

HESSE FLATOW

Squier, Christopher. "Hesse Flatow presents Xiao Wang: Seeing Through". Placebo Post, March 5, 2025. Online.



SEEING THROUGH

Text by Christopher Squier
March 5, 2025

Hesse Flatow *presents* Xiao Wang: Seeing Through

February 14 – March 15, 2025

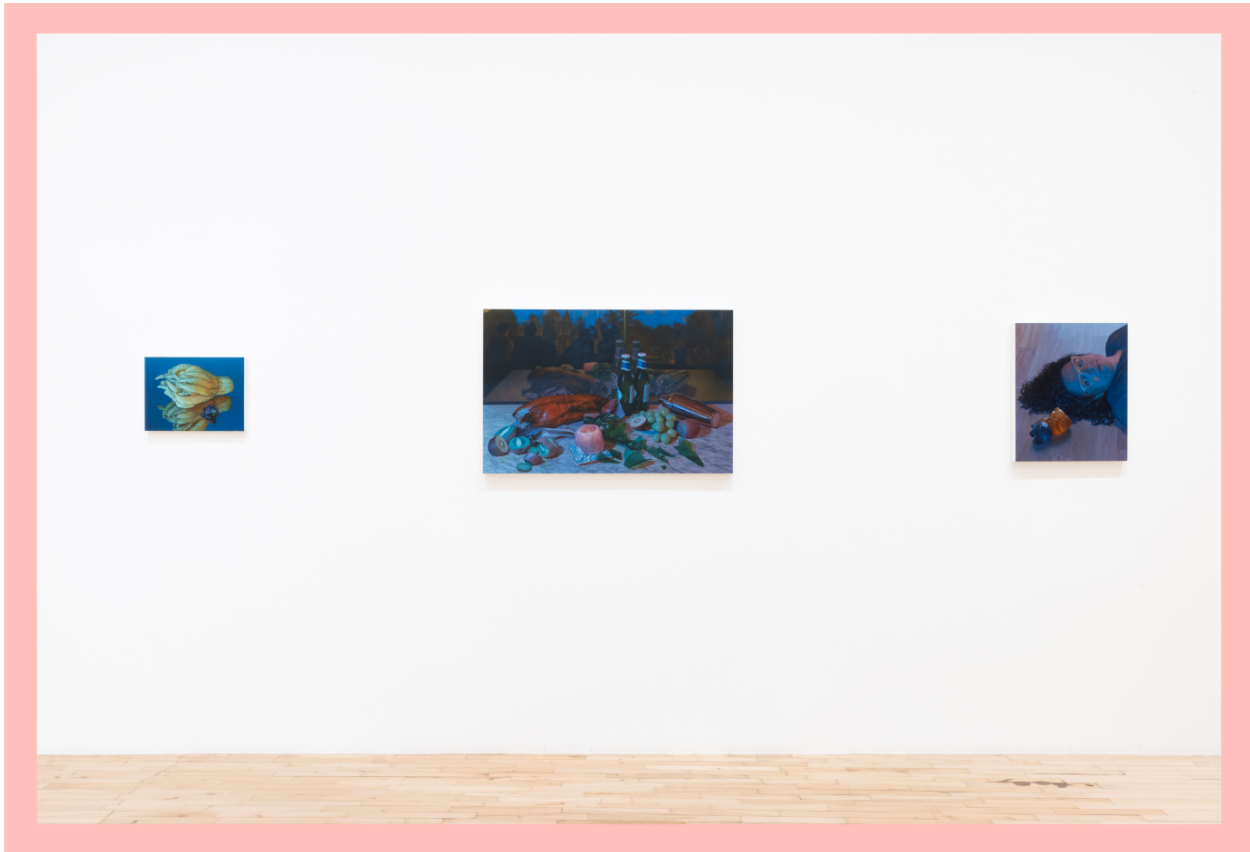


In Xiao Wang's *Seeing Through*, I found myself transported to those late hours of the day when evening meets darkness, when the orange rays of the sun cling like cobwebs to the surfaces of objects, rebounding across matter and electrifying it. Stepping into the exhibition at Hesse Flatow's new Tribeca gallery, you feel each painting's dusky, crepuscular glow as if hearths and candlelight are encircling you amid a blue velvet

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gloaming. Warm and cool hues duel with one another, producing optical vibrations. There's an ancestral, primordial genome that this palette taps into, exerting a magnetic pull at odds with the blazing neutral whites of standard gallery illumination. In the supple warmth of twilight fading to night, or of night passing into dawn, Wang locates the emotional depth of his subjects, who seem to mark the passing hours with unease and a certain troubled disposition. Likely, they find themselves under the influence of the same malaise that many of us feel as political headlines blare and civil rights transmute to dust. Likely, they cozy themselves up in the comforts of the evening to insulate themselves from these events, and yet stay awake worrying. Certain objects within each composition act as portents of our collective apprehension, keeping company with Wang's sleepless figures: a porcelain figurine of a two-headed horse, its eyes wide and mouth agape, unable to trot off in either direction; a raw steak, oozing blood onto the tiled floor; a shattered glass bottle beside a healing Himalayan salt votive; a toppled good luck cat fallen to the ground; and the lemony fruit of the Buddha's hand, its "fingers" clasped in prayer.



For me, the exhibition's atmosphere recalls Elizabeth Bishop's insomniac description of the night: "that world inverted / where left is always right, / where the shadows are really the body, / where we stay awake all night." At night, windows and mirrors are polished

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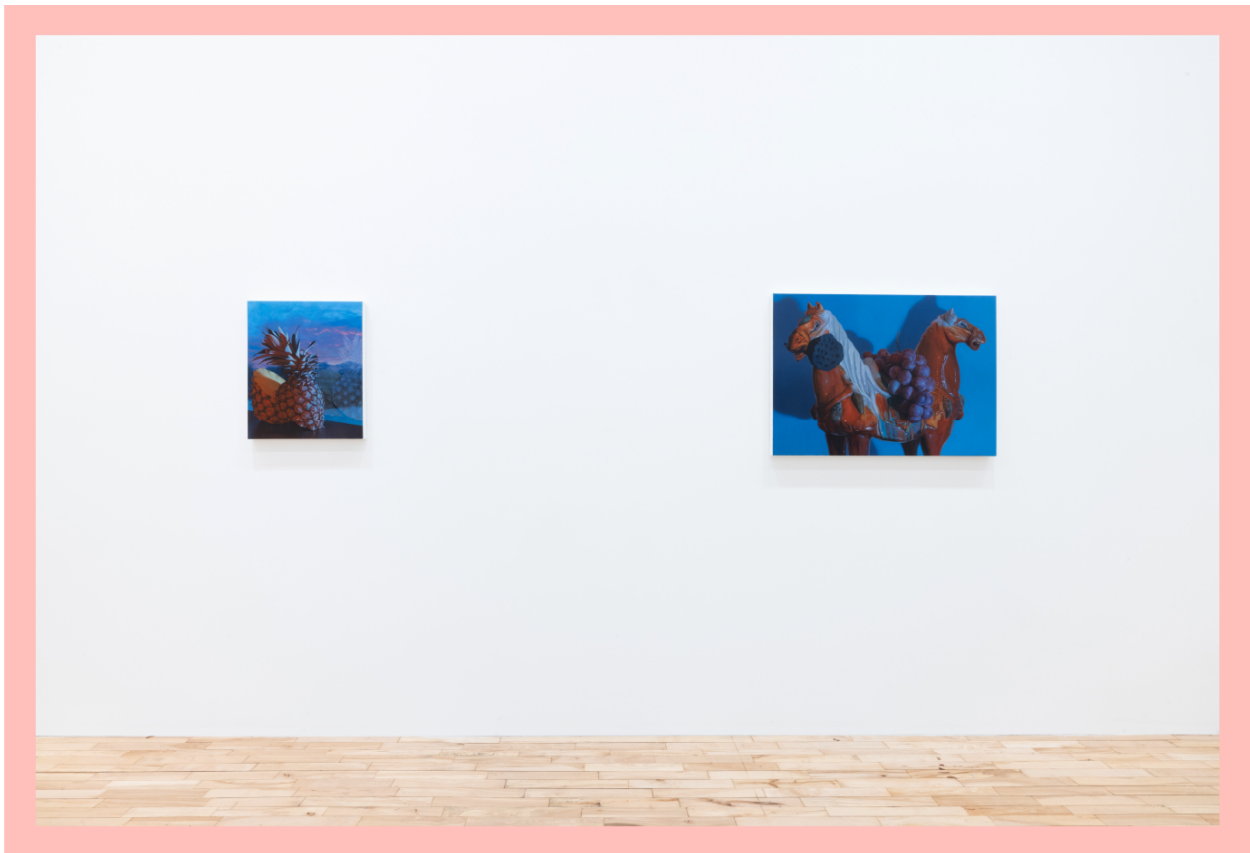
with an obsidian sheen. In their reflective planes, doubles proliferate, overlaying indoor and exterior worlds. This doubling creates a montage effect of still life and landscape. In one painting, a bisected pineapple far from its native tropics leaves its ghostly imprint on a wintry scene of snow and bare branches. There's a kind of longing and sadness to the scene, the solitary fruit somehow dejected, its leafy crown akimbo. Similarly, in *Kathy in the Window*, Wang's wife (the artist Kathy Sirico) sits reflected in a folding mirror, surrounded by the wavering glow of candlelight and the softness of early dawn. The scene forms a kind of altarpiece. Its offerings are analgesics of everyday comfort and numbness: potted plants, a brown bag of brick-red persimmons, half a glass of red wine, a cascade of spilled ibuprofen tablets. Sirico gazes elsewhere, out beyond the canvas' frame. Like many of the other figures shown here, there's a restless, distracted feeling to her portrait. Wang shows us all to be insomniacs, looking at the future with trepidation. The human skulls that feature in two of his other paintings propel this existential sensibility to its natural limits with a melodramatic gesture torn from Dutch still lifes of old.



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The tour de force of the exhibition, a monumental oil painting spanning over eight feet titled *Seeing Through*, depicts a group of Wang's friends and peers (myself included!) gathered in various states of revelry, romance, isolation, and dejection. The lower-right corner of the composition reveals its conceit: a string of Christmas lights runs along the wooden frame of a mirror, into which we as viewers gaze. The odd angle and setting recall Manet's mirrored portrait of a Paris nightclub, *Un Bar aux Folies Bergère*, in which the bartender's reflection appears to engage in conversation with a customer while the same figure simultaneously stands facing us, drained from an interminable shift. This same legerdemain, a sort of hallucinatory hall of mirrors, is put to use in Wang's painting through the shifting sense of perspective, in which a fiddle-leaf fig and a server's platter rise up, the black-and-white tiled floor sits askance, and certain figures are seen doubled, their faces melting disturbingly together. If, elsewhere, the night is a place of solitude and fraught soul searching, here it is capacious, capable of containing the full range of human emotion. Each of Wang's cast of characters is on their own journey, lost in the everyday torrent of life: infatuation, heartbreak, conviviality, and sorrow. It's a profound piece and a skillful feat of painterly technique which draws the viewer in and rewards them with its rich textures, overlapping narratives, and hidden details.



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Image captions:

[1] Xiao Wang, *Seeing Through*, 2024. Oil on linen. 50 x 100 inches. Photo by Jenny Gorman.

[2] Installation view: *Xiao Wang: Seeing Through*, 2025. Hesse Flatow, New York, NY. Photo by Jenny Gorman.

[3] Xiao Wang, *Kathy in the Window*, 2024. Oil on canvas. 36 x 48 inches. Photo by Jenny Gorman.

[4] Installation view: *Xiao Wang: Seeing Through*, 2025. Hesse Flatow, New York, NY. Photo by Jenny Gorman

Visit:

Hesse Flatow

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New York, NY 10013.

Tuesday – Saturday | 11am – 6pm

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