

# G-IRL

## Faye Wei Wei



Recently graduating from Slade School of Fine Art, 23-year old Faye Wei Wei is apart of a new wave of passionate young artists giving new life and energy to painting. Working from her home studio in South London, Faye's large-scale dreamy figurative artworks are impressive in size, affection and prowess. With canvases almost the height of the room and a floor piled with drawings, the only way to describe the experience of encountering Faye's work is to liken it to a reverie. Gorgeous and compelling in equal parts, it's hard not to gush while getting lost in the romance of the pastel tones and buoyant mark making. Influenced by illuminated manuscripts, Fra Angelico and the symbolism of sea, the London born painter's emotionally-charged and aesthetically-decorative work explores love, masculine tropes and the performance of gender. With her first ever solo show at Cob Gallery soon approaching, we spent the afternoon with Faye to discuss her time at art school, wanting to be more than a token Asian artist and whether or not it's possible to have a crush on a painting.

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Words by Kadish Morris & Photography by Dunja Opalko

**Do you remember the first person to encourage you to make art?**

I had really great teachers in high school and a really amazing art department. I always knew that I wanted to do it but I was really lucky to have people who encouraged me to do it too. I went to a school that was pretty much all boys and I felt really competitive. I wanted to be just as good as the boys or even better. So I'd always be quite obnoxious in class and make really big drawings and occupy a lot of space.

**I imagine it takes a lot of confidence to make a large-scale work...**

I usually paint on canvases that are 72x54 inches. It's exactly the right weight and size in proportion to my own body. When I'm working on this size, I can make exactly the right gestures. When you're mark making, you're kind of dancing with the painting. You're performing in a way. It seems like exactly the right size for me. I can move them around and they're not too hard to stretch. I find it really difficult to do small paintings. The scale is really challenging. Because my work is figurative, I really want to feel the human scale. You're making something come alive that looks like a human. It's a really intimate thing. You're totally alone and lost with this person that you're forming out of nothing.

**Do you feel like painting big means you're less conscious of every mark you make?**

I really try to make every mark mean it. Even if it's big, I think every element is so important to how it looks in the end. I feel like when I'm there in front of a canvas, I have to be really genuine, otherwise, the marks look sloppy and it doesn't hold the love and emotion and the magic that I want it to.

**Is intimacy important to your practice?**

Yes. I'm totally infatuated with painting. I was reading this interview between Jutta Koether and Mike Kelley and they were taking about the difference between painting and music. They were saying that you can't have a crush on a painting like you can with a band and I liked that idea. Music can be so overwhelmingly romantic. I think a lot of artists sometimes just wish they made music. There's something about music that totally envelops your entire body. Whereas with painting, unless you're making it, you're not having that type of experience with it.

**I think it's possible to have a crush on a good painting...**

I hope so. I just love that everyone still really loves art. I think there is something about art that is so magical. I went to the abstract expressionist show at the Royal Academy. It was amazing to see people responding to painting in that way still. People were looking at a de Kooning and you could feel them getting lost in the energy and the expression. I guess in a way it's similar to music.

**Do you feel like painting's power is in its ability to instantly connect with regular people?**

Yes. I feel like with painting, you look at it and it either draws you in or it doesn't. It's so immediate. I think you can look at a painting without having any knowledge of the context. You don't have to over intellectualise it because if a painting is good, whatever it's about, you get this gut reaction like 'Wow, someone really cared and there's so much love in this'.

**What was your experience like at Slade School of Fine Art?**

I love Slade. I miss it. It was wonderful and I'm so lucky to have thought about nothing but painting for four years. My teachers were so wonderful and patient and inspiring. And all of my friends were lovely. I just felt really special being there. You'd be in the studio late at night drinking red wine and everyone would be so passionate about what they did. It was a mess and it smelled like turps and you couldn't breathe, but it was a really wonderful school.

**Talk me through your process...**

I work a lot from drawings. But they're a thing in themselves. You can never replicate the same feeling. So often times – I draw something and realise, I'm never going to make a painting as good as this drawing. They're not just a sketch for the bigger thing. I really believe in that. To hold that tension and energy and passion, it has to be a totally new image and something that surprises me. I have a really specific surface that I need to paint on. It takes me quite a long time to prime them. They need to have a really quick surface for the paint to slip and slide on. Otherwise if it gets too absorbed, the colours get muted and the marks disappear. I paint really thinly too. I see it as having a pond of water before me. The thinness of the paint adds to this idea that the painting is like a pond and I'm laying out objects on top of the surface. When I was young, I had this precious jewellery box and I would lay out my earrings and rings, and I feel like I'm doing the same thing. I'm laying these objects out onto the canvas. My paintings are not grounded in anything real. For me, painting is a space for you to dream within or to have a fantasy. It's about instinct and emotion. I don't ever want it to look like the real world. When I paint thin, the colours feel more fresh. They have more light. I really like how things look when they feel fresh.

**Talk to me about the two figures present throughout your work...**

I'm really interested in the performance of gender. Sometimes I'll feel really feminine, whatever that means, and sometimes I'll feel quite masculine. Criticism I get a lot is that people say that my work is decorative and feminine, but I think – why are you saying these things as though it's a bad thing? This is how I choose to perform my gender and if I'm being criticised for it, it's because you're associating femininity with weakness and that's your problem, not mine. I think my work always goes back to these ideas. The duality between the male and female.

**And the horses?**

That's me trying to figure out masculinity I think. Going to museums and seeing these Equestrian sculptures. Macho bronze men on horses winning battles. I'm taking these masculine tropes and making them soft. Almost feminising them. I'm collecting these things that are becoming my personal tropes. The sea urchin, the greek sculpture, the flowers. These things are becoming my personal bag of tricks.

**Do you ever come back to something the next day and hate it?**

Of course. I think everyone does. When you're up close to something and then you stand back, you're always surprised by what you've made. I woke up one morning wanting to paint banana car and after I had painted it, I stood back and thought 'Wow that is truly the ugliest thing I have ever made' [Laughs] But I'm learning to let loose and embrace failure. Luckily, oil is very flexible and you can just paint on top.

**Where do your ideas come from?**

I hoard a lot of source imagery. I collect images of greek sculptures. I go on image banks. I also go

to museums and draw. I love the Wallace Collection. Every room feels so old. Also, when I was in New York. I would go around junk shops and collect photographs that people took of the sea. This idea that people would try and stand before something so vast and as amazing as the sea, and try to swallow it in one picture on a disposable camera. I think it's really sweet and human that we try to do this. It's similar with painting. I see this vastness of landscape and life and you have to try and capture it. If you take a picture of the sea, it'll never be as grand as the real thing. I love the symbolism of water, and the sea, because they're romantic tropes. Read any poets work and they would have written about the sea or the moon.

### **What do you do for fun?**

I love the cinema. I get really absorbed by it. I love the romance of it. The ritual of getting popcorn and sitting in a dark space. Totally been taken away. I'd love to make a film one day. I really like this film called *In the Mood for Love*. It's like a long poem. It's by this director from Hong Kong called Wong Kar-wai. The colours in it are so beautiful and it's really artistic and gorgeous. It's set in 1962 which is the year my mum was born. I like seeing what Hong Kong was like when my parents grew up there. There's this part in it when the man whispers a secret into a hole in an old wall and he fills it up with dirt after he's done. I kinda feel like I'm telling secrets to my paintings sometimes but they will always stay silent for me.

### **What music are you into?**

I love love songs. Don't you think it's weird that all songs are about love? Don't you think it's weird that they're aren't songs about friendship or dinner? [Laughs] That's true actually. I guess love is something everyone can relate to in some form...So it's totally fine for me to make work about love! I make paintings that are really pleasurable. I don't want to burden people. Painting for me is a form of escapism.

### **You spent last summer in New York. What do you like about the city?**

In New York, the people are a lot less shy. People are much more open there and that's something that I really appreciate. I spent the summer in New York and LA. I'd never moved away from home. I was flung into this world where I had to find somewhere to rent and make new friends. I just love the city so much because I associate it with freedom and finding myself there. The sunlight is so gorgeous there. I began making pastel candy coloured paintings when I was there because I was feeling really inspired by the light. Also, I love Chinatown in New York. When I was growing up in London, being Chinese and being from a first generation immigrant family, I've always felt really different. But walking around Chinatown, I felt so at home there – surrounded by people who look like me. It's exciting to not feel like an outsider. I don't feel like I'm necessarily being discriminated against here. I'm just more aware that I look different. After Brexit, there's a weird vibe and energy and it's really scary.

### **What do you typically use the internet for?**

I love Instagram. As long as it doesn't consume you. As long as I know that my paintings are much more important than getting a like. It can be a really useful tool so why not? It's why I changed my name. My name is actually Faye Wong and not Faye Wei Wei.

### **I was going to ask about your name...**

Faye Wong is a super amazing pop star in China and so I changed my name because I literally

wouldn't be able to be googled. It was a pragmatic decision. But also around the time I was 16, Ai Weiwei was in jail. I don't necessarily connect to his work, but it was the first time a person with a Chinese face was really important in the western world and in the art world. He became really important to me because he was making it easier for people like me to be accepted. Through changing my name, I was able to claim my own identity and make it whatever I wanted it to be. It's stupid to think that you shouldn't be pragmatic about these things, but the internet is so important. If I was Faye Wong still, no-one would be able to find my website. It's really basic stuff.



**I notice you have a Picasso book. Is he one of your favourite artists?**

I love his drawings. They're amazing. You can tell that he's looked at so many bodies. How ever abstract it is. It always feels amazingly solid and present. He really is the master.

**Who else do you admire?**

My friends. I really admire my contemporaries. It's also the competitiveness you can have with people who make good work. It makes you feel jealous. I'm very jealous of my friend Omari Douglin. He's quite amazing. I really like illuminated manuscripts. Old medieval stuff. Piero della Francesca. Fra Angelico. He made these murals in San Marco in Florence and I saw them when I was 18. They were so beautiful. They glittered in the sun light because he would crush up quartz and add them to the paint. They had all these surreal looking floating hands and heads to depict multiple moments in one picture. I also saw this amazing show in New York of Suellen Rocca's work. She's really diaristic and quite girly or whatever that means, but her work is really powerful and she really inspired me. I was talking to my sister about the difference between Tracy Emin and Antony Gormley. Tracy Emin makes really beautiful diaristic biographical work but it's seen as weak because it's about her emotions. Whereas Antony Gormley makes work about his body and about the patriarchy and about masculinity but his male emotions are seen as universal. I think Emin is incredibly brave and super smart. For girls like me who make work that is really emotional, she paved the way for us but I feel like she's not as respected in the same way that other YBA's are.

**People tend to criticize her a lot more than the other YBA'S...**

People are really polarised about her.

**I think people are always quite polarised about successful women...**

It's always like 'She's great, but she's had no children!' It's nothing new, but nothing's been done. I'm not whining about it. It's the truth. It happens across all fields.

**When you get to a certain age, you realise it's not just a theory, it's actually real!**

Yeah. You realise you're not delusional. It really is happening [Laughs]

**Do you want success?**

I want to be successful for my work and not for being a token Asian girl that paints. Also, I don't feel like I should feel ashamed for wanting success. It's 'embarrassing' to admit that you want to earn money or be famous, but actually, if you want to survive, you have to realise these things and be pragmatic. I don't expect it to come to me on a plate. I am scared sometimes that my race and my gender might hinder me in the future, but as women of colour, we just have to be even stronger and work even harder and be even more intelligent than our male counterparts. It's annoying that we have to prove ourselves, but I'm up for the challenge. I'm not just going to be weak or let people define me as a girly painter. I'm just as serious as most of the boys who are doing it.

**How do you know when a painting is finished?**

Instinct. It just feels right. It takes everything out of me. I really put all of my energy and concentration into it. It's really nice being able to work in my own space. At art school. It's more performative. People would tell me that my work was really "pretty" so I would make it really brutal. But now, I have much more freedom to make stuff that I want to make. I feel so young on this journey of painting. I don't think I'll make good work till I'm 80 years old! But now that I've graduated, I'm just really trying to paint more. I just want to get better at it keep pushing myself.

**What do you think about the sentiment that painting isn't contemporary?**

It's a really funny idea when people say that painting is dead. Painting can never die. I think there's something about it that people will always feel for. People think it's ridiculous when a Picasso sells for millions, but a good painting has so much currency and is so important to human spiritually. I just really believe in painting.