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The Ultracontemporaries

Faced with the internet's image-infinity and a market with no outside, how can an artist emerge in our oceanic right now? With eclectic sensibility and the distance of technical excellence; an ambivalence about art's purities and vanities; a certain feline savvy around the rich; and a firmness of heart to withstand the dashing one's hopes.

By Travis Diehl

In the lingo of the art market, Parker Ito (*1986) and Juliana Halpert (*1989) are both ultracontemporary artists. They're roughly the same age. But Ito has been through a full career cycle already. This summer, they mounted a synergistic, tumultuous, two-person show, "Au Jus," at Bel Ami in Los Angeles. Halpert writes in her half of the press release,

a twin confessional in two columns, that she was "a little starstruck" the first time they met: "In college, we all thought Parker was the coolest shit around." That would have been around 2012 – when Ito was on the iridescent edge of the post-internet bubble. He had a studio staffed with assistants, collector Stefan Simchowicz was flipping his paintings, a work of his sold at auction for a high five figures.

Then the bubble burst. Ito, who had spurned the system, reconfigured himself as a more conventional gallery artist.

Julien Nguyen, *bic manebimus optime*, 2021
Oil on linen on panel, 51 x 41 cm



He announced his reemergence in 2015 with “A Lil’ Taste of Cheeto in the Night,” a manic installation of powder-coated sculptures, string lights, and big internet-y paintings of classical sculptures, cartoons, chains, pipes, and flowers, all hanging from actual colorful chains in a warehouse next to his Los Angeles gallery, Château Shatto. But “reemergence” isn’t quite right. While Ito streamlined

Juliana Halpert, *Orchid dreams (Bruce)*, 2023, chromogenic print, 61 x 50.5 cm

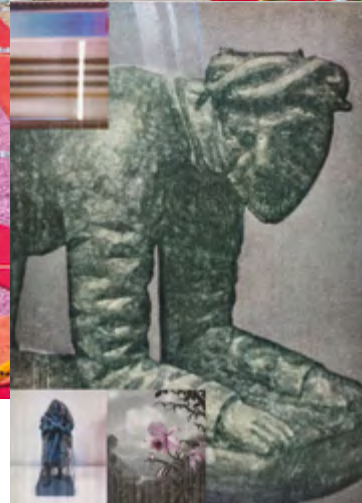


his studio and tweaked his approach, the work hadn’t stopped tumbling out, like the internet: refracted, relentless, often pornographic, ever flowing. Ito likes to say that his real *gesamtkunstwerk* is his website, parker.sex.

“Au Jus” has that flavor, too. Halpert and Ito mix up new and old work, photography and painting and video, trying to extrude the associative, aesthetic sense of their friendship into rooms full of objects. Halpert’s photos include a portrait of her best friend, pictures of orchids, and a shot of a Jules Olitski painting reproduced in a book – which vibe with Ito’s stippled paintings of Christian statuary collaged with print-outs of birds and big-breasted cartoons. The show skims through a Rolodex of references, from medieval to Renaissance to modern; figurative to abstract to electronic. This degree of eclecticism is only possible now, when you can



View of “Parker Ito: A Lil’ Taste of Cheeto in the Night,” Château Shatto, Los Angeles, 2015



Parker Ito, *Clear Susbi #5*, 2023
Ink, acrylic, gloss varnish and paper on canvas, 163 x 117 cm

Courtesy: the artist and Château Shatto, Los Angeles

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Avery Singer, *The Studio Visit (Version)*, 2012, acrylic on canvas stretched over wood panel, 183 x 244 x 4 cm



Photo: Roman März

google old masters at high resolution and find color prints of the great works at Goodwill.

There's a careerist subtext to the show: a slightly older, more famous artist linking up with a younger, more "emerging" one, to their mutual benefit – a little freshness for a little clout. The artwork is networking, too. The objects on the walls and floors chat with one another in a way that reflects the show's premise, a friendship begun in the art scene and maintained by DM, where the lines between artistic and imagistic and personal confluence and/or flirtation entwine into a picture of what it takes to be an artist in 2023: to emerge, reemerge, and survive into an ambiguous middle-career, to project a certain savviness about business and your own status as a marketable entity, and to convey that in your work in a way that isn't so insider-y or navel-gazing that it alienates your audience. Easy, right?

Issy Wood (*1993) seems to have figured it out. Her coveted paintings fall broadly into two categories: collections of disparate but coherent objects, like still lifes of thrifted clocks, china, tchotchkes, and toothpaste ads; and aggressively cropped close-ups of clothing, armor, car interiors, and (lately) teeth. She has a way of dappling oils straight from the tube onto tricky fabrics. Her *Chalet* (2019), which set her auction record in 2022 when the gavel fell at 587,484 dollars, is a five-by-six meter close-up of a pair of leather gloves, painted on black velvet. "Furni," her latest show at Carlos/Ishikawa in London, features little pictures of dice, cheerleaders, jewelry, and other sundries painted on upholstered furniture. Like Ito, she doesn't discriminate between mass-produced objects and unoriginal images. This sense of browsing through the internet's junkyard, racking in here, composing there, rendering it all in dim tones and soft focus, stitches these fragments together within the artist's sensibility.

Wood turned heads in 2022 when she was courted by the biggest names in two industries – Mark Ronson, record producer, for her pop music, and Larry Gagosian,

Painting, metonymic with Art in a way other media can't be, is a great way to be ultracontemporary: to signal that you're undertaking this "art" thing advisedly.

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Avery Singer, *China Chalet*, 2021, acrylic on canvas stretched over wood panel, 255 x 305 x 5 cm



© Avery Singer. Courtesy: the artist, Hauser & Wirth, and Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler, Berlin. Photo: Lance Brewer

megadealer, for her art – and parted ways with both. "If I wanted an older man to hold money over my head," she quipped in the *New York Times*, "I would've gotten back in touch with my dad." Instead, she's playing the long game – not rushing to show, not flooding the market, resisting overexposure. She even mostly refuses (with the exception of the *Times* profile) to sit for photos. Her self portraits in "Furni" are coy, too. Wood paints her face big, but covered by cosmetic masques – as if to say, here I am, faking it, not really here.

It must drive collectors crazy. She seems to know the power of saying no. And she seems to realize that there's a "market" component to being ultracontemporary. *Artnet* coined the term in 2019 to distinguish artists born 1975 and later from those post-war and merely contemporary. When paintings sell for millions in the secondary market, it's often because you can't get one from the galleries. Wood's auction record is six times Ito's. So are those of Lauren Quin (*1992) and Lucy Bull (*1990), Los Angeles artists known for a kind of brushy, electric abstraction; other artists in the ultracontemporary category, like Njideka Akunyili Crosby (*1983) and Avery Singer (*1987), regularly hit seven figures, records an order of magnitude above Wood's.

Why be so crass? Part of the challenge of being an ultracontemporary artist is to appreciate, and rebuff, the pull of the market. Artists and their dealers control the supply; they resist the urge to ship damp, undercooked paintings to Basel. They say no to Gagosian. And successful ultracontemporaries also often make work that winks at its desirability as a commodity. Of the narratives available to the ultracontemporary artist: There's selling out, whatever that means today; there's operating as a personal brand, embracing "business art" à la Jeff Koons, or à la Telfar; there's always the option

to languish in obscurity, or to quit. The ultracontemporary artist may believe in the purity of art, but also in the vanity of the market – recognizing the beauty and profanity of a networked world from which there is no outside, no underground, no escape. Their work reflects this ambivalence.

Approaching the whole world like the internet, your work like scrolling, marries nicely with this self-aware

stance. From Ito's semiotic vomit to Wood's classical alienation, whatever they depict has the cropped, out-of-context sense of the web – and by extension, the very contemporary mode of pastiche-ing past and present and (maybe) future, of existing not just "now," but actually in several eras at once. Stylistically, some of their work could almost have been made earlier, by a previous generation. It's comforting

that way. Yet, some *punctum* always pins it to the ultracontemporary.

Avery Singer's story has an element of destiny. Her parents are both New York painters, she's named for another New York painter (Milton Avery), and she grew up in a downtown loft. She states in interviews that she knew from a young age she wanted to be an artist. Yet there's a prodigal phase, too – as an art student at Cooper Union, she tried every medium *but* paint, as if hoping, pleading, for some other fate than this archaic, drained practice.

It turns out that Painting, metonymic with Art in a way other media can't be, is a great way to be ultracontemporary: to signal that you're undertaking this "art" thing advisedly. Singer's breakthrough paintings ca. 2012, grisaille tableaux of blocky figures in graphic settings, parody cliché features of the artist's life like "studio visits" and "genius." (But if people start calling you a genius – well, that's ok too.) One figure wears a baseball cap, another wears a beret.

This ambivalence around committing to a life in the arts manifests as coolness, distance; Singer's work, like that of her peers, comes stacked with formal and rhetorical signals that she's not getting carried away by the mystique. The collector and viewer get to feel that they, too, can enjoy art (the purity thereof) – stunning paintings bristling with skill and replete with allusions – without getting too close to the profane reality of finance or the maudlin tradition of self-expression.

Singer parodies the conventions of bohemianism, and she also performs them. Her debut at Hauser & Wirth in 2021 featured big, layered paintings mired in Wojak memes, art history, and hipster paraphernalia. *China Chalet* (2021), titled after a New York hangout that folded during the pandemic, is composed like a picture of a ski slope, except the wobbling white ground is a tablecloth littered with iPhones and

View of "Issy Wood: FURNI,"
Carlos/Ishikawa, London, 2023



© Issy Wood, 2023. Courtesy: the artist and Carlos/Ishikawa, London. Photo: Damian Griffiths

© Issy Wood 2023. Courtesy: the artist; Carlos/Ishikawa, London; Michael Werner, New York. Photo: Stephen James



Issy Wood
OKAY (Miranda ices cakes under duress), 2019
Oil on linen, 100 x 135 x 4.5 cm



Issy Wood
Chalet, 2019
Oil on velvet, 161 x 130 x 4.5 cm



whippits and e-girls buried by what looks like bathroom graffiti. This is ultracontemporary bohemia. So is *Sculptor & Robespierre* (2021), where a 3D model of the French revolutionary taken from an *Assassin's Creed* game downs a White Claw. With so many objects overlapping in irrational ways, it's hard to say what any of Singer's latest paintings is "of," except that they describe a kind of askance relationship to a life in the arts ca. 2020 – which includes documenting your shambolic, semi-ironic scene for posterity, semi-unironically.

As an ambivalent painter, Singer tries to distance herself from the canvas, and from painting, with layers of technique. She composed the early grisaille works in Sketchup, an art school standby, then committed them to the surface with an airbrush and masking tape. Since then, she's adopted increasingly sophisticated 3D modeling software, and also bought a robot for her studio that was designed to paint race cars. These technical removes are key. Hers are paintings you need a computer to make, that echo tradition but could only be made today, and so exist in this laminated, self-reflexive time of the ultracontemporary.

People will say any painter with real chops is using "Renaissance" or "old masters" techniques; maybe – but few of them grind their own pigments. Julien Nguyen (*1990) does, though. Nguyen is a man of his time. He draws on anime and *ukiyo*. He wears a tricorn hat in his studio and tweets about lapis lazuli. His canvas *Executive Solutions*, included in the 2017 Whitney Biennial, lines up painted vignettes invoking everything from the School of Athens to World War I – the bottom center panel looks like Francis Bacon riffing on Holbein's entombed Christ in the palette of Wayne Thibault – under the banner of the *New York Times*.

In Nguyen's self-portrait, *bic manebimus optime* (2021), the painter poses in front of a misty teal and blue mountain range, which could be the view through a window, or a painting on the wall. The single, flat, silver button on his shirt, based on a detail of 18th century fashion, echoes the silver lenses on his magically wireless eyeglasses. This button signals Nguyen's ultracontemporary MO. Like Wood, his self-portrait is oblique, offering a recognizable, collectable likeness of the artist while withholding the interior. Nguyen hides his eyes. He also lets you in on his intense sartorial awareness. The title translates as "here we will remain most excellently" – supposedly the words of a Roman soldier defying the Gauls. This statement, in the present, feels futuristic.

Parker Ito happens to own a Jules Olitski painting from 1990. He writes in the "Au Jus" press release that it was given to him as a gift and used to hang over his bed. Now, it hangs with his work and Halpert's on a wall at Bel Ami. The painting's surface is several inches thick, outrageous impasto, a late Olitski that looks like you zoomed into a patch of brushstrokes until they're as large and deep as a sea flecked with pastel spray. It looks like it could have been made in 2010; Ito says as much, comparing the painting to the zombie abstraction he was making around then. However your paintings *look*, the trick is to live and die like an ultracontemporary artist. —

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