

*Tao Siqi: Paintings That Lick and Claw*

The first time I saw a painting by Tao Siqi in the flesh it made my mouth water, just a bit. Faced with the hyper-saturated image of a pair of disembodied MAC-lined lips, eagerly sucking a hot big toe (sweat/saliva droplets running in rivulets between metatarsals like opulent pearls), I felt like I had unwittingly been trapped inside some sort of deviant Pavlovian image circuit. Initially I was completely seduced by the artist's rough and realistic rendering of the glamorous hand (complete with glossy manicure and down-played golden engagement ring) that gently grips the partly-imbibed foot at the center of *Loyalty* (2022). However, I also noticed an accompanying feeling of prickly discomfort, like a soft dread in my chest, spawned by the sensory intensity and unsettling erotic force of this image (I am British after all). I stood in front of this small oil painting feeling thrilled and slightly embarrassed. I generally don't blush, but a slight rouging of the cheeks would have felt appropriate to match the fever-pitch palette of bubble-gum cherry highlights and pulsating peach-plum shadows that Tao manipulates so deftly. From conversations with the American artist Keith Boadwee, I have since learned that "shrimping" is a popular term for this particular act and am now wondering if that doesn't partly explain why the crustacean-maximalist colouring of this painting feels so unexpectedly harmonious.

I had come across some images of Tao Siqi's paintings on the internet nearly a year earlier: wandering aimlessly around the miniaturised but infinitely expansive gallery district that is now home to the art world's Instagram timelines the whole world over, I came across some installation images from *Nine Lives*, a group exhibition in New York that had recently opened at Fortnight Institute. Riffing on different understandings of cat symbolism in contemporary painting, one image showed a cute

and vampiric cat-bat hybrid hovering in front of a crescent moon that sat lodged and beaming in a night sky of impossibly bright amber; the creature's long tongue was resting on the bushy tail that made up the entirety of its body. Looking back at this image now I notice the moon seems to be bleeding, or at least oozing some sort of yellow sap at the same time as the cat's large and cute eyes weep tears of ecstatic sparkles. The painting captivated me with its earnest peculiarity, in a way that it is often difficult for individual works in a group show to do - even more so when looked at via flattened jpegs on a phone screen some several hundred miles away.

The reason I mention these two separate "first times", other than as a convenient way to structure an impossibly short text responding to an artist whose work I truly delight in, is that I think they speak to some of the aesthetic interests that reside at the core of Tao Siqi's painting practice. If you take one look through the list of works featured on their Instagram account, or via their artist page on Capsule Shanghai's website, you'll notice that open mouths, cats and tongues are motifs that abound throughout the artist's work in recent years. Tasting dew drops, patches of hairy flesh or the warm open air around them, the tongues in Tao Siqi's paintings seem to act as a new kind of sensory visualising tool. Translating between the surface of potent images (that make the skin crawl as much as the heart sing) and the ambiguously concentrated internal responses that they elicit, these tongues point towards a new mode of painting: one that returns to a photo-realistic style of representation, but focuses on those images that speak to and elicit a bodily response beyond the subject matter specifically depicted. Feline, in their elusive character and domestic familiarity, the images in Tao Siqi's paintings rest on the skin, occasionally clawing at the nerve endings but also soft to the touch and radiating warm energy.



Kiss, 2021  
Oil on canvas

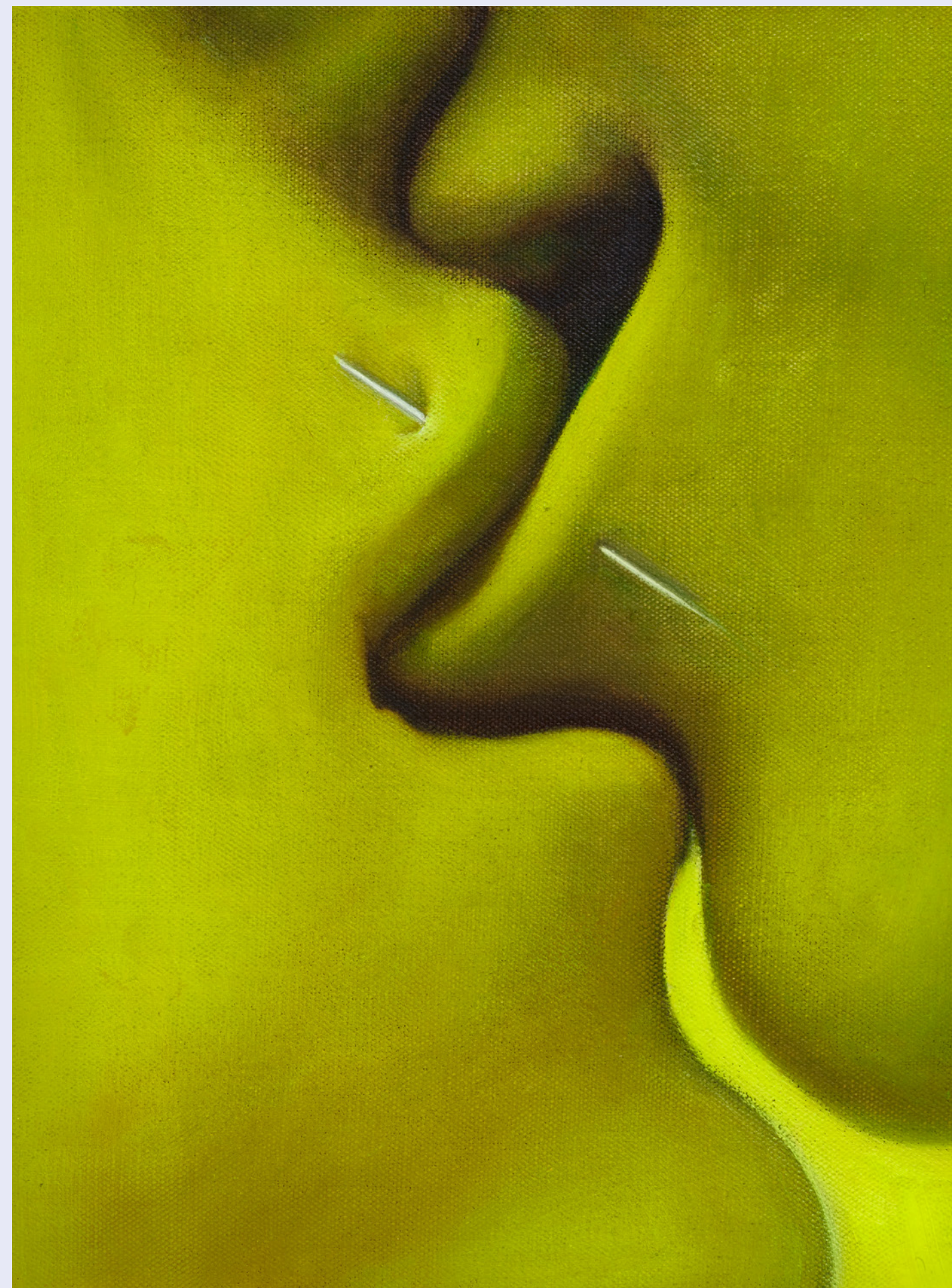


Loyalty, 2022  
Oil on board

All artworks are courtesy of the artist and Capsule Shanghai  
(Loyalty is courtesy of the artist, Capsule Shanghai and OTP)



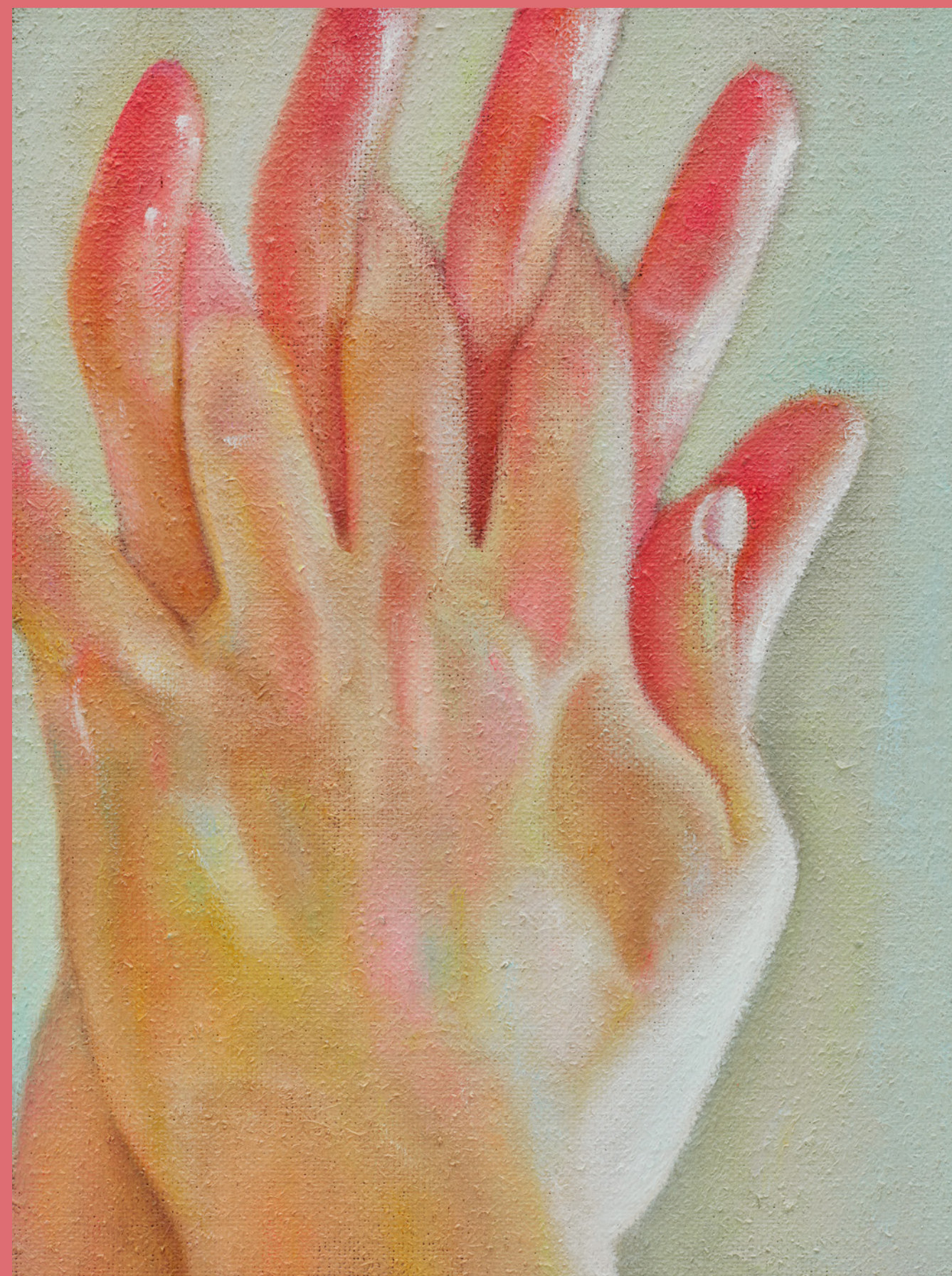
Yawn, 2021  
Oil on canvas



Kiss, 2021  
Oil on canvas



Dew, 2021  
Oil on canvas



Hold, 2021  
Oil on canvas