


# FIGURE



*conversation with* **AMANDA BA**  
**OCTOBER 2021**

**N° 48**





*A Night Away (Yearning)*, oil on canvas, 170 × 190 cm, 2021.

**MARCO GALVAN** *in conversation with*  
**AMANDA BA**

**MG**

I seem to understand that you are a self-taught painter. How did you approach art?

**AB**

Generally, I would say I'm primarily a painter, meaning that painting is the medium through which I can most clearly express my ideas. It has now become a familiar practice to me.

As for my video/performance work, I made them all while I was in China and I would like to continue making them. The current situation is quite unfortunate because I have to wait until I can go back to China to start working on videos again. I don't feel like I want to make films anywhere else but there at the moment. All of what I've done is location based and, in order to be inspired, I need to find a place that is both visually interesting and has some historical integrity, as well as some socio-political significance.





*Caring for the Upbringing of Young Adults Holds Up Tomorrow's Sun,*  
oil on canvas, 120 × 165 cm, 2018.



Basically, my video making process consists in exploring, taking notes of certain spaces that would be interesting, going back and starting to do something there.

**MG**

**AB**

And how did you approach painting in the beginning?

In the beginning, it was in high school. I've always drawn since I was a kid, since around four. During the years I've been building up and amassing technical skills, so I fundamentally knew how to draw figures and I had basic knowledge of colour composition. I went to a normal suburban high school and I had this one art teacher who was really kind and inspiring.

Up until I was 16, I had tried every other medium besides oil painting, so it became my main focus for the next few years.

My high school teacher also encouraged me to enter local art competitions. The fact that I would do well gave me and my family enough validation to pursue this path in college.

I think I have always made art with some sort of goal in mind... When I was younger it was with the goal of mastering and conquering different mediums in order to be able to make any image that I wanted. I was running through every medium like graphite, ink, watercolour, gouache, acrylic. I went through all of them in order to have that sort of skill set.

I have this idea, which I think many artists share: when you're younger you don't care too much about museums or galleries; when you're younger you spend a lot of time online looking at Tumblr, Instagram, looking at those pop culture images, such as a Disney Princess with tattoos on her. What I mean to say by this is that unless you come from a background where people have exposed you to galleries and museums, your interest is not in art history but

in whatever you find in your subculture and sub-cultural corners of the internet.

When I started oil painting, I was still looking at DeviantArt, Tumblr, Pinterest. While developing my practice I understood that painting had this much, much longer history. So my earliest influences were all really classic and kind of basic — Lucian Freud, Vincent Van Gogh, Alice Neel, John Singer Sargent... Generally, in the beginning, I was really attracted to other painters who painted people.

**MG**

Talking about influences, I was looking at this one painting you made in 2018, *Caring for the Upbringing of Young Adults Holds Up Tomorrow's Sun*, which reminded me of Liu Wei's cynical realism. Is there any sort of post-ironic take on a realist perspective regarding the transition that Chinese society has gone through?

**AB**

Yes, I think definitely. Zeng Fanzhi is another Chinese painter that I find particularly inspiring who usually depicts flashy figures with mask-like faces. I believe that some of his paintings were very influential for that painting that I did. I made *Caring for the Upbringing of Young Adults Holds Up Tomorrow's Sun* after I went to China, and I remember seeing all these men playing cards in my apartment complex, which is the main subject of that painting.

In relation to cynical realism, I would say that this painting definitely shares some of that sentiment, as it is essentially taking a critical eye to the Chinese rapid development and how it has remoulded the fabric of the country in the last 30 years. It's like two different Chinas existed at the same time, Old China and New China, and I think of my grandparent's generation as witness to their world constantly shifting during their lifetime as they went through post-cultural-revolution development.





*Dinner time*, oil on canvas, 230 × 300 cm, 2020.

MG

Have you had the occasion to live for a certain period of your life with your grandparents?

AB

Yes, I was raised by them when I was younger between one and five years old. I didn't spend any time with my own parents as they were in America and I used to see them once a year. I have a lot of nostalgia and empathy for people of that generation—that's my main experience in China, hanging out with my grandparents. That's the age group that I've been exposed to during my time there.

MG

This sentiment of nostalgia seems to translate in your work. *Dinner Time* (2020) puts together a series of elements that seem to evoke a distant memory. I'm particularly thinking of the red ocean, the Chinese objects in the house as well as the meal itself. Is there an intention to revisit the past? Are your paintings usually conveying these sorts of narratives?

AB

Let's take the two paintings we've just mentioned as examples. I am very averse to beauty. I don't like to paint beautiful things and I tend to not really enjoy other paintings that portray objective beauty. Even though it could be just a stylistic choice for some artists, mainstream/shallow beauty is a cheap and easy way to get someone to enjoy a painting.

I almost don't want people to be able to enjoy my painting so easily—I want to pull them in, in a way where they have to work to enjoy it. When I'm composing things I think a lot about every single element I put into the painting. Not necessarily because I need the audience to understand every detail of every symbol that I put in, but it's more of a way to justify to myself some sort of genuine intent that I'm putting into the painting.

With *Caring for the Upbringing of Young Adults Holds Up Tomorrow's Sun*, I gave this





*Self Portrait with Red Dogs*, oil on canvas, 150 × 120 cm, 2019.



really, really long title which comes from a banner that is present on the wall in the back of the photographic reference for the painting—it's a government propaganda slogan. Combined with the uncertainty of where Chinese society is going, I thought it was a poignant reference and symbol to have there.

When I started to draft *Dinner Time*, which was a really, really difficult painting to compose, I worked on that painting — not continuously — for three or four months. It was a really challenging painting because of its size, and because it felt like working on two paintings in one because of the dividing wall. The light and the transition from one room to another was something that I dedicated a lot of time to. I also inserted a mix of plastic stools which are very common in China, and actual wooden dining chairs—I thought of it as a sort of coexistence of Eastern and Western elements that could indicate that the scene could both be happening in China or in the United States. Generally speaking, these two paintings are good examples of how the elements I put into paintings are for good reason.

**MG**

This feeling of coexistence and *in-between-ness*, where you play a lot with what is real and what is imagined, is a duality that seems to characterise your feelings towards your life in China. Your 2019 solo show “Homecoming” in Hefei, China, exhibits ten paintings and three performance video works, one of which sees you symbolically reconstruct your grandmother’s home to then deconstruct it right after, leaving no trace. How did you conceive this exhibition?

**AB**

The whole process behind that exhibition was crazy, sometimes I think about it more like a huge event rather than a solo show. It was at the Hefei local museum Lai Shaoqi. The city where I'm from





*Full Table*, oil on canvas, 160 × 260 cm, 2019.





*Young Grass*, oil on canvas, 160 × 280 cm, 2019.



is not particularly contemporary art-centric. There are no galleries and the museums there besides ones centering around traditional and local art. The museum where “Homecoming” took place has an exhibition space, but the larger museum is dedicated to an artist called Lai Shaoqi, a Chinese ink painter. He did calligraphy and focused on scenes from the Cultural Revolution.

At first, I was speaking with my dad’s friends about this idea to have a show in China and work on some paintings over there. After that, I was having dinner with some people and I got to talk about it with a lady who is in the city’s Arts Council. She really pushed for the exhibition to happen, introducing me and this project to the Arts Council, the Cultural Council, and then the International Council. They all were very excited about the idea, so it came out to be publicised as “the American-born Chinese girl who returns to her roots to make paintings about China”, acquiring a very nationalistic overtone. It was also one of the only times where my grandparents could ever see what I was doing. They’re too old to travel to America now. The exhibition itself felt kind of like a birthday.

I had to personally deal with everything, from writing the English/Chinese press release to deciding where to put the works and selling my own works. The local news came and I gave a speech during the opening ceremony... Everyone was giving me flowers! It was so unusual that it almost felt like a performance event. Weirdly, I felt as if the whole spotlight ended up being pointed towards my story rather than my paintings.

In the end it was really fun, but it wasn’t the conditions under which I wanted to be operating for a solo show. It felt very monitored. I had this sense that I couldn’t paint anything too







extreme or shocking or derogatory towards the Chinese government.

**MG**

Your most recent paintings show an extensive use of red and green, two colours that seem to stress the coexistence of two dimensions, the real and the fictional, as neon-green is often associated with sci-fi. Is there a psychology of colour associated with this specific palette? Does red have a political meaning?

**AB**

Yes, by using red I feel like it's quite hard to avoid a political meaning. Also, I always welcome a political interpretation of my work. So then red becomes immediately associated with communism. Although, funnily enough, the red that I use is the most expensive colour I own. It's called cadmium red and when it's in my paintings and you see it at its brightest, that's when it's straight out of the tube. I'm really drawn to that colour, and I think that figures painted in that colour are extremely powerful. In real life, there would be no justification for things and figures to be red like that. If you think about it, figures being green, or blue, or purple, indicates a sort of nighttime scene; but when it comes to red it is a difficult colour to justify or to link it to a situation or real-life scenario. For this reason, I think it makes the figures stand out in a very intense way. As for the green, it's complimentary to red and for me, to make those two colours work well together in a painting without making it look too Christmas-themed is a sort of colour theory challenge. Then, as you said, I like having that psychoactive green, because it indicates that the painting is representing an environment that is not a real or realistic space.

**MG**

Dogs have increasingly become a prevalent presence in your paintings, being sort of partners in crime with the women they're represented with. You said you got your inspiration from Donna J. Haraway's book "The





狗女人放狗屁 / *Dog Woman Releasing Dog Fart* / *The Bitch is Non-sense*,  
oil on canvas, 100 × 100 cm, 2021.





*My Beast, All Mine*, oil on canvas, 100 × 100 cm, 2021.



Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness”. Is the dog carrying the same characteristics of the dog in the Chinese zodiac, which is guardian and protector?

**AB** It has less of a connection to the Chinese zodiac animals. Also, I was born in 1998 so I'm a tiger. So I think if I painted something in relation to the zodiac, that would be tigers.

**MG** ...which actually appears in *Woman Pinning Tiger to the Ground* or in *Woman! Tiger! Triptych*...

**AB** Oh yes, and it will probably appear again. But as far as dogs are concerned, currently there are two types of dogs that I've been painting: one is the American Bulldog dog, and if I use that breed in my work, I'm painting something in relation to Haraway's critical theory that I've read. The other dog that I would paint is my actual dog, that I've used in my most recent painting of my partner, *A Night Away (Yearning)*. These two types of dogs have two different connotations in my work: if I paint my dog or a dog that resembles it — like a beagle or a hound-looking dog — in that case there's a direct reference to an episode of my life; when I use the pit-bull or the American Bulldog, I'm using it to describe something that goes beyond my personal experience and I'm using it to describe a theoretical project.

**MG** Other than the dog, some older works include animals such as tigers, roosters, pigs, cows. Sometimes, because of the expression they're pictured with, they seem to be a ferocious interaction with the human, like in *Sublime Reconciliation*, *I Miss My Dog* or *Four Canines*. What type of relationship underlies the figures you paint?

**AB** I always try to avoid making the animals not like pets or putting them in a hierarchical position that feels lower than the humans. My intention is to make the animal as much of a subject as the person, hence why the size of the dogs corres-



*Woman Pinning Tiger to The Ground*, oil on cardboard, 60 × 90 cm, 2018.





*Lover: She is Reading*, oil on canvas, 213 × 168 cm, 2021.





*Sublime Reconciliation*, oil on canvas, 100 × 130 cm, 2021.



ponds to the humans'. As you spotted, there's always a level of tension between the figures, but I never want it to be clear if one is dominating over the other.

Going back to what I was saying earlier, if I paint my pet dog, it would look a lot more like a pet: smaller in size and doing what a pet dog would do. When I'm painting other dogs, or animals, in more fantastical scenarios, they are almost operating on a mythological level. If you think about Hercules fighting the boar or the lion, similarly in my paintings these figures are almost like adversaries. They're very worthy and intelligent adversaries. Sometimes they can be friends or lovers. The interaction between them is more equal and nuanced rather than just a relationship of ownership. All of this goes back to the books that I read and inspired me, like the one by Donna Haraway where she deconstructs a human-centric hierarchy by analysing our relationship with dogs.

From my point of view, relationships with animals can have a queer component actually, for a number of reasons. Like one example being how furies, which are people who have an interest in anthropomorphic animals, are often queer people, and they tend to be marginalised; but also how queer people who aren't able to have children often adopt a lot of animals. It's interesting how our kinship and our intimacy with animals is based on a completely different language, which is mostly based on touching and feeling. We can't have a conversation with them — we don't exchange facial expressions.

What I got out of the two books that I get inspired from is an attempt to deconstruct a human-centric scale of worthiness. If you were to treat all things in the same way, both animate and inanimate, this perspective could offer future







alternatives in which the capability to deconstruct other hierarchical institutions, like capitalism, becomes more concrete. It can also address pressing issues like climate refugees of the future that are a consequence of our disrespect and dominance over inanimate ecological resources — thinking costly and neocolonial mineral extraction. I just think that even if we're still at the frontier of this sector of critical theory, which is being written right now, there are a lot of possibilities as it is a very rich field to explore, and on my side I'm exploring it through my paintings.

**MG**

In relation to this annihilation or hierarchies that you try to operate, *Running on All Fours Towards the Future* is a pretty eloquent title for one of your paintings that depicts a woman and a dog running together in the same position. Is the “future” a reference to the Asian diasporic identity?

**AB**

Yes, I mean it's related in that sense to a current American moment of politics, contingent on things like prison abolition, dividing the police, and so on and so forth. I think when I say “the future” — and if you're asking me about Asian diaspora — it's more about me choosing to align myself alongside other POC people, who have fought for a specific vision of the future that I personally share. So it's hard for me to generalise and I cannot say that that's the vision of the future that every single Asian-American wants to see.

**MG**

Earlier, you were telling me how every element in your paintings is there for a specific reason. In *Suburban Giantess* a woman is holding an ice lolly that she shares with a pit-bull in *American Girl*, *American Bully*, *American Bomb*. Is there a particular meaning behind this ice lolly?

**AB**

Yes, all of the elements have a personal significance. In the case of the popsicle, I thought it was a fun thing to play with as the ice lolly is called a Bomb Pop, and to me it's a very Western repre-





*Suburban Giantess*, oil on canvas, 190 × 170 cm, 2021.



sentative symbol. I liked that it was red, white and blue, which recalls the colours of the U.S. flag, and I also like its name Bomb Pop, maybe in relation to Independence Day fireworks... and it's just a snack for children!

I remember having it when I was a kid and I used to live in a cul de sac in the suburbs in Ohio. Cul de sacs in suburban neighborhoods are prized as they offer an additional sense of security—it's a very white upper middle class thing. The ice cream truck would come down and park there for a good 15 minutes and in effect, it was a private party for all of the kids to get ice cream. The background in *Suburban Giantess* is actually Google street view of my house in Ohio.

**MG**

Concerning the woman figure, do you have a model you get inspired by? Most of them seem to look alike, is it a form of auto-portraiture?

**AB**

It's basically myself, I'm my own most available model. It's only semi-autobiographical because I'm not labelling each one as a self-portrait. I think I'm the best figure I could use to represent what I want to convey in my paintings. It's a common thing for other POC painters—wanting to see people like us represented. It's not just a self-portrait, it goes beyond that. Our likeness becomes representative of a wider community of people like us. It's a bit harder for me to use someone else as a subject, because I would want to respect their likeness by creating a portrait, whereas sometimes the characters in my paintings operate as part of a larger visual project, and in that case it makes much more sense for me to just use myself. I am perfectly comfortable objectifying myself.

**MG**

In paintings like *A Night Away*, *Bitch and Bull*, and *CHINK*, I can spot some voyeuristic and grotesque elements, both of which are traits that used to be averted





**CHINK**, oil on canvas, 60 × 40 cm, 2021.





*Bitch and Bull*, oil on canvas, 100 × 100 cm, 2021.

for a long time in history, especially in China. Do you think you're trying to challenge this feeling of aversion?

**AB**

This goes back to me hating beautiful things. I don't want to paint beautiful things and when I paint naked figures I never want to worry about the male gaze. I'm bored of talking about the male gaze. I enjoy the challenge of painting figures without sexualising them and not adhering to typical standards of beauty. This doesn't mean that I'm trying to make them look disgusting though. I'm naturally averse to representing women with a standardised idea of beauty—it could be long eyelashes in Western culture, or, in Chinese culture, having double eyelids, small hands and very slim feet. I enjoy making figures that the wider public could find a little bit difficult to look at.

**MG**

So do you aim to unsettle and perturb the viewer with your paintings? Domestic spaces and familiarity get altered by the colour but also the size of figures, highlighting once again how fragile the perception of the real and imaginary world is...

**AB**

Yes, definitely. I have a very strong stomach for gore and I have some dark fascination with it. So from my perspective my paintings don't feel edgy at all but I can understand that for some people that could be the case. When I paint, it doesn't feel crazy for me to look at genitalia, or blood, or a muscular body. To be honest, I don't think that I'm being that shocking, but I absolutely understand that my tastes are different. It would be very different if I was a normie white girl painting what I paint. In my case, it's literally who I am, and I find it funny and interesting when people share their perspective on my paintings.





*Last Night I Crept Into a Cow*, oil on canvas, 130 × 180 cm, 2020.





*Four Canines*, oil on canvas, 175 × 180 cm, 2020.



Amanda Ba, Figure Figure 2021  
Courtesy of the artist.

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