

THE BROOKLYN RAIL



Wang Ye: *Legume Blossoms in Blue*

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By Ryan Steadman

For Yale-educated, Changsha-born embroiderist Wang Ye, conflating one's own origin story with the history of art is a comforting creative format. Before Ye was even born, their embroidery teacher—the master weaver Auntie Li—had traveled to Japan to demonstrate her hometown's unique form of Xiang embroidery, which has been passed down across many generations and centuries. While abroad, Li was introduced to a mystifying art form she'd never seen and wouldn't soon forget: Western modernism. Cut to nearly thirty years later, and Ye, who had voraciously consumed both historical and cutting-edge art while studying abroad, would return to Changsha and bond with Li by transmuting

their favorite modernist artworks into embroideries, including an uncanny version of Meret Oppenheim's surrealistic *Object* (1936), a cup and saucer covered in Chinese gazelle fur. It was an innocent act of cultural translation between friends, but one that would become a beacon for Ye's artistic practice moving forward.

In his 1856 book, *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, nineteenth-century French diplomat, politician, and world traveler Alexis de Tocqueville mused that “history, it is easily perceived, is a picture-gallery containing a host of copies and very few originals.” As a survivor of multiple bloody regime changes in France and a

proto-cultural anthropologist who dedicated his career to analyzing systems of government during visits to the newly formed United States, Ireland, and elsewhere, Tocqueville had presumably earned this blasé stance. With their first solo exhibition in New York City at YveYANG, titled *Legume Blossoms in Blue*, Ye aligns with Tocqueville's apt metaphor while turning it on its head through their generous, Warholian approach.

Upon entering the gallery, visitors encounter one of Ye's most esoteric works, *Catching Light (Early Spring)* (2023), the first of three hand-woven fishing nets found in the exhibition. Hanging down from a single point near the ceiling



in an abundance of colored bands, this columnal object nimbly merges China's traditional masculine (fishing) and feminine (weaving) roles to form a type of genderless self-portrait. The multihued work is illuminated by red, green, and blue lights, and positioned as it is by the front entryway, *Catching Light (Early Spring)* could also be viewed as a personal form of signage, advertising the exhibition through Ye's artistic language.

After moving into a slender corridor leading to the central gallery, the vibe quickly changes from public to intimate as you encounter an alcove displaying one of Ye's wall works—a detailed embroidery (smaller than a piece of notebook paper) of overlaid images of butterfly wings, titled *Over its own reflection* (2025). Due to their organic silk threads and a heavily blended, proprietary embroidery technique, Ye's images tend to appear holographic, with light refracting off them differently depending on the viewer's position. *Over its own reflection* is no exception and, perhaps, revels in this effect more than any of Ye's other artworks on display. Butterflies are auspicious symbols in China, representing longevity and joy. But Ye's fractured image also nods to the illusory nature of art itself, referencing both "The Butterfly Dream" (a well-known story by fourth-century BCE Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi) and its Western cousin, "The Dream Argument" (first popularized by René Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy*). Both of these texts, in their own ways, express how man cannot fully determine whether our dreams or senses are closer to the objective truth.

After circling through this loaded exhibition, one of Ye's most sumptuous works, *The room with the view* (2025), meets you on your way out. Though it instantly evokes fin-de-siècle Matissean modernism—via a sunlit table, fresh flowers, and a window framing a wild mountainscape—the artist actually sourced the inspiration for this beatific image from an industrial embroidery catalog. One's head cannot help but spin with an endless loop of artistic deference: from the Post-Impressionistic exploration of Far Eastern art forms to the reabsorption of those trickled-down aesthetics into commercial imagery, and, finally, back into Ye's sophisticated contemporary artworks which, from halfway around the world, so clearly yet delicately elucidate how art gets reinterpreted across both time and space.