

Yi To: *Where the pebble hits the water*

By [Nina Wolpow](#)

In paintings by the fledgling artist Yi To, hazy forms in various stages of development—fetal, infant, mature—confusingly intertwine, and are intermittently inspected by fully articulated physiognomies. The result is a tension between the inchoate and the fully wrought, the emerging and the calcified, that emblemizes the position in which the artist, in the early stages of her career and life, finds herself. Seven of these works, and three additional sculptures are now on view at Chinatown’s recently-opened Someday Gallery, and speak collectively to the subconscious, sub-narrative dredging that marks the distance between the artist and the realization of her art.

In *Glyph* (2020), a brawny arm extends from an also robust shoulder, which is connected in turn to a head that is disproportionately small. The head is bald, and though the face is not infantile, its tautness and simplicity are. Cognitive dissonance is compounded by a bluish phallic form that either overlaps or is visible—X-ray style—inside the mouth of the ambiguous subject, and which is affixed—catheter-like—at its other end to the inner crook of yet another arm. At first glance, this second limb seems to belong to another, backgrounded form; at second, it appears the partner to the other, essential to the same body of which the head is part. The link could be sexual,



Yi To, *Cosmic Hiccup*, 2022. Oil on canvas, 47.3 x 35.4 inches. Courtesy the artist and Someday, New York. Photography: Daniel Terna.

developmental, exigent, or, more likely, a nebulous combination of the three. Taken together with its title, the painting suggests the limn between the pictorial and the narrative, the symbol and the symbolized, a chasm that is sometimes easily traversable and sometimes menacingly vast.



Yi To, *Archaic Wiring*, 2022. Oil on canvas, 36 x 36 inches.
Courtesy the artist and Someday, New York. Photography: Daniel Terna.

One witnesses such distortions as *Glyph*'s—which aim more to play Escher-like with the mind, challenging the premise of comprehension, than they do to comment on atomized subjectivity in the manner of Cubist disjointedness—in each painted work. In *Cosmic Hiccup* (2022), leg-like forms bend in supplication and are tended to by, or of-a-piece with, a pair of defined hands. In *Archaic Wiring* (2022), which could just as well be titled “vestigial veins,” a

bleached, organic mass hovers at the center of the canvas, surrounded by other more saturated forms. The mass is prodded at on its top edge by one of To's favored, delineated hands. If the hand—sculpted and pleasing to the eye—represents the modern human in its most complete state, then the shapes beneath the hand are indicative of the anti-aesthetic nature of our most essential, most internal parts. The wiring, the plumbing, is only archaic because of our contemporary neglect.

To completes her paintings not only by adding to them, but also by using stripper to thin out and away, thus submitting whatever narrative emerges to a process of immediate degeneration. The effect is a simultaneous emulation and compression of the aging process, as it relates to living, breathing creatures, and to the attempts at expression

they make; consider prehistoric cave paintings, which, even in their illegibility, transmit immense and instinctual, but potentially ineffable, meaning to their modern witnesses. The palette To deploys—bruised-blues, sandy-browns, reds between a sanguine and a russet—is likewise both mimetic and expository. That it is inescapably the former is an issue with which To will have to contend, as it paradoxically enhances and degrades the philosophy of the work. The artistic appropriation of premodern art-making (rather than of premodern art) is perhaps not as compelling as the ontological dilemmas that inspired such a time-travel in the first place.

The three sculptures in the show are part of a new and promising experiment in three-dimensions for To. As a sort of triptych, they also emblemize this growth. One, *A Raw Nerve* (2022), is affixed to the wall; a second, *The Backbone of a History of Rewriting History* (2022), appears to slide off of it, supported in part by the floor; and a third, *Eternity's Springboard* (2022), stands independently, its frame hung with strands of red and blue yarn—archaic wires?—whose ends gesture towards, or settle on, the ground. Composed primarily of metal and concrete, and absent any figuration, these sculptures break with the problem of how to depict that which is beyond, beneath, or before depiction, and begin to embody it instead. - **Nina Wilpow, April 2022**