

# BROADWAY

THE ART NEWSPAPER



Andrew Kuo, *Four ZZZs (10/15/20) (2021) Broadway*

4/16/20

## **Andrew Kuo: Water Lillies**

Until 15 May at Broadway, 373 Broadway, Manhattan

Andrew Kuo is most widely known for his complex, emotionally intricate infographic charts, a handful of which are on view here. The poetry comes first from the foundational conceit of quantifying the unquantifiable, as the charts measure varying degrees of intangible phenomena like sadness, friendship, and identity. Each features a key; a blue-gray color in *Sad! #2 (3/20/21) (2021)* indicates the amount of “Knowing that someday I’m going to die but not believing it until I see it” for example, while a yellow in the same painting denotes “Admitting that the things that dropped on me will eventually start from me”. These paintings stand as totems to our ever-unfulfilled desire to reason with an unreasonable world. Then there’s the fact that beyond the poignant framework of the infographics, they doubly succeed as strong, hardfought abstract art. A few abstractions on view that don’t have keys—along with the show’s title, *Water Lillies*—complicate the body of work by highlighting its subtle and unsubtle winks and nods to the canon of art history.

# QUANTUMARTREVIEW

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## REVIEW: ANDREW KUO, WATER LILIES



Andrew Kuo, *Extra #2 (3/7/21)*, 2021, acrylic and carbon transfer on linen, 65 x 76 x 2 in

**Andrew Kuo** works in infographics, is a popular podcaster, writer, painter, father, native New Yorker, but foremost a thinker. His conceptual abstractions imagine a delightfully (ir)rational system for mapping poetic exuberance and personal truisms. The wit within runs the gamut, from wry, to cutting, to hopeful, to angry to sad. I measure art by how much it makes me feel and his exudes a great emotional variety while managing to turn the salt of life's wound into realizations inherent in refused expectation.

By using what appear to be complicated info graphic visualizations, Kuo maps his daily poetic reveries and longings, providing the viewer with a key at the bottom of each piece. The keys unravel the meaning of color and form as succinctly as a scale shows size on a map. Inside, particular hues or timetables correlate to giddy, probing, disheartening, immeasurable thoughts.

In the painting *Extra #2 (3/7/21)*, Kuo's personal command to "Get wiser but also younger and more Chinese with no back pains" is deemed equivalent to all patches of light gray.

The title of this series is *Waterlilies*, as in **Claude Monet**'s. Monet built an artificial lily pond as a homage to Japanese culture for his garden home in Giverny, France. This pond simulation, bristling with feeding koi and rainbow unreality, inspired many of the modernists most cherished works.

Many of Kuo's paintings, including *Flower #2*, *Water Lilies*, *The New Yorker! #3 (4/2/21)*, *The New Yorker! #2 (10/10/20)*, and *Well! (2/21/21)*, combine the language of information graphics with gestural expressionism, drippy ab ex, and color field spirituality. The stems of these referenced movements grew from roots roused by Monet's impressionist works, whose formalist principles (along with the painterly phenomenological and expressionistic explorations of so many other seminal abstraction fore-bearers, too many to name here but think of the much earlier El Greco as example) chip western cannon piece by piece off of its monument of narrative figuration toward a pile of Greenbergian pure abstraction. The problem I have always had with abstraction is that in its dire effort to birth a new language from nothing, from our reds, yellows, blues, triangles, circles and squares, it inescapably escapes from universal meaning and interpretation to end up floating freely in the ether of unmeaning, maybe trying to justify itself through juxtaposition of textures, historical provenance, or emotions. Maybe its meaning is seen by the ivory tower collegiate who don't mind exhausting themselves in small white male histories of which man painted white on white monochromes, or which man claimed blue and dragged naked women through it, or what did Malevich really cover up (a racist joke) with his boring black square? For all of these reasons I have truly never connected with abstraction, more I've looked at it as a not so fun and very exclusionary dead end (the color field spirituality being my one exception), but this dilemma is cheekily solved by Kuo, in that he has the perfect tool to assign meaning to his splotches and drips. He makes them maps with a key to his internal dilemmas.

I want to take a moment to further consider Monet's water lilies and the name of this exhibition. Japanese visual aesthetic was one of the great inspirations (cultural appropriations) of the Modernists. Monet had a collection of profoundly influential Japanese wood block prints (including ones by Hokusai) which are still on display in his Giverny residence. In the 1800's the British forced violently an end to Japan's long held national isolationism, and out poured the riches of an advanced society here-to-fore barely glimpsed or imagined by Europe and the Americas. The way **Gauguin** violently claimed the images and culture of Tahiti, western male art modernists stormed the cultural shores not theirs and pillaged, like they have long pillaged, naming the "new images" they found their own innovations and great cultural advancing victories.

As a descendant of a Taiwanese writer father and an art historian mother, it is clear to me Kuo contends with the violence, racism, and ignorance of being American and rooting his career in the historical trajectory of what amounts to endless cultural abuses. As our country begins to admit its history of violence, I'm very excited to see new minority American voices take hold of power and hold court in the art world, but I fear the Wizard of Oz old white men behind their curtains who are adroit at finding new ways to make riches off of voices not theirs.

To conclude, Andrew Kuo's exhibition is glowing with wit, candor, and intelligence. His poetry and thinking match the beauty of his visual formalism. *Waterlilies* encourages its audience to ask a poetic question normally kept dormant but close to the surface of consciousness. That is the question of our spirit's desire weighted against the automated grid of everything bigger, next to the humbling clockwork of existential largeness that demeans our personal hopes in the grandeur of its instrumentation. The bigness is maned, tuned and focused by God knows what, maybe God, chaos, simulation, or...? It's the cosmic question that, when it comes down to it, all provoking art is asking, what orders us and how, and wouldn't it be nice to have the key?