

# CULT

aimee friberg exhibitions

ART | 27 JUN 2021 | BY [HARRIET LLOYD-SMITH](#)

## Masako Miki's shapeshifting spirits draw on Japanese folklore

In San Francisco, Osaka-born artist Masako Miki explores human identity, transformation and the Japanese Shinto concept in a new series of playful candy-coloured bronze sculptures



Portrait of artist Masako Miki by Andrew Payter. *Courtesy of CULT Aimee Friberg Exhibitions*

'New Mythologies', is a new solo exhibition of bronze sculptures, watercolour paintings and felt sculptures by Japanese artist Masako Miki. The San Francisco show is on view at CULT Aimee Friberg Exhibitions' new location within Yves Behar's global design firm Fuseproject.

These hyper-polished bronzes in explosive pop colours and playful motifs continue Miki's exploration of the Shinto concept of the Tsukumogami yōkai – shape-shifting spirits that occupy household objects. In this folklore, inanimate objects can become sentient beings.



Masako Miki, left: *Ichiren-Bozu (Animated prayer beads)*, 2021; centre: *Kuchisake - Onnna (Mouth tear woman)*, 2021, right: *Nyoijizai (Animated back-scratcher)*, 2021, all painted bronze. Courtesy of the artist and CULT Aimee Friberg Exhibitions

Miki is best known for her anthropomorphic *yōkai* sculptures made on a human scale from brightly coloured felt wool. For these new works, in collaboration with Artworks Foundry in Berkeley, the artist tackled bronze casting and pushed the medium to its limits.

‘Bronze sculptures have a beautiful presence with a patina finish that offers curvilinear movement in my work. I have combined both patina and very subtle layers of paint to create flickering optical illusions of colour, which emphasize movement and highlight the shape of form,’ says Miki.

Miki has put a modern twist on the age-old process by densely layering opalescent car paint to create silky, frictionless surfaces. The results are easy on the eye, but it takes work to get under their skin.



Left: *Connecting Shapeshifter*, 2021; right: *Contemplating Chestnut Shapeshifter*, both cast bronze with automobile paint and urethane. Photography: John Wilson White. Courtesy of the artist and CULT Aimee Friberg Exhibitions

The artist's spirits occupy liminal and fluid notions: secular and non-secular, animate and inanimate. They also explore the nuances of non-binary spaces: between gender, biracial identities and her own experience as a Japanese immigrant woman living on the intersection of two cultures.

In addition to the show, Miki recently released a series of her bronze yōkai spirits into the public realm. The outdoor art installation, titled *Holographic Entities Reminding of the Universe* was commissioned to inaugurate Uber Technologies' new campus in Mission Bay, San Francisco.

'My sculptures have been shape-shifting in materials from paper to felted wool and now, in innovating on the appearance of bronze with new form and materials for a contemporary audience. These evolutions are a natural process because the essence of the shapeshifters is fluidity.'



Installation view: Masako Miki, 'New Mythologies' at CULT Aimee Friberg Exhibitions. *Photography: Wyatt Hall, Impart Photography. Courtesy of CULT Aimee Friberg Exhibitions*



Masako Miki, *Ichiren-Bozu (Animated prayer beads)*, 2021, painted bronze. *Photography: John Wilson White. Courtesy of the artist and CULT Aimee Friberg Exhibitions*



Masako Miki, *Ichiren-Bozu* (Animated prayer beads), 2021, painted bronze. Photography: John Wilson White. Courtesy of the artist and CULT Aimee Friberg Exhibitions



Masako Miki, *Mint Nopperabō (Faceless ghost)*, 2021, cast bronze with automobile paint and urethane. Photography: John Wilson White. Courtesy of the artist and CULT Aimee Friberg Exhibitions



Masako Miki, left: *Animated Pine Tree*, 2021; middle: *Animated Hinoki Tree*, 2021; right: *Dango Mushi Ghost (Roly-Polly Insect Shapeshifter)*, 2021, all wool on EPS foam, walnut wood. Photography: John Wilson White. Courtesy of the artist and CULT Aimee Friberg Exhibitions



Installation view: Masako Miki, 'New Mythologies' at CULT Aimee Friberg Exhibitions. *Photography: Wyatt Hall, Impart Photography. Courtesy of CULT Aimee Friberg Exhibitions*

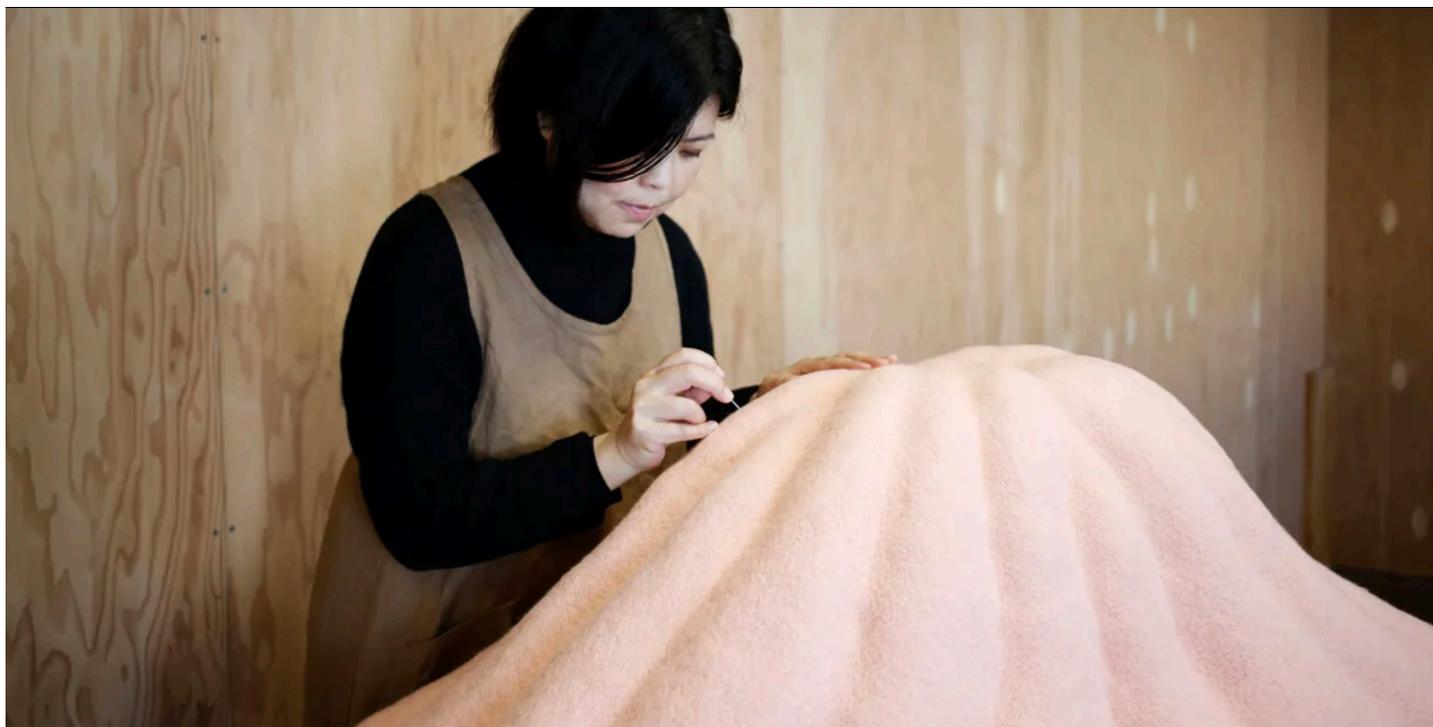


Installation view: Masako Miki, 'New Mythologies' at CULT Aimee Friberg Exhibitions. *Photography: Wyatt Hall, Impart Photography. Courtesy of CULT Aimee Friberg Exhibitions*

# ART PLUGGED™

## Discussing Public Art, Fluidity, and Shapeshifting with Masako Miki

Artist Interviews · Last updated: November 8, 2021



While the rest of us were hiding from the world in Lockdown, California based Japanese artist Masako Miki has been rather busy. She recently created a monumental installation of nine bronze sculptures for Uber's new headquarters in San Francisco, hosted a stunning solo show *New Mythologies* at CULT Aimee Friberg Exhibitions and is about to embark on a streetscape project. The collaboration between city departments, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Yerba Buena Community Benefit District, plans to turn 800 feet of Minna and Natoma Streets into an arts corridor. Her sketches for the street furniture draw from Filipino myths, creating simplified, three-dimensional forms based on boulders, the sea, sun, moon and stars.

Her work is characterised by anthropomorphous felt sculptures, detailed animal portraits, bulbous bronzes and fluid watercolours which collectively explore interconnectedness and a spirituality beyond binaries. Her work is joyful and deceptively complex, drawing on multifaceted and diverse mythologies such as the Shinto concept of *yōkai* (shapeshifters).

*“The Shapeshifter series started because I wanted to share my process of dealing with dilemmas and questions concerning my bicultural identity between Japan and the US.” -Misako Miki*

Her overall oeuvre carries a positive message, championing a fluid liminality that pushes beyond the binaries culturally enforced in western society, such as secular and non-secular, animate and inanimate. Her shapeshifting entities exist between dichotomies and remain irreducible, drawing on her own experience as a Japanese immigrant woman living at the intersection of two cultures. I caught up with her in the wake of the very successful *New Mythologies* solo show.

**Q: The past year, year and a half, has been a busy period for you, with multiple exhibitions and public art installations. Can you speak about your practice and life during the pandemic: keeping busy, making art, planning ahead?**

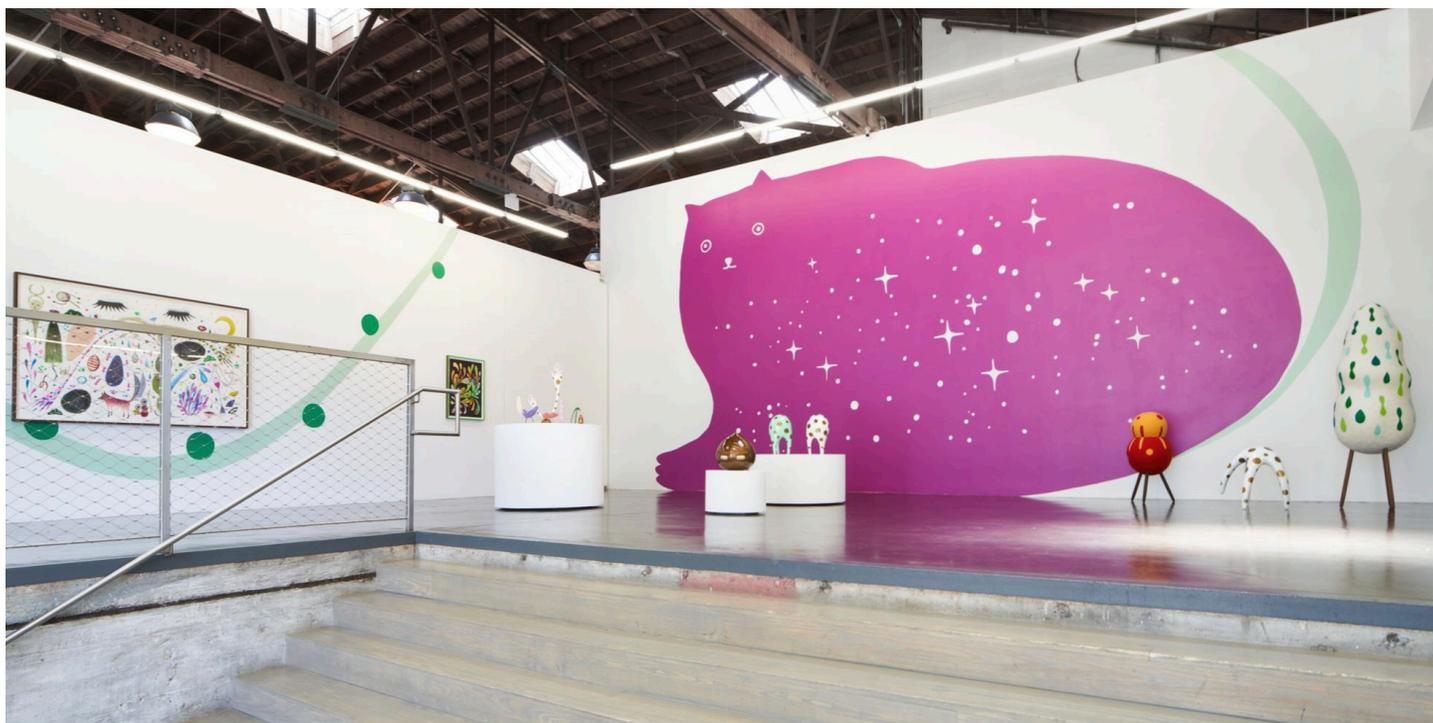
A: It was chaotic, but I feel very lucky. For my outdoor installation at Uber’s new headquarters in Mission Bay San Francisco, we had just started to pour the foundations for nine large bronze pieces the week the city shut down. For a long while there were just giant holes in the ground where the pieces would be. Fortunately, we were far enough along where the project had to continue. So, it was interesting coordinating remotely with so many project managers on such a complex project. And I was designing four large stainless-steel sculptures for a new coastal cultural park in Shenzhen, China. They were doing all the production with their foundries, so we were able to manage that job remotely.

I was also preparing two shows in San Francisco and New York, so it was serious studio time for me — which I think benefited from the isolation. I had plenty to focus on. There was one project that just disappeared. A 30-foot bronze sculpture. We were literally a day from signing the contract, and they cancelled. It was right when everything started shutting down in March 2020. I was very anxious around that time wondering what would happen with work and my art. But I feel very grateful for those opportunities. I have two public art projects coming up this year. I cannot wait to work on these projects.

**Q: Your current show, *New Mythologies* at CULT Aimee Friberg Exhibitions, expands an ongoing investigation of yours, one exploring your dual Japanese and American identities. Has the pandemic, the surge of AAPI hate in America, the many movements for social justice, affected the way you view this exhibition?**

A: Accepting and celebrating dual/multi-cultural identities as a self-hood is one of the important ideas I express in my work. I believe we must evolve and re-invent our identities as the old identifications don't apply to our non-binary society anymore. And our unjust social and racial inequalities are based on old mythologies and fictions that do not reflect the truth of ourselves. The last few years have been a challenging time for everyone, and, especially in the US, the real unresolved issues on race surfaced in the worst ways. As our social values need to be seriously re-examined now, it is my belief that we ask the right questions to redefine our collective identities.

Relating to my on-going research, the exhibition *New Mythologies* also reflected largely on life and death. I responded to tragedies caused by social injustice, racial discriminations, and the loss of my father last year. Witnessing my father's passing made me reflect deeply on life and death and realise everything is connected at the end. I think we all experienced grief as a collective last year. The exhibition shares my process of grieving and positive narratives of empathy and resiliency needed in our current society.



*New Mythologies* at CULT Aimee Friberg Exhibitions. Photo by Wyatt Hall, Impart Photography. Courtesy of CULT Aimee Friberg Exhibitions.

**Q: The exhibition also furthers your exploration into the Shinto concept of Tsukumogami yōkai. For those not familiar with yōkai, could you speak a little about this rich body of Japanese folklore, and, also, what drew you to/drew you back to these mythologies?**

A: The *Shapeshifter* series started because I wanted to share my process of dealing with dilemmas and questions concerning my bicultural identity between Japan and the US. I began to explore these questions by referencing Japanese traditions based on Shinto's animism. *Yōkai* (shapeshifters) appear in my ancestral mythologies and folklore.

The simple translation of *yōkai* would be something like ghosts, deities, or preternatural creatures. *Yōkai* appear as different forms like human, animal, natural object, and man-made objects. *Yōkai* are not personifications of the spirit or ideas, the spirit is usually experienced through the unique physical entity. It's a bit difficult to define who/what they are because they possess dual characteristics of being sacred and secular and animate and inanimate.

These characteristics resonated with me because they manifest the synthesis of dualities by accepting contrary characteristics. So, shapeshifters are inherently boundless in their nature as they continue shapeshifting throughout their existence. These hybrid beings can become more than one thing. Because of their unique characteristics, they do not conform to accepted identities; instead, they generate new identities. I felt these ancient *yōkai* characters offer interesting narratives that are relevant to our current society. In our non-binary society where multiculturalism, gender fluidity and biracial identity seem to be more the norm, our identities have become more complex than in the past.

Shapeshifters also bring non-human-centric perspectives of the universe. In Shinto animism, everything in the universe is sacred because spirituality exists within materiality. Nothing is considered insignificant; even a mundane object like a simple tool is imbued with spirit. The embodiment of this idea is a group of shapeshifters called *Tsukumogami yōkai* (shapeshifters of aged-discarded tools); They include a wide range of characters — from an animate iron pot to animated scriptures — and these objects have come alive after 100 years of existence. This is rooted with the Shinto idea of “*Yaoyorozu no kami*,” which literally translates to Eight Million Gods. It means there are a myriad of gods in this universe. The interpretation of the idea is that many deities exist because they are incomplete deities. They can only fulfil their duties as a collective.



**Q: While we have been talking about a number of your ongoing interests, you have started to assert yourself in a new medium: bronze. After largely working in felted wool, what was it like making the transition to working in bronze?**

A: I began to explore bronze when I worked on the Uber headquarters outdoor installation. Working with bronze has been such an interesting process, and I am learning so much about the medium. I am intrigued by its history and depth.

The process becomes collaborative with the foundry. My large felt pieces share a similar process: involving multiple elements of 3D scanning and CNC cutting to produce works. But working with bronze requires more parties to complete works. This necessitates clear communication and trust with the foundry. I feel so much possibility working with bronze in terms of the scale and placement. Bronze can be installed both indoors and outdoors and can scale up in monumental size by collaborating with master artisans and foundries. I am looking forward to working with this material in the upcoming years.

**Q: New Mythologies features work in bronze, felt sculpture, and watercolor, offering different textures, depth, color, and form. How do you understand and view these materials? Do you see yourself continuing to work in these different mediums?**

A: I respond to materials almost instinctively, then begin experimenting with small pieces. Exploring new materials makes sense because my work is about being able to shift and evolve by keeping idiosyncrasies.

I enjoy working with multiple materials because each one offers a unique identity. The authentic quality of each material helps to create strong narratives in the work. Watercolour's quality ties with the idea of fluidity. The transparency of the medium shows complexity by a wide range of colour mixing and layering processes. Needle felting with wool is generally considered a craft medium. I tend to gravitate more towards craft mediums than fine art mediums. I have made a lantern series with two materials — Japanese rice paper and starch glue.

I love the simplicity and accessibility of the materials. For felt sculpture, I just need a single needle and wool felt. The wool material invites viewers with its tactile textures and bright colours. I love the transformation of these simple materials when the work is completed. With bronze, I responded to the material because of the flexibility in casting process and final finish, which can be patina-ed or painted. Bronze is a durable material for the outdoors as well.

I continue to learn and practice using materials like bronze, felt and watercolours in my work. But also, I have the privilege to collaborate with other artisans, and I get excited to work with new materials. I have been exploring wood and possibly glass fibre reinforced concrete for my upcoming public art projects next year. Sometimes projects introduce me to these new materials.



**Q: You received a commission from Uber for an outdoor installation at their new campus in Mission Bay, San Francisco, which is just a short walk away from your CULT show. What was executing this large-scale, prominent project like for you?**

A: I was beyond excited for this opportunity. It was quite an involved project due to the scale. I created nine bronze sculptures from three feet to 20 feet high. I love how everything came out, and I appreciate everyone's enthusiasm to create something meaningful together for the community.

Collaboration with many talented professionals was one of the highlights from the project. I am grateful to everyone who made this installation possible. I also learned so much about working on large-scale installations. It is quite a process to complete this level of project. It takes a long time to plan, produce and install. .

Every step requires great attention, communication, and collaborative efforts. This project expanded my visual language and opened more opportunities for outdoor installations

**Q: This comes on the heels of a public art installation show you did in Shenzhen, China, in December 2020. Are you interested in working more in public, outdoor contexts?**

A: Yes, I am. I enjoy the process of collaboration in public art projects. Another reason I like to work in public, outdoor contexts is accessibility. Now that I have completed a few public art projects, I started to think about how we can experience more art every day.

Public art can expand the audience in a significant manner. When art lives openly in public, people can pass by on the way to their work or taking a walk with friends and families — art-work becomes part of their everyday life experience. I think this is an important idea in our communities. Art installations can be a reminder of current issues and create dialogues for new perspectives that are relevant to our lives.



*Plant Ghost (cream dots), 2020; Plant Ghost (green stripes), 2020 and Plant Ghost (mint green dots), 2020 in Holographic Entities Reminding of the Universe. Photo by Henrik Kam. Courtesy of the artist and CULT Aimee Friberg Exhibitions*

**Q: Finally, both of these shows find you moving away from the human scale to something larger than life. What has it been like extending beyond the intimate scale of so much of your previous work?**

A: Being able to change in both material and scale echoes the idea of fluidity. My art emphasizes the idea of accepting dualities and continues to expand the definition of unique identity. I enjoy seeing my work expanding from miniature size to life-size and monumental scale. It shows the process of growth and evolution. It is a different way of expressing ideas. Intimacy can be experienced with a smaller scale, whereas a viewer becomes a part of the installation in a large, monumental work. I will continue to work on both scales in the future. It is not about either/or — each scale offers a unique way of connecting with viewers.

I find it interesting to create monumental outdoor sculptures that are not historical heroic figures. Many of my sculptures are discarded aged tools of shapeshifters. It is ironic that scale here creates the importance of mundane and replaceable objects. They are ordinary characters in ancient mythologies, like the ordinary people in our society. This mirrors the importance of collective efforts by the ordinary who bring extraordinary deeds to our society. Perhaps these sculptures can make ordinary people more visible.

<https://www.instagram.com/masakomiki/>

# METAL

M A S A K O M I K I

S H A P I N G O U R C O L L E C T I V E  
F I C T I O N

*For long, the California-based Japanese artist Masako Miki has looked to blast out loud internal dichotomies and explore our shape-shifting character, turning the spotlight away from our inside-the-box individuality and more directly to aspects of fluidity that connect us all together. By heavily drawing inspiration from Japanese folklore and Shinto concepts, Miki's work blurs the lines of identity while sharply categorising our social life as collective mythology that aches for dialogue and deeper collaboration – an idea thoroughly explored in her new series *New Mythologies*, now on view at Cult Aimee Friberg Exhibitions in San Francisco until September 25.*

**From detailed paintings to the current larger-than-life amorphous sculptures, what made you decide on pursuing art as your way of expression?**

I believe that art is one of the greatest communication tools. I still remember my struggle of not being able to communicate with others in college because of my poor English-speaking ability. I started to feel completely isolated and started to feel depressed in my early years in the United States. This changed when I took a drawing class in the art department. For the first time, I made friends because I could interact with other students through art. We connected by sharing art and its process. We painted together until late at night in the studio – there I found my community. Since then, art has been the best communication tool for me.

I started to paint my own experience after my graduate program. This developed into autobiographical work. I started to paint about my dilemmas and questions of cultural identity. I created metaphors using particular animals' ecology – like deer, wolf, and whales. I believe that visual language expresses the relationships of image and meaning; in particular, I am interested in images that project our cultural values. As my style has evolved from the beginning of my career, I am still exploring the idea of signifier/signified in my work.

Can you talk more about the themes that you touch on through your work?

Each of my series focused on particular narratives and had specific inspirations as subject matter. For detailed paintings, it was important for me to set the context as a plot in order to portray psychological narratives. However, lately, my style has evolved into something more abstract. Setting a particular plot became less important in my current series. I started to use the specific cultural references of Japanese shapeshifters, which offer more open-ended interpretations, and these visual and conceptual references became unique signifiers of a new identity in my work.

**It is known that your work is strongly influenced by Japanese folklore and the continuous exploration of the Shinto shapeshifters concept of Tsukumogami, a type of yōkai or spirits. What kind of role would you say your cultural background played on your journey to become an artist?**

My cultural background played a significant role in my journey to become an artist. Firstly, Japanese animistic mythologies and folklore bring unique visual references to my work. Secondly, I am celebrating my cultural heritage, and I am also interested in re-contextualising these ancestral narratives for contemporary society.

It has been an interesting process to research and expand the idea of mythologies – I see it as starting my own traditions. I also feel connected and familiar with these ghosts/shapeshifters because these ancient mythologies are rooted in our everyday culture in Japan. We see them in TV, films, comics, landmarks, daily and communal rituals. I am intrigued by the commonality and extraordinary qualities of shapeshifters. At the same time, I wanted to explore what these mythologies and folklore meant in different periods in Japan; why these mythologies have been accepted and believed in a particular time and continue to be a part of our culture. This led me to explore and think about how these mythologies are even more relevant to our current society.

*“Death has become reality for me. Now, I think about how my life will end on earth, and this question leads to the next question – what should I be doing now?”*

**Now, the idea of ‘dichotomies’ seems to be one of the main concepts you tend to explore; via both the techniques and materials used, as well as exhibition themes. Why do you think that this is an important topic?**

I think we all have experiences of dealing with dichotomies or dualities in our lives. It is a part of life. For me, it started as a question of cultural identity. As a native of Japan who has lived in the US for more than 25 years, it has been a struggle to determine how to identify myself. Asking this question is important because it can determine my actions now and in the future.

In today's society, we see an increasing number of non-binary spaces unique to our current situations. This, of course, relates to gender identity and fluidity, but also biracial identity and multiculturalism. Our identities have become more complex as our society has evolved. The respect for every individual has been deeply challenged in our current culture. I feel these ancient narratives offer different perspectives in contrast to the traditional views of our identities. They also ask a question of our collective identities – who we are as a community and also as a nation. I think being able to shift, change, and evolve into unique versions of ourselves is the only way for us to survive in this rapidly changing society. Shapeshifters are also signifiers of the synthesis of dichotomies. They accept contrary characteristics of being sacred/secular and animate/inanimate. Shapeshifters are inherently boundless in their nature as they blur the lines of these “barriers.” These hybrid beings embrace duality in themselves to invent new identities, instead of conforming to accepted ones.

**What's the main message you want the audience to leave a Masako Miki exhibition with?**

My intent is to craft new mythologies. I want to re-contextualise these narratives to draw new metaphors. Every mythology reflects the time when it was created. There is an idiosyncrasy of the time, but also universality is embedded, which transforms timeless narratives. As an artist, I question what kind of mythologies need to be crafted now.

According to French semiologist Roland Barthes, our society asserts its values through specific cultural materials: we express collective cultural values through them. This cultural material can be the artwork and the cultural values are what people project onto the artwork. I want my work to function as what Barthes calls 'signifiers' – expressing our collective cultural values. And my work deals with particular narratives about connectivity and empathy – Barthes' 'signified.'



**Did the pandemic environment of isolation have an impact on your creative process?**

It did, I am still processing the new normal. I had several projects cancelled or postponed due to the pandemic, some of which are coming back, but not all. Being isolated was helpful for me to reflect on what has been happening in our society. It's been an interesting time to deeply assess what I should be making as an artist. I should say, I was also very lucky that for the past 2 years I was working on my first public art project – Holographic Entities Reminding of the Universe – for Uber's new campus in San Francisco. It has been such an exciting process to create work for the public and collaborating with Artworks Foundry in Berkeley (California) for these large-scale sculptures.

**How is *New Mythologies* different from your previous works?**

As I continue to explore cultural identity questions, the exhibition reflects largely on the idea of life and death. The recent pandemic, the Black Lives Matter movement, racial injustice, and hate crimes, especially to the Asian community throughout the last year, made me reflect deeply on these issues.

As a society, we experienced death as a collective. Simultaneously, the personal experience of losing my father last year made a significant impact on my perspective on life and death. It was one of the most difficult experiences to see him passing while we took him home with hospice care. I was fortunate to be with my father until the end of his life, but it was also extremely difficult. The rituals in Buddhist traditions made quite an impact on me. I saw my father coming out as a skeleton from the crematory furnace, and we followed the ritual of collecting his bones with my family. The ritual reminds living ones to help the deceased in their next journey of the afterlife. It was an intense experience for me to see him that way. Death has become reality for me. Now, I think about how my life will end on earth, and this question leads to the next question – what should I be doing now?

The exhibition also shares the grieving process. We lost so many loved ones through the pandemic and through violence – I painted an offering series with many flowers for this show. It started with my experience last year in Japan. I bought so many flowers last year, as my mother was obsessed with leaving fresh flowers every day for my father's altar. The room was occupied with so many flowers for a long time. It helped her and me grieve and heal from the ache of missing him. These bright flowers are an offering to everyone who visits the exhibition

## What else informed your exhibition?

If I may share, I just finished reading *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* by Yuval Noah Harari. Harari's idea resonated deeply with what I have been exploring. I always believe our perception is our reality, but our perceptions are not necessarily informed by truth. Harari proposes that sapiens out-ruled other species because of our ability to believe fictions – collective mythologies, which we call ideology in modern times. And believing the same stories allowed sapiens to form large-scale human corporations, establish a capitalist society, religions and the nation itself. If stories are the only way for us to connect and trust each other, I feel that building new mythologies is a relevant issue for our time.

## **You tend to explore very different techniques, which results in a more unique feeling for each new exhibition. What made you decide on watercolour painting and bronze sculptures as the primary techniques used in *New Mythologies*?**

Watercolour is an ongoing medium for me, which I continue to explore in this new body of work. The loose and transparent quality of the medium expresses the most important characteristic of the shapeshifter – fluidity.

I first explored bronze for my public art project at Uber, consisting of nine sculptures for the pathway at Uber's campus, which is accessible to the public. They range from three to twenty feet tall. They greet and welcome visitors. I wanted to continue exploring the new medium in this show on a smaller scale. I also experimented with the finish of the bronze surface. I combined the centuries-old technique of traditional patina with the modern invention of automobile paint. Returning to Barthes' theory, the synthesis of the contrasting finishes has become a signifier of the signified – new identity of bronze work.

## **In the past year, we've seen a global tension in the social sphere, leaving nations – more than ever – in desperate need of collaboration. In addition to that, 2020 was a very tumultuous year for American politics, with a noticeable desire for change. Your work, visually very colourful and inviting, has the power to transmit an empathetic feeling and an acute sense of connection between public and piece; characteristics that seem extremely relevant and desirable in this environment. With that in mind, would you say your new series indeed carries a direct relation to the current political and social climate?**

Yes, absolutely. It is my intention to use bright colours and playfulness to invoke a sense of inclusivity and accessibility. In my 2019 exhibition *Matrix 273* at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, I responded to our political situation by creating a space that was overtly uplifting and inviting when we were experiencing exclusiveness and disconnect in American politics. The new series continues to carry the message. I am also responding to racial injustice, ongoing hate crimes and the devastating violence in our society.

I feel responsible to continue the dialogue about celebrating and accepting our new identities in contemporary society. Collaboration and connectivity play an important role in navigating our society to a more just, equitable future.

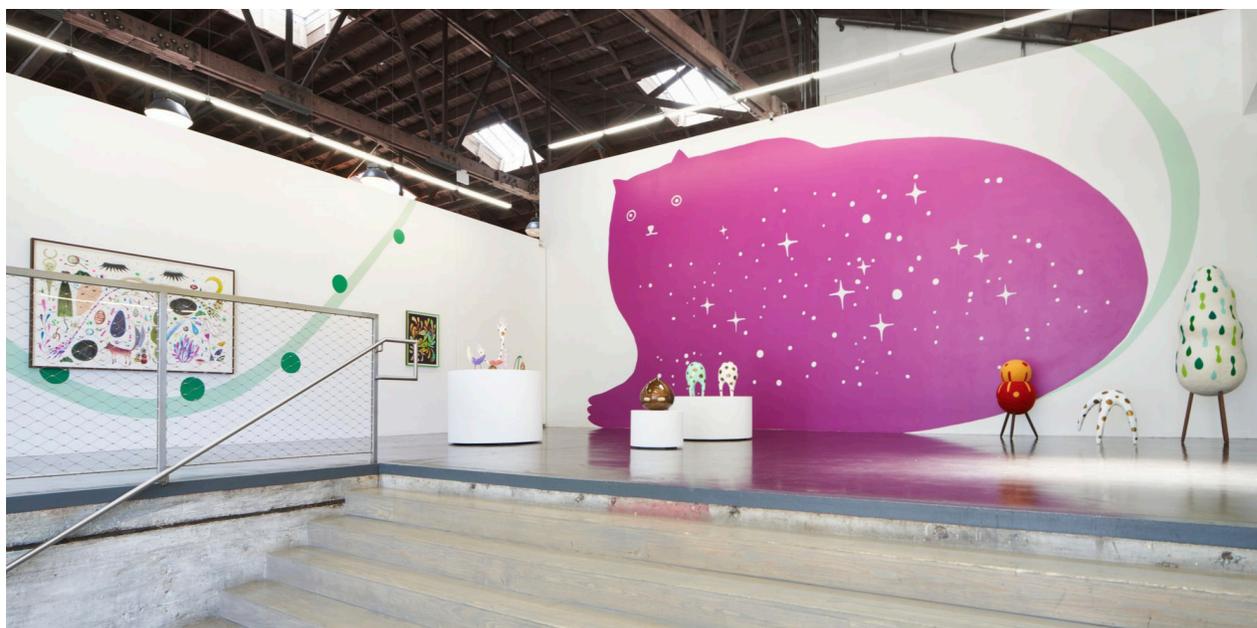
**Your pieces have a very clear uniqueness while also presenting an atemporal feeling. Would you say in terms of message that atemporality also remains?**

The presence of atemporality in my work comes from my thoughts on cosmology. As we have evolved and changed social mythologies or ideologies over time, I still feel the fundamental parts of us have not changed much. We are still living on Earth and seeking answers to the perpetual questions of where we come from and where we go after life on the earth ends. Our relationships and connections to the natural world are emphasised by animistic beliefs, particularly Shinto animism, which presents themes of nostalgia.

This can be further illuminated by the etymology of the word ‘nostalgia’ itself: in Greek, ‘nostos’ means return or home, ‘algos’ means ache and pain. It is our collective feelings of aching to be home in the natural world. Though we live every day in the natural world, we have become distant and disconnected due to our exploitative relationship with nature. My work explores how everything in the universe is sacred and spirited. Thinking about this from a non-human-centric perspective can remind us more about our humanity and the future identity of ourselves as species.

**Finally, if you could give one advice to your younger self, what would that be?**

Not being afraid to accept new identities for myself. I want to continue being fluid, and always in the process of becoming throughout the rest of my life. I want to encourage myself to continue pushing forward the important dialogue around our identities as individuals, communities, and as a nation.



# Wallpaper\*

## The art installations defining outdoor spaces

We've scoured the globe for the most exciting, surprising and compelling outdoor art installations



Artist: Masako Miki

Location: Uber Campus, San Francisco, USA

There's something about viewing art outdoors. Escaping the strictures of the white cube and set against landscapes, cityscapes or seascapes, sculpture can take on an entirely new life. *Al fresco*, art is at its most accessible. It is used to commemorate, celebrate, shock, invite engagement and define the outdoor space it occupies.

Read our guide to the best outdoor art installations to stumble upon, or seek out.

Interdisciplinary artist Masako Miki's Holographic Entities Reminding of the Universe are as playful as they are otherworldly. Permanently installed in public view on Uber's new campus in Mission Bay, nine outdoor art installations explore the Shinto concept of the *Tsukumogami yōkai* - 'shape-shifters' that take the form of commonplace objects and undefinable forms. Miki's anamorphic *yōkai* sculptures are often created on a human scale from brightly-coloured felt wool, but now take shape as larger-than-life - and equally as vibrant - bronze sculptures. Miki's characters are simultaneously sacred and secular, animate and inanimate and reflect the nuances of nonbinary spaces across gender, biracial identities and the artists own lived experience as a Japanese immigrant woman on the inters

# WIDEWALLS

The Psychology of Collecting Explored –  
Chris Fallon Reflects on his Art Practice



The L.A.-based artist Chris Fallon looks behind the subconscious purposes of collecting. He explores the potential of objects to say something about us and who we want to be. How we present ourselves through collected objects is the central theme of his exhibition at CULT Aimee Friberg Exhibitions in San Francisco, on view until December 11th, 2021. Titled *Irresistible Deception*, the show brings Fallon's new works filled with ambiguous figures and various amassed things that can be found in domestic spaces. He is critical of this practice; it tells us more about who we want to be than who we really are. It's a show-off for others that often hides a personal sense of inadequacy.

Chris Fallon spent his formative years in Mexico, Texas, Massachusetts, New York, and San Francisco. As he explains, Mexico and its folk artists played a significant role in his artistic research, leading him to include bright, intense colours in his pieces. The colours have a symbolic function as well; the artist is using them in a manner that inverts cultural tropes. Gender biases are turned upside-down, our own insincerity exposed.

Formally, the works are patchworks of colour, objects, and patterns that hit affective responses. Laugh, fright, feelings of unease, and amusement, come in waves, bit by bit, as each part of a painting is explored and visited. The garish figures bring a menacing atmosphere; the wallpapers cheer it up. Faces and masks are the most disconcerting; their smiles are crooked, the noses robotic. The mixture of references balances out the extremes. Our comprehension is jogged, not just of Fallon's art but also of the world we create for ourselves.

We got in touch with Fallon to talk about his artistic inspirations, unique style, the meaning of colours, collecting, and other aspects of his fascinating practice.

## **Cultural Appropriation and the Compulsion to Collect**

**Widewalls: Your paintings are filled with various objects, figures, plants, and masks, as well as references to popular culture, celebrity figures, and objects from art history. Can you introduce your work to us? What inspires your choice of forms and topics?**

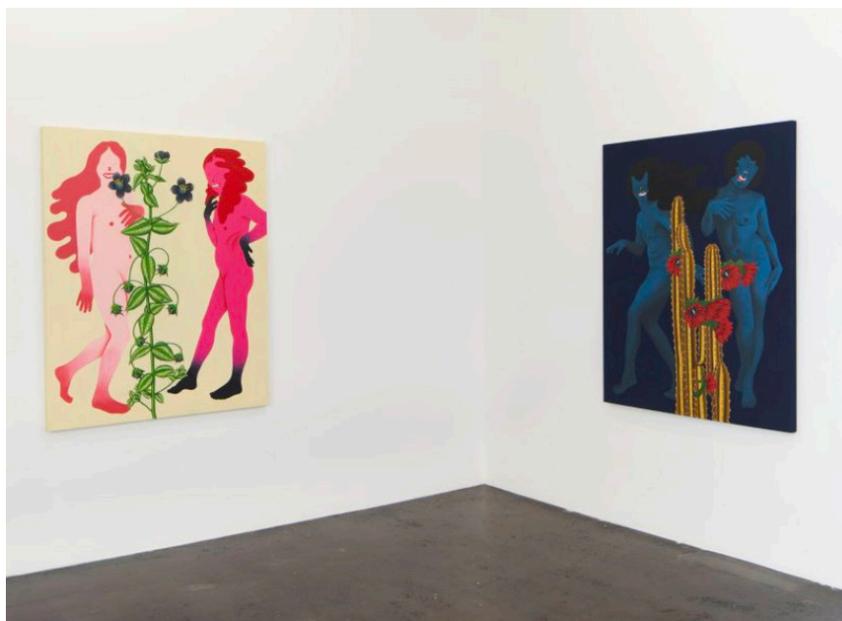
CF: The human compulsion to collect things is fascinating to me. The inanimate stuff we surround ourselves with communicates so much about our personalities, or rather, our deliberately assembled personalities. So the types of objects we choose for broadcasting our aspirational selves to others are important. A classical Greek bust on a mantle might be intended to transmit sophistication and worldliness, but to me, there's a tragicomedy inherent to that posturing, especially when that bust turns out to be just a cheap replica, as is often the case. We don't fully believe in our own worth, so we assemble objects to do that heavy lifting for us. The specific objects I depict might be culled from pop culture, product brand imagery, or ancient art, all of which put equally strong stamps on the collective psyche. I see no real hierarchy between objects because, unless they have practical uses, their value is merely a mutually agreed-upon construct.

**Widewalls: There is an array of topics you address, from gender politics to colonial past and representations of domesticity. How do you engage with them, and what aspects are you interested in revealing?**

CF: My engagement with colonialism definitely stems from my own experience growing up as a white American kid in southern Mexico in a family that loves collecting antique saint statues, ceremonial masks, pottery, textiles, etc. There's an implicit fetishism and appropriation when white people amass artifacts of other cultures. In a way, it's just an extension of the control and ownership we've wielded for centuries over indigenous peoples. One person's "celebration" of a culture can easily and rightly be defined as little more than appropriation. And to be clear, my apple hasn't fallen far from the tree in this regard. I'm a collector too, and many of the objects in my own home could spark debates about appropriation and fetishism. My family wasn't particularly religious, so our visits to churches were more to take in the grandeur of the structures and the lavishness of the religious art.

This left a huge impression on my developing brain, so it's no wonder I'm drawn to gilded objects and Christian imagery. The ubiquitous blood-soaked Jesus statues were particularly transfixing to me.

As for the gender politics and domesticity you ask about, they both essentially stem from the 1950s and 60s TV shows that were in syndication when I was growing up, where men's and women's roles are clearly defined: men were dominant and masculine, while women were passive and feminine. The human figures in my work exhibit traits of all genders, despite their otherwise gendered trappings of hair styles and clothing.



## Vanity and Influence of Mexican Folk Artists

**Widewalls:** The masks and faces you paint are quite striking. The features are reduced but still highly expressive — mouths are disconcerting, the noses squares of paint. How did you come to this reduction of forms? Can you speak more broadly about your style?

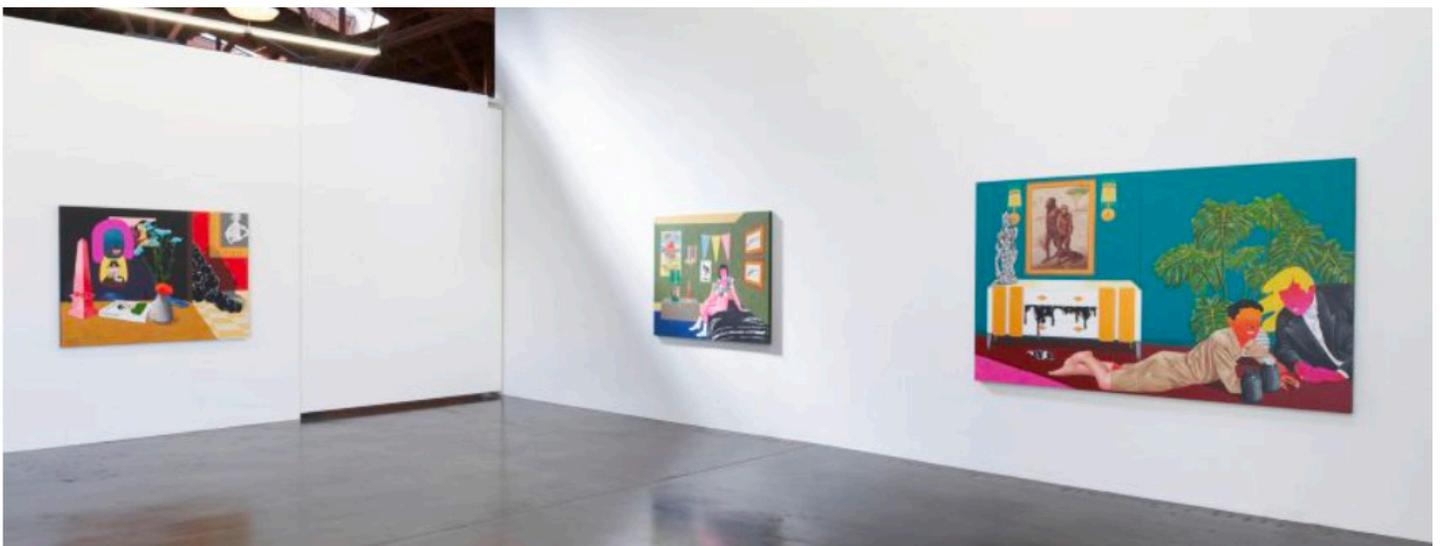
CF: Vanity is another theme I play around with a lot, which manifests in the idiosyncratic way I render bodies and facial features. The glamour suggested by flowing hair and glossy red lips is tempered by crooked teeth, square noses, and beady little eyes. Like, despite the effort these figures put into their appearance, their beauty aspirations will never be fulfilled. The hair might be right out of a shampoo commercial, but the skewed features are nullifying. They're oblivious to the fact that they're hiding behind masks of their own making. I also render my people more flatly than the interiors and objects around them, which accentuates the extent to which relying on those things to tell our story often has the adverse effect of reducing, rather than enhancing our dimensionality.

**Widewalls:** We wanted to ask you about colours. Your website opens to purple and red letters, and your paintings are anything but shy of colours, with occasional pink and red figures lounging around. Why pink and red tones? How did your palette develop over the years?

CF: My love of bright, garish colours is another result of the time I spent in Mexico. Mexican folk artists often use really bright, saturated tones, which imbue their work with a certain playfulness. I've always been struck by how Luis Barragán brought these wild colours into his minimal modern architecture, so that must've really seeped into my subconscious. I use red a lot because of its visual and symbolic strength. Red has so many bold associations—like passion, lust, aggression and, of course, blood—so it's a colour that everyone has a distinct relationship with. Pink is the colour most associated with femininity which I feel can be used effectively to subvert that convention. I also just love the way both colours interact and contrast with drab or dark colours.

**Widewalls:** There is a lot of humour in your work. It's not overt, which makes it even more arresting; it lingers in details and references. How important is this aspect to you?

CF: I want the humour in the work to come through for everybody. That's very important to me because, while I am touching on some big themes, part of me will forever be a teenager obsessed with underground comics and bathroom humour, so I take care not to make my paintings overly didactic or self-serious. In one painting, I put Jughead from the Archie comics on the jacket of the Kenneth Clark art history book "Civilisation," which just made me laugh and also happened to fit the spirit of the work, which I titled Western Civilization.



## Irresistible Deception

**Widewalls: Your solo show *Irresistible Deception* is currently on view at CULT Aimee Friberg Exhibitions. Can you tell us more about the show and the selection of works?**

CF: The paintings in this show represent a considerable development of my style because I previously worked on a much smaller scale and showed mainly the figures' heads with no real context for their environments. I wanted to pan out and find out what types of spaces these figures occupied and what they'd assembled around them. In a way, it felt as though they were telling me who they were as I went along. Each piece essentially starts with a riff on one of the themes I'm working with, and I flesh it out into a tableau.

**Widewalls: You look into the psychology of collecting with these paintings and what collected objects reflect about us and the absences we feel. It seems that the world we create could be both funny and nightmarish. How do you reconcile these poles in your art? What do they reveal to you about our contemporary condition?**

CF: I touched on collecting psychology in an earlier answer, but the nightmarishness you're sensing is real. I'm glad that comes through. I think of it more as phantasmagoria. The tension between beauty and ugliness is pretty central to my work. My hope is that the allure of the bold colours, arguable beauty, and cartoonish elements strike the viewer first and that the darker underbelly reveals itself more upon closer inspection. Just like in real life.

**Widewalls: Which artwork would you pick to be your avatar, if you could choose any from history?**

CF: This is a tough question. My brain doesn't really work this way. I'd have a better answer if you asked me which Seinfeld character I most identified with.

**What are your plans after the solo exhibition? Any future projects you could share with us?**

CF: Now that the dust has settled, I'm back in the studio, starting to work on a new series. Just expanding and zooming in and out of the world I've already created. I think of my paintings sometimes as 2-D depictions of dioramas, which are endlessly fascinating to me and have a strange, complicated history, so I'm excited to delve into that a bit more.

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# INTERLOCUTOR

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Exhibition Feature - IRRESISTIBLE DECEPTION at  
CULT Aimee Friberg Exhibitions



CULT Aimee Friberg Exhibitions is pleased to announce Irresistible Deception, a solo exhibition of new paintings and drawings by Los Angeles-based artist Chris Fallon, on view at CULT's new home, located within Yves Behar's fuseproject (1401 16th St., San Francisco). The exhibition runs through December 11, 2021. Irresistible Deception is Fallon's first solo presentation with CULT.

In this new body of work, Fallon — known for his striking images of ambiguous figures that both draw on and challenge existing traditions of portraiture — explores how the practice of collecting shapes the fashioning of domestic space. From the most lavish to the most impoverished of circumstances, the spaces of human habitation take form through the amassing of objects.

Beyond the functional value of the objects we amass, collecting might serve a variety of unconscious purposes: exhibiting a material archive of wealth, documenting travel and performing worldliness, creating a narrative of personal achievement, or attempting to craft an aesthetic sensibility ultimately tied to norms of gender, class, racial, religious, or national identity.

Fallon observes that collecting is a quotidian activity that appears practical but also evinces a form of compulsion or drive. In his paintings, human-like figures share space with the objects that come to define them — collections of memorabilia, cars, books, religious iconography, botanicals or art. Often the human figures recede into the background, ceding the space to representations in different registers: masks, sculptures, trophies, mirrors and paintings within the painting.

In preparation for the exhibition, Fallon delved into the psychology of collecting, drawing on US iconography while illuminating the strangeness — and the queerness — of its constitutive image-repertoire. Human figures in Fallon’s paintings are relatively flat, while objects and plants are rendered with detailed definition. His painting style references formal portraiture and classical painting as well as cartoons and other so-called lowbrow art forms, positioning his work in an uneasy middle ground. The tone of the works veers between humor, emotional intensity and nightmarishness. While the paintings draw on familiar images, they translate them into a unique pictorial space that upends expectations and leaves the viewer unsettled.

In his exploration of formal strategies of portraiture, Fallon’s work also challenges American notions of masculinity and femininity as perpetuated by Old Hollywood, advertising and other forms of media. His non-binary figures hover in a liminal zone beyond the gendered archetypes that have shaped the history of American domesticity. Additionally, the works allude to the colonial heritage of collecting represented in the work through the inclusion of “ethnic” masks on the walls of his imaginary figures’ spaces. While the works proliferate meanings, ultimately they create a dreamspace that might appear as the nightmare of our historical present or a vision of a world that hovers just beyond the threshold of perception.



“Last Looks”, 2021, Acrylic on wood panel, 48 x 60 inches



"The Night Gardeners", 2021, Acrylic on wood panel, 60 x 48 inches



"Back Room", 2021, Acrylic on wood panel, 48 x 60 inches

Thoughts on the Exhibition by Chris Fallon:

The human compulsion to collect things is fascinating to me. The inanimate stuff we amass communicates so much about our constructed personalities and aspirational selves. For this series I imagined what types of spaces my human figures occupied and what they'd assembled around them. A classical Greek bust on a mantle might be intended to transmit sophistication and worldliness, but to me there's a tragicomedy inherent to that posturing. The specific objects I depict might be culled from pop culture, product brand imagery or ancient art, all of which put equally strong stamps on the collective psyche. I see no real hierarchy between objects because, unless they have practical uses, their value is merely a mutually agreed upon construct.

My use of bright, saturated colors and certain iconographic choices comes partly from formative years spent as a white American kid in southern Mexico in a family that avidly collected folk art, pottery, antique saint statues, textiles, etc. There's an implicit fetishism and appropriation when white people collect artifacts of other cultures, which is where the issue of colonialism creeps in. My apple hasn't fallen so far from the tree in this regard. I'm a collector too, and some of the objects in my own home might spark their own debates about propriety.

Vanity is another theme I play around with a lot, which manifests in the idiosyncratic way I render bodies and facial features. The hair might be right out of a shampoo commercial, but the skewed mouths, square noses and beady little eyes are nullifying. Part of me will forever be a teenager obsessed with underground comics and bathroom jokes, so I take care not to make my paintings overly didactic or self-serious. Behind the humor there's a darker space in this show that I hope the viewer finds. Look behind our carefully crafted collections and presentations and you might find something a bit unsettling.

*Irresistible Deception will be on view at CULT's new home, located within Yves Behar's fuseproject (1401 16th St., San Francisco), through December 11, 2021.*

## ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Chris Fallon (b. 1976, Princeton, N.J.) spent his formative years in Texas, Mexico, Massachusetts, New York and San Francisco. He has presented solo exhibitions at Percy Gallery, Oakland; Partisan Gallery, San Francisco; Park Life Gallery, San Francisco and was included in "Sun Kissed Chokehold," a group show curated by Laura Watters and Kaylie Schiff at Y53, Los Angeles and "Janus," a group show at CULT Aimee Friberg Exhibitions, San Francisco. He exhibited work at the 2020 Spring/Break Art Show, Los Angeles. His work is represented in the public collections of the Los Angeles Contemporary Archives and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. He currently lives and works in Los Angeles.

