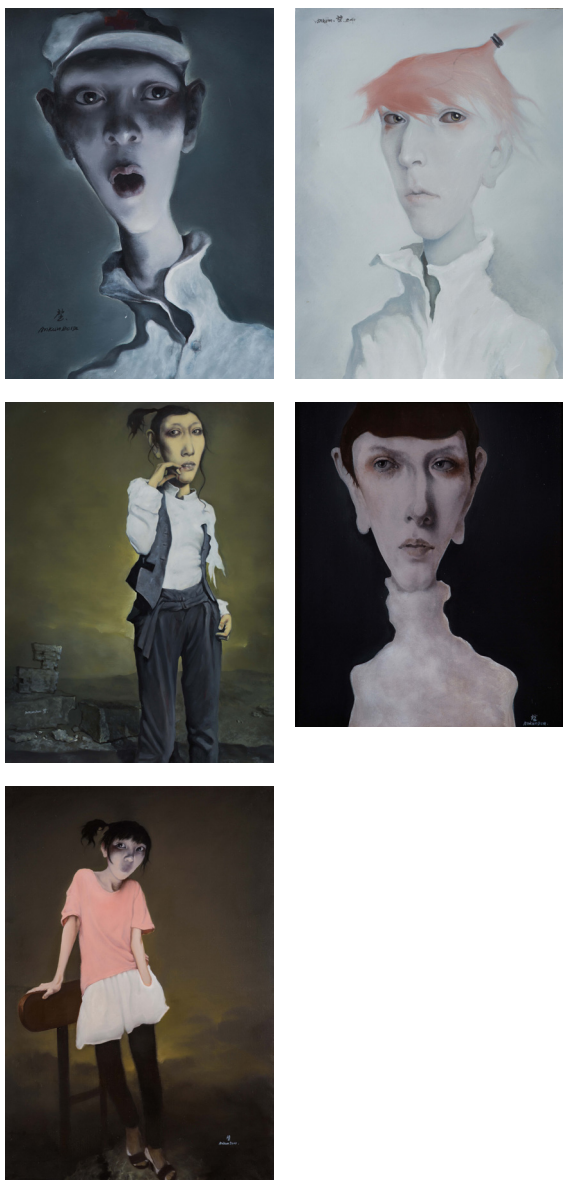


An Kun



Clockwise from top left

My pretty friend Zhen, 2012
oil on canvas

My pretty friend Naonao, 2011
oil on canvas

My pretty friend Respect, 2011
oil on canvas

My pretty friend Shushu, 2010
oil on canvas

My pretty friend Yan, 2011
oil on canvas

La Trobe University, Geoff Raby Collection of Chinese Art.
Donated by Dr Geoff Raby AO through the Australian
Government's Cultural Gifts Program, 2019. © An Kun.
Photos: Jia De

The subjects of An Kun's *My pretty friend* series are gaunt, their skin sallow and cheeks sunken, yet their eerily elongated bodies and proportions imbue them with a certain elegance. This tension between repulsion and admiration is embodied in the awkward poses of the two full-length portraits, *My pretty friend Yan* (2011) and *My pretty friend Shushu* (2010). Yan's left arm is skewed impossibly behind her body with her hand resting on the hip of her grey slacks. Shushu's left arm seems contorted as it slips into the pocket of her tutu-style skirt. Their clothes offer no obvious sartorial clues to their identities except that they are contemporary individuals, Yan in a vest and white blouse with grey slacks, and Shushu in a pink T-shirt, white skirt and heels. Their identities and locations are ambiguous, as the backgrounds are a hazy mist.

Similarly, in the smaller portraits *My pretty friend Naonao* (2011), *My pretty friend Respect* (2011) and *My pretty friend Zhen* (2012), the subjects' identities are hidden, despite the detailed rendering of their clothes. Respect wears a white turtleneck, Zhen and Naonao wear white button-up blouses. These are intimate bust portraits highlighting elongated necks and the subjects' large eyes, portrayed with exaggerated European physiognomy. Naonao's eyes are a shade of green (a contrast with Naonao's bright pink hair) and Respect's and Zhen's eyes are light shades of grey.

These works are part of An's *My pretty friend* series in which An paints bizarre portraits of socialites in his social circle in China in a European style. An's use of background sfumato (an oil painting technique in which colours and tones are blended to create an atmospheric effect) attests to this style, reflecting his own experience developing the oil painting department of the China Central Fine Arts Academy. Since China's Open Door Policy in 1978 allowed foreign businesses to set up in China, transformations in Chinese economy and culture have occurred with greater exposure to Western influence. These characters are suspended in that collision and tension between cultures. The names of the subjects suggest that they are ethnically Chinese, but their European features interrupt crude expectations about their physicality. The misty sfumato backgrounds and casual clothes enhance this effect, making it difficult to place these subjects, which remain disembodied in space and time.

Soo-Min Shim, 2022