

BERNHEIM

TSAI YUN-JU

Signs of Life
BERNHEIM, London
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To misread is not to fail. This is the wager Tsai Yun-Ju makes in *Signs of Life*, her first solo exhibition at Bernheim London, and it is a wager the paintings more than sustain. Working across monumental canvases and intimate tempera panels, the London-based Taiwanese artist constructs an exhibition organised around a deceptively simple premise: perception is not passive reception but active, error-prone, projective labor. What we see when we look at an abstract painting tells us as much about the architecture of our own cognition as it does about the work itself.

The historical anchor for this proposition is elegant. During the Ming dynasty, Chinese court officials encountered giraffes for the first time and, lacking a zoological category adequate to the animal's improbability, identified them as *qilin*, the mythological celestial creatures of classical Chinese cosmology. The misrecognition was not ignorance; it was interpretation under pressure, meaning-making at the limit of the known. For Tsai, this episode becomes a structural metaphor for abstraction as a mode: not a withholding of meaning, but a proliferation of it, an invitation to the viewer to do the cognitive work that representation would otherwise foreclose. The seven paintings in the exhibition operate accordingly. They do not resolve. They accumulate, suspend, and radiate possibility.

The technical foundations of Tsai's practice are as layered as the paintings themselves. Her training in Gongbi, the classical Chinese ink painting tradition defined by meticulous brushwork and painstaking, incremental precision, provides a conceptual as much as a technical substrate. Against this, Tsai presses a second inheritance: the luminous spatial logic of Italian egg tempera, particularly the frescoes of Masolino da Panicale, whose *Baptism of Christ* she encountered on a recent trip to Italy. The result is a painterly syntax that belongs wholly to neither tradition and is enriched by both, a surface practice in which translucent layers (between ten and twenty per work) accumulate into fields of pastel complexity that feel simultaneously ancient and irreducibly contemporary.

What animates these surfaces is a productive instability of register. Tentacle-like forms, feathered textures, shards of Renaissance iconography, and architectural fragments hover in states of ontological indeterminacy; almost figuration, almost abstraction, always both. Pencil marks score through painted layers; gestural passages collide with pointillist accumulations; scratch marks open onto earlier strata of the composition. In works like *Signs of Life* and *Celestial Kirin*, the canvas functions less as a surface than as a stratigraphic record, a site where successive acts of making and revision coexist in visible tension. The paintings do not present the trace of a process; they *are* that process, held in arrested becoming. Figuration does not disappear in these works so much as it goes underground, persisting as residue, suggestion, half-memory; as the visual equivalent of something almost recalled.

Signs of Life is not an exhibition about resolution. It is an exhibition about what happens in the interval before resolution arrives and what we learn about ourselves in that suspended moment of looking.

Tsai Yun-Ju (b. 1998, Taichung, TW) lives and works in London, UK. Tsai's abstract and painterly style creates a light and fantastical feel to the paintings, enhanced by the colourful pastel palette. Through gestural brushstrokes which move freely and fluidly across the painting, she pushes the spatial boundary between the viewer and the canvas. She has recently exhibited at Tara Downs, New York, US (2025); Bernheim, Zurich, Switzerland (2025); Bernheim, London, UK (2025). Tsai's work has entered the permanent collections of ICA Miami, the JPMorgan Chase Art Collection, and Museu Inima De Paula, Belo Horizonte. She trained at the National Taipei University of the Arts (BFA, 2020) and the Slade School of Fine Art, London (MFA, 2022).

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