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In Conversation with Greg Ito: Solo Show 'Apparition' Presented by Anat Ebgi
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Greg Ito Apparition, 2021

As much as we would like to think only of the best and happiest parts of life, there is darkness as much as there is light. Greg Ito, an inherent storyteller, unfolds the truths and connectivity between what we as humans believe to be good, evil, and what hangs in the balance. In his solo show, titled Apparition and hosted by ANAT EBGI, the artist hones in on the complexity of the human experience, revealing how both light and dark experiences are part of the beauty of living.

Drawing from his own personal experiences as well as shared experiences at large, the collection speaks to transitional periods and hidden darkness within outward beauty. The artist speaks on his process of representing this dichotomy in his work, using symbolism and contrast to create this balance in each piece. While his art is inspired by his personal life, Ito seeks to inspire bigger conversations with his work about the human experience, creating a body of work that is bigger than just him as an individual. The immersive exhibit is Ito's first solo show at the Anat Egbi gallery, taking visitors through a kind of metamorphosis as they journey through the exhibit.

By interspersing both aspects of destruction and decay with growth and wonder, Ito's work represents the non-linear and complex process of change, both good and bad. Whether it be

through his masterful use of color choice or his precise hand-painted strokes, Ito has made a name for himself in the art world as a highly dedicated, crafty, and meticulous artist who places emphasis on symbols.

What was your inspiration for Apparition?

I feel like it's about all human experience, through my experience and the relatability of experiences with other people. My personal inspirations come from my family history, being in internment camps and persevering through that. I feel like every background that people have, most of them deal with the same problems, everyone has to deal with death and sickness and hardship. Pain and sickness and death. Loss, tragedies. Those unpleasant surprises, like someone getting sick. So, that's the access point, because I want it to be accessible. A lot of the symbols in the work are also accessible, like the butterfly and the flames and the flowers growing. We get the growth and we get the destruction. We get the balance. You, as the viewer, are put into these worlds that you see these occurrences. And I feel like that's the power of a symbol, right? You put it out there.

What's crazy about symbols is at first, it's just an inanimate object. Or a thing, like an owl. It's just a regular animal, but over history and over the course of humans meeting owls, they're imbued with meaning. And that meaning would be wisdom. Or like a clock being time. And people can access those symbols however they want. It could be uplifting. It could be more scary for them. And I like having open conversations, that's why I like the work. I do think about my family's history and my cultural background, all those things while I'm making the work, when it's just me learning more about myself. But I feel like what I'm projecting out into the world through my art doesn't necessarily talk about that. But those are conversations that are held around the work. So people can apply it to themselves. Obviously, there's a few stylistic references to Japanese culture.

I think you do an amazing job of connecting these darker themes with like this brightness and like having that duality and connection between both in your paintings. And I was wondering how do you like to approach the canvas with these ideas in mind.

It's pretty organic. For the window compositions, we make the composition of the window, and I just kind of think of what I want to see. For this body of work, I was doing a lot of house structures. So I was like, okay, let's put in the house. Where is this house? What's the setting, what's the time? What's going on around the house? It's slowly building a narrative for what I want to include in the composition. For the longer ones, I like to have them work somewhat diagrammatically, like a diagram.

Have you ever looked at occult spiritual diagrams? Or like, alchemy diagrams? It'd be the sun and the moon, and then there's a guy holding dirt and fire, and it means something, from back in medieval times. Those were these diagrams for understanding the world around them. And that's how I approached these paintings. So I'm like, what's the setting? And I always include the cityscape and the mountains that surround LA and then the ocean or some kind of water. I like to have those balances, and then populating it with people. And then building a narrative through my lexicon of symbols that I've used. Let's put an hourglass in there. And it's all relational too. So they're all linking into one another to create a story. But it's kind of funny because the one thing that I think is cool is that a lot of people think I do everything on a computer, but I can't stand computers. They stress me out, so I don't do any kind of Photoshopping.

It just looks so clean. I couldn't help but think that there's no way that someone could do that with their hands because it just looks so crisp.

There's a little bit of tape in the large straight frames. But everything inside of those windows are hand painted. And that's something I like too. I'm removing myself from the painting in a way. Like you don't see strokes, you don't see gestures. And maybe that goes back to your last question where it's like, 'Oh, are you highlighting the history of your family in these works?' And I'm kind of inspired off of that, but I'm removing myself from that. So even conceptually, I'm removing myself, my artist's identity from it. To talk about these larger, more epic conversations.

Greg Ito Apparition, 2021, Anat Ebgi, Installation view.

Like, as if it's a human tradition to go through this amount of suffering.

I think people don't think about that enough. Pain and loss and sadness. Those are all universal. We choose to inflict it on one another, it's so weird. Why are people so mean to each other? Like, why do people choose to be bad to one another? So there's a hopefulness in the paintings, even though they can be really dark.

When I have conversations in front of my paintings where people are confiding in things that are intimate and really hard to talk about, but having artwork inspire those conversations is so cool. When you're talking about these bigger, kind of heavier conversations, it's not good to do it in certain ways. That's why the paintings are so colorful and crisp and playful, so it kind of masks this darkness in the works. And I feel like that's very much, us as people where we like to have the mask, but we all carry some kind of burden. And when I look at the house, when you first walk in to see the house, the house looks great. You're like, 'Oh, that's cute. It's a little house and it's nice.' And as you're walking up, you see this painting of the house on fire.

And you're like, “Whoa, that’s so dark.” But it's also a playful image. When you step in the house, you look to your left and that whole back wall is completely burned down. And to me, that was almost a self portrait, because I felt like I was the house when we first had the baby. I'm so happy and excited for the future, and to hold this little human in my arms. It’s really beautiful, but it's also scary where you're like, are they going to be okay? Am I going to be able to make enough money to have a family? All the hardships and all the things that could go wrong are firing off in your head. So even though I needed to be composed and happy and enjoy the moment, there was a part of me where it was on fire. But I just had to stay standing.

So in a way, the house was kind of a self portrait. The things that I was thinking about. I was thinking about the burdens that we all carry, the image of the house burning down, but also the growth, all the flowers. And then I was thinking about the clock. With the spinning ramen, I was thinking about generations. Like this is the next generation and how it's every turn. The family is just continuing to move into the future.

And there’s some weird little things that I was thinking about. So like the ramen, it's a post-war food. So during the war, they were like, we need food that's cheap and easy to make when they're on the battlefield. So instant ramen was a thing.

Oh wow, I didn't know that.

Since my family's experiences— during World War II are kind of post-war, after the instant ramen, it's like, now we're the future. We're moving into the future. And then there's the little bird cage with a small house in it. And it's fleeing from that birdcage. So it's acknowledging the fire and being able to come to terms with it. And then when you walk out of the house, in the burned section? You're basically the Phoenix emerging from the flames. And that's why when you walked out of the house, you were confronted with the butterfly, Tondo. And the Tondo is like Yin and Yang, where it’s the growth and beauty right next to this kind of chaos and destruction. And we all embody both sides.

I think I saw you at the gallery picking one up off the floor and letting it outside. It brought the idea of coming out of this cocoon, and kind of like the Phoenix anecdote there. I thought that was really cool.

I wanted to activate the space in a way that was a little bit more of a time-based medium. So I worked with this hatchery in the South Bay, and they specialize in educational caterpillar kits and stuff. When you're a little kid, you get a cup with the caterpillar and then you watch the whole process. And since I was dealing with this symbol, that was the main symbol that I was really focused on. Also being home in quarantine and stuff, and us kind of feeling that pressure from that period, and then us coming out. That was also that experience that we all shared together, the whole world, during the pandemic.

And now we're all kind of emerging. So the butterfly is a symbol. I thought it would be really rad to include actual butterflies, but do it in this way where it was educational and symbolic and done within the right pathways for it to be ethical and also fun for the guests.

And, yeah, it was great, because those butterflies are migratory. They're called Painted Ladies and I thought that would be really cool with the painting. And they follow the light source, and they would just fly out on their own. Did you get to see any?

Oh, I saw! I think sometimes the butterflies would land on the painting and it would just be part of it. And I think that was really beautiful.

And it was nice to see people helping— like when they saw a butterfly, they're like, ‘Oh, I want to bring it outside.’

And little kids are engaging with it and people watching them emerging out of the chrysalis. That's really crazy to watch. I don't know if you've seen it before, but you’re like, ‘Whoa, that butterfly was just in there?’ And now it's finally coming out. And then when you watch it take off, it's one of those things like watching a baby be born, or something. It's really...amazing.

I thought it was good. It gave it a little bit more complexity, it gave it this other level. And it had a little bit of chaotic energy too. Art is so contained and perfect and trimmed. And my show was that, but having this component that I couldn't really control seemed fitting for me, coming to terms with the fact that I can't control everything.

Right. That's very true. Yeah, and that's more of a beautiful way of showing it and making it something tangible. I think I want to ask— I remember seeing the water sculpture, but I was wondering what were your thoughts behind that one?

Yeah, so I was thinking about exchange, how we're talking about how the paintings inspired dialogues. I've seen people that don't even know each other, talking about their own personal experiences in front of the paintings. Like, ‘Oh, this one reminds me of, my mom's house burned down when she was young’ or someone's like, ‘Oh, the other day I left the oven on.’

It's just so scary that you can lose everything. And what do we do culturally to do that? Over tea and the idea of ceremony—an exchange and focusing on togetherness. And tea is also nourishment. When I was young, when I went to college, my mom gave me one of these small single teapots and it was just the cheap ones you get from the Asian market. But it seemed like it was her goodbye gift. It was like, ‘Okay, you're off to college.’ Obviously, she got me pots and pans and stuff like that, but for her to give me this little teapot? She was like, ‘Oh, you have to have one of these?’ And I just thought that was so Asian of her to do, which is funny because we're not like super Japanese.

We’re pretty relaxed. And I was like, ‘Okay, cool, I'll take this teapot.’ And I used it for a really long time. I still have it. But it made me think, too, about my daughter. Now that she's here, she's only gonna keep growing and won't stop. So, I wonder when I'm going to give her a teapot.

Yeah. When she goes to college, that’s so cute. You can give her the same teapot.

I’ll be like, ‘Here’s this dirty old one.’

Greg Ito. The Ceremony, 2021. Acrylic on canvas over panel. 62 x 200 inches.

That's amazing. So my last question for you is I know that opening a show is an incredible feat. Especially with this, with having so many moving parts going on. And I think I read that it took you two years, right? This was two years in the making?

Well, it was two years in the making because the pandemic pushed it back. And I had the idea for the show. The plan was that we were going to do Freeze LA, which is the art fair. And then after that, we did Freeze and it was a big success. We were like, ‘Okay, cool. Let's do your solo show. It's going to be so awesome.’ And then the pandemic hit and it was so bittersweet. But I was a totally different person then. So it got pushed back, and having it be pushed back, it made me start to transition. Like once my wife got pregnant, I had to make so many mental life changes to be like, ‘I'm going to be a dad.’ That's so crazy. Can you imagine when you become a mom?

Yeah, like what is that? Am I going to do a good job? And am I going to be even just a good parent? So we went through all of these conversations. And it wasn't smooth, like, ‘Woo, baby time.’ We had arguments, we had doubts, our fears, like we think our neighbor passed away of COVID and was in his house deceased for a while.

We’re close to downtown and Chinatown, and it was shut down. It was just really dark, right? And when she found out she was pregnant, we couldn't see anybody. They’re like, ‘You can't get COVID at all or it'll complicate the pregnancy,’ and it's just so much fear.

There was so much fear everywhere. And we're in our little house and we had to just persevere. We had to just be like, ‘Okay, let's prepare, let's stick to our plan.’ There wasn't a lot going on, so it's not like we were getting FOMO from missing parties and cute stuff to go to. Then we did Basel Hong Kong, so that was our next project. And that was good because that was the last body of work I made before the baby was born. And then the arrival of Spring, so it was the next chapter. And then this body of work was made after she's here with us. But yes, definitely through that two year span, so much changed. It really blew my mind because I look back and I'm just like, ‘Wow, it's so different. We still do the same stuff, it’s just our whole lifestyle is completely different now.’