

BROOKLYN RAIL

ArtSeen

Kemar Keanu Wynter: *Rücken-*

By Amber Jamilla Musser



Kemar Keanu Wynter, *The Sun's Gaze (Marinated Leeks)*, 2024. Acrylic on Evolon, 63 1/2 x 90 1/2 inches.
Courtesy the artist and Klaus von Nichtssagend.

What first looks like a moody expanse of chocolate and burnt umber with hints of green and rose gold gives way, upon closer inspection, to a set of underlying patterns. At evenly spaced intervals, lighter shades of mauve produce long narrow islands snaking their way from the bottom to the top of the painting. Looking closer still, one can find a few partial pale horizontal fragments of lines. The mood in *Endo, Exo (Spiced Hot Chocolate)* (2024) is cozy. Despite the painting's large size (70 by 101 inches), it invites viewers to give themselves over to noticing the irregular accumulations of pigments and the variety of hazy shapes. This is the warmth and fuzzy embrace of spiced hot chocolate when contemplated deeply.

Wynter has, in other words, made tangible a sphere of embodied memory by pairing words with shapes and colors. By his own description, they are crystallizations of Wynter's own time shared with loved ones in the company of favorite foods. These paintings, then, capture a dense layering of temporalities and feelings. The duration of these relationships is different from the time Wynter has spent painting, and that is different from the time spent eating or cooking or simply being, and each of these different times contains a multitude of feelings embedded within them. Wynter is able to summon this temporal thickness in part because his own process is itself reliant on the vagaries of time.

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Each painting begins with him soaking large sheets of Evolon, a polyester microfiber paper, in copious amounts of water before painting on it with acrylic. What we see in Rücken—the German word for back—is, in fact, the back of Wynter’s paintings. After he has finished painting on the wet paper, he leaves the paintings to dry for several days. Although he revises them as needed, Wynter allows time for the water to evaporate, leaving colors to bleed into each other and to pool into mysterious shapes. The horizontal faint lines in *Endo, Exo (Spiced Hot Chocolate)* are records of the placement of the floorboards in Wynter’s studio while the vertical lines show where the plastic creased and bunched when he laid it beneath the wet paper.

In other words, the paintings not only hold memory, but they also bear the imprint of place; not just the specific specificity of Wynter’s studio, but the multiple places he and those he is invoking have spent time—both together and apart. This geographic sensibility feels especially palpable in *The Sun’s Gaze (Marinated Leeks)* (2024) where the earthy browns, beiges, and light greens look like a topographical map. Here, the imprint of plastic has made parts of the painting look like cracked arid earth, making felt the heat of the sun. *Knead Bee (Marionberry Cheesecake Ice Cream)* (2024) similarly invokes the aerial view of terraforms, but here the deep blue that peeks in at one side and the blur where blue and pink meet ask us to think about the view from a plane when one is coming in from the ocean. The blur becomes clouds, and the pink and orange creases become mountains. And while we might be able to see how sun and plant come together through the color palette of the leeks in *The Sun’s Gaze (Marinated Leeks)*, there is a gap between this image and the feeling of eating ice cream. This disjuncture is productive, however, because it makes evident that Wynter’s paintings reside in the terrain of the material and immaterial simultaneously. The absence of brushstrokes keeps them untethered to any one specific reality so that they are free to take up space in any number of imaginaries. Yet, the viewer is anchored into feeling a particular set of sensations by the immersive hues.

And it is in this oscillation between groundedness and mobility that we find another way into thinking about

Rücken-. While the paintings’ fluidity, which finds an echo in Wynter’s process since he must give over many aspects of his design to the will of the water as they dry, is central to its materiality, so, too, is the perspective of the viewer. In addition to being the term for back, Rücken- also refers to the tradition of *Rückenfigur* painting, which depicts the backs of figures. This means that these paintings emphasize the specificity of situation; they make the viewer aware that the figure in the painting, who otherwise is opaque, has a personal perspective on the world. Likewise, Wynter is the figure whose perspective we are experiencing as viewers—we get hints of this in the titles of the paintings, which evoke a particular world and set of experiences. But just as with *Rückenfigur* compositions, this knowledge of situatedness provides a self-reflective quality, inviting us to think about where these paintings (and their landscapes) reside in us. Given the ubiquity of food, we might more properly ask how Wynter foregrounds the processes of metabolism, which is to query how food, relationships, places, and memories can be transformed into fields of color and shapes and live on in this distilled form.



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