



*Canon*

Thomas Blair, Kunning Huang, Waseem Nafisi

March 21 – May 11, 2024

**Opening reception:** Thursday, March 21, 6-8pm.

Kapp Kapp is pleased to announce the opening of *Canon*, a three-person exhibition featuring new paintings by artists Thomas Blair, Kunning Huang, and Waseem Nafisi.

Blair, Huang, and Nafisi's painting practices intersect vis-à-vis an examination of the image through the lens of the post-modern art historical canon, each reckoning with notions of flatness, authorship, and identity by way of the printer. Building upon a post-Warholian trajectory, the three artists, who were also classmates at The Cooper Union, have circumnavigated the many 21<sup>st</sup> century ideations of painting and technological developments, arriving separately yet with equivalence at three distinct practices using inkjet printers, scanners, AI, and image processing technologies to paint. This new generation of image painters are transgressing a historic medium, reaching its inevitable point of progress. *Canon* is a consideration of this very point of progress, where do we go from here? Blair, Huang, and Nafisi have the answer.

Thomas Blair's approach to imagemaking began with photography. Though his practice perhaps is the most painterly of the three artists, Blair uses a variety of photographic devices and techniques to create the content for his paintings, whether it be a camera, dragged from the internet, scanned from a book, or generated altogether with artificial intelligence. Blair's hand is deepest involved within his image processing as he paints, edits, layers, and adjusts his images in Photoshop to an aesthetic flatness translatable via his large format Epson P9000 printer. By deconstructing these images into further layers, in which each layer contains a part of the final image, and then printing these layers onto the same sheet of canvas, Blair has remodeled his inkjet printer as if it were a kind of digital silkscreen, in many ways mirroring Warhol's iconic screenprint. Blair prints layer after layer of inkjet, colliding layers of color, masks of black and shadow, and masterfully camouflaged elements of, what the artist refers to as, "inside-out trompe l'oeil," in which the layered ink becomes rich enough that it forms a visual layer of "paint" on the surface of his work, tricking the eye with a material illusionism. For *Canon*, Blair has produced his largest painting to date, *White Car Crash*, 2024, a clear incitement of Warhol's 1960s *Death and Disaster* series, which, instead of sourcing its reference from a newspaper report on a fatal car accident, Blair has instead invented his own car crash image via AI technology. Neutralizing the once-scandalous content of its lethal abjection and reality principle, Blair has rendered the iconicity of '60s violence as now virtual and personless. Nearly eight feet tall, *White Car Crash* towers above its viewer, inviting you to examine its many layers of informational strata and eventually becoming an abstract experience, no longer defined by the brutality of the invented image and instead supposing its viewer to engage with the flatness of the image itself. Raised on the internet, Blair's material process not only builds a physical depth to the flatness native to photographic and digital technologies, then, but also reiterates the depth of contemporary life as thoroughly saturated with postmodern flatness, well articulated by David Joselit in his *Notes on Surface*— a text which has remained influential to Blair: "flatness may serve as a powerful metaphor for the price we pay in transforming ourselves into images — a compulsory self-spectacularization which is the necessary condition of entering the public sphere in the world of late capitalism."<sup>1</sup> Like Huang and Nafisi, Blair has interfused new technological capabilities with a deep familiarity of the postmodern canon, crossing his name out to visually mortgage the publicity of his authorship, transforming into image.

---

<sup>1</sup> Joselit, David. 2000. Notes on Surface: Toward a Genealogy of Flatness. *Art History* 23: 19–34.

Each of the three artists engage with systems designed to introduce varied constraints within their practices, utilizing technology that can be operated very precisely, the given constraints allow for moments of unconscious and accident that circumvent the precision of their tools. Kunning Huang has incorporated several such elements within his painting practice. Huang's earliest form of artistic expression was by way of calligraphy, which he studied as a child, working with ink on a traditional Chinese calligraphic rice paper. The dimensions of a standard rice paper are influenced by the tradition of calligraphy, which historically were made in long, narrow, vertical strips as used in scrolls. Huang's paintings each utilize this rice paper as a substrate; like Blair, Huang begins with a source image, often an art historical reference which can be as widespread from a painting by Willem DeKooning to a 17<sup>th</sup> Century Qing Dynasty composition. Huang then, via image processing, makes adjustments, layers, and edits to the original source image which he scales to be printed. Introducing another such limitation to his process, Huang, using a Canon printer which he has rigged to disperse his own colored inks, prints selected tiles of the adjusted source image onto paper-sized acrylic sheets. Effectively, Huang is left with a negative of the image in ink remaining on the surface of the plastic, which he then transfers to his sheets of rice paper, rubbing in way that mirrors the printmaking process, which he then affixes to canvas. Sometimes re-tiling the image in direct relation to the original orientation of its source, Huang will also posit his own supposition to the canvas, renegotiating elements from the reference image to create an entirely new, abstracted composition. Where Blair's revisions happen before the image contacts the surface of his canvas, Huang adds an additional layer of flatness in his manual assertions. Take *Untitled*, 2024, a new painting which sources its reference from *Jieziyuan Huazhuan (Manual of the Mustard Seed Garden)*, a 17<sup>th</sup> Century printed manual of Chinese painting, which was intended as an instructional guide for replicating various plant forms. Huang then obscures his recontextualization with four opaque, black panels, each with apertures in varying positions revealing pieces of the image underlaid, at once acknowledging his own presence and inserting the presence of the camera within his painting. Both metabolizing the context of the source image's Chinese pedigree and inserting modern technology vis-à-vis the printer and camera, Huang, conversely to Blair, implicates a flatness with a cultural identity, transforming to image by submitting his self to a palatable image.

The exhibition's title, *Canon*, is equally in reference to the printer and camera as it is the postmodern canon, a parallel point of entry to painting for Blair, Huang, and Nafisi. For *Canon*, Waseem Nafisi has produced a new body of painting, each of which, like Blair and Huang, begin with a reference image. For Nafisi, these images are often pulled from artist monographs, an analog connection to the canon, which he then scans via his compact laser-jet printer. Nafisi's exact approach for each painting changes from here, using the bed of his scanner to configure varying new compositions, which he will then grid and print on standard Letter format paper, which he transfers to linen in tiles. For *BarPeasants*, 2024, a new large-scale painting, Nafisi began with a scan of Kazemir Malevich's 1928-29 *Girls in a Field*. Nafisi then, using the new scan, which finds Malevich's painting at the book's centerfold, prints a to-scale miniature which he affixes to a miniature canvas, left ultimately with a pocket-size facsimile of Malevich's original. Laying the miniature on the bed of the scanner, Nafisi layers miniature strips of wood behind the canvas to mimic the shape of an artist's easel. The digital scan is then enlarged, gridded, and transferred to linen, which Nafisi then stretches over frames that he has modified with beams of wood to align with the strips of wood pictured in the original scan. In a "reverse trompe-l'oeil" effect, in many ways an inverted aesthetic partner to Blair's own approach to trompe l'oeil, Nafisi's stretched linen now bulges with, what seems to be, a stretcher bar protruding from behind the canvas, which shrugs the linen at its tightly stretched edges. Creating both a visual illusion and a physical intervention, which reads as nearly-crucifistic, the artist, like Malevich, flattens his image to a point of abstraction to, as Malevich would term, reduce the image to "pure feeling."<sup>2</sup> Nafisi bridges this flattening beyond the physical boundary of his painting, inciting a consideration of the painting as object itself and, therefore, inciting the artist himself. Nafisi's meta-compositions are self-reflexive, aware not only of the flatness of the many forms of image they contain, but equally aware of their position as paintings.

---

<sup>2</sup> Malevich, Kazemir. 1927. Suprematism. *The Non-Objective World*: 64-66.



Nafisi, like ~~Blair~~ and Huang, has negotiated a new relationship to the image. The three artists are responding in real time to the current state of painting, dragging the image to its outer reaches and reshaping the medium itself.

*Canon* will remain on view at Kapp Kapp through May 11, 2024, featuring the work of ~~Thomas Blair~~ (b.1996), Kunning Huang (b.1993), and Waseem Nafisi (b.1996).