

# John Yau

THE ART OF ASKING QUESTIONS

By Christopher Busa

BORN JUST NORTH OF BOSTON in 1950, John Yau grew up in a household where his immigrant parents spoke Chinese to each other, though he never learned it himself. He wrote in the poem “Ing Grish”:

I do not know Ing Grish, but I will study it down to its  
black and broken bones. . .

I do not know Chinese because my mother said that I refused to learn it  
from the moment I was born, and that my refusal  
was one of the greatest sorrows of her life . . .

I do know English and I know that knowing it means  
that I don’t always believe it. . . .

Anguish is a language everyone can speak, but no one listens to it.

And thus, he was gifted with the central theme of his future career, a journey into an interpretation of words, seeking and communicating meaning through what is said, mis-said, unsaid, dreamed. The author of over fifty books of poetry, artists’ books, fiction, and art criticism, Yau writes poetry that explores identity through an examination of language, and he explores nonverbal mediums as well; he has become a leading commentator on contemporary art, exploring how the mute image becomes articulate when the viewer voices her or his experience of viewing.

Physical trauma in his early years also shaped Yau’s literary sensibility: during his senior year at Bard College, he was traumatized by a serious car accident, which left him hospitalized for eight months and led to future surgeries. He acquired a distinctive limp during this forced respite, which also seemed to increase the agility of his nimble mind. Following his graduation from Bard College, where he had gone to study with Robert Kelly, and after living in Cambridge and recuperating from his accident, Yau moved to New York, spending the summer holed up in the great rooms of the New York Public Library reading on microfiche everything the poet John Ashbery, another profound influence, wrote about art for the *New York Herald Tribune*, which, while he lived in Paris, Ashbery had worked for as an expatriate columnist. Yau was also inspired by the writings on art by other New York School poets, such as Frank O’Hara, James Schuyler, and Barbara Guest.

In the fall of 1975, Yau enrolled at Brooklyn College and studied for a master’s degree in creative writing, taking courses with Ashbery. The next year, Yau published his first collection of verse, *Crossing Canal Street*, in which, without sentimentality, he portrayed contemporary Chinatown, the largest concentration of Chinese people in the Western Hemisphere.

During an interview in his art- and book-filled apartment in New York, Yau told me that he began writing art criticism “because, on a very basic level, I thought it would teach me how to write. Over the last thirty years, this has changed. Received wisdom dominates the art world. Slowly, I’ve developed an argument with



Author photo, *In the Realm of Appearances: The Art of Andy Warhol*, 1993

PHOTO BY MICHAEL STELLA

how things seem. Warhol said he painted Coca-Cola because everybody drank Coca-Cola, even the Queen of England, which is deeply assimilationist. While everybody drank Coca-Cola, not everybody could drink it in Buckingham Palace or in a diner in the segregated South. Perhaps the poetry world is as accepting of innovation as the art world, yet much of the poetry world is stuck in English departments, where, for the most part, the only kind of poet they like is one who is dead.

“I like to collaborate with visual artists, such as Thomas Nozkowski in *Ing Grish*, because they set parameters that as a poet you might not get to. I’m now working with a young artist named Charles Webster, an abstract artist, and I thought I would get the things that he makes to be the speakers in the poem. I would not have thought of that unless I had the images in front of me.”

In his overflowing apartment in Lower Manhattan, Yau lives with his wife, the artist Eve Aschheim, and their grade-school daughter Cerise, who putters around the room while we talk. Among the many paintings flowing along the high walls, salon-style, are the striking drawings of Aschheim, who concentrates on the linear markings that, in painting, serve to outline contours of images. Yau included Aschheim’s work for an exhibition of five artists that he curated in 2013 for the University of Hartford, *LINES + SPACES*.



In 1977, not long after moving to New York, Yau discovered that he had become obsessed with the art of Jasper Johns, who had a mammoth exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art that fall and winter—over two hundred large paintings, sculptures, graphics, and drawings, surveying twenty years of work, from 1955 to 1976. On view were the large seminal paintings, such as *Flag* (1954–1955), the iconic symbol of America, which is not a flag, but rather a painting of a flag. Johns might have titled his painting *This Is Not a Flag*—even though the flag is the symbol of our country, Johns’s painting, anticipating Pop Art before Pop emerged, offered an astute and novel function for representation during the very apex of Abstract Expressionism.

With Duchampian impishness, Johns seized on the idea for his *Painted Bronze (Ale Cans)* (1960), two bronze cylinders hand-painted with the logo of Ballantine Ale. Leo Castelli, of Castelli Gallery, sold them immediately. Yau explicates differences in the two “cans,” one of which is punctured by a church key, the other apparently sealed and unopened. Brilliantly, Yau, in *In the Realm of Appearances: The Art of Andy Warhol* (1993)—something of a companion book to his two widely praised books on Johns, *The United States of Jasper Johns* (1993) and *A Thing Among Things: The Art of Jasper Johns* (2008)—compares Johns’s sculpture with a dual image by Andy Warhol, *Before and After 3* (1962). The comparison is apt and keenly instructive. As Johns’s beer cans depict after and before, Warhol’s depicts a similar progression in the visage of a woman, taken from a newspaper advertisement, before and after plastic surgery, her ill-proportioned hooked nose transformed into a smooth ski slope of parabolic grace. Drawing out the differences between the work of Johns and Warhol, Yau observes that their juxtaposition shows the pause between what has been finished and what has not yet begun, concluding that Johns’s sculpture proposes an “investigation into time,” representing the state of *during*, while Warhol merely investigates the before and after.

These questions were first raised in the twentieth century when Marcel Duchamp began showing his “ready-mades,” such as his porcelain urinal, reversing its top and bottom for display, not as in a store showroom, but for exhibition in a gallery as a work of art. Thus, a functional object was offered as art, presenting a secondhand experience from a fresh perspective, transforming the familiar into an uncanny, original experience. Yau suggests that Duchamp offered avenues for divergent directions in the way viewers frame their perceptions, obliging us to consider the relationship between what a thing is and what it looks like: “Duchamp’s work makes us aware of a choice: Either we live in the world of appearances or we plunge into the realm of experience.”

Andy Warhol began his career as a commercial artist, making drawings and watercolors of retail products, such as shoes, which were reproduced in large-circulation publications such as *LIFE* and *Glamour*. Yau points out that, like Norman Rockwell, whose paintings became famous when they were reproduced in magazines, Warhol took a revolutionary cue in achieving commercial prominence: “By 1962, when [Warhol] began using silkscreened images in his work, he completed a reversal. The reproduction became a painting.” Yet, Yau



John Yau engaging with an audience member at a talk he and Brenda Goodman gave during her show at the Life on Mars gallery, Bushwick, New York, 2015 PHOTO BY PHIL SMITH



Jasper Johns, *Painted Bronze (Ale Cans)*, 1960, oil on bronze, 5½ by 8 by 4¾ inches  
MUSEUM LUDWIG, COLOGNE, GERMANY



Andy Warhol, *Before and After 3*, 1962, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 72 by 99½ inches  
WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART, NEW YORK

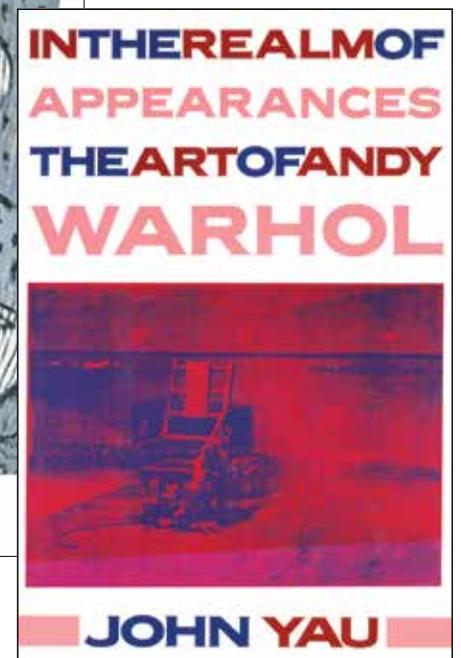
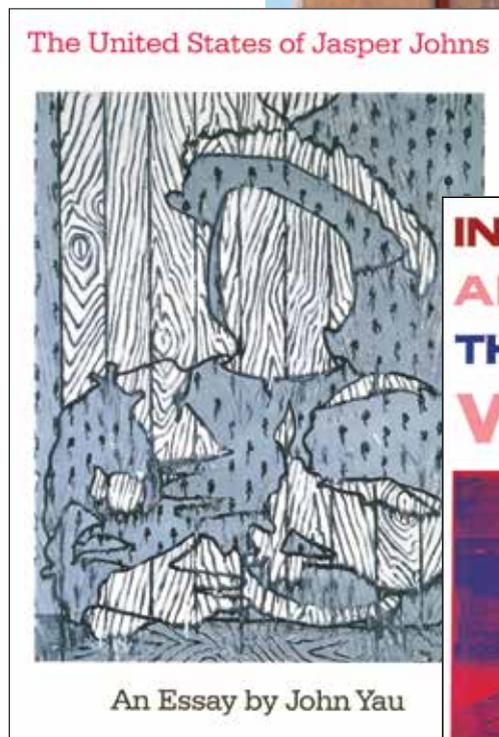
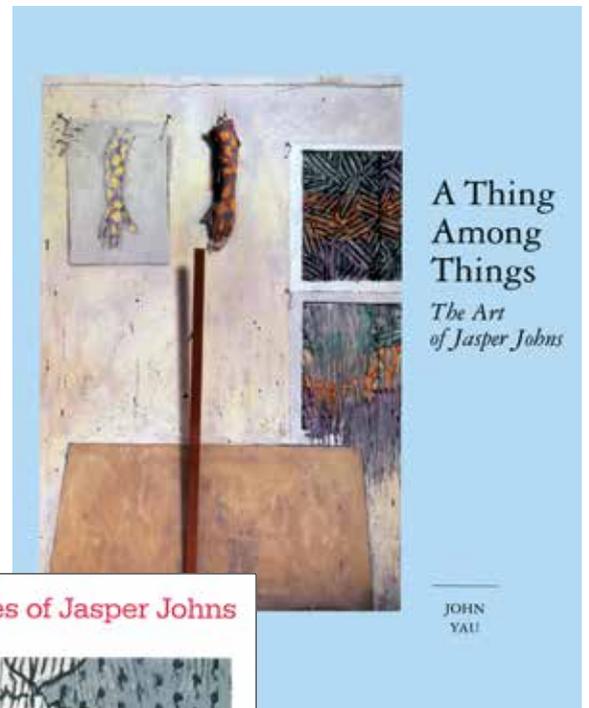
wondered, “Are Warhol’s paintings truly universal or are they sufficiently artistic? Did he reveal the emptiness at the core of consumer society or is he celebrating its legitimatizing power? Is he addressing something common to us all or is he perpetuating certain myths embedded in the fabric of culture?” The tension between the questions raised by Yau and our responses is the source of the animating power of the art he discusses.

Genuine inquiry begins with the examination of the available, which is one reason Yau was attracted to the aesthetics of Johns and Warhol, both of whom, in different ways, were less interested in creating new imagery than penetrating more deeply into things already around us. In his enigmatic manner—the so-called “Johnsonian conversation,” which has troubled critics who have tried to nail down just what Johns means in conversations with others—the artist has offered, “I’m interested in things that suggest the world rather than suggest the personality. I’m interested in things that *are*, rather than in judgments.” Yau discusses how Johns, during the ’60s, modified the fully closed circuits of his targets by abutting a side of the circle to the edge of the painting, “i.e., the world. Johns connected his evidence of time’s irreversibility to actual time.”

Johns said famously that he was inspired to paint his first work representing the American flag by a dream he had of painting the flag. The next morning, he got up, bought materials, and started painting. For his canvas, he used his bedsheet, then fashioned three rectangles, one for the blue field of white stars, another for the red and white stripes to its immediate right, and the last for the rest of the thirteen stripes. These rectangles were affixed to a plywood backing, and Johns used melted wax to embed bits of newspaper into the lumpy surface.

Some scraps of words, not visible in reproductions of *Flag* (1955), are discernible in front of the actual work. The chatter of everyday talk has become the matrix for the symbol of our country, and, as a symbol, the flag may represent an ideal, and not an actual fact, that the states are united. One bit of language that is clear, even prominent, is the phrase “Pipe Dream,” just beneath the blue canton. The phrase originated in Turkey to describe the kind of fantasy induced by smoking opium in a pipe, and perhaps it is true that the dream of uniting our very separate states is a fantasy we share. Johns further explored this concept with his iconic “maps” of the United States, showing in stenciled letters abbreviations for states.

Just as our nation’s states are surrounded by water, so our daily life is engulfed in the oceanic experience of dreaming. Yau observes that in *Flag*, Johns was trying less to represent the flag than to convey the state of dreaming he experienced when he painted the flag. This perspective offers Yau the opportunity to raise novel psychological and philosophical questions not ordinarily available to art criticism. Yau argues that Johns’s definition of seeing includes dreaming:





the ocular perception of “seeing” while dreaming challenges our waking experience of a stable figure and ground orientation. In dreaming, negative space disappears, blending subject and situation into an all-positive continuity.

Yau points out that in very different points in Johns’s career, the artist incorporated motifs in which figure and ground are indivisible. The bathtub in his home becomes a place for meditation on the un-homelike. The landmass of the United States blends with the oceans that engulf it. The painterly crosshatch patterns evolve into hard-edged colored diamond patterns. The layering of a thing within a thing is an incubation of an ideal within its own physical expression. Yau cites the succinct koan posed by the Chinese philosopher Chuang Tzu, who dreamed he was a butterfly, happy in that transformation, but when he awoke as himself, he was uncertain if he had dreamed of the butterfly or if the butterfly had dreamed of him.

Yau brings into our visual awareness issues seldom pondered in painting. Certainly, if time, as Henri Bergson said, is what keeps everything from happening all at once, then how does a static image represent temporality, motion, or narrative sequencing? When Yau was a graduate student at Brooklyn College, his teacher, Jack Flam, editor of *Matisse on Art*, referred to Bergson in his examination of Matisse’s *The Red Studio* (1911), depicting the sanctum sanctorum that is an artist’s private space for creative work. The room is painted in a very deep, dark red, with brightened outlines of whitish, X-ray-like skeletal sketches of many of the artist’s works in progress. Matisse’s painting, Yau said, is about “time becoming.” Yau refers also to a well-known Warhol painting of a suicide in which we see the figure in the air just after she has jumped from a window, but not yet landed. The image implies that our lives are surrounded by lacunae; the artists Yau admires attempt to provide meaning for our lives by placing them into larger contexts.

If Yau brings in time, especially in his books on Johns, he also brings in eating and dreaming—two other key experiences of not-knowingness. He introduces the idea that the artist is more than an eyeball expert, connecting his thoughts and involuntary appetites to what can be visually expressed. If poetry is the language of languages, then it may be capable of voicing the muteness of visual art. It is the most useful way to escape abstract, academic categories via parabolic speech, creating for the reader what the image is doing through the personal experience of one’s own reaction. In his first years in New York, Yau read a lot of James Agee’s film criticism and Edwin Denby’s dance writing, realizing that there was a whole tradition in America of poets and writers writing about something other than their own practice, and that this tradition existed outside the canon. Poets like O’Hara and Ashbery are not recognized for their writing on visual art. Weldon Kees is another example. Yau cites a film review by Agee that begins: “It was like



Luca Del Baldo, *John Yau*, 2014; (left) Glimpses of John Yau’s home  
PHOTOS BY PHIL SMITH

Yau argues that Johns’s definition of seeing includes dreaming: the ocular perception of “seeing” while dreaming challenges our waking experience of a stable figure and ground orientation. In dreaming, negative space disappears, blending subject and situation into an all-positive continuity.

drinking cup after cup of weak orange pekoe tea.” He feels that there is a belle-lettrist tradition that Ashbery and O’Hara inherited from Agee, Kees, Virgil Thompson, and Edwin Denby, who once described costumes of dancers as clashing, “all wrong, like going to a department-store tie bin after a Christmas sale.” This writing offers an opportunity to relate aesthetics to everyday activity.

For Yau, experience is all. With the title of his second book on Johns, *A Thing Among Things*, inevitably we have to bring up the concept of “the thing in itself,” postulated by Immanuel Kant in *The Critique of Pure Reason*. Philosophers since Plato have wondered about ideal forms, forms that exist as ideas preceding our experience of forms in the world. Kant said, yes, we do have ideas we are born with, but they only come into being at the occasion of experience. Kant called this “thing in itself” a “noumenon,” contrasting it with a phenomenon encountered in experience. Yau understood that, when he looked at a work of art, he transcended the mute helplessness of an object by incorporating his own thoughts, feelings, and evaluations. His aesthetic edifice developed a philosophical and psychological foundation. Yau summoned Freud’s topography of the human mind to find language for dividing the traditional dualism of the mind and body into the tripartite territory of id, ego, and superego, with only one fully conscious part trying to govern parts unknown.

Yau’s criticism connects directly to his poetry. In *Ing Grish*, his collections of poems published in 2005 in collaboration with the maze-like,

# About John Yau

BY BARRY SCHWABSKY

IN SOME WAY I would like this to be a poem about John Yau. It would be a poem in the sense articulated in some words I read recently, words that John himself quoted from the poet and translator Sawako Nakayasu, who said—John says—“I work mostly in poetry because it claims to be neither fiction nor nonfiction, because it acknowledges the gap between what really was or is and what is said about it.” Reading these words moved me because, although I had thought before, wondered before, about the fact that we don’t usually impose the categories of fiction and nonfiction on words we call poetry, I had never previously understood the import of this fact; Nakayasu, while hardly saying anything about it, seeming simply to take note of it (as I thought I already had but now came to realize I had failed to do) manages to convey the reason it is so crucial that a poem is neither fiction nor nonfiction: For all the beauty and force and accuracy we may sometimes give to our words, there is an irreducible gap between them and whatever it is we mean the words to be about. The words are what we call a poem when the beauty and the force and the accuracy of them seem to be, not so much in the strenuous and unending efforts we make to diminish that gap between the words and what they are about, as in the lucidity with which our words acknowledge and, as it were, frame that gap.

So I would like this, in some way, to be a poem about John Yau. And that’s despite the fact that I am not, this time, going to talk about him as a poet, though a poet is what he is first and last. And I also intend that not this time but some other I will speak of him as an editor, a publisher, a teacher, a talker, a friend—I don’t just mean my friend, though he is, any more than when I say “talker” I mean someone who talks to me; as I mean someone in whose nature it is to converse, so I mean someone in whose nature it is to be a friend. I could also, but not now, speak of him as a bibliophile and even an art collector, though not in the sense that someone who appears on the *ARTnews* list of “Fifty Most Important Art Collectors” is an art collector—he is more like a rescuer of artworks as he is of books and sometimes of people. “To a book collector,” as Walter Benjamin reminds us, “the true freedom of all books is somewhere on his shelves.” We can run through the variations: “To an art collector . . . on his walls.” “To a cultivator of friendship . . . around his table.” And perhaps I can also add, “To a critic . . . in his interpretation.”

That’s why I would like this to be a poem, in some way, about John Yau, and in particular about his way of being a critic, however much there would also be to say about him as an editor, a publisher, a teacher, a talker, a friend, a bibliophile, an art collector, or first and last a poet. Because as a critic he takes things that he’s found “lonely and abandoned on the market place” (again, the words are Benjamin’s) and offered them a kind of freedom in his thoughts, in his interpretation. And he offers this freedom not only to the things he loves but even to the things that he hates. (But wait: My daughter’s fourth-grade teacher trained his pupils never to use the word *hate*. They were rigorously required by him always to substitute the word *loathe*. Actually it’s not a bad idea.

So let me revise what I just wrote: And he offers this freedom not only to the things he loves but even to the things that he loathes.) But let me set aside the things that he loathes for now—I’ll come back to them later—in favor of those he loves.

I would like this to be a poem about John Yau, in some way, but not only about John but about anyone who, like him, loves change, who loves it when someone who is already on to a good thing tries to shake it up, see what that good thing can turn into. It’s a restless, Faustian love, I know—remember Faust’s words to Mephistopheles as they strike their bargain: “If to the moment I should say: / Linger on, thou art so fair! / Then bind me in chains, / Then I will gladly perish!” If death is the only alternative to change, it’s no wonder that, “In an age of signature gestures and stylistic branding, artists who change and, more importantly, are able to expand the possibilities of their work are few and far between.” I borrowed that line from John’s response to a recent show by Steve DiBenedetto, a review that reminded me of everything I like about art criticism. John writes of one of DiBenedetto’s paintings that its “structure seems energized, as if some unseen current is flowing through it,” and I immediately recognize that the same thing is true of his writing about it, and then furthermore that I feel something similar happening to myself as I read it. This unseen current just keeps flowing. It passes from one to another. But what happens when this current fizzles out or blows up in a flash of transient sparks, wasting away in a dead spectacle? That’s when change is no longer a matter of exploration but of what John calls *assimilation*, a way of grasping at status by imitating those who already have it. This impulse toward assimilation is the one he finds in the work of artists like Jeff Koons, which teaches, in John’s reading, that “to be out of the mainstream is in fact a mark of imperfection, and that you must be willing to do anything necessary to be embraced by the white middle class.”

I would like this to be a poem about John Yau and in praise of how his resistance against the pull toward assimilation is a declaration of freedom—not a freedom from the feelings of inadequacy and vulnerability that can potentially lead anyone to “self-hatred, as well as obeisance to a soul-destroying ideal” but the freedom to understand those feelings in order, not just to assuage them, but to avoid being manipulated by means of them. There is always a gap between what we are and what can be said about us. That’s why there’s an aspect of the human being that can only be addressed through a poetry that finds its force and beauty and accuracy in acknowledging the gap between what we are and what is said. And although this has not turned out to be the poem I would have liked to write about John Yau, at least I can think that in some way the gap has been acknowledged.

*BARRY SCHWABSKY is art critic of the Nation. His recent publications include a collection of critical essays on art writing and art writers, Words for Art: Criticism, History, Theory, Practice (Sternberg Press, 2013) and a book of poetry, Trembling Hand Equilibrium (Black Square Editions, 2015).*

meditation-inducing mandala images of the artist Thomas Nozkowski (who shows in Provincetown at the Schoolhouse Gallery), Yau confronts the inevitable tendency of contemporary speech to lose track of the historical meanings of its words, conflating disparate sources in a kind of pidgin English. The etymology of *pidgin* has several roots, one said to derive from the Chinese pronunciation of the English word *business*, which would indicate an origin in the needs of traders who did not share a common language. Another root originates with carrier pigeons, birds used for carrying brief written messages prior to modern communications. A pidgin language functions as a lingua franca, a simpler form of communication, the grammar taking shortcuts, such as employing basic vowels.

Punning, Yau writes of his own name: “I do not know Ang Grish, but I can tell you that my last name / consists of three letters, and that technically all of them are vowels . . .” He reveals a secret of his own identity: “The authority on poetry announced that I discovered that I was Chinese / when it was to my advantage to do so.” He mixes *Ing* and *Ang* because he does “not know either Cantonese or English, Ang Glish or Ing Grish.” Yau’s art is, paradoxically, an effort to reduce language for the purpose of expanding its possibilities.

*Borrowed Love Poems*, published in 2002, features on its cover a painting by Jasper Johns, *Untitled* (1998), an encaustic on canvas with embedded objects. The painting is essentially three vertical panels with a string-like line traversing the panels from the upper left to the lower right, as if to unite the figuration of one panel with the harlequin/diamond pattern of its adjacent panel. The string-like line signals Johns’s later use of what he called “catenary” devices to create reliefs that cast shadows on his flat surfaces. Echoing Johns’s practice of using available motifs instead of creating original images, Yau introduces his poems with an epistle by the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam: “What I am saying at this moment is not being said by me.”

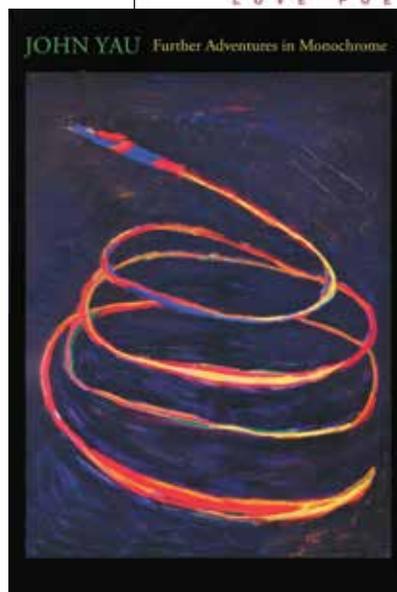
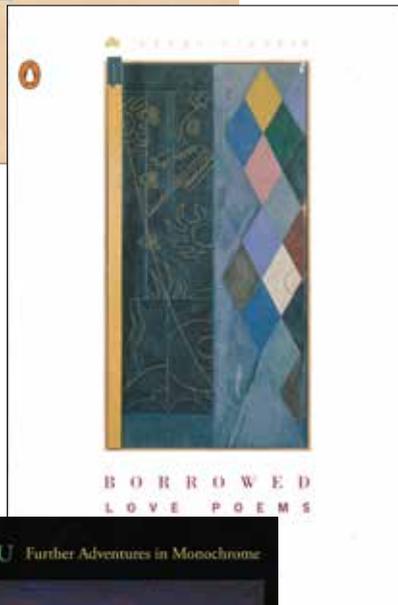
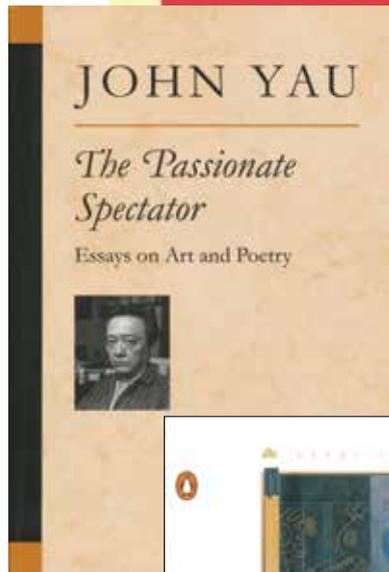
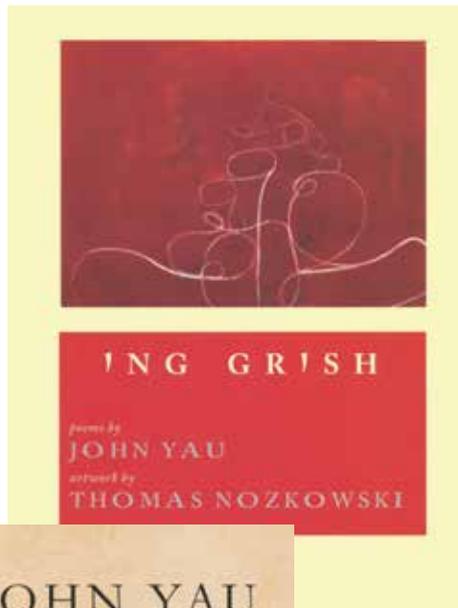
The concept of a love that is “borrowed” is Yau’s core theme, most emphatically embodied in two poems, both titled “830 Fireplace Road,” in tribute to Jackson Pollock. Yau takes us into Pollock’s studio at this address in East Hampton, to the scene of the artist “dancing,” flowing paint from the end of a stick, letting it fly without the use of a brush. The poems are structured around a published statement by Pollock: “When I am *in* my painting, I’m not aware of what I’m doing.” Yau offers variations that examine Pollock’s meaning, much like a sculptor attempting to finish a three-dimensional work while being obliged to work on only one perspective at a time. Yau walks around Pollock’s sentence:

When painting, I am in what I’m doing, not doing what I am. . . .

When painting, I’m not doing. I am in my doing.

In the second, longer poem, Yau speaks again as Pollock:

Because of making, the I has no I.



Because changes because. I have no the. . . .

I have no fear of because, no fear of destroying the I.

In Yau’s most recent volume of poetry, *Further Adventures in Monochrome* (2012), the art critic delineates the issues of being in the moment and envisioning the ideal form by speaking as a poet: “I believe there is a secret relationship between pronouns.” Like lovers in an illicit love affair, our refracted perspectives spy on each other:

My fundamental self is at war with my multiple personalities . . .

My multiple selves are at war with my fundamental personality

because one is never only one.

In another poem in this book, Yau suggests an explanation or predestination surrounding the birth of Yves Klein, the champion of blue:

Yves Klein was born because Baudelaire predicted this propitious event by naming colors, which, like all colors, escape the confines of their names, becoming more than an emanation of infinity. Even black can get away from its name, which is why Malevich had to surround it with white. But what is color that isn’t surrounded by another color?

I am driven to wonder why we speak of things “taking place,” as if an event were rooted in location. Yau sees this as “obscurity becoming visible,” where “eternity is a place but infinity is an event.” Yau leaves us with questions, not answers.

Exploring how prose can function as poetry, *Further Adventures in Monochrome* introduces a composite persona Yau calls “Genghis Chan, Private Eye,” again punning on the word *I*. This alter ego functions to create a Chinese-American identity by “jamming together,” Yau told me, the historical figure Genghis Khan—who brutally united many of the nomadic tribes of Northeast Asia and turned the Silk Road into an effective trade and communications corridor with the Middle East—and Charlie Chan, the popular noir detective in the American cinema of the 1930s and ’40s. Chan was portrayed, in opposition to xenophobic fears of a Yellow Peril, as intelligent, benevolent, heroic, and honorable, if not quite fluent in English. This fictional identity liberates Yau from himself:

The story is simple because it is not a story, but a chain of events in which you are a link. One afternoon, in neither the distant future nor the nearby past, I happen to find myself confronted by a series of largely unspeakable circumstances, all of which were indelibly marked by the entrances and exits of my shadow. Thus I am forced to quit my position at the White and Wong Detective Agency, and seek my fortune elsewhere.

As he had done in his earlier work on Pollock, Yau also includes a poem, “Ventriloquist,” in which a key statement by Jasper Johns is utilized for reworked variations on the

theme of “not knowing”—this time, not knowing the relation between a dream and the dreamer:

One night I dreamed that I got up the next morning  
I went out, bought materials, and began to paint  
The next night I dreamed that I began . . .

Among his voluminous writings on living artists, John Yau has written incisive précis of important Provincetown artists, including Richard Baker, Pat de Groot, Mary Frank, Jim Peters, Michael Mazur, Robert Motherwell, Paul Resika, Myron Stout, Bob Thompson, and Jack Tworkov. In 1983 he reviewed *Ten Fellowship Artists from the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown*, on the occasion of an exhibition in New York at the Marisa del Re Gallery. He spoke about how the Work Center was “akin to Plato’s Academy, despite the philosopher’s notorious misgivings about artists.” He noted that, in a time when everybody interesting seemed to be twenty-nine years old, the average age of the Work Center artists was twenty-nine and a half. Yau singled out a sculpture by Jim Peters that combined feathers, a photograph, paint, and wood, observing, “It’s a grimly humorous documentation of a contemporary Icarus as well as a comment on the aspirations underlying all artistic endeavors.”

Since the late 1980s, Yau has shared his unique perspective on art and art criticism, holding distinguished teaching positions at the Pratt Institute Graduate School of Art, the Maryland Institute College of Art, the School of Visual Arts in New York, Brown University, and the University of California at Berkeley. While in California, he was named the Ahmanson Curatorial Fellow at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. He founded a small nonprofit press, Black Square Editions, in 1999, publishing experimental writing such as the poetry of Barry Schwabsky, who is the art critic for the *Nation* magazine. From 2007 to 2011, Yau was the arts editor for the lively *Brooklyn Rail*, leaving to found the online art magazine *Hyperallergic* with a collective of writers including Thomas Micchelli, Albert Mobilio, and Claudia La Rocco. Now he also teaches two days a week at the Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University.

“I teach a graduate course and an undergraduate course,” he told me. “The undergraduate course is one year long in two semesters, a required course for art majors. I made up an art history class, which begins generally with Monet’s sources in Spain, Velázquez and Goya, asking students questions about what is modern painting. I show them films and introduce them to various things they may not know about. I get them to think about



*Streak/shift*, 2014, oil on canvas on panel, 16 by 12 inches COURTESY LORI BOOKSTEIN FINE ART

*Eve Aschheim worked on modestly scaled canvases and panels—often no bigger than 17 by 14 inches—with an austere geometric vocabulary. This consists largely of elements ranging from small, non-repeating vertical dashes to surging clusters of sharply angled lines—the sum of which suggests a world in transition, where balance is precarious and fleeting.*

John Yau writing about Eve Aschheim’s work in the catalogue for the 2013 exhibition *LINES + SPACES* at the University of Hartford.

how to write about art and how they see it. By the second semester, they go to Chelsea or the Lower East Side and write reviews of shows they’ve seen.”

One book on Yau’s syllabus is Charles Baudelaire’s *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, with its stirring account of “The Passionate Spectator,” which Yau appropriated for the title of his 2006 collection of essays on art and poetry. In a discussion of Frank O’Hara’s art criticism, Yau ties in Baudelaire’s writings about an alert observer:

O’Hara looked at art from a very different vantage point, one that was less protected, more open. Instead of approaching art with a theory, whose primary purpose is to aid the critic in establishing a hierarchy of verifiable values, he lived as a *flâneur*, which means he tried to live in the now as completely as possible.

Yau includes Baudelaire’s account of this alert observer, who strolls through the turmoil of modern life, amid overwhelming urban unease, calmly claiming individual power to preserve his autonomy:

The crowd is his element, as the air is that of birds and water of fishes. His passions and his profession are to become one flesh with the crowd. For the perfect *flâneur*, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and infinite. To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the center of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world . . . impartial natures that the tongue can but clumsily define. . . . Or we might liken him to a mirror as vast as the crowd itself; or to a kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness, responding to each one of its movements and reproducing the multiplicity of life and the flickering grace of all the elements of life.

John Yau, living in “a world of transition,” is our time’s “passionate spectator.” ❌

CHRISTOPHER BUSA is editor of Provincetown Arts.



John Yau and Brenda Goodman during a discussion of Goodman’s show at the Life on Mars gallery, Bushwick, New York, 2015 PHOTO BY IRENE LIPTON