

## Cary Kwok *Is this Love?*

13 June – 19 July 2025

Stepping out of the midday fumes of Caledonian Road and into the creamy old world of The Yellow Bittern, I spot Cary Kwok across the room. He is sitting on a warm wooden bench, dazed and staring at the rays of May sun streaming through the windows onto the custard-coloured walls. As I approach he jumps up to offer me his seat, and after a gentle back-and-forth of politesses I settle in a chair across the white tablecloth from him.

Cary and I have met to discuss *Is This Love?*, his forthcoming exhibition at Herald St, which will be his sixth with the gallery. Originally from Hong Kong, the artist moved to London in 1995 to study fashion at Central Saint Martins and has lived here ever since. A meticulous draughtsman, his detailed acrylic and ink paintings on thick slices of cardboard are intimate windows into fantasy worlds, often candy-toned and cinematic and, until recently, largely explicit in their eroticism. He references contemporary popular culture as well as period art, design, music, and film, carefully researching each object and item of clothing that makes its way into his vignettes. Underlying each scene is a narrative – one that he invents in his head but seldom tells, offering the beholder the chance to construct his or her own story.

As if casting himself in a Wes Anderson movie (or, perhaps, one of his own paintings), today Cary is immaculately dressed in shades of buttercup from head to toe, blending in with the walls; he even pulls up his trouser leg to show me lemony socks. This is not his first time at the Irish-British bistro, opened only six months prior by the enfant terrible chef Hugh Corcoran and Frances Armstrong-Jones, founder of Luncheon magazine, who waves from behind the counter. She and Cary are old friends, from their numerous collaborations including two covers by the artist, the most recent of which hangs framed by the entrance of the restaurant. It shows the corner of a table in raking light and hazy shadows, covered in cerise drips and rim stains from two half-drunk wine glasses. The left and top edges bisect an ashtray filled with cigarettes and cinders, as well as a wine bottle in the French style, its label emblazoned with LUNCHEON and the artist's name in an elaborate, swirling cursive. The scene could be a detail from a Brassai photograph of the 1930s, perhaps with two lovers kissing just outside the frame.

Taking its title from the 2011 film *Midnight in Paris*, the acrylic and ink painting from which this cover image was printed anchors Cary's forthcoming exhibition. The suite of works in *Is This Love?* continue his so-called romantic pieces, less graphic, both in style and in content, than the homoerotic fairytales which once abounded in his output. These new paintings are filled with shadows and night skies laden with glowing clouds, nocturnes in sharp contrast to his earlier daygo palettes. And yet, this series sees a reintroduction of eroticism, made more subtle this time through silhouettes and bulging outlines. In no work is there a full figure, or even a complete face; despite this, the human presence is heavily palpable, suffused with sensuality, enigma, longing, and poignant sentiment.

Frances comes over to chat, and we are delighted to learn that the boutonniere bunches on each table, each with different flowers from one another, come from her London balcony-grown garden. After a while, she takes our orders. This is not an establishment where drinking is optional, so I panic-order a calvados, which turns out to be a pleasant accompaniment to our hearty meal. After asking my, and Frances's, suggestions several times, Cary settles for a white wine, with trout to start and crab vol-au-vent as his main, and I choose asparagus, followed by cold roast beef. There are no wrong choices at The Yellow Bittern, and when it arrives my asparagus is warm and buttery, its thick spears a vibrant green with carefully – lovingly – shaved ends.

I ask Cary about the role of music in his work. 'When I listen to a song, I listen to it over and over, for days,' he says, and I'm surprised to hear he still uses iTunes as his streaming service of choice. A few pieces in the exhibition were borne from songs, including *Rouge*, a continuation of the artist's earlier work *Bleu Marine* (2024), which was inspired by the Luc Besson-directed music video for Isabelle Adjani's 1983 hit, Pull Marine. The newer piece is foregrounded by a hand holding a double-mirrored compact, which reflects a pair of lips being painted cherry red. On the right lingers a James Dean-esque shadow. As in each of his paintings, the artist's signature is carefully incorporated; in this instance, as the delicately etched branding of the cosmetic casing. *Every Time We Say Goodbye – Chapter 3* similarly stems from earlier work and is titled after a 1965 song by Ella Fitzgerald. As indicated, this is the third iteration of a scene set by Cary which shows the moment when someone – perhaps a lover, a close friend, or a family member – has left. While Chapters 1 and 2 capture the view of the departed character as seen from a window, the newest version turns the metaphoric camera back to the protagonist gazing down. Cary explains that the lyrics from the titular song continue: "Every time we say goodbye, I die a little." That's the vibe I was trying to create. Every time you part with someone you love, you look forward to the next time so much that it's all you think about. The yearning is so intense, it's like a little bit of you dies until the next time you see each other again.'

As our mains arrive, I point out that two paintings – *A Chapter* and *Is This Love? (Holiday Edition)* – contain wedding bands. Against these two works, the hand in the titular work *Is This Love?* is conspicuously missing a ring. Do they form a subplot within the exhibition – or, taking it one step further, are all the pieces connected in one overarching story? Cary points out that the latter, fellatory work only shows the right hand, but doesn't reveal anything further, and when I press him on whether the ring next to the whisky glass signals the beginning or the end of a marriage, his lips remain sealed. 'When everything is spelt out, you lose the aspect or opportunity to create your own narrative.' Does he enjoy films where outcomes are left mysterious? 'Sometimes,' he tells me, and lists some of his favourites: Luca Guadagnino's *Call Me By Your Name* (2017), Ang Lee's *Sense and Sensibility* (1995), and Paolo Sorrentino's latest movie, *Parthenope* (2025).

By this point in our conversation, we have made our way through a delectable feast, and I am excavating a loafy, boozy hunk of a baba au rhum while Cary cracks through the burnt sugar crust of his crème brûlée. I ask him what he's working on, and he describes a bed with crumpled sheets, on which a book and a pair of glasses have nonchalantly been left behind. Days later I see the completed work: the paperback carefully rendered in the style of a 1990s Penguin Classics with yellowing edges, its cover illustrated with an earlier painting by the artist, *Beguiled* (2022). This 2022 piece marked the beginning of his move towards realism, and in this new context it is even more soft and romantic. Another painting similarly harks back to his previous work and continues variations on a theme: *One Cigarette in an Ashtray – Chapter 4 (Shot by Cupid)*. Like the series' very first iteration (a round clear glass ashtray on a green ground), the most recent version can be interpreted as a detail or prop within an even earlier piece, *Men on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (2022), a scene of infidelity set against an Almodóvar-inspired 80s interior. In Chapter 4, the outline of the amber vessel and its shadow form a heart, the cigarette like an arrow piercing through it. As if taking a close-up of a film still, Cary imbues this quiet tableau with potent objects, each a symbol or a clue.

Despite its cosy size, there are endless entertainments at The Yellow Bittern – not least its basement bookshop. We finish our drinks and make our way down the narrow staircase, discovering its cavernous delights. While I rifle through first editions of Edna O'Brien, Cary picks up a vintage book of cartoon sketches, and we speak about the hints of adultery in his exhibition, sneaking in the discarded rings, smoky shadows, and signs of seduction. Cary laughs as he realises that even in his early work, 'You would always see Prince Charming cheating on Snow White...'. What does he think of this ongoing theme? 'I never thought much of it. It could be a story.' And on this louchely enigmatic note we put our books down and head back upstairs, saying our goodbyes to the team at the restaurant as we make our way out into the uncharacteristically resplendent London sunshine.

By Émilie Streiff