

Lily Wong Navigates The Self



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During the height of the pandemic, Lily Wong felt disconnected from her body, a jarring experience that inspired an exploration of the self. In search of harmony and spiritual connectivity, a recalibration of her external and internal being, the Brooklyn-based artist began researching holistic medicine. Honing in on practices that are pillars of Traditional Chinese Medicine, including a broader understanding of Eastern medicinal practices, Wong painted these discoveries, creating a dialogue surrounding the healing of the body and its relation to the natural world.

I Will Wade Out is Wong's first West Coast solo exhibition that illuminates the navigation of self, with painted figures representing disorientations, natural curiosities, and wonder. Running November 12 through January 21, 2023, at Various Small Fires, Los Angeles, Wong's show is a feast for the senses— a balance of cool subtleties and vibrant allure.

Text by Michael Hall

Photo courtesy of VSF and Ian Lewandowski

A departure from Wong's instinctual portrait work, "I Will Wade Out" draws on the natural world and the relationship nature has with beings, empowering Wong to depict landscapes— creating a conversation between her figures and their setting. Wong's use of muted hues and rich tones elevates the surrealistic works, a beautiful display of her subjects in tandem with the organic. Much like in nature, where a tree is a part of the earth, Wong arrived at this understanding that humans have a deep connection with themselves and the environment when exploring holistic medicine, the driving theme in this show. "An Eastern approach to medicine is holistic, treated as an intergraded system, whereas in Western medicine, everything is separate and compartmentalized," Wong explains. "It was new for me to think about the body as a whole system integrated with your mind, spirit, and environment."

While traditional Chinese Medicine was not uncommon to Wong, specifically in her upbringing, the Chinese-American artist lost touch with these methods, inevitably phasing them out of her life. This fractured cultural lens is how Wong navigated most of her adulthood, finding herself investigating these traditions, crystallized in her work for the show. In researching, Wong notes, "I was looking at body charts, different pressure points, and meridians that are found in the body. One point on your wrist is connected to your brain or your heart, or your lungs. You can access multiple parts of your being through these specific points." Understanding that the body is a network in parallel with the natural world, Wong sought ancestral and spiritual connectivity, where these ideas live in abundance.



Shown in *Dislocations (Pell Street)*, 2022, the subject wanders about NYC's Chinatown, disoriented, in search of something lost or found. In the frame stands a sign depicting various pressure points on a foot and a pegasus appearing in the sky, symbolizing internal power, freedom, and creativity. In *The Sky Breaks Open for Nu*, 2022, Wong paints her dear friend, an uncommon occurrence where most figures are either strangers or transmutations of herself. Nu is resting on a tree in deep contemplation, barefoot among an otherworldly puddle, a natural interconnectedness. Each work is a manipulation of paper, allowing Wong to uncover pieces of herself while forging a new relationship with the external.



Through strong symbolism and moody abstractions rooted in reality, "I Will Wade Out" bears a vulnerability of Wong inviting the viewers to reassess their relationship with their bodies and environments. A north star that guided Wong along the journey of holistic health and the connection between mother nature and beings was her culture, an internal light that never dimmed. While Wong's journey of exploring the inner self is never complete, the shining artist acknowledges the immense relief and betterment she has felt by not only accepting an Eastern approach to Medicine but exploring the process through her art.