

# WANG SHUI

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As in art and in life, WANGSHUI is not trying to get precisely anywhere. Yet just now, their fluid work, steadily switching mediums and defying categorization, has nevertheless arrived in Venice. Obsessed with the origins of consciousness and humanity's preoccupation with violence, they hope that, through AI, love will find a way

CERTAINTY OF THE FLESH, installation  
view at Haus der Kunst, Munich, 2023, multichannel  
live simulation, LED panels, computer



People are always asking me, like, where's the AI? They're always looking for the AI," WangShui said to me. The question should not be entirely unexpected, since the artist has gained a fair amount of attention in recent years for using artificial intelligence in the making of artworks—in an installation at the 2022 Whitney Biennial, for example, that involved two oil-on-aluminum paintings and an LED sculpture from the *Isle of Vitrious* (2022) series, which portrayed "this place that only existed between my perception and the machine's perception." The paintings in particular seemed—and were—handmade. Yet WangShui looked at me nonplussed, as if to say, isn't it obvious where the artificial intelligence is? "It's already in us. It's like we're already integrated. I mean, data is already so much a part of our daily lives. We have this constant data input that we're absorbing. It's about developing a kind of awareness to how it feels inside our body more than it's about, you know, creating some sort of binary opposition between humans and machines."

WangShui and I were having this conversation in a place that looks as far removed from data input as it's possible to get these days, at least in the northeastern US. We were deep in the countryside, a hundred miles from New York City, in a converted barn that's surrounded by a cow pasture. The barn is red, as barns in America are supposed to be, but it is sprawling and ungainly, like an overgrown shed. The nearest urban center, if you can call it that, is a hamlet half a mile down the road that boasts a few 19th- and 20th-century frame houses and a tiny Methodist church. Just beyond the cow pasture are woods in every direction; except for a couple of tumbledown structures flanking the barn, there's not a house in sight. It's an unlikely place to be working with AI, WangShui admitted. But it does offer the kind of soaring interior space that their Manhattan apartment does not.

WangShui doesn't think much of binary opposition, whether it's humans versus machines, or humans versus other humans. They identify as non-binary, and many aspects of their being seem an expression of that: the extreme variety of their work, which can range from a cascade of LEDs to an oil painting on aluminum to a habitat for silkworms; their resistance to being attached to some sort of narrative; even their past reluctance to be photographed. "The contemporary conception of identity is that you are *this*. You have a fixed identity," they said. "And in the art world it's really



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become a thing—you’re an artist that fits in this category, which means you produce this type of work. It really is this kind of trap. If we all kind of orient ourselves to expand our perceptive structures, we won’t be trapping each other. We’ll actually be seeing each other more fully.”

Does this attitude have something to do with their being queer, being trans?

“Yeah. I mean, it’s that same kind of oscillation. To me, being trans, it’s not about any point of arrival. It’s about this constant practice of being aware and shifting, and being comfortable with that fluidity. It’s not about getting somewhere.”

**T**hough WangShui often appears quite glamorous in photo shoots, this was a workday, a Tuesday afternoon in February with a rapidly approaching deadline for the Venice Biennale, where their installation is being featured in the international exhibition. They were dressed for work: black running pants and a dark gray zip-up Protémoa sweater, with their long black hair tied back and up and out of the way. The floor of the barn was unpolished concrete. In front of an oversized garage door sat a plywood worktable scattered with stuff—magazines, water bottles, a MacBook, a printer, Philip Ball’s lavishly illustrated *Patterns in Nature*, Franco Berardi’s semiotext(e) book *Breathing: Chaos and Poetry*. Above the table, the garage door’s lone row of glass panes was buzzing with flies—a feature WangShui has learned to live with. On the wall across from the table, the artist had taped little digital printouts of paintings they’d made for their solo exhibition *Window of Tolerance* at the Haus der Kunst in Munich. But the studio was dominated by three four-meter-high aluminum panels, each of them incised with a swirling, cryptic design. Arched at the top, these panels looked like vastly overscaled altarpieces bearing the marks of some primitive, possibly gnostic gospel. Their titles are *Cathexis I, II, and III*.

The panels were bound for the Arsenale, Venice’s 900-year-old naval shipyard, where they would be fitted into a trio of enormous, arched windows in the 16th-century Artiglierie. The three pieces would get almost imperceptible traces of pigment before being shipped off a week from now. “I’ve been in this process in the past three years of just really creating different types of marks,” they said, walking up to the panel with the most elaborate design. “This is probably

the most complicated one I’ve made. Like this, for example, is done with a certain grade of sandpaper.” They pointed to an abraded part of the surface, then to a nearby section incised with small, overlapping circles. “This is done with a metal brush. This is kind of like a circular motion. And these rings”—they pointed to a series of widely separated oval shapes—“I use, like, these dental tools. It actually can sound like nails on a chalkboard, right? But somehow it felt so good.”

Stepping back, I registered in this intricate design a long, coiled presence—more than one, actually.

“I don’t know, I think this snake just appeared and kind of took over the painting,” said WangShui. “And since then I’ve been trying to kind of trace where that comes from in terms of consciousness.” This has led them down some rather esoteric paths. They mention *The Cosmic Serpent*, a 1998 book by Jeremy Narby, a Canadian anthropologist who went to Peru, got down with the native culture, and ended up—“it’s kind of like shamans and ayahuasca ceremonies, it’s that kind of book,” said WangShui. One of its main lessons is that “nature has its own language, and that language is form. So he needed to stop overthinking everything and just follow the form.” Eventually, after various hallucinations and a significant amount of form-following, Narby began to register the resemblance of twin snakes—a universal symbol of knowledge, death, rebirth—to the twisting strands of DNA. “So I’ve become really fascinated with it as a kind of symbol that’s related to what they call the origin of knowledge,” WangShui went on. “It just came to me that these works should be about snakes somehow.”

Not that you have to go to the Peruvian Amazon and drink ayahuasca to find snake symbolism that’s tied to the origin of knowledge. WangShui is Chinese American, born in Dallas in 1986 to Christian parents. Fervently religious and deeply conservative, they moved to Thailand when WangShui was little and served as missionaries there. They were hardly supportive of WangShui’s emerging identity as a trans person. Masculine/feminine, Asian/American—“I was always in this very liminal kind of space,” they said, a space of perpetual transition. “I was having to, you know, deal with and resist my parents, their ideologies. And there was this whole other world in front of me—that was where I was heading, but I almost didn’t have enough agency to have it.”



HYPPHAL STREAM (ISLE OF VITR.:OUS), installation view at the 16th Biennale de Lyon, 2022  
 Previous spread: WEAK PEARL, mixed-media video installation on view at the Julia Stroschek Foundation, Berlin, 2019  
 Flexible LED mesh, mica flakes, three-channel video, surround sound, loop

Eventually, though, they turned 18. Back in California, they enrolled in Pasadena City College, then transferred to the University of California, Berkeley, to study art and social anthropology. This led to another problem, however. “When I got to Berkeley, I got all these grants and fellowships and things where I was always having to narrativize my biography. And everyone wanted a very simple story that was, you know, logical or digestible. They want to place you or label you. And so much of my work is about evading those structures.”

**E**vading indeed. What WangShui calls liminal, others might consider fugitive. No great surprise, then, that they should appear in *Going Dark*, a recent group exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum in New York that featured mostly Black artists—Glenn Ligon, Kerry James Marshall, Faith Ringgold, Carrie Mae Weems, and Charles White among them—and the “strategies of concealment” they have pursued. WangShui’s strategy has to do with what they call “these in-between spaces,” “this negative space.” That’s where they feel comfortable, where they wish to dwell, in a realm where neither they nor their work can be pinned down. “That’s why I always want to keep it moving between these many different formats,” they said. “Every project that I did I presented in a different medium, because I wanted people to know that they weren’t going to get one thing. It was about building a freedom into it for myself.”

Before snakes, it was reality TV. WangShui spent the couple of years after the pandemic hit in thrall to *The Bachelor*, the ABC reality show that pits a dozen or so seductive women against each other in an increasingly desperate bid to win the affections of a studly man, or at least persuade him not to dump them next. The show trucks in shock and randiness and hope and heartbreak, and what it doesn’t provide—any actual sense of reality, for example—was for several seasons more than made up for by *Unreal*, a fictional counterpart co-created by a former producer on *The Bachelor*. “It’s about these two powerful women who are kind of like really manipulative and just create all of this drama,” WangShui said of *Unreal*. “It’s kind of about this way that we’re exploiting people’s identities. That’s the time that I feel like we’re living in. There’s these dual narratives about, like, progress and inclusion, but there’s also this intense dimension of violence.”

WangShui’s response was on display in the exhibition at the Haus der Kunst. In the first room, a series of oil-on-aluminum paintings created in partnership with an AI—each one a comment on some aspect of reality TV. *Pillow IV (Amazing Taste)* (2023) alluded to the air of sensuousness and luxury that reality shows project, while the clutch of champagne glasses in the painting *Window of Tolerance* (2023) suggested not just extravagance but inebriation and lowered inhibitions. Over in the second room, playing out on a large screen, was *Certainty of the Flesh* (2023), an AI-driven



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WINDOW OF TOLERANCE, 2023, oil on aluminum, 244 x 153 x 5 cm



COWLICK BUZZ, 2023, oil on aluminum, cast bronze, 244 x 152 x 5 cm



BLINDSIDED, 2021, oil on aluminum, 229 x 109 x 1 cm





WANGSHUI photographed in New York by MATT GRUBB for BLAU International

simulation of the “reality” dynamic at work, a breathless sequence of OMG! moments masking the true reality of exploitation and sleaze.

As we sat talking in their studio, WangShui suggested we move to the other side of its lone interior wall. Stepping over a tangle of electrical cords studded with tiny LEDs, I entered an even larger space that held some tables and a couple of chairs. The chairs faced a long heap of LED-studded cords that were hanging down to the floor from about a meter above. I took a seat while WangShui turned on the LEDs, which blinked on and off in an almost mesmerizing fashion. I stared at them for several minutes before I registered what I should have seen right away: that while I was focused on the lights that were *on*, it was the lights that were *off*, the negative spaces, that formed the imagery. Birds, maybe, flying from right to left across the curtain of lights?

“Flies,” said WangShui. Like the flies on the garage-door windows.

A much larger LED screen comprises the other part of WangShui’s Venice installation: *Lipid Muse*, a 12-meter-wide mesh that spills down to the floor from a height of about a meter. When you enter the room from the far end, this cascading mesh will be nearly 30 meters away, far enough that you’ll be able to make out its imagery; move closer and that imagery will disintegrate into a jumble of lights. This won’t be the only example of negative space on view: WangShui considers the scratches, the shallow incisions in the aluminum panels, to be negative space as well. But that’s just the start of what they are attempting here.

“I haven’t described this project to anyone yet,” they said. “I haven’t even let my gallery come here. But what we’re trying to do is to create a simulation. We have been investigating this question of desire and this question of love, and how it can be simulated and what we can learn from that.” This simulation was built by WangShui and their programmers, Brandon Roots and Caco Peguero, with the game engine Unity, which generates 3D imagery in real time; it’s what you’ll be able to make out on the screen of LEDs when you enter the Artiglierie. What they’re simulating is the emergence of a consciousness.

The word “consciousness” crops up so often in talking with WangShui that it might be viewed as their ultimate concern. There are the snakes. There is painting in general—“one of the most direct

paths to our consciousness,” WangShui told me. And then there is AI. “I’m not interested in the potential of AI having its own consciousness or whatever,” WangShui said. “So much of that conversation is about humans versus AI. That’s something I have zero interest in. I think AI is a tool to simulate and mirror dimensions of consciousness. It should be a tool to help evolve our species. I think it could save our species from the misguided cultural/behavioral patterns we’ve created, such as violence. That’s why I’m really interested in machine learning—as a tool for thinking or rethinking our kind of foundational ideas of something like love. Because there’s so much violence now, and violence is about people who are unable to engage with love.”

As with AI and machine learning, WangShui views Unity—the game engine, the simulation engine—as a tool for understanding consciousness. The simulation they have undertaken makes sense within the context of panpsychism, a view of the mind that has gained currency in recent years as advances in AI and neuroscience have brought renewed attention to the question of consciousness—a phenomenon that is still not fully explained after centuries of inquiry. Panpsychism has been explored by philosophers from Plato to Leibniz to William James to, most recently, David Chalmers. “It’s like this idea that every dimension of matter has consciousness,” said WangShui. “It’s considering, well, if everything has its purpose, and every atom kind of knows what its function is, couldn’t that be considered consciousness? So it’s starting from that base level and thinking, OK, how can we understand the process in which matter forms something as complex as love?”

WangShui is an omnivorous reader, but their approach to research is like their approach to art and their approach to AI: highly intuitive and deeply idiosyncratic. So do not expect to walk into the Artiglierie, view the simulation from 30 meters away, and grasp all there is to know about love and consciousness. To appreciate their art is not to understand it but to be mystified by it. As with everything involving consciousness, the element of wonder will not be denied.

WangShui’s contribution to *Stranieri Ovunque—Foreigners Everywhere*, the international exhibition of the 60th Venice Biennale, will show from April 20 until November 24, 2024.

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