

Judy Chung
Cafeteria

February 13–March 14, 2026



Judy Chung, *Symbiosis (Cafeteria)*, 2025, Acrylic on canvas, 72 x 49 inches x 2

RAINRAIN is pleased to present *Cafeteria*, Judy Chung's first solo exhibition with the gallery. Featuring a new body of paintings, the exhibition turns to the social microcosm of school—its rituals, hierarchies, and quiet violences—not as autobiography, but as a framework for thinking about how identity is formed, rehearsed, and negotiated in public. The cafeteria emerges as both setting and metaphor: a place where taste, belonging, and self-presentation collide, and where everyday decisions can feel unexpectedly consequential.

Chung's practice is built around collision. Opposing forces—cute and grotesque, sincerity and artifice, control and rupture—coexist within the same pictorial space, preventing meaning from settling into a single reading. Her paintings feature archetypal figures and recurring personas that deviate from expected roles, functioning as psychological avatars and fragments of a collective self. Drawing on art-historical drama and contemporary image culture (Baroque theatricality, painterly violence, and post-internet debris), Chung's visual language is filtered through a disarming anime and kawaii surface that acts as a deflating skin. Beneath the bright palette, the work exposes both the rawness of social judgment and the strategies we develop to endure it.

This tension is mirrored in her process. Chung often begins with digitally constructed compositions before translating them into paint, allowing physical gestures, slippage, and resistance to interrupt and deform.

The thematic core of *Cafeteria* is shaped by Chung's experience of cultural displacement, having moved frequently between U.S. states and South Korea during her formative years. School social life, she notes, can feel especially unforgiving: rules are enforced bluntly, and judgments around "cool" and "uncool" are immediate and collective. Food, in this context, becomes a potent symbol. Spaghetti—comforting yet embarrassing, familiar yet abject—threads through the exhibition as fixation, threat, and anchor. Its ambiguity reflects what Chung describes as aporia: an object whose meaning cannot settle, oscillating between attraction and repulsion.

The exhibition's anchor, *Symbiosis (Cafeteria)* (2025), depicts a chaotic lunchroom scene centered on a three-headed student caught in an ambiguous act of consumption or expulsion. Spaghetti spills across the composition as surrounding figures, eerily uniform, recoil or stare from a distance. Referencing the theatrical gestures of Caravaggio's *Supper at Emmaus*, Chung reframes revelation as social exposure, presenting the cafeteria as a compressed world of rigid groupings and invisible borders.

Turning inward, *Spaghetti Lariat* (2025) introduces Chung's recurring Heroine figure, bound by spaghetti-like restraints and suspended between forces: compulsion and restraint, duty and refusal. Borrowing from RPG archetypes and loosely referencing Manet's *The Dead Christ with Angels*, the painting captures a state of fatigue and refusal, a body caught within expectation.

Violence is distilled in *Communion* (2025), where severed head fragments are carefully plated and consumed. Drawing on the iconography of Salome and Judith, the work collapses distinctions between victim and aggressor, where consumption becomes a fraught attempt at reassembly.

Throughout *Cafeteria*, smaller "artifact" paintings—honor-roll certificates, Picture Day images, and distorted cafeteria menus—offer intimate entry points, where institutional order and personal memory quietly unravel.

In *Cafeteria*, Chung constructs a world that is at once playful and punishing. The paintings resist resolution, holding contradiction in suspension rather than offering release. What emerges is a portrait of subjectivity shaped through friction between desire and conformity, individuality and collectivity, where survival often depends on learning how to perform, adapt, and endure in plain sight.

Judy Chung (b. 1990, Seoul, Korea) lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. She received her Master of Fine Arts from Columbia University in 2018 and her Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from Pratt Institute in 2013. Her work has been shown internationally in exhibitions including *What do Angels Look Like?* at RAINRAIN, NY [2023], *Vicotriassecret* at Helena Anrather, NY [2022], *Figuring the Uncanny* at Field Projects, NY [2021], *Happy Hardcore* at Miriam Gallery, Brooklyn, NY [2020], and *there's something about PAINTING* at Tatjana Pieters Gallery, Belgium [2019]. She has contributed to publications including DATEAGLE ART, New American Paintings, and Elastic Magazine.

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RAINRAIN is pleased to present *Cafeteria*, the first solo exhibition by Brooklyn-based artist Judy Chung. The show features a series of new paintings that highlight Chung's excavations into an underbelly of nostalgia through a meticulously layered maze of unpredictable symbolisms.

Cafeteria includes an eponymous and central painting, *Symbiosis (Cafeteria)*, where viewers meet the show's protagonist in the midst of dramatic action. In Chung's quintessential palette of bright neon colors, we find our main character spewing (or perhaps inhaling) heaps of spaghetti noodles in a school lunchroom strewn with the bright yellow strands. The velocity of the lead figure's action seemingly creates a glitch—her limbs and head are multiplied and spread wide in an attempt to find balance as onlookers are caught mid-reaction.

In her book, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sarah Ahmed questions what emotions do—specifically investigating the relationship between human emotions, actions, and the various sociopolitical hierarchies and agendas that impact them. By offering an understanding of the associations humans place on emotions vs thought or reason, Ahmed speaks to what is deemed “appropriate” in our society. Similarly, Chung's practice finds fodder in deeply seated memories, like the hyperspecific childhood understanding of which foods were deemed “appropriate” or “cool” (chicken nuggets) and which were not (spaghetti). By joining the several onlooking students seated around the edges of the painting, viewers are pushed to experience multiple vantage points—oscillating between the central figure, the students, and their own gaze. In her text Ahmed notes, “The very physicality of shame—how it works on and through bodies—means that shame also involves the de-forming and re-forming of bodily and social spaces, as bodies turn away from the others who witness the shame”¹ We, as viewers to Chung's painting, may shift in our shoes with pity while also reading the reactions of the peers, which further influences our response and understanding of the space shared in the work.

This level of heightened perception is a key aspect to experiencing Chung's exhibition. The pieces in *Cafeteria* showcase Chung at her most potent, beckoning viewers close with the disarmingly cute aesthetic of her canvas and palette before unfurling a myriad of psychosocial questions. Chung and the characters in her paintings are protected by shields and camouflage, but with a porosity that allows intimacy, similar to the armor donned by the Heroine character in *Spaghetti Lariat*—protected all over, but with a gaping hole in the torso—her heart remains vulnerable.

By Claire Kim

¹ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. (Routledge, 2013), 103