

Best by 07/21/2026 at Eli Klein Gallery

In Conversation with Clare Hu, Tianyi Sun, and Shaan Ken Rao

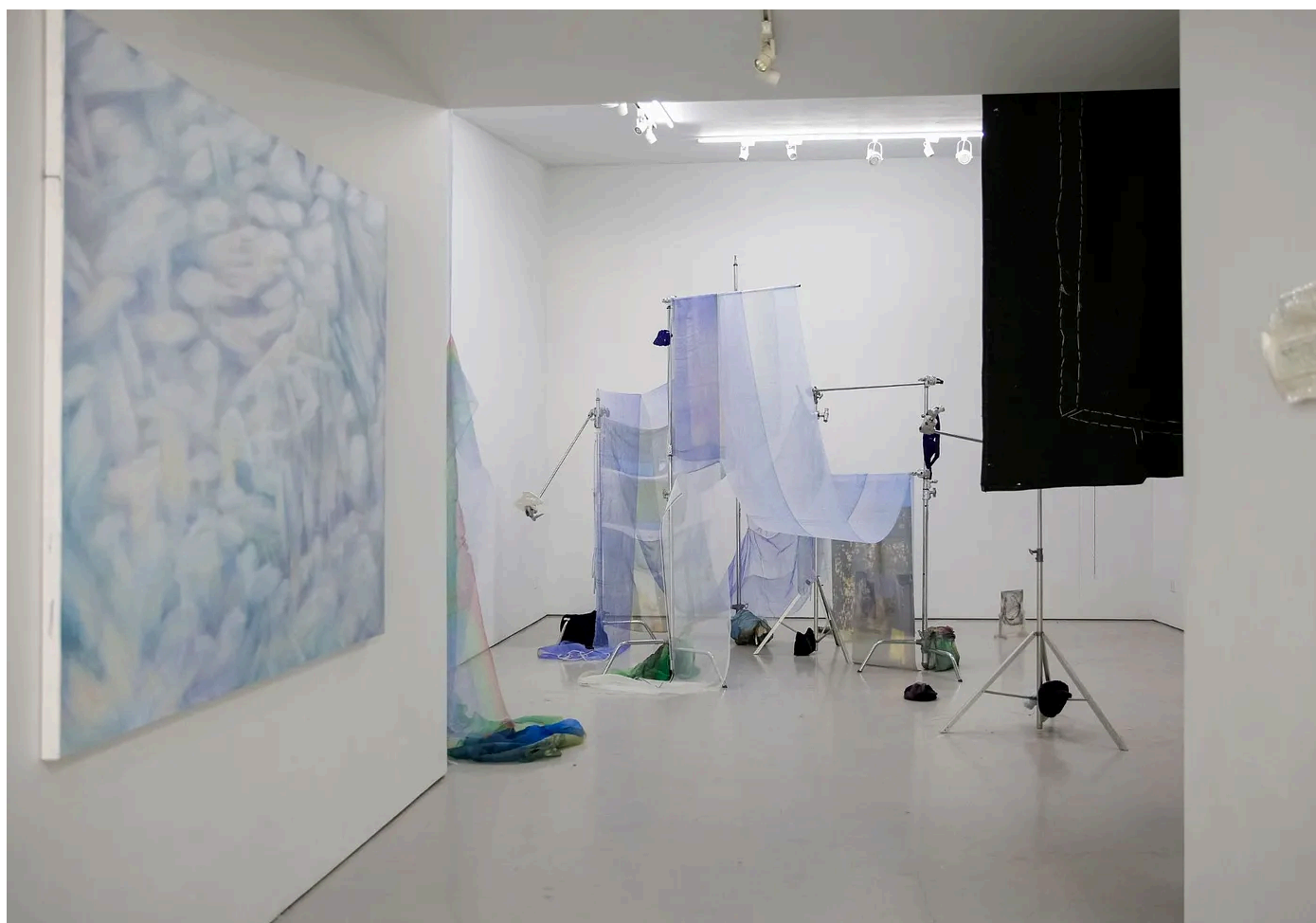


SHOWRUNNER

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Interview by Chloe Alto

For artists Clare Hu, Sun Tianyi, and Shaan Ken Rao, their residency-then-exhibition already well past its expiration date. At Eli Klein Gallery, [Best by 07/21/2026](#) borrow language from product packaging, marking the start of the gallery's sophomore residency in July as its expiry date. The once existent teleological explanation of art

production, which presented itself as “produce, select, and present” now renders obsolete. In a climate of rising costs, contracting budgets, and institutional retrenchment, to remain in the art world is to attend to its mythological being— both consumption and parturition, and its excretion and decay. Perhaps a more transparent model would add another verb to ‘produce, select, and present’— discard. I sat with Hu, Sun, Ken Rao, and curator Phil Cai to discuss how their open-door residency and exhibition reconsiders discarded substances as things to be studied, categorized, archived, and recycled.

Chloe Alto: When you first began this residency, was this the first encounter with each other’s work? How would you describe the relationship between your practices at the beginning versus how your works engage now?

Shaan Ken Rao: We had not encountered each other before. But we spent a lot of time here, over two months, and I think over that time, our work definitely started to play off each other’s ideas. Clare and I often talked about grids.

Clare Hu: I think it was interesting, this big relationship with the grid, but seeing different tactics when it came to looking at the grid, either through more of a painted aspect or more through weaving. It was interesting to see how we could both really push against it in those two different kinds of ways.



Clare Hu, *table iii (blooming leaf + valley forge dogwood)*, 2026. Grid paper, graphite, graphite screen print, and glass, 76 x 76 cm

CA: Regarding some of the objects and materials present in the exhibition, we see I Susans, digital images printed on cotton, organza, acetate, C-stands, red beans, graphite, and porcelain. You each possess rich individual practices as researchers, filmmakers, musicians, photographers, and fiber artists. Can you tell me about how title refers back to the exhibition, and how this configuration of work and materials came together?

Tianyi Sun: I feel like we haven't really encountered each other before, but it was re interesting because we kind of all came to the space together, and there was this subconscious throughline that kind of just emerged between all of us— whether it's

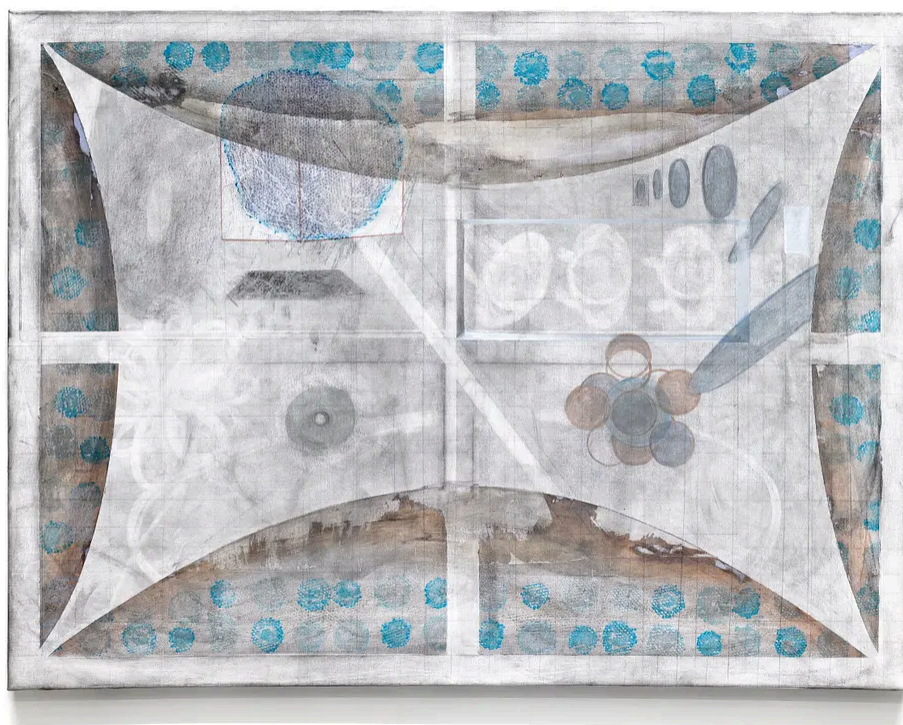
taste or these embodied experiences that we share, that kind of comes across your work. So whether it's the palette, the materials we use, or even motifs, I feel like I'm kind of speaking on behalf of all of us: they're materials that we've always been working with. It's less like we decided to work with them during the residency, but more that we subconsciously already carried all of this. Being in such close proximity there's this inherent kind of influence, but also, I think it wasn't as a direct result. It's really nice to share that affinity towards those objects and motifs as well.

CA: Each of your practices work with systems or forms of coding, whether through weaving drafts, training data, or improvisational grids. The press release describes exhibition as a process as 'a journey filled with erroneous grammar, unconscious gibberish, and deliberate muting.' How do the paradoxes and human/nonhuman errors which arise from following a system, affect the way you understand your practice as an artist?

CH: I think it's really interesting, thinking about weaving drafts. The books that I refer to the most are a book of patterns that you're supposed to follow, but there's so many mistakes in them. I think the mistakes of either 30 years or 20 years is what makes it really exciting, and it makes those really old things alive again when you're following. You're still making the same mistakes that someone made, I don't know, decades ago. So I think when I'm thinking about codes and mistakes, I think about lineage in that way and trying to carry on a certain type of language or code into the future.

TS: I think it's so interesting also because it's this idea of, you know, when something is a mistake, it becomes more of a structure, a part of the tradition. But then we kind of feed that into what we experience in the present, which is so much of what data collection or data analysts do. As a result, it's less that this is reality, but more so that our idea of reality, and it has been our idea of reality for centuries. So we don't really have the tools or even the language to describe alternatives. I think that was something that comes back more and more.

Another thought I was thinking a lot about is the labor in our works. I feel like this element of labor comes back so often, whether it's the repetition of weaving, or even the lines in Shaan's paintings, but also [his] practice as a musician and this idea of practice. So much of our work is about doing things again and again and again, whether it's this shot we need to take again, just again. This repetition I think it's really interesting, which I feel is a really nice touch to the— I don't know if you were thinking about this— but the title *Best By [07/21/2026]*. You know, it's this idea of how do we recreate something that's already gone again?



Shaan Ken Rao, *Inside a Pixel*, 2026. Pencil, graphite, and ink on canvas, 76 x 102 cm

SKR: I was also thinking about that previous question when we were talking just now like how so many things, like our other practices, are not necessarily seen in the final product of this exhibition, like the *Best By [07/21/2026]*. So it's interesting, but we see each other as things like that that the audience doesn't get to see. It's just interesting

CA: "Best by" borrows from the language from product packaging, where expiry date sorts the viable from the expired. At the same time the exhibition is interested in less linear forms like fossilization, decay, excess, and the transformation of objects into archival material. What questions are you thinking about in relation to time and creation?

TS: I think for me, it's interesting also because we have that element, but there's also the actual, very physical element of this being a short residency with this amount of time. And there's always something so fleeting about the summer as well. I feel like when you're working with this kind of loss or expectation of something being over, it's a really different cadence to the way that you work. And I think that sometimes comes across in the work as well, in really interesting ways, whether that's something that feels more precarious or more provisional, or something that feels more like actually documenting the process of making versus working towards something fully resolved or concrete.

I feel like that was really interesting to reflect on here as well, especially with Phil (curator) being so interested in the systems of what you say. In that sense, I feel like here, or with this residency for me, time became less of this subject matter. But it became kind of evident in the way the works were.

Specifically speaking, in the installation, there's forms of attachment that are very quick to make versus, you know, if I was to do something like the works I made in the studio, they're very long. One cast can take months to make from beginning to end. Certain ways of attachment, whether it's a specific screw or a specific nodule, need time to plan and create, whereas here, I think for me, I wanted to do something that felt much more quick, whether it's using C-stands or magnets or even safety pins—things that are very quick to attach. I feel like [that] became really interesting to create almost like the apparatus that's expected to go down as soon as they come up, almost.



Tianyi Sun, *Cookie [Cloud Ear]*, 2026. Glazed porcelain, 32 x 23 x 4 cm.

CH: That's so interesting, because I feel like now I'm thinking of all the different mo of traditionality that we've all three been working with. It's been such a short amour of time, and actually, how rich of a thing that is, because I feel like having to push yourself to make something creates so much room for experimentation too. So I fee the same way with the clamps and how things are installed. It's really interesting to think about a gallery space where things are supposed to be [filled] with things tha are actually very quick and fleeting and temporary.

CA: You question the standardized procedure of 'produce, select, and present' in contemporary art production. Does participating in this residency place you within framework, or does it present new modes for art production? How might your participation here contribute to a more equitable system of art production?

Phil Cai (Curator): I think, to answer this question, I'll have to go back to [Assimilation Antagonism: The Third Place Bites Back](#), that essay that I wrote. I think this is where I'm strongly at politically, because I do think the gesture of challenging doesn't equate to the consequence of integration. We can have a gesture to challenge them inside but we don't hold a 100% positive outlook on actually things for systems being changed. Maybe this passive assimilation is inevitable, but it also doesn't stop us from making a gesture of challenge.

So this is a gestural challenge, this residency. It does challenge the system, especially the middle part, "select." We're simultaneously producing and selecting, we're somewhat making this process transparent in public. Is that the equivalent of the artist producing their studio and respect from the studio? Maybe they are. Maybe the final product would be the same if we had done that. But the gesture that we're making with this residency actually gives people, at least I would think, hope that something different can be achieved. It might be achieved eventually.

So I do think there's a myriad to this process. Whether the [end goal] is inevitable or not, we're actually making an attempt, or at least publicly, a public-domain gesture, challenge the standard analysis.

To answer your second question, we do think that practically, this is a very good model, and it helps the diversity of the ecosystem. Because from a general public standpoint, it's usually a very black-box system. So this at least gives our clients an maybe press a chance to look at, "Oh, this is what artists do, and this is how they evolve from their studio into a commercial space." It just gives them some information, sheds some light into the black box.

CA: 'Best By' also signals an end. What comes after this expiry date?

PC: I would say intuitively a new life comes after the expiration date. And in each of three artists' cases, this means something different. Whether it's for Tianyi, you're looking retrospectively at yourself as a filmmaker. We think of this installation as a

quote unquote mold-making process. If we take filmmaking as a sculpture-making process, these infrastructures—the C-stands—are her looking retrospectively at the mode of the sculpture in filmmaking. These modes are usually detached and discarded after the filmmaking process. But she's turning them literally into the space to inspect why they're there, but they help to assist. So this is originally kind of a discarded item being put back into focus.

And for Shaan, it's his personal experience, and for Clare, it's the determinism of the weaving process. It's usually a very kind of end-product-based medium, but she's looking, once again, retrospectively, at this meeting of this middle layer of the overs patterns in their draft format and turning them into works with different lives. So I do think it's new lives being generated.

SKR: It was funny. I was here the other day, on Monday, and I was asking Tianyi, like what she's up to, or what she has to do for the rest of the [day]. She asked me, and like, "I have to do homework." So that's what I'll be up to.

TS: We're gonna get that A plus. I'm gonna go back into editing jail.

CH: Yeah. I think it's like, get back on the loom. It's time to start weaving again. More of the longer-process stuff.

TS: Yeah, back in our sweatshops. The repetition never ends.

Interview by Chloe Alto.

[Best by 07/21/2026 is on view at Eli Klein Gallery](#) through October 31.

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