound figure who, though seemingly under control, has a relaxed body and a calm expression(*Fairy Lights*, 2025); a boy resting his head on a white pillow with his arm bent, his expression indifferent while two small birds peck at each other atop his head (*Chirping*, 2025, tempera on wood, 50 × 60 cm); a man and a woman lying on their sides on a bed in similar postures, their eyes not meeting each other's but gazing upwards (*Mirror*, 2026, tempera on wood, 53 × 45 cm); a man and a woman, each laughing while holding their own bodies on two separate canvases (*Giggle*, 2025, tempera on wood, 2× 40 × 30 cm); a man and a woman depicted in half-length portraits, one in front of the other (*Relationship I*, 2026, tempera on wood, 30 × 40 cm); and a man and a woman with their bodies open towards each other, touching but not tightly embracing (*Cuddling*, 2026, tempera on wood, 105 × 85 cm). For Yan Bingqing, what he paints is his own emotion. He refuses to further explain where these emotions originate, no matter the events or time period. As they are derived from concrete life, they no longer point to a specific source.

These works feature individual, universal figures that serve as recurring motifs of loneliness, isolation, intimacy, and desire. Consider the curled-up figure, for example. The body is tense, yet the expression does not appear overly painful. In the upper right corner of the canvas, red and green halos float against a gray-green background, resembling a hallucination (*Melancholy*, 2025, tempera on wood, 80 × 60 cm). In another piece, the thin wires wrapped around the body appear to be a bondage of desire but are in fact shimmering fairy lights gently encircling the figure—"You are simply bound by something shiny" (*Fairy Lights*, 2025). The images that best represent his works are those of adolescents whose bodies are not fully developed with ambiguous sexual characteristics. These figures appear as insomniacs on pillows (*Chirping*, 2025), or as naked youths running and "blooming like flowers" (*Indulge*, 2026, tempera on wood, 100 × 80 cm). These figures do not resemble the robust physiques of classical sculpture or the distorted torsos of Expressionism. Instead, they exist in a contradictory, in-between state. They embody the innocence and fragility of children, yet they carry emotions that do not belong to childhood: restlessness, insomnia, and a sense of misplaced vexation.

Yan Bingqing has a natural preference for this "neutral" state. The figures in his paintings rarely engage in strong gender performance, neither appearing deliberately masculine nor feminine. Even when their gender is identifiable, it does not convey sexual desire. The body is ordinary and exists in a primal state. It can be elongated and extended or curled up and held tightly. Through unassuming, nondirectional postures, the body conveys unconscious freedom and pure energy. It is worth noting that this bodily image does not devolve into a beautiful tribute to "youth", nor does it become a realistic allegory of nostalgia or growing up. Instead, it is closer to the here and now—a body that is both sincere and restless. What he attempts to capture is the blurred line between desire and innocence.

In Yan Bingqing's paintings, you can sense the accumulation of his genuine emotions over time. However, you would not find definitive answers about emotions, desire, or meaning within the canvas. What you see is simply a painter placing himself on the canvas and then stepping back. He leaves the painting with an empty background and unclothed figures. You might feel curiosity, but an answer is not necessarily to be found.