

(L.A. in S.F.)
Candice Lin
at Friends Indeed

November 12, 2020–
January 6, 2021



Roger and friends, Candice Lin's recent exhibition at Friends Indeed, included seven oil paintings depicting her eponymous cat Roger that were never intended to be seen by the public. However, just as the exchange between the private and public has become increasingly muddled under the parameters of a smothering, pandemic-imposed domestic life, so, too, has the artist's relationship to the work she makes privately, and what she offers for public viewing. As far as quarantine-specific pastimes go, Lin took up the appeasing act of painting her cat, each portrait painted at home with left-over paint from her more 'serious' paintings.¹

For Lin, these intimate paintings mark a significant departure—not in subject matter (as cats have featured frequently), nor in their representational nature, but rather, in medium and materiality, as well as in interiority. Until recently, Lin's practice—nebulous, rigorous-in-research, and strategically diverse, has not publically included a medium as canonically European as a stretched oil painting on canvas. Likewise, her body of work has seldom

included such an intimate, even autobiographical, glimpse into her interior life. Much of Lin's previous endeavors have delved into destabilizing legacies of colonialism, slavery, and migration, often focusing specifically on colonial flora (such as fungi).

In light of Lin's research-based and outward-looking praxis, this shift towards interiority is a new lens for the artist. When I reached out to Lin to fact check some of my assumptions about the work, she told me that the paintings were a pleasurable activity, made under the veiled belief that they would not be seen. As such, they are objects plucked from Lin's private (interior) world. The pieces are distinctly modernist in their depiction of interiors: chunky impasto application, cross-hatched wallpaper, a plethora of bedspreads. Yet unlike the modernists, for whom the domestic interior became a pivotal repeated signifier of modern urbanity, Lin depicts her cat not as a sidekick to another eroticized protagonist (e.g., Balthus), nor as a decorative wallflower of interior life (e.g., Vuillard), nor as a stand-in for the entrapped woman (e.g., *A Room of One's Own*). Instead, Lin's cat is a cat—the protagonist of his own contemporary quarantine melodrama.

Across the paintings, Roger deftly slips through various social interactions, his life punctuated by idiosyncratic mobility during a time when many of us are afflicted by limited social opportunities and an enduring sense of claustrophobia. In each, Roger appears in a seemingly different home, traversing easily through the quarantine as a sort of vicarious fantasy. In *Can You See Me?* (2020), Roger scampers up the chest of Lin's father, mid-meow, demanding to be seen by an eyepatch that resembles a saltshaker. Meanwhile, in *Dance With Me* (2020), he stands with his hind legs, buoyant, one paw clasping his dance partner's outstretched fingers. Omitted from the paintings is any indication of how he gets from interior to interior—Roger's many voyeuristic tête-à-têtes ask viewers to consider the domesticated cat as, arguably, one of the best-suited commuters to navigate rules of confinement with adaptability, pandemic or not.

In place of a press release, Lin's longtime friend, curator Michael Ned Holte, included a letter he wrote to Lin—a choice that strives to nurture the intimacy of the work. In it, we discover that the friends that fill Roger's dance card are fictive surrogates for the loved ones Lin cannot spend time inside with. Yet, these friends being fictional (all but Lin's father) raises a question: Is Roger's mobility rooted in his physicality or the imaginary? Perhaps, both.

Lin suggests that in addition to his dexterity within the domestic and imaginary, Roger and other cats alike navigate death with grace, too. In a private letter Lin shared with me responding to Holte's press release letter, Lin writes that cats "are guardians...to scenes of tenderness and death."² The correspondence between Holte and Lin is tender, too. As Lin's letter suggests, Roger intently observes a couple who appear to await their imminent separation, one passing into death in *At the Death Bed* (2020). Roger lounges just as comfortably in the center of a bed while cat-demons of other worlds (underworlds?) congregate as if around a dinner table in *He's so handsome, what's his name?* (2020).

In the same letter written to Holte, Lin likens cats to what she thinks of as cat-demons: Chinese tomb guardians and earth-spirit demons who often wear large headdresses and horns that look like oversized cat ears. The ceramic sculpture *Gonads Vessel (Striped Cat Demon)* (2020), positioned all by itself at one end of the gallery, is a ceramic vessel that features a yellow imp perched atop a pair of spiked testicles. Lin explained that in Chinese mythology, demon cats, like Roger and his wanderings about, protect earthbound souls and lovingly accompany them to the underworld. In sitting directly across from the entrance of Friends Indeed, the striped spirit appears to

Top: Candice Lin, *He's so handsome, what's his name?* (2020). Oil and encaustic on wood panel, 18.5 x 24 x 1.5 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Friends Indeed.

Bottom: Candice Lin, *Bedroom Licks* (2020). Oil pastel, oil, and encaustic on linen, 14 x 18 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Friends Indeed.



¹ Lin embarked on the endeavor of making “serious” paintings last fall, using lard and wax as a conceptual medium in a series exploring pathogen and anti-Chinese racism for *Pigs and Poison*, her 2020 show at Govett-Brewster Art Gallery in New Zealand.

² Candice Lin, e-mail message to Michael Ned Holte, October 4, 2020.

guard the gallery, fortifying the interior space and its earthbound visitors.

While the house pet has been lauded as a crucial quarantine companion (easing the day-to-day of indoor spaces), Lin’s paintings remind us that cats can take on roles with a more spiritual resonance—muse-cats, cat-demons—that provide further behavioral lessons for humans. Amidst rising death tolls in the U.S. and a global reckoning with mortality, the converging interiorities of *Roger and friends* point to coping strategies for how one might live life (mostly) indoors with no shortage of grief (but perhaps, with grace). The softness of Roger’s transitory voyeurism parallels the ways in which the pandemic has softened certain boundaries, as indicated by Lin’s sharing of private work in such a public way. In doing so, she also complicates the exceptionalizing of “good” versus “bad” paintings, “serious” subject matters versus trivial ones. Lin portrays an interior life that places the domestic quotidian and paranormal side-by-side—obscuring distinctions between public and private, real and fictive, work and leisure—suggesting that perhaps the most appropriate coping strategy for pandemic living is to surrender to dwelling in the intermediary space between false binaries.

P.S. I write this from bed as my cat Fern (who, like Roger, is black and white) vies for attention on my chest.