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## The Grammar of a Shadow: Inside Xinyun Chen's Painted Symbols

Our Friends · Sunday, October 4th, 2026

For Xinyun Chen, a symbol becomes interesting at the moment it stops feeling obvious. Her paintings often start with images that already carry familiar associations, then test what happens when the surrounding context shifts. What feels instinctive in a skull, a dove, or a hand shadow is, in her view, largely learned.

Chen's paintings begin by questioning that instinct. Based between New York and Baltimore, she received her BFA in Illustration from the School of Visual Arts in 2023 and her MFA in Painting from the Maryland Institute College of Art in 2025. Her work has been shown in New York, Baltimore, and London, including at the Peale Museum. In 2026, she attended a residency at Vermont Studio Center.

Her move from illustration into painting also changed the questions she was asking of images. In the ongoing Echo Chamber Project, she considers when an image begins to function as a symbol, and how much that shift depends on context.

### Starting With a Skull

Chen often works through this problem by returning to Dutch Golden Age still life.

Dutch Golden Age still life became one way for Chen to think through that problem. A lemon may suggest wealth because of the setting around it, while a skull in a vanitas painting can define the scene almost immediately. For Chen, that difference shows how context and learned association reinforce one another. The Echo Chamber Project grew from this exchange between image, symbol, and context.

On the canvas, those questions are worked out through form. Chen often lets a recognizable image hold together just long enough for a shift in space, surface, or repetition to change how it reads.

### Learning to Let an Image Drift

One artist who helped clarify this idea for Chen was the Brazilian painter Paula Siebra.

Chen has cited Brazilian painter Paula Siebra as important to this line of thinking. In Siebra's still lifes, familiar objects can feel slightly detached from physical space. Chen was especially interested in how small changes in perspective, edge, and color could make an object read less as a

thing and more as a sign. That observation reinforced her sense that image, symbol, and context are shaped together.

REFRAIN makes that principle visible.



*Xinyun Chen, REFRAIN, 2024. Acrylic on canvas, 36 x 72 in. Courtesy of the artist.*

In REFRAIN, identical wine glasses appear in different painterly conditions. Some flatten into repeated signs while darker versions seem closer to successive moments of one form. The object stays the same, but repetition changes its role.

## What a Hand Can Say

Hands occupy a different place in Chen's work because they already sit close to language.

Hands are central to the Shadow Puppet series because gesture already carries meaning before it becomes language. Chen uses hands to form animals and human silhouettes while keeping the body that produces the shadow visible. Critic Yashica Dahbre has linked these works to communication before codified language, when gesture itself could carry symbolic weight.

Language enters the work more directly through Chen's experience as a Mandarin speaker. She has written about the pictographic history of Chinese characters, using the ancient form of "turtle" as an example of an image becoming a linguistic sign. That history sharpened her interest in how painting can also examine the way it produces meaning.

This relationship becomes particularly tangible in Shadow Puppet 07: Deer.



*Xinyun Chen, Shadow Puppet 07: Deer, 2026. Acrylic on linen, 30 x 40 in. Courtesy of the artist.*

Shadow Puppet 07: Deer brings together antlers, branches, roads, a map, and a deer-shaped hand shadow. Some links are visual, while another is linguistic: the Mandarin words for “deer” and “road” are homophones. Chen describes the work as an attempt to picture association itself, with one connection leading into the next.

The same logic appears in how Chen paints time.



*Xinyun Chen, Shadow Puppet 02: Rabbit, 2025. Acrylic on linen, 19 x 32 in. Courtesy of the artist.*

Shadow Puppet 02: Rabbit applies the same approach to time. Lunar phases, a calendar grid, and the Chinese temporal marker *mao* (??) appear with a rabbit-shaped hand shadow. The systems do not align into one timeline, and the rabbit remains both animal image and constructed shadow. Chen often keeps several readings active at once.

## When Painting Gives Itself Away

Chen's Olive paintings begin from nearly the opposite position.

The Olive paintings push the same questions toward the mechanics of painting itself. Chen chose a subject with relatively little symbolic baggage and placed it inside unstable *trompe-l'œil* spaces. Inconsistent shadows and exposed linen interrupt the illusion, making the viewer notice how the image has been built. The olive becomes less important than the painting's own surface, light, and spatial logic.

The question of interpretation becomes more explicit once viewers enter the work.

Shadow Puppet 03: Man pushed Chen's thinking in another direction.

Shadow Puppet 03: Man made that role of the viewer especially clear for Chen. She has written that she focused on formal relationships while making the painting, then encountered interpretations she had not planned. Rather than treating those readings as errors, she became more interested in how much meaning comes from the viewer's own memory and cultural knowledge.

## Keeping the Question Open

In August 2026, Chen presented many of these works together in Echo Chamber, her solo

exhibition at ASPACE Gallery in Brooklyn.



*Installation view of Echo Chamber at ASPACE Gallery, Brooklyn, August 2026. Photo by blublu LLC. Courtesy of the artist.*

The exhibition brought these questions into one room, but the project remains open. Chen continues to work with familiar images rather than a private symbolic code. What changes is the condition around them: repetition, scale, shadow, surface, or context. Her interest lies in the moment when recognition is still possible, but certainty begins to loosen.

*Image at top: Xinyun Chen, Shadow Puppet 03: Man, 2025. Acrylic on linen, 38 x 46 in. Courtesy of the artist.*

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