

# Flash Art

REVIEWS

27 January 2025, 9:00 am CET

## Michael Abel “MUTT” *YveYANG Gallery / New York* by Qingyuan Deng



Michael Abel, “MUTT”. Exhibition view at YveYANG, New York, 2025. Courtesy of the artist and YveYANG, New York.

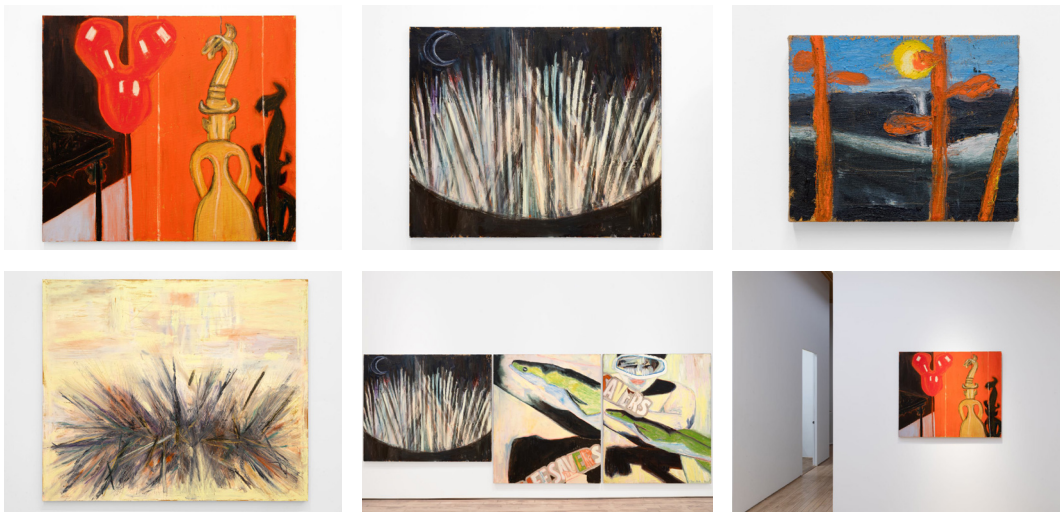
Michael Abel’s paintings refuse to offer clarity about what they want or need — assuming we accept the mythology of a painterly subjectivity that can precisely locate its own desire. The painter’s first exhibition at YveYANG Gallery, “MUTT,” knows no time, geography, or genre. Facts are subsumed by fictions untethered from their original medium. In the end, no one has the final word.

The exhibition title derives from two paintings that explore the concept of “mutt,” a derogatory term for people of mixed ancestry. In these works, Abel subverts the presumed positionality of self-portraiture, abandoning frontal observation and top-down perspectives in favor of zoomed-in, upside-down views. These views highlight the artist’s genetic anomaly: an overgrowth of hair trailing down his neck, presumably the result of an interracial blend of hereditary traits. In *Mutt* (2024), liberal use of oil stick on linen achieves color blocks simultaneously languid and vital, specific to the represented body and disseminating to other imageries, blotches of unresolved messiness that resist the kinds of biographical readings usually readily available within the trope of an affected artist’s self-portrait. The extra line of hair spirals upward along the ridge of the artist’s spinal contour. The seat of reason is subjugated to a materiality of madness with different colors twisting and turning. The other hair painting, *Mutt (Spike)* (2024), with its focus on additional hair exploding into frantic lines of flight projecting outward, mutates to the territory of full-blown abstraction. Still, everything makes sense here. Abel was trained as an architect. He is concerned with modernism’s fraught aftershock first and foremost, which is to say that his paintings cannot help but excel at mobilizing differential blocks of space with varying degrees of intensity and delight via the constructed nature of painterly logic.

# Flash Art

Abel is an intuitive and affective painter, acutely perceptive to the difficulty of representing a given thing in its fullest legibility. Instead of chasing after the bigger picture, he insists on saying the thing he has ascertained without a doubt, until the said thing takes on another register of intensity through repetition. To this end, *Burning Bin (Moonlight)* (2024), uninterested in the psychological realism so popular with practitioners of contemporary painting, only recalls Abel's hazy memory of the frenzy of the original event and nothing else. The episode evolves into absolute nothingness through the artist's candid and virtuosic brushstrokes pressing onto themselves, which are reminiscent of early works by Jutta Koether, whose "bad painting" exudes a punk sensibility incredulously hostile to distinctions of taste and accusations of excess. Similarly, the conundrum of pinning down immigration stories — of the artist's move from Toronto to New York, and previously his Chinese mother's relocation to Alberta — becomes horror drama in *Lady Liberty Bounce V02* (2024), in which *Lady Liberty*, consisting of stretched patches of muffled, muddy color, each layer obfuscating and revealing the last one, whirls like a ghost who haunts suburban serenity, embodying the failed promises of emancipatory politics. Its more stationary counterpart is *Moonlight (After Munch)* (2024), in which *Lady Liberty* becomes an angsty, faceless spirit paying a malicious visit to a domestic scene appropriated from Edvard Munch's *Moonlight* (1893).

Translation and mistranslation and transference and countertransference are important themes to Abel. In *Forbidden Mickey* (2024) and *Before Christ (Mickey)* (2024), the artist transforms vaguely Asian quasi-mystical gimcracks that he found on eBay and stand-ins for Mickey Mouse into neo-pop memorabilia with melancholic auras that are evident in the vicissitudes of sensual pigments. Remnants of ideologically explicit spaces (such as the Forbidden Palace or a church) are flattened into the misty slippage of multicultural encounter. Possibly three-dimensional aspects are suggested by the presence of shadows. Elsewhere, devotions to past fantasy regain new contexts in the present. In *Before Christ (Self Portrait of Bill Zhou)* (2024), Bill Zhou, both an imaginary childhood cowboy and a misnomer inspired by the artist's mother's mistranslated name, is transmuted into a Chinese literato set against a plethora of timeless elements. What does the repeated phrase "before Christ" mean? The spiritual act of kneeling down before Jesus Christ, or the chronological time before the messianic event that is Christ's birth, along with his eternal and universal logos that needs no translation? Both ring true as Abel jumps between different cultures and times, from the mysterious beauty of Crucifixion worship that resides beyond language in *The Green Christ (After Denis)* (2024) to the glamorous, airy, Michel-Majerus-adjacent and fundamentally unserious *Blotter* (2024) and *Lifesavers* (2024), which revel in the dilemma of language. Sometimes Abel seems to take a leap of faith in that which supposedly transcends the boundaries of history and culture and is still expressed through language. Sometimes Abel retreats to the orderlessness of personal truth far from immediacy. If anything is conclusive, it is that a mutt (Abel certainly is one. Can Jesus be counted as one? Think how he is racialized across the world!), burdened by the mystery of genetic recoding, is the original autofiction, yielding undulating cross-references and intertextuality, counterfactual and larger-than-life.



Top row, from left to right: Michael Abel, *Forbidden Mickey*, 2024. Oil and oil stick on linen. 101,6 x 121,9 cm. | *Burning Bin (Moonlight)*, 2024. Oil and oil stick on linen. 152,4 x 182,9 cm. | *Moonlight*, 2024. Oil on linen. 20,3 x 25,4 cm | Courtesy of the artist and YveYANG, New York.  
Bottom row, from left to right: Michael Abel, *Mutt (Spike)*, 2024. Oil and oil stick on linen. 182,9 x 152,4 cm. | Michael Abel, "MUTT". Exhibition view at YveYANG, New York, 2025. | Courtesy of the artist and YveYANG, New York.