

EXIT, STAGE RIGHT

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Yoichiro Yoda creates a magical world of nostalgia in his body of paintings that offer glimpses of New York City's long-since-gone movie palaces populated with deceased Hollywood cinematic legends and contemporary ghost-like female interlopers from Yoda's own narrative history. Having spent years researching and visiting dozens of theaters in New York City's Times Square neighborhood, Yoda is most certainly an expert on the history of the movie palace — and its unfortunate extinction. A huge movie buff, Yoda is equally well-versed on the origins of cinema, from the very first talkies through to more recent productions. And yet his heart lies on the era of Charlie Chaplin's Hollywood, and as a result, Chaplin often appears in Yoda's paintings, perhaps as a referent to the age of joy that the old movie palaces brought to countless audiences who have been long-since replaced with tourists and shoppers that now populate the reclaimed spaces of the theaters, which more often than not are large chain restaurants and fashion stores that yield no hint of the former grandeur of the spaces they inhabit.

Yoda pays particular and careful attention to the physical spaces of the theaters he depicts, concentrating on the ornamental aspects of the vaults and boxes, chairs and prosceniums. His painting style is perhaps best placed between Realism and Surrealism: the overall effect is of an actual space, easily imagined, and yet slightly off kilter thanks to Yoda's flowing line and shifting viewpoints. His color palette also edges the viewer into the realm of the mythical: red and green are frequently used, giving his compositions a highly-charged energy that hovers between discomfort and awe. Yoda further heightens the cinematic magic of his paintings through the inclusion of phantom forms of actors and actresses playing their roles on the stage, in the rooms or public areas of his theatrical backdrops. As these figures hold court in the regal splendor of these now abandoned theaters, the viewer cannot help but reminisce, and perhaps more importantly, fantasize about the scene before her.

And this is where Yoda's paintings are at their strongest, in their powerful allure to inspire the imagination through the scenes that he chooses to depict, culled in equal sway from his imagination and the very real theatrical environments that he witnessed firsthand prior to their destruction. As an urban archaeologist, Yoda spent much of his youth figuring out ways to get into the shuttered theaters of 42nd Street, or those that were being used for adult movies or other unusual uses. He befriended building superintendents, construction workers and anyone else that could grant him access to the once regal movie palaces of his hometown of New York. Once there, he investigated all areas of the buildings, finding old movie projectors and equipment, movie announcements, calendars and documents that hinted at the richness of their past lives. In addition to photographing these spaces, Yoda also videotaped many forays into this ghost world, and as a result, was able to create a vast database of images that he now draws upon for inspiration in his paintings and their physical worlds.

By infusing these real spaces with characters from the films that once played there, Yoda rethinks a world that once held much cultural sway, but that no longer exists in any dimension. Of course, one can watch an old Chaplin movie at home on a DVD, but it is no longer possible to view them as they were meant to be seen: in a majestic movie palace, with live musical accompaniment, and in the heart of the Big Apple. Yoda makes certain images even more romantic by infusing them with female characters from his own life. In some cases, these are women that he had romantic yearnings for, whereas in others, they are simply fierce women that he respects, like a roller derby team, for example. By inserting these very contemporary women into his otherwise historic paintings, Yoda furthers the narrative playing out within each scene, obliterating the line between the history that infatuates him and his own lived here and now.

In addition to the many theaters that make up the main subject matter in Yoda's paintings, he has also been entrenched in an historic examination of the Hotel Pennsylvania, located across from New York City's Penn Station on 7th Avenue at 32nd Street. Also once a grand and opulent hotel, like the theaters that Yoda portrays, it too has fallen on hard times. Now an economy hotel with cheap rooms in the heart of New York, the remnants of its grand past are often times hidden behind partitions and new walls. Yoda reimagines the hotel as it once was, however, and also brings his cast of characters into the spaces of the hotel, as if they were important guests. Again, through his dedicated study of this former giant in the hotel world, Yoda presents a history of New York City as it once was, and in so doing becomes an historiographer in addition to a painter.

As a result of this duality, Yoichiro Yoda is able to author paintings that plug directly into the collective subconscious of both New York City, and by extension, the world. His viewers are able to immediately connect with his paintings, thanks to our own experiences in opulent theaters, be they the homes for a symphony or a ballet. We are further drawn into his paintings thanks to his inclusion of the stars of Hollywood's Silver Screen — icons that are familiar the world over. His talented hand and magical flourishes in paint make the paintings visually appealing and mysterious, and as viewers, we begin to imagine what it might have been like to sit in one of these grand environments, watching our favorite stars on the screen before us. We of course still do this today, but in certainly less opulent spaces. And yet, through his careful attention to detail, Yoda encourages us to believe in the past, as we all exit, stage right.

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