

SEASON

BEFORE THE END

FRANCIS MCWHANNELL

Before
the

End

On Tony Guo's
Queue



ABOVE AND OVERLEAF
 TONY GUO
 Queue, 2026
 Oil on linen
 1450 x 2400 x 35mm

At the core of *Queue* is a queue, or rather a group of people. All are similar in haircut, body shape, and attire. They face away from us, apparently looking at something. Like witnesses seen from behind in a Renaissance altarpiece, they invite us to join them in their spectating. But we cannot see what they see. They are a screen as well as an invitation. Several of them stand on a table, one on a chair. Another perches on what might be a bicycle. One wears a red jacket against which a tiny individual materialises, arms raised aloft, in a pose that might indicate surrender, surprise, or something else altogether. Is this a decoration, a microcosmic scene-within-a-scene? We cannot know. The space occupied by the larger figures is equally mysterious, dominated by serene and radiant blues. Diaphanous patches of colour abut and overlay one another, conjuring in my mind the image of an achingly delicate appliqué quilt or a much-loved garment verging on unmendable. Figures merge with environment, recognisable form with painterly gesture.

On the right-hand side of the canvas is a roughly rectangular region of ochre and orange. It connects with a passage of similar warm colour on the opposite edge, creating at once an enveloping frame and an impression of a split screen. On the right, a lone figure faces us and seems to cause fruit from a bowl to levitate. Could this be the spectacle that has provoked the gathering? Could this be the visionary from whose mind the gathering emerges? As with so many works by Tony Guo, there is no definite story; instead, we are presented with slippery, evocative vignettes. His paintings are informed by his experiences as a queer person stretched across multiple cultural worlds, and one can certainly begin to make observations, ponder questions, venture interpretations. But one must be content to remain in the realm of speculation. Guo's focus is the languages that painting speaks, rather than the verbiage we might seek to impose on painting.

Queue is the title of both a work and the broader exhibition of which it forms a part. The term is poetically ambivalent. It connects with gatherings, groupings, and lines of figures and other entities within Guo's paintings. It suggests the many artists and artworks of the past and present that converse with his practice.¹ And it foregrounds the making process, drawing an analogy between a queue and a painting—an accumulation of motifs, gestures, forms, colours, associations, all ostensibly driving towards an end: the final work, the final show. However, Guo does not place the emphasis on an end. His emphasis is on the queue itself, something that can be tedious and drawn out, but is also marked by anticipation for the desired event, ticket, or toy; by happy chatter; by unexpected connections. Waiting in line can be its own end. Looking at Guo's



works, one can sense the joys and frustrations of his queuing—that is, his painting practice. He is more interested in painting as a verb in the present continuous, as curator Natasha Conland once put it, much less concerned with a painting as a painted object.

Guo has likened his creative methodology to ‘unscripted theatre’; improvisation and a willingness to run with intuition are critical. He notes in conversation with me that the works in *Queue* ‘constantly and obsessively set up conditions for something else to happen’. One move cues another. ‘Each decision is less a resolution than a provocation. The paintings proceed by continuous renegotiation.’ His strategy is in harmony with the concept of queer formalism as discussed by artist Amy Sillman and writer William J. Simmons. Traversing representation and abstraction, and treating their separation as unimportant, if not illusory, the works at once build structure and chip away at a sense of stability. They are coloured by notions of mask-wearing and performance, tactics that can both conceal and reveal the innermost self. Guo is a voracious consumer of cinema, and his works possess a subtly filmic quality. Within their outward stillness, time seems to pass or unfold. Each work has its own identity, is its own drama and its own world. There are echoes between them, but no grand narratives binding them. Each is an act of rehearsal as well as performance. As Guo has worked, he has drawn from himself and his practice new attitudes and expressions.

Guo’s paintings have long centred on figures engaged in activities. While they have always resisted simple explanation, his images have often centred on labour or conflict, evoking the work and struggle of making art, of understanding the world, of coming to terms with oneself. *Queue*, the exhibition, signals something of a shift. Things are happening, but the action tends to be dialled down and the scenarios are exceptionally enigmatic. The most immediately legible painting is *Find*, also one of the earliest by date. It shows a group of people queuing for and moving through a security checkpoint. Symbols of fruit on the scanning gateway call to mind the New Zealand Customs Service, with its strict proscriptions against food. A figure whose features rhyme with those of the artist passes through the gateway with a large watermelon in his belly. He is watched by a guard holding a sword-like security wand decorated in red and green, which makes me think of the inside of the melon. Suggesting movement scrutinised and controlled, fear engendered and weaponised, *Find* speaks strongly to the present moment, yet it remains open-ended, a prompt not a declaration.



TONY GUO
Find, 2026
Oil on linen
1450 x 1200 x 35mm

TONY GUO
Tug, 2026
Oil on linen
1450 x 1200 x 35mm



Another earlier work, *Tug*, depicts two figures seated across from one another at a large table, like two siblings at dinner or representatives of two opposing parties at a negotiation. They grasp the ends of a springy, yellow coil that looks part banana, part modelling balloon, part rope. The title suggests a tug of war, or perhaps a fight over a prized last-thing-left, but the activity is arrested. If the figures are in a rivalrous engagement, it is not at a point of critical tension or strain. There is no sense of a drama at its peak, and there is no sense that we are at a beginning or end. Other elements of the painting overtake the central scenario. Curious crayon- or chalk-like scribbles move across the surface of the table, gird the yellow coils, edge a ceiling fan overhead, and pick out a cascade of chairs tumbling down the right-hand side of the canvas. The work could well be speaking about the battle of creativity, a sort of tug of war between maker and thing being made, in which a perfectly acceptable state is a kind of stalemate, where both parties accept that neither can—or, indeed, need—win out.

In *Signs*, the activity is still more hushed. There is an almost even balance between representational and abstract elements. A cluster of seemingly male figures moves through, or stands within, a space dominated by yellow and with noticeable passages of brown, green, red, and white. Peer closer, and a rich array of colour emerges, flashes of purple, pink, turquoise, and neon green playing off the earthier tones. A chevron pattern echoes the sword implement in *Find*. A house—simply depicted, as if drawn by a child—is superimposed with a hazy visage that might be the artist in his youth. A face on a façade, a face as a façade. The title *Signs* connects with a series of picture-like forms that hover in front of the heads of some of the figures. It is tempting to read these as labels, markers of identity, either self-imposed or imposed from the outside, but they might just as easily suggest emergent ideas, dreams, or even the accoutrements for a ‘who am I?’ guessing game.

Similar picture-like shapes occur in *Drill*, one of the most recent works in *Queue*. Here, they feel entirely abstract. There is a clear central scene, exhibiting deft linework and rendering. Two figures wear protective suits of some sort (diving suits, hazmat suits, space suits), while a third stands over them, leaning on a ladder, perhaps directing the eponymous drill. But the tableau is not dominant. It is interwoven with pattern and gesture. The emphasis is on the practice—and practising—of painting in all its multiplicity. The work includes some of the most luscious paint handling in the show. Translucent peach dances across the top half of the canvas. The bottom right-hand corner is populated by sweeping lines of purple



TONY GUO
Signs, 2026
Oil on linen
1450 x 1200 x 35mm

TONY GUO
Drill, 2026
Oil on linen
1200 x 1000 x 35mm



and fluttering strokes of red and green. There is harmony but also dissonance. Drabber, heavier colours clang with vivid, buoyant ones. *Drill* becomes a declaration of Guo's interest in difficult painting, painting that pushes back against prettiness and formula.

Roll is a small and radical canvas. The only traces of representation are a few ball-like forms carrying numbers and a face similar to the one in *Signs*. The work speaks of painting as an intuitive act. It seems to have been rapidly executed, yet it feels less like a study and more like an accumulation of lessons learned and still being digested. A second small work, *Allergen*, contains a series of legible motifs and almost dares one to try decoding it. In the top left-hand corner, a thorny hoop is draped with a cloth on which several puzzle pieces appear, and from which they appear to drip. In the bottom right-hand corner, a cloudy form ghosts a wobbly lattice. I find myself thinking of symbols of the Passion: the Crown of Thorns, the Veil of Veronica, the Cross. The background of the painting is dominated by deep maroon, glossy and luscious. Along the right-hand edge are neat vertical bands in blues, reds, and browns that put me in mind of abstract works by Richard Diebenkorn. The title *Allergen* chimes amusingly with the idea of the cloth as a handkerchief and the cloud as a cough or cathartic sneeze.

Like *Allergen*, *Chamber* is suffused with whimsy and pathos. It centres on a large entity reminiscent of a bed, which is pale but mottled with colour, like a pearlescent shell or light skin faintly bruised. Vibrant blocks, many of which bear large human ears, are superimposed over the maybe-bedding. A plethora of connotations come to mind, from the notion of 'listening in' to the sensation of an ear resting on a chest. A sgraffito light shade and bulb, emerging from the maroon background at the top of the picture, intensify the impression of painterly experimentation, and reinforce the potential interpretation of the image as a bedchamber. But other kinds of chamber can, of course, be read in the painting, from the tiny cochlea to the metaphorical echo chambers that we all must attempt to resist as we attempt to develop understandings of ourselves and of the ever-inscrutable world around us.

A subtle evocation of a bed, or bedroom context, is discernible in *Straight Ghosts* as well. A single head, seen roughly from above and contained within a kind of grey triangle, might be a figure asleep. Further up are two more heads, their faces pressed together, eyes closed. The painting is an enchanting tapestry of colour and form, uniting the strengths of all the other works in *Queue*. One region suggests a small wall, another a kind of headland by the sea. But, here as elsewhere, one is ultimately left to contend with a painting as something in constant flux. It is not totally resolved, not definable,

TONY GUO
Roll, 2026
Oil on linen
400 x 350 x 25mm

TONY GUO
Allergen, 2026
Oil on linen
400 x 350 x 25mm





TONY GUO
Straight Ghosts, 2026
Oil on linen
1000 x 750 x 35mm

OPPOSITE AND OVERLEAF
TONY GUO
Chamber, 2026
Oil on linen
1250 x 1250 x 35mm



but a reflection of a passion- and necessity-driven labour on the part of the artist to find a way through making art. It is a testing of the eternally dynamic language of painting. As someone who is always trying to talk, verbally, about painting, I must constantly remind myself that painting is the language. These things by Tony Guo—and this thing that Tony Guo does—are the expression. My job, and your job, is to participate in a completion of the expressive act. Painting is the queue. We, the spectators, are the awaited point of arrival.

¹ Among artists he has cited recently are Prunella Clough, Milli Jannides, Yue Minjun, and Tal R.

² The gathered figures in *Queue*, the painting, are adapted from a scene in *One Second* (2020), directed by Zhang Yimou. Other films that Guo has recently spoken about include *Resurrection* (2025), written and directed by Bi Gan; *A New Old Play* (2021), written and directed by Qiu Jiongjiong; and *Synecdoche, New York* (2008), written and directed by Charlie Kaufman.

³ The figures in Guo's works have often appeared as semi-self-portraits, carrying his features.



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