

Gillian, Jillian and Me

Shifting Identities in the Painting of Yan Wen Chang

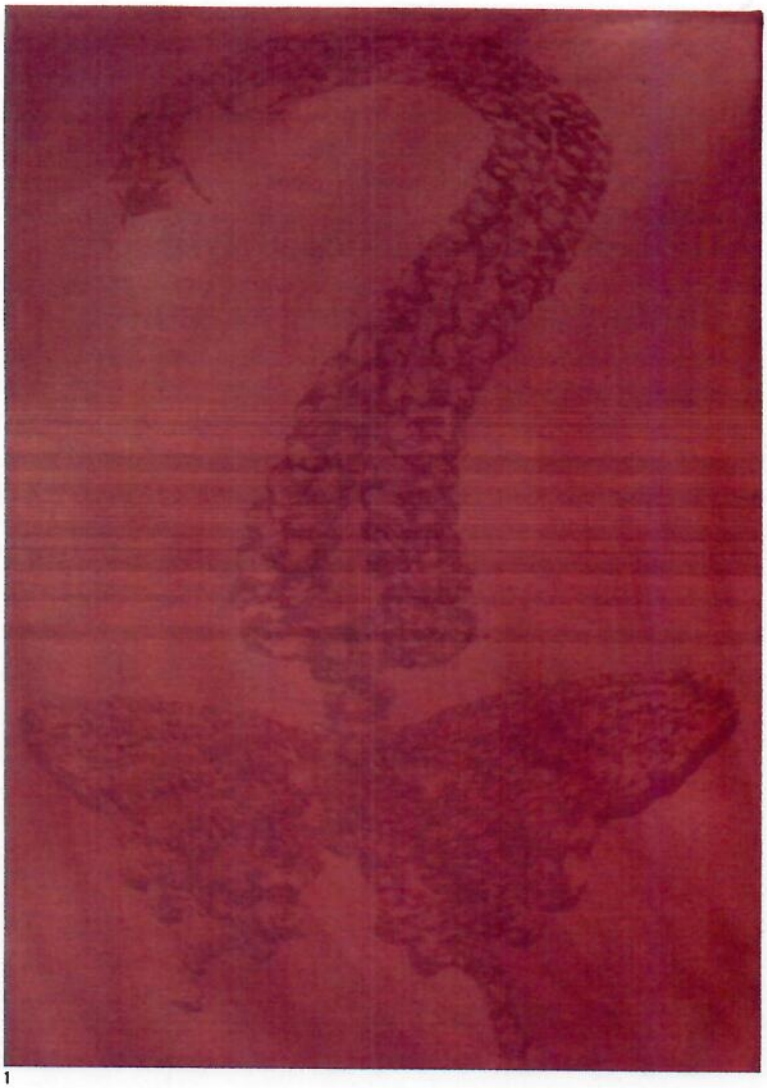
by Robert Enright

Yan Wen Chang, the Guelph-based artist, has figured out how to tell her story. It begins when she leaves Malaysia as a 17-year-old and comes to Toronto alone, and everything unfolds from that moment on. She realized she couldn't tell the story alone, so she enlisted the help of a pair of identical twins, Gillian and Jillian. Gillian is Yan's birth name and she used it until her third year in university when she switched to the gender anonymity of Yan. The result is that three people who are closely associated assume a shared purpose: to tell a particular story of immigration characterized by oppositional states—"hope and desperation, defiance and vulnerability, ambition and collapse." (These are the artist's pairings.) Their telling begins in the oppositional and then works towards a space of negotiation. Yan admits that what interests her the most is when the twins stop behaving like opposites and change positions. The story the three of them tell is one of will and determination (she has said elsewhere that "everything in my life pointed in the direction of not being a painter"), of adaptability and looking closely at a range of artists—including Francis Bacon, Jasper Johns, Ed Ruscha, Bruce Nauman, Shirley Wiitasalo, Tala Madani, Janiva Ellis and the animator Ralph Bakshi—from whom she took what she needed to use in her own art.

In Yan's early work the body and its accoutrements was a set of metonymies: the Cheshire smile, the slanted eyes, the dice, the rearview mirror, the handgun, the butterfly jewellery. That narrative was a darker one, what she describes as "living within the chaos." But as the circumstances of her personae changed and they gained agency, Yan "needed to push her 'portraits of self' into a full body." She recognized that her reduced gestures and objects had to become whole. They insisted on embodiment.

There is a way that immigrants perform their identity for the culture in general, and that realization determined some aspects of the way she represented her characters. Two theatres entered the work: the stage and the fashion runway. In *Gillian's Parlay*, 2026, Gillian enacts the multiplier effect as a naked chorus line of her selves performs balletic moves on a stage that looks like the spiral floor of the Guggenheim Museum. The act of performing is not without its ambiguities; in *Gillian's Game*, 2025, the theatrical spotlight turns into a surveillance searchlight and what might have been choreography is now a question of running for safety. Yan tends to use things in ways that take advantage of a productive instability. For her, a simple form like a small red dot can oscillate between intimacy and danger without ever settling into one meaning. Few situations in her painted world offer a situation clear of ambiguities. She recognizes there is an inherent tension in sexualized representation, so *Gillian's Nine*, 2026, combines celebratory sexuality in Gillian's open-armed gesture with the suggestion of exploitation in the woman wearing knee-high boots behind her who crawls away on all fours. Flamboyance and fetish occupy the same space. In the background what seem to be blonde models move forward on a red runway while Gillian's right foot steps on a handgun. The medium for the painting is gunpowder and gouache on canvas. The possibility of some kind of damage is intimated; in *Gillian's Tape*, 2025, the twins are on a film set wearing their uniform of short-shorts and bodice-fitting tops. (Yan says that "hopefulness, in my paintings, manifests itself as seduction.") They look towards a camera, but the male cinematographer is flat out on the stage. The porn shoot, if that's what it was, has been stopped, and the reasons for that interruption are not provided. We rarely know what and why things are happening.

It should come as no surprise that the emblem that best embodies the complicated circumstances of Yan's narratives is the question mark. She likes the fluidity of the gesture; it is "fluid, sensual and almost calligraphic." The mark turns up in myriad ways: as a Cuban link chain, as a $100 banknote, as custom grillz, as a note asking, "Do You Remember?" on the back of a hotel postcard, as an orthographic questioning of what desire means on the black silhouette of a Rolls Royce, and as hair ribbons in *Portrait of Self with Question Mark Ribbons*, 2024. The question mark is not always an interrogation, nor is it necessarily a placeholder for doubt. Its most effective—and resonant—deployments occur when a pair of question marks is conjoined to form a heart. By symbolizing the moment "when the self resolves," the simple combination shifts the story away from ambiguity and in the direction of innocence.



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The following interview was conducted in the artist's studio in Guelph on April 16, 2026.

BORDER CROSSINGS: Take me through the idea behind the "Gillian" paintings.

YAN WEN CHANG: The "Gillian" series, at its core, is painted by and from the past. The characters, scenes and movements within the works are inspired by experiences taken from my life in Toronto before moving to Guelph to do my MFA. This familiarity I have with city life shapes the imagery of the work and evokes qualities of desperation, seduction, disillusionment and sorrow, which were feelings I had when living within the chaos.

The paintings embody what you've called "the combative battle of the self's polar opposites." Is there a good and a bad Gillian, or is that too simple a way of looking at them?

I actually think that is too simple a way of looking at them; I'm not interested in dividing the self into good and bad. The paintings usually begin with opposing forces—hope and desperation, defiance and vulnerability, ambition and collapse—but I'm interested in the moment where those opposites stop behaving like opposites. They begin to coexist. That's why Gillian and Jillian are identical. The doppelgänger is usually presented as two clearly defined versions of the self, but I wanted to resist that. If you can't tell them apart, then neither one can permanently occupy the role of aggressor or victim, hero or villain. They're constantly exchanging positions. I think that comes directly from my experience of immigration. Immigration isn't the subject of the work; it's the condition under which the work thinks. It taught me that identity isn't something fixed that you simply have; it's something you negotiate.

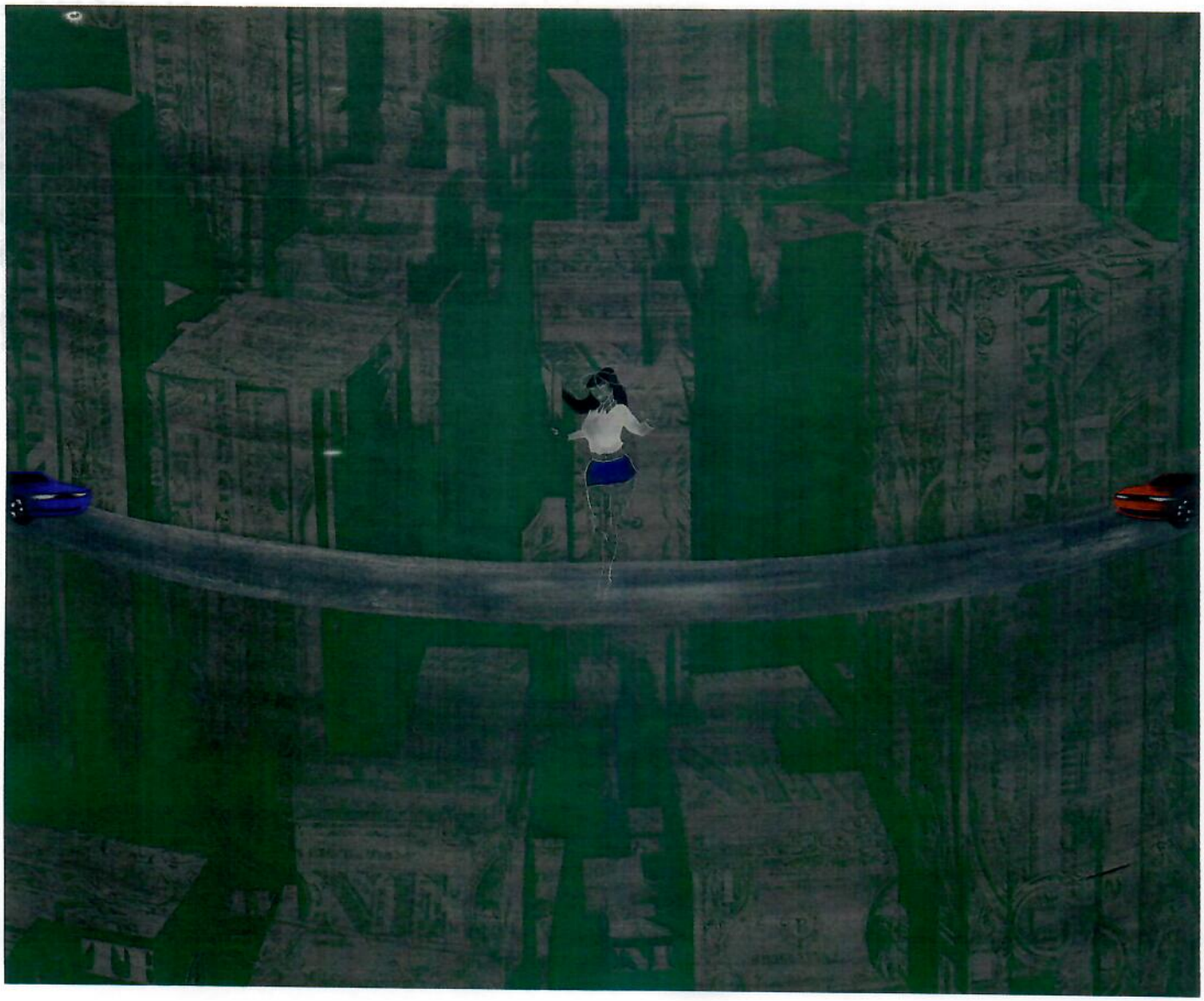
You make no distinction between Gillian and Jillian?

Sometimes one of them has a little star tattoo below her eye and sometimes one wears glasses,

1. *Cuban Link Chain Question Mark*, 2024, gouache on canvas, 71.1 × 50.8 centimetres. Courtesy the artist and A.D., New York.

2. *Banknote Question Mark*, 2024, gunpowder and chromium oxide on canvas, 116.84 × 106.7 centimetres. Courtesy the artist and A.D., New York.

3. *Gillian's Last Resort (after Shirley Wiitasalo, "The Shortest Route", 1978)*, 2025, chromium oxide, gunpowder and gouache on canvas, 147.3 × 177.8 centimetres. Courtesy the artist and Susan Hobbs Gallery, Toronto.



but there's no real difference between them. They become one self.

Where did their look come from?
I have been using the self-portrait for a long time in my work, but it was often reduced to just the eyes and a smirk-like grin. I started watching Ralph Bakshi's cartoon films, which inspired the way I drew the female figure, emphasizing a very male-centred view of sex appeal and beauty. His films are loaded with contradictions; they reproduce misogynistic stereotypes while simultaneously exposing the fantasies, excesses and anxieties embedded within them. That tension interested me. Rather than celebrating those depictions, I wanted to borrow their visual language and redirect it toward examining how femininity is constructed, performed and consumed by the spectator. With Gillian and Jillian I really wanted to develop a very singular and recognizable look that I could use over and over again.

Did the cartoon character give you a certain kind of freedom as an artist?
Totally. One of the key aspects of my earlier work was the self-portrait, which, compared to other subject matter, held the strongest resonance for me. But I always felt that in order to fully commit to that compulsion, I needed to push the portrait into a full body. That allowed the figures to have more freedom, more movement, personality and instability, rather than being fixed in a single cropped identity. A lot of that thinking comes from looking at artists like Tala Madani, who treats the body as something that can be everything at once: fragmented, excessive, unstable and constantly shifting between states. That idea of the body as elastic is important to me and it's why my figures are often repeated, split or multiplied rather than presented as singular, coherent forms. I've also been thinking a lot about Janiva Ellis and how she uses the cartoon as a structure that can hold psychological and social contradiction at the same time. For me, the cartoon isn't illustration but a distorted register where internal and external realities blur, collide and mutate. It gives me permission to stretch identity beyond realism, to let it fracture and reform without needing to resolve into something stable.

You don't call them self-portraits; you call them your "Portrait of Self" series. In that designation are you moving away from the more conventional self-portrait and moving to portraits of self?
I am. For all the paintings prior to "Gillian," it was always something like *Portrait of Self at Final Destination* or *Portrait of Self with Question Mark Ribbons*. I had been using that phrasing because, for me, it prioritized the portrait over the self. This felt like an important distinction; it separates me from my paintings so they can have their own agency.



***Gillian's Game*, 2025, oil and gouache on canvas, 125.7 × 210.2 centimetres. Courtesy the artist and Susan Hobbs Gallery, Toronto.**

Were you resisting a literal reading of autobiography in your work?
Yes. I introduced myself as Gillian, my birth name, until my third year as an undergraduate at Ontario College of Art and Design. I switched to Yan because it is a name without gender connotation. At that time I was reading Barthes and was very interested in his idea that the self should be removed from the work. I was also thinking about how withholding parts of the self could function as a form of protection. Around the same time I encountered Vivek Shraya's photo series "Trauma Clown" (2019, Patel Projects), and the concept of the show was really profound for me in the way it speaks to how artists of colour are often positioned as performing versions of themselves



for visibility within the commercial art world. That framing stayed with me and shaped how I was thinking about self-presentation and authorship. The exhibition "Gillian" is called that because it returns to those formative years when I first used the name Gillian after moving alone from Malaysia to Toronto. Those years were difficult. There is a real gap between that identity and who I became later as Yan. It would have been more than 10 years between when I stopped using the name Gillian and when I titled the exhibition "Gillian" at Susan Hobbs Gallery. Yan gave me the distance to paint Gillian. I couldn't paint Gillian until I stopped being her.

Could I piece your biography together by looking at your bodies of work?

In short, no. Autobiography gives me material, but painting transforms it into something else. However, you could definitely start to get a sense that the self in my paintings is mercurial and always in combat. I feel like certain works are in harmony, like when I put two question marks together and they become a heart that symbolizes when the self resolves. But the characters in the "Gillian" paintings are all up to no good, and you're not supposed to know what is going to happen. There is no chronology to the works, which would make it hard for anyone to piece them all together to create an entire narrative structure.

Another way to read your portraits is through an art lens. You use Bruce Nauman's radiating wheel as a structure in your text-based piece. You're always on the lookout for something that you can use in some way.

Art was always a way to insert myself in the canon. Throughout my life many things pointed me in the direction of not being a painter, so it is very important for me to be taken seriously and to draw connections. For this I look to artists like Francis Bacon and Jasper Johns. Looking at art, especially when it resonates with me, makes me feel less alone. Art history shouldn't be a burden but more of a conversation. The fact that other people have painted with the same or similar ideas as I have makes me feel I'm not crazy, like this idea has been explored before and so well. And with my work I'm saying, "This is how I'm thinking of that idea, together with you." It's really beautiful, actually. The same goes with certain writers, like Paul Chan. When I read him, I know I'm not crazy because he said it so much better than what I was feeling.

So in *Gillian's Parlay*, which includes gunpowder, you're paying homage to Ed Ruscha?

Yes. I saw this very low-resolution photo of him breaking up gunpowder with a mortar and pestle when I was making my banknote paintings in 2023, with Ruscha being the primary source of influence for that work. Those drawings were so exquisite. It wasn't just the image of the process that captivated me but the way gunpowder seemed to sit between drawing and painting, delicacy and volatility. For me, gunpowder has become an important material because it carries both physical and symbolic weight. It's inherently unstable, associated with violence and force. But when it's ground down and incorporated into a painting, it becomes incredibly fragile and quiet. That contradiction mirrors many of the emotional tensions I explore in my work: hope and precarity, ambition and collapse, vulnerability and defiance. Rather than using it for spectacle, I'm interested in how a material with such destructive associations can produce something intimate and psychologically charged. In *Gillian's Parlay*, the gunpowder becomes

another way of embedding those contradictions into the surface of the painting itself.

Tell me about *Gillian's Obsession*, a constellation of star shapes.
Gillian's Obsession is an endurance painting. I started it at the beginning of working on the exhibition and it was the last painting I finished. It has more than 12 layers of black paint, so the process became almost ritualistic, almost painful at times because of the sheer amount of labour. What mattered most to me, though, was the small red dot that appears at its centre. The red dot began with Jasper Johns's target paintings and the way he transforms an ordinary symbol through attention to materiality and surface. But as I worked, it accumulated other associations. It became a beauty mark, a gun target, a drop of blood and even HAL's unblinking red eye from *2001: A Space Odyssey*, a point of fixation that feels simultaneously seductive and threatening. I like that such a simple form can oscillate between intimacy and danger without ever settling into one meaning. The two abstract paintings with the inverted question marks also contain the red dot. While making them I kept returning to the psychological intensity I experienced when I first emigrated from Malaysia to Canada. There was a heightened state of attention, a feeling of constantly zoning in, trying to orient myself in an unfamiliar place. That sharpened focus could feel exhilarating and exhausting at the same time, which is why one of the paintings is titled *Gillian's Thrill*. *Gillian's Obsession* extends that same state of mind. The red dot becomes a visual concentration of obsessive looking and of the compulsive drive that keeps bringing me back to painting.

Your exhibitions are always meticulously considered. You don't do single paintings; you do multiple paintings that have a narrative connection.
It's much easier for me to think in terms of a body of work than of a singular painting. First of all, it relieves a lot of pressure because I don't need to say everything in one painting—I can say it across 10. Each painting can do something different while contributing to a larger whole. I listen to a lot of music and look at a lot of fashion, so I think about exhibitions the way I think about a fashion show or a mixtape. A fashion show is like a mixtape to me because everything flows. The runway models are walking to the tempo of the music, and a form is being carried on their bodies through duration and bodily movement. On a mixtape there might be a four-minute-long banger, but it only hits as hard because there's a 30-second interlude that slows everything down or shifts the mood before. Those quieter moments are just as important.

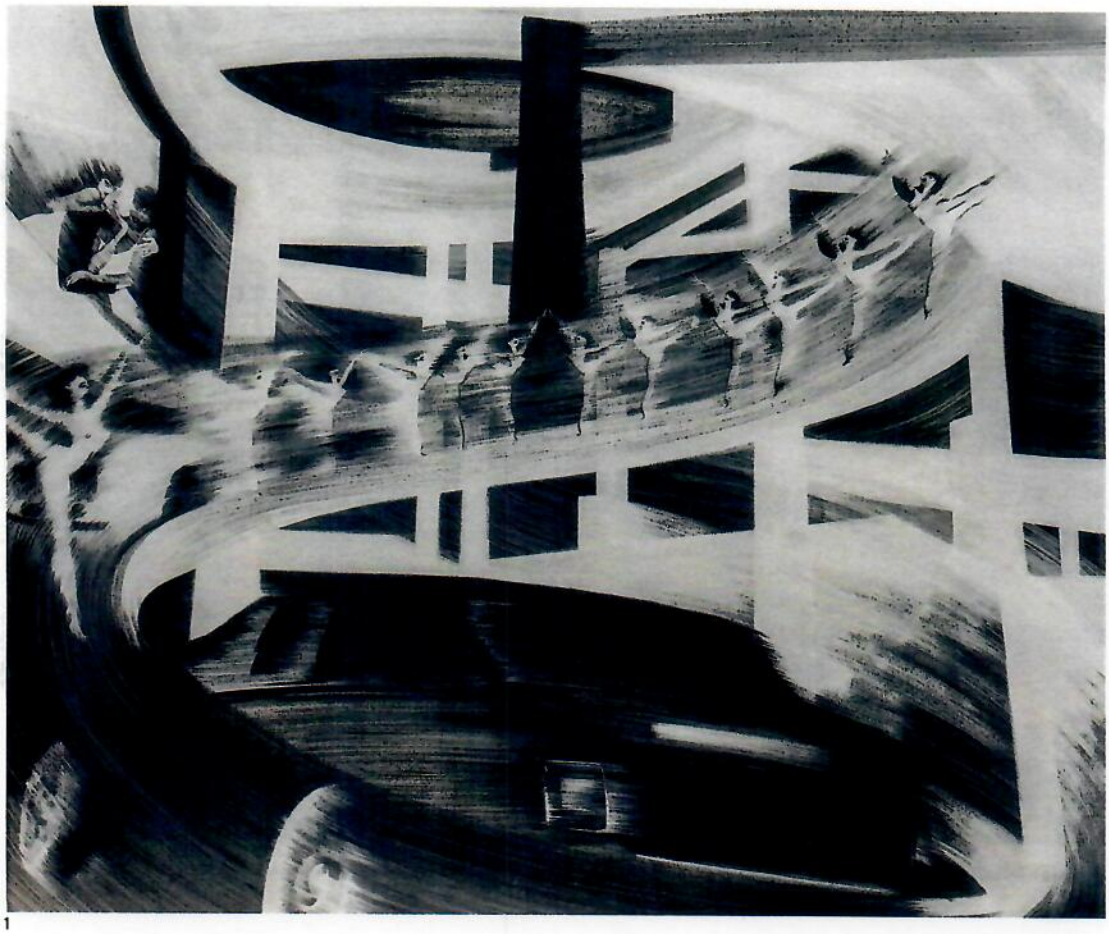
***Gillian's Tape* is troubling. It has the look of a porn shoot. You take the guy lying down from Francis Bacon, but we don't know why he's on the floor. He's not filming, and any involvement he might have had doesn't look like it was in his best interest. What were you thinking about in that particular painting?**
I actually started with the idea of a threesome with Gillian, Jillian and another man. But almost immediately I became less interested in depicting that literally than in using it as a way to construct a psychologically charged space. As I worked on the painting, I kept removing the things that would make the scene too easy to read. I'm less interested in telling you what happened than in making you feel like something already has. I was looking a lot at Francis Bacon while making *Gillian's Tape*. What has always stayed with me about his work isn't the subject matter itself but the way he creates psychological pressure through space. His rooms never feel stable. They're theatrical, compressed and emotionally loaded. I wanted to borrow that sense of tension without borrowing his narratives. There are clues that suggest intimacy, surveillance, or even violence—the bed, the camera, the figures, the structure of the room. But none of them are meant to resolve into a single story. I think a lot of my work resists being read literally.

You had an exhibition in New York called "Nympho."
"Nympho" was my first solo show in New York at A.D. NYC, which was my obsession with the question mark. I was reading Thomas Bernhard's *The Loser* and I became very interested in this obsession with losing, and winning, and some people's need to be the best or else they can't be anything at all. I was relating it to the feeling of an obsessive hypomania regarding sex. So that's where the title came from and why the subject matter relentlessly repeated itself.

Why are you obsessed with the question mark?
The curve of the question mark is fluid, sensual and almost calligraphic, so painting it feels incredibly graceful. Then you arrive at the dot, which has a completely different energy. It feels abrupt, almost like a bullet hole or an impact mark. Something more forceful and confrontational. I like that a single form can contain those opposing gestures. It mirrors a lot of the tensions that already exist in my work. All of these paintings are different question mark paintings. I turn the $100 bill into a question mark, make a ghost question mark out of a car, a Cuban link chain with a question mark, and a rose question mark. I called the exhibition "Nympho" because it was about emulating something you can't live without.

***Gillian's Last Resort* is connected to your long-standing admiration for Shirley Wiitasalo's *The Shortest Route* from 1978, in which two cars are going to collide. Often in her work, there is a sense of the ominous.**
Gillian's Last Resort was the first painting I finished for the show and it was the most important one. It was a painting of the dream of coming to North America where there's money in the cities; if you look closely the whole city is made of banknotes. It was based on the notion that you can create anything from nothing, but as I started my life here, I realized it was not as straightforward as that. So adding my figure to Shirley's version was an insertion of my experience.

Are there any accidents in your work?
I do leave certain things up to chance, but I don't think of chance as the opposite of control. The more I paint, the



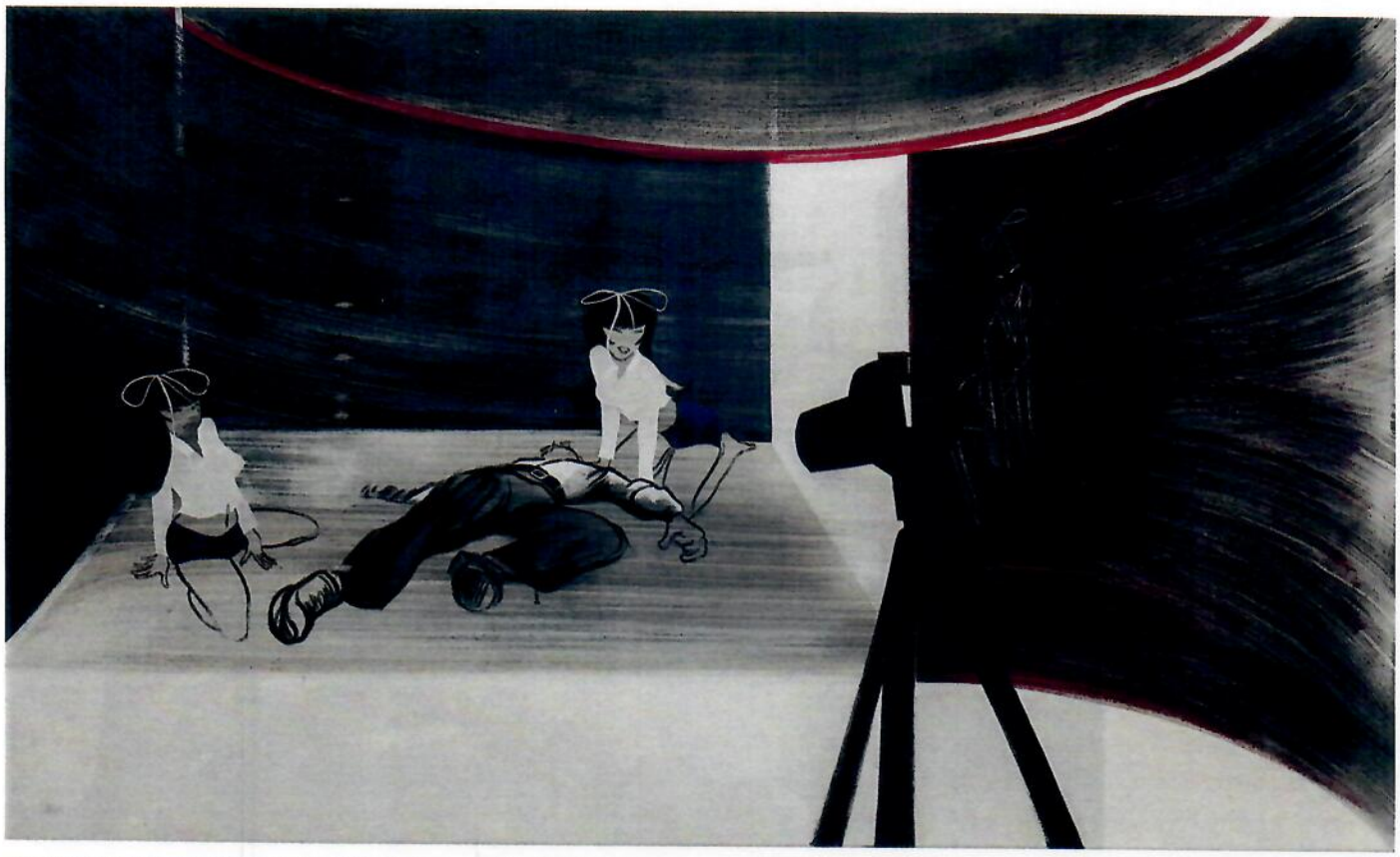
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1. ***Gillian's Parlay***, 2026, gunpowder and gouache on canvas, 147.32 × 177.8 centimetres. Courtesy the artist and Matthew Brown Gallery, Los Angeles.

2. ***Gillian's Nine***, 2026, gunpowder and gouache on canvas, 147.32 × 177.8 centimetres. Courtesy the artist and Matthew Brown Gallery, Los Angeles.



Gillian's Tape, 2025, oil and gouache on canvas, 125.7 × 210.2 centimetres. Courtesy the artist and Susan Hobbs Gallery, Toronto.

more I understand why I make particular decisions and the more precisely I can articulate them. What may have once felt instinctive or accidental gradually becomes something I can recognize and intentionally build upon.

The figure in your paintings is always running somewhere. Is she running to get away or running to get to something desirable?

I don't think they're running away or toward anything. They're just running. That state of constant movement feels very familiar to me. Immigration isn't one event where you leave one place and arrive at another. It produces a psychological condition where you're always negotiating between different worlds. The figures carry that feeling. They're driven by ambition, desire, anxiety, hope—all at the same time. So the question isn't where they're going; it's whether they'll ever stop moving.

Have you consciously resisted moving your figures in the direction of more overt sexuality? You have the same reticence in depicting violence. Was that a conscious decision not to go into the darkest part of the dark zone?

I think that has to do with a focus on resisting the literal, especially in figurative painting. I always think about the importance of seduction in my work. There is meant to be a strong sense of desire as it mirrors the hopefulness of the North American immigrant dream. That hopefulness, in my paintings, manifests itself as seduction, and its seducing nature is a tone I find most appealing about my work. And I don't mean seduction in a flashy Jeff Koons way. That's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about when you're sitting at a bar and you see a sexy guy and you know if he takes you home, you might die. There's a darkness that goes hand in hand with seduction. I'm more focused on that darkness. I'm not interested in knowing whether the guy kills me if I go home with him at the end of the night, but I'm interested in the energy just before that moment.

The rose has played a role in your work for a long time. It turns up in *Gillian's Rose* in this new body of work. Does it have some special symbolic value?

I've been using the rose for a very long time, especially since I moved to Guelph because I lived close to a Walmart that is open until midnight. I would get groceries there and they would always have those cheap, ugly red roses, not the really dark red ones, the cherry red fake-looking ones. I would see people buy them late at night and wonder, where are they going? Did they upset their girlfriend? Is there a party tomorrow? Maybe a graduation? Is someone dying at a hospital? There's a cemetery across from the Walmart, so maybe people were taking roses there in the middle of the night. Anyway, I thought about how flowers, roses especially, are meant to be beautiful and how that beauty is purchased and taken somewhere else for someone else to experience, too. Once the rose is placed somewhere different, the context changes. Like with Jasper Johns's target paintings, the meaning is open. So in *Gillian's Rose* she's crouched down to the floor, bent in a sexual position. The city's looming over her, but her total concentration is on the rose, this symbol of beauty. I guess it was the most emotional painting for me.

How much do those recognitions happen in the making of the painting? Once you start, do you pretty well work it through because you've got such detailed drawings of what it is you want to do?

I usually begin with a formal composition that keeps me anchored, but with this body of work I challenged myself to let paint be paint. I used to really white-knuckle the medium. I was a toxic girlfriend to painting. I would look at a canvas and think, you have to be exactly like this. And if you don't become like this, I'm going to destroy you. It was such a controlling relationship. Over time, I realized that the limitations of paint weren't obstacles to overcome; they were qualities to work with. In my own life, so many of the things that once felt like limitations have ultimately become my greatest strengths. That changed the way I think about materials, too. Every medium has its own limitations, and I'm interested in what happens when you stop resisting them and instead let them speak for themselves. I draw different materials into conversation with one another because they don't always agree. Paint sometimes disagrees with drawing. Oil disagrees with cardboard. Control disagrees with chance. I like things when they disagree. That's where something unexpected can emerge and the work starts driving itself. I think the reason I paint so much is because I'm constantly trying to expand my understanding of what paint can do and of how I can relate to it. It took me years to realize I didn't have to control every outcome. I could trust the material, work with it and end up with something that felt more alive than anything I could have forced.

***Gillian's Game* is an example of your complicated psychological read because when you're in the spotlight you may be running from surveillance or danger, but you may also be in the spotlight because you want to be the centre of attention. Those two Gillians are operating on both sides of that spotlight culture.**

They are, and I really like working within that tension. I often talk about them in terms of surveillance or being watched, but the lighting in those paintings also behaves like the spotlights of a runway show. So it shifts between something threatening and something performative. That ambiguity keeps my paintings alive. The same structure can suggest exposure and danger but also visibility and desire: being looked at because you are under scrutiny, or because you are the centre of attention. The runway becomes more explicit in a later painting, *Gillian's Nine*, where that idea of a central stage is fully activated. Across these works, I'm interested in holding those opposing readings together without resolving them, so the painting stays unstable and open rather than settling into one clear narrative.

Are you obsessed?

Obsession, for me, has become less of a subject and more of a method.

The idea of obsession ties into your quote from Sylvia Plath's "Mad Girl's Love Song." In that villanelle, she goes into a kind of dream world where she admits, "I think I made you up inside my head."

A villanelle has a strong tie to the structure of a song. When I was reading the poem, I was forming the tempo in my head because I listen to a lot of music and I think about painting as a mixtape. But the quote "I think I made you up inside my head" is an acknowledgement that nothing is real and everything is real. I thought it was the perfect line for the show without saying too much.

There is a literary tradition in which the poem becomes self-reflexive. Yeats does it when he's stuck; he goes back to his circus animals as a way to get over his writer's block. In a painting like *Gillian's Trap*, you consciously bring together earlier aspects of your work. What's interesting about that procedure is that your current work is always haunted by your older work.

It's about who you are, what you're going to be and what you've already done. The self is all these things collapsing together. In that sense, the paintings feel like an echo of the past, a projection of the future and different elements of previous work.

The last time we talked, you said the street will always be a part of your work. Is it?

Absolutely. When I immigrated to Toronto, I went through a lot of different experiences and not all of them were good. I was hanging out with musicians, rappers, performing artists, the whole entertainment industry, which is an even bigger, scarier world than the art world. To see that unfold in my head was insane, and it formed a lot of my experiences because people who go into the industry who might not have come from money, for example, get exploited and things go left. But the street element I'm referring to is *edge*. I think that's always been me, but living in Toronto made me even more gritty. I think it comes across in the way that I handle paint. I hope my paintings tell someone that I was built up from the concrete of the city.

Do you think you've developed a painterly language that is yours now?

I think so. Certainty is the least interesting thing my paintings can offer. I'm not painting narratives; I paint conditions. And, for me, my paintings become interesting once the conditions fall apart. ▮