

NIGHT GALLERY

2276 E. 16th Street, Los Angeles, California 90021

nightgallery.ca

SUSAN CHEN

I Am Not a Virus

September 18 – October 23, 2021

Night Gallery is pleased to present *I Am Not a Virus*, an exhibition of new paintings by the New York and Connecticut-based painter Susan Chen. This is Chen's first exhibition at the gallery.

During the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, the artist collaborated with twenty-six different sitters of Asian and Asian American descent who live across various states in the country. After locating her subjects through various social media platforms, Chen painted her subjects via Zoom in real time. Despite her unfamiliarity with her sitters, Chen's portraits distill much more than just their subjects' likenesses. Informed by just a few hours of Zoom conversation with each person, Chen creates compositions that illuminate the experiences, desires, and emotions of her sitters. This closeness comes from Chen's attention to detail: from nail polish bottles to birth control pills, the objects in Chen's compositions are rendered in the same heavy brushstrokes as the people they are connected to. Viewers are thus prompted to consider the many elements of Chen's paintings evenly—the subjects themselves are important, but so are their stories.

This focus on Asian American humanity and history has been central to Chen's work. But after the rise in hate crimes against Asians in the wake of COVID-19, Chen's practice took on a new impetus. While her past work alluded to Asian American cultural alienation, her recent paintings address anti-Asian hate with a sharpened sense of directness and urgency. In a self-portrait, *I Am Not the Kung Flu*, the artist captures herself wielding a taser with an array of self-defense weapons scattered across the table in front of her. A pepper gel canister, a whistle, tear gas, a personal alarm, a pocket knife: these are just some of the items Chen found while surveying online what Asian Americans were buying during the pandemic to protect themselves from assault. Indeed, over the course of the past year, the means of survival have changed drastically for Asian Americans like Chen.

Chen's involvement in the fight against anti-Asian racism extends beyond her artistic practice. In the aftermath of the Atlanta spa shootings in March 2021, she attended several Stop Asian Hate movement rallies. Inspired by the gravity and hope of these gatherings, Chen distilled her experiences into the largest painting in the show, *#StopAsianHate*, which depicts a group of life-sized protagonists wielding signs with anti-Asian-violence slogans.

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Amid endless reports of anti-Asian hate crimes, the sense of urgency that Chen has felt in her day-to-day life has translated into her work. In the artist's own words, her paintings became more "intentional," both conceptually and formally. Each portrait was executed as a piece of an overarching narrative. Each color was premixed with delicate care before touching the canvas. In order to achieve the more closely-defined goals behind this show, Chen needed to paint with conviction—the thick layers and bold pigments of paint that punctuate her new canvases are evidence of her increased confidence.

These days, reported cases of anti-Asian violence continue to rise, but media coverage has dwindled. Chen, it seems, has found her voice at the right time.

Text by Dani Yan.

Susan Chen (b. Hong Kong, SAR, 1992) received her MFA from Columbia University in 2021 and her BA from Brown University in 2015. In August 2020, Chen presented her debut solo exhibition, *On Longing*, at Meredith Rosen Gallery. *I Am Not a Virus* is her first solo exhibition at Night Gallery and in Los Angeles. She is a 2020 Hopper Prize Winner and a 2019 AXA Art Prize finalist. Her work has been featured in *New American Paintings* and reviewed by the *New York Times*, *Hyperallergic*, *Artsy*, *Artnet*, *Art & Object*, *Observer*, *It's Nice That*, *Galerie Magazine*, and others. She divides her time between New York City and Hartford, CT.