

IMPULSE

Thiang Uk's Contradictions in Harmony: "Shadow's Edge" at Bureau

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by Maria Owen



A constant negotiation between creation and destruction, Thiang Uk's debut exhibition, *Shadow's Edge*, opened at Bureau in Tribeca earlier this month. In a past interview, the artist described the mythical elements of his work as his "ancestors' animism mingling with Christianity," noting his ever-developing identity as a "born Burmese national, Chin minority, and now, Asian American." Uk has lived in Myanmar, Florida, Maryland, and New York, his work reflecting the wide range of his experiences and his resulting interpretations.

Uk's work resonates with that of the early Abstract Expressionist painters, the aesthetic and methodological parallels obvious in his intuitive, automatic style. Less obvious—though no doubt significant—are the psychological similarities between Uk's early life and that of artists working in the aftermath of World War II. Artists have long interpreted war, instability, and migration in attempts to process or make sense of violent change. As Willem de Kooning and Mark Rothko immigrated to the United States in pursuit of stability, making work following a profound global conflict, Uk too fled political violence, coming to the US with his family early in life. In imagining his place in a broader art historical lineage, it is undeniable that the artist's life and work align significantly with a certain archetype of the American painter, a timely reminder that perhaps the most "American" thing one can do is to come from elsewhere.

Ancestral oral histories of shapeshifting and the personification of nature appear throughout Uk's paintings, the recurring tides suggesting Floridian seas alongside a more symbolic ocean, pitting actual memories alongside concepts of an unknown journey or hidden depths. In *Untitled (Serpent, Fire, Hands, Winds, Sky)* (2022), a dragon-like creature crescendos in a trembling, fiery landscape. Hands hold and release, a dark portal looms, a precious egg remains light and unencumbered. Here are allusions to Christian myths, universal fables, and origin stories in the absence of written language. Painting offers a practical solution, illuminating visions in the mind's eye that are better felt than spoken.



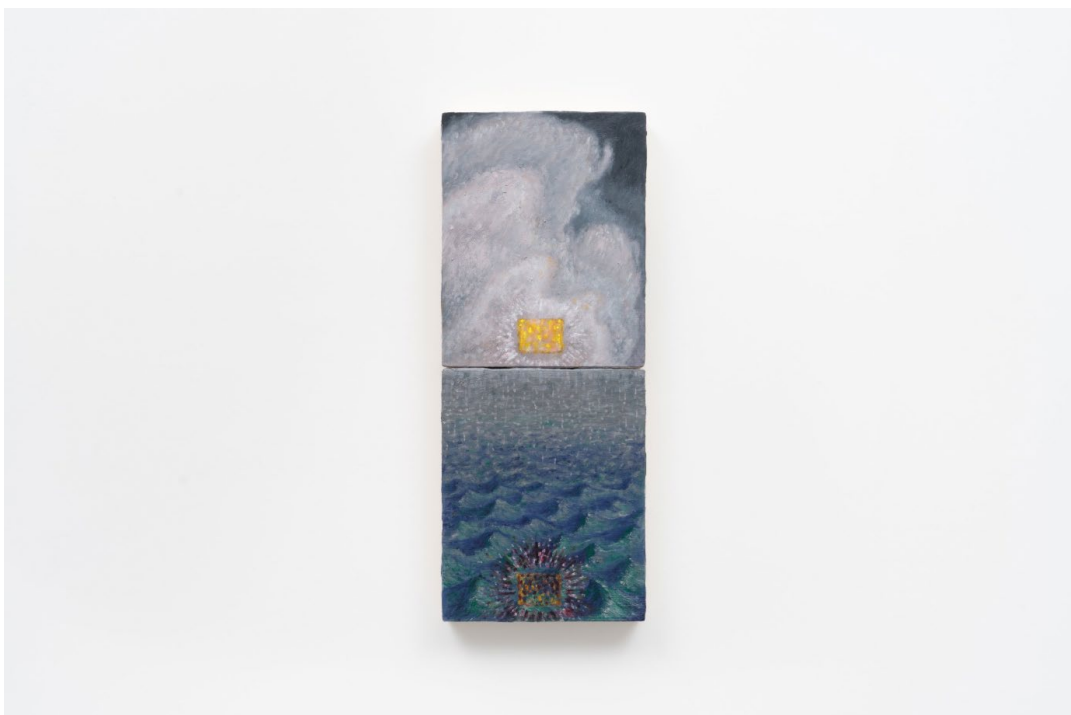
Horses appear throughout Burmese mythology: the animal's head is written in the stars at the birth of the universe, while Uchchaihshravas, a Hindu horse with seven faces, is created from rough ocean waves. The red, emblem-like creatures of Uk's paintings directly echo German painter Franz Marc's *Horse in a Landscape* (1910), while the shifting, swanlike equines in the main plane of *Horses* (2024) gesture to the artist's memory. Totem and essence are united in a collage of visual languages. At times, as in *Ocean in Green (With a Drawing of Franz Marc's Painting "Horse in a Landscape")* (2023) and *Shadows and Stars* (2024), Uk literally collages paper onto the larger tableaux.



Many of the paintings of *Shadow's Edge* employ similar dichotomies: pairs, such as in the diptychs, or overlapping images where a small scene is superimposed onto a larger field. *Diptych in Yellow* (2023) proposes a sense of linear time, as though one is regarding a change in the winds upon the water and clouds, captured in two frames. It is only in seeing layered works like *Shadows and Stars* and *Horses*, where layered images suggest harmonious action, when one begins to consider *Diptych in Yellow* as two distinct realities, occurring simultaneously despite their contradictions. The recurring use of the color scale as in *Ocean in Green (With a Drawing of Franz Marc's Painting "Horse in a Landscape")* and *Untitled (Serpent, Fire, Hands, Winds, Sky)* feels too comfortable at times, a straightforward visual solution that's purpose appears to be distinctly aesthetic. One wonders how this motif could be pushed further, or set aside to make room for new visual experimentation. Yet there remains an argument for its presence: these scales frame more complex elements, balancing the paintings and grounding the palette.

Elsewhere in *Untitled (Stacked Diptych 1)* (2024), Uk stacks two iterations of the same composition, positioning glowing parallelograms at the foot of each frame. Though illustrated differently—one block gleams and rises while the other fades and sinks—the apparent weight of each frame retains tension. The eye is anchored by both forms, bottom-heavy, despite that one appears to be ascending. There is a satiating brilliance to Uk's ability to depict such paradoxes, simulating the feeling of attempting reconciliation between disparate experiences or sentiments. Additionally, in conversation with his other implementations of historic methodologies, Uk's use of rectangles brings Kazimir Malevich and the Suprematists to mind, building on past proposals for universal language.

Such painterly, seemingly spontaneous paintings abound in contemporary art contexts, swirling with vague symbols and historic references. Many of them are beautiful, offering aesthetic satisfaction or reflecting "good painting," but Uk firmly sets himself apart by effectively delivering what others struggle to pin down. He deconstructs a contemporary experience of consciousness—memory, fear, longing, movement, desire, self-image, history—and recomposes it in expressive yet carefully architected compositions. *Shadow's Edge* proposes visual routes to a sensation of remembering, bypassing any need for words to describe.



Shadow's Edge is on view at Bureau from March 1 to April 12, 2025.