

## 太阳雨：陈开 & 妮可·蓬格拉萨米·费恩

### DROPS FROM THE RAINBOW: CHEN KAI & NICOLE PHUNGGRASAMEE FEIN

Leo Gallery Shanghai

DURATION: 2024.11.3-2025.1.5

OPENING: 2024.11.3 4-7PM

ARTISTS: Chen Kai, Nicole Phunggrasamee Fein

CURATOR: Meng Xianhui

VENUE: Room 301, Ferguson Lane, 376 Wukang Road, Xuhui District, Shanghai



## FOREWORD

Leo Gallery is delighted to announce the upcoming dual exhibition *Drops from the Rainbow*, showcasing works by artists Nicole Phunggrasamee Fein and Chen Kai from November 2, 2024, through January 5, 2025. This exhibition will feature representative works from Fein's career alongside several new works by Chen Kai, created since 2020.

In Shanghai, the phenomenon of sunshowers—a burst of rain under clear skies—is a familiar one, often followed by rainbows stretching across the sky. The Song Dynasty scholar Shen Kuo documented this in his *Dream Pool Essays* (梦溪笔谈), noting, "A rainbow is the shadow of sunlight in the rain. It appears when the sun is shining through." The exhibition title "Drops from the Rainbow" hints at how vibrant colors are delicately scattered across the artists' canvases, resembling raindrops. Through the distinct approaches of Chen Kai and Nicole Phunggrasamee Fein, viewers are invited to witness how each artist engages in a dialogue with their works through diverse materials and methods.

The term "Neo-Impressionism," coined by French art critic Félix Fénéon in 1886, defined the style epitomized by artists like Georges Seurat and Paul Signac, known for pointillism. This art form, rooted in a classical emphasis on form and Impressionism's focus on light, projects a sense of tranquility while reflecting the deepening understanding of optical theory accompanying technological progress. Today, although pointillism's vibrant surfaces and visual blending of colors remain in contemporary painting, the motives driving these compositions have diverged significantly from those of the 19th-century artists.

Born in 1990 in Wuhan, Chen Kai received foundational art training in China before expanding his horizons at the San Francisco Art Institute. There, his passion for color deepened, inspiring him to revisit the pointillist technique. Beginning with experimental brushstrokes, he soon focused on the selection of materials, colors, and compositions, treating painting as a layered process, where the outcome emerges through compositions formed in the preliminary stages of creation. In Chen's early works, this painterly expression alternates between spontaneous emotional release and restrained composure, emphasizing the aesthetic value of each brushstroke as a fundamental element of visual language.

As Chen continues to redefine pointillism's symbolic and structural language, he finds his practice increasingly aligned with fields of color, built up like strata of materials over time. The recently presented works can even trace their origins back to 2020, during his residency at Swatch. While the traces of the past are difficult to discern in the paintings, the brushstrokes and the logic of layering new

color dots from different periods resonate with one another within the works. It is within this extended timeframe that he began to contemplate the significance of the materials themselves. In this new body of work, he explores the inherent significance of his materials. This approach resonates with "Minimalism," a movement emerging in contrast to the expressive Abstract Expressionism of the 1940s and 1950s, representing an ultimate commitment to the essential existence of materials. James Meyer, art historian and the representative figure of this genre, has noted that such works feature "materials existing solely as materials; colors, if used, carry no additional references. These pieces are often positioned on walls, in corners, or directly on the floor, presenting an installation art that reveals the gallery as a tangible site, inviting viewers to consciously navigate their surrounding space."

Building on this foundation, Chen's compositions and concepts increasingly embrace Minimalism. He perceives the canvas, framed and supported, as an artwork in its own right, employing materials such as oil paints and substrates in his creative process. As he engages directly with the canvas, he paints along the fabric's texture, intuitively deciding on the thickness of the paint layers during his direct engagement with the canvas. As he delves deeper into the canvas, Chen finds himself drawn to the spectrum of colors, much like the gardens in Gustav Klimt's work, which left a lasting impression on him. Around 1900, Neo-Impressionist works from France and Belgium were regularly exhibited in Vienna, influencing Klimt to develop a highly personalized variant of pointillism. Rather than dissolving all subjects into a uniform grid of color dots, he applied the technique selectively, stylizing landscapes into entirely artificial, two-dimensional structures.

Chen's latest works, dominated by yellow hues, evoke sunlight; while inspired by natural landscapes, he does not aim to replicate nature. He hopes each piece resembles a sheet of paper exposed to the elements, gradually developing its unique character over time. Each work thus embodies its individuality, whether as a play of sunlight scattered through forest canopies or as layers of golden ripples extending outward. Hermann Hesse's poetry, embodying the desire to be "soaked in sunlight without longing for anything else," aptly resonates with a generation inundated with information. Chen, therefore, avoids conveying any specific message, instead constructing a new visual language that directly engages the viewer. In his experiments, layering colors, the viewer's experience becomes part of the artwork, with shifting light and prolonged observation naturally blending colors before their eyes. Chen's intention is not representational or emotive like abstract expressionism; rather, he invites the viewer to explore an ever-evolving field of color, fostering a subtle, immersive engagement.

Born in 1974, Nicole Phungrasamee Fein studied social psychology and art at Tufts University, the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, and Mills College in Oakland. Three decades ago, while still a student in Boston, she grappled with large oil paintings. It was during this time that she spent a summer at the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou. Immersed in traditional Chinese ink techniques—flowers and birds, landscapes, and calligraphy—she found a more fluid and comfortable way to create, one that felt truer to her nature. This experience led her to adopt watercolor on paper as a life long medium. In *Drops from the Rainbow*, the artist presents explorations from 2020 to 2024, confining herself to square or circular formats. Through these strict self-imposed limitations, she achieves a diverse range of effects, such as delicate dots of paint and evenly distributed lines, making it difficult to discern the process behind each artwork. The layers of primary colors revealed at the edges showcase the elements that structure the composition. Between the sprayed, dispersed, and overlapping colors, one can imagine how these deeply personal processes unfold beneath the surface's tranquility.

"Unless you walk through it yourself, you cannot truly paint this landscape." Fein has traversed the peaks of Huangshan and wandered through fields of grass in Tanzania during the April rainy season. She

recorded her walks on a long roll of paper, capturing the passage of time in her paintings. "When I paint, I feel as if I'm taking step after step, documenting each moment and maintaining a steady rhythm, much like walking." For her, the passage of time signifies a belief in wandering without a destination, trusting that placing one foot in front of the other is the right course. Upon returning to San Francisco, she sought to maintain this slow pace and sense of conviction, a philosophy that permeates her creative practice.

After briefly experimenting with developing photographs in a darkroom using chemicals, Fein realized she preferred the direct experience of painting. She slowly lays down lines on paper, allowing each to dry before applying the next; the subtle overlaps serve as her unique mark. She retains test papers where she mixes various colors, sometimes incorporating all the hues into her work, while also shifting to serene monochromes. The diverse overlapping patterns create a sense of movement and rhythm, as she employs brushes of varying widths and thousands of transparent layers of color to produce unpredictable combinations. Maintaining intense focus over extended periods, she describes each interaction as a spontaneous response to the present moment—namely, the paper itself. Fein holds no preconceived notions about how these colors interact; she creates based solely on her observations, completing her works amid precision, perfection, and unexpected surprises, a process that cannot be replicated.

Her titles are composed of dates and names of colors like Spring Green, Rose of Ultramarine, and Scarlet Lake. She records this information on the back of her works, creating a puzzling poem as the color names connect seamlessly. The seemingly simple yet complex essence of her works comes from her facility with water - controlling the water and letting it flow. The pieces in *Drops from the Rainbow* reveal her many new discoveries in color mixing and separation. The colors, which are inspired by her observations of the sky, are created by mists of colored water, while revealing underlying colors at the edges, and pushing the works toward different positions on the spectrum. Transitioning from the geometry and structure of square grids and circular forms, the latest rectangular forms, in contrast, appear more organic, suggesting a return to mountain peaks and endless fields of grass.

In Fein's practice, the calm surface of her works often conceals the process beneath. She continually returns to the simplest beginnings, where lines connect to form areas, intersecting to create grids. Each piece is an iteration that leads to the next creation. Both her works and those of Chen Kai bear the imprints of time, generating more space through diverse marks. The splashes of color that burst from the spectrum fall like raindrops, charting their respective artistic journeys.

## CURATOR INTRODUCTION

**Meng Xianhui** Independent Writer, Curator, Senior Media Professional

She completed her undergraduate and master's degrees in History and Art Theory. Previously, she served as a senior editor at The Art Newspaper China. Her focus lies in the presentation of contemporary art across media, exploring how multicultural integration shapes artistic expression. She aims to reinterpret and understand current artistic practices through the rich perspectives of historiography. In 2023, she curated "Mirroring Bodies and flowers Flower: Zhang Hui" at Nan Shan Society. She also participated in the personal project "Fu Chun" by artist Yan Shanzhun as part of the

Contemporary Artist Series at Pingshan Art Museum, and hosted the spring session of the Pingshan Art Museum's Four Seasons Academic Salon, titled "The Experience of Life and the Soil of Art." In 2024, she curated the group exhibition "Spring Sprang Sprung" at Hunsand Space and curated the group exhibition "Pattern-makers' Maze" at Lisson Gallery's Shanghai space.

## ARTISTS INTRODUCTION

**Chen Kai** born 1990 in Wuhan, received his BFA in Oil Painting from Hubei Institute of Fine Arts in 2012, and an MFA from San Francisco Art Institute in 2018. He currently lives and works in Shanghai.

Chen Kai's new works delve into the interplay of color, time, and abstraction through large-scale abstract oil paintings using pointillism. Each piece consists of countless color dots layered through repeated sessions. This gradual process reflects the natural accumulation of time, building rich texture and depth. In this series, Chen Kai employs optical-mixture techniques to explore the relationships and tensions between colors. Chen Kai's painting process unfolds naturally, with each layer permeated by time, attention, and light. His latest series reflects the subtle power of time and invites contemplation of its delicate changes.

Chen was the recipient of the Headlands Graduate Fellowship Award in 2018, the Swatch Art Peace Hotel Artist Fellowship in 2019, and Leo Gallery Artist Residency in 2020. Chen's works have been included in exhibitions at Leo Gallery, ART 021 Shanghai, Headlands Center for the Arts, Fort Mason Center for Arts & Culture, Root Division, Live Worms Gallery, CArE Doug Adams Gallery, and San Francisco Art Institute, among others.

**Nicole Phungrasamee Fein** born in Evanston, Illinois (1974) and grew up in Santa Barbara, California. She attended Tufts University (BA), the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (BFA), and Mills College, Oakland, CA (MFA). She lives and works in San Francisco.

Nicole Phungrasamee Fein is noted for her agile handling of pigment on paper. Going back two decades, her drawings are made sequentially. As the work has evolved, delicacy and tranquility are constant. Multiple layers of earth tones in overlapping strokes - left/right, top/bottom - defined the earliest pieces. The result is visually akin to weaving. Gradually color choices expanded but remained muted. About fifteen years ago, a decidedly more vibrant spectrum appeared. Combined with predominantly horizontal lines, these evoked luminous landscapes or seascapes. Later, lines radiating from a central point in the Tondi series introduced the circle to what had been predominantly square.

She has exhibited nationally and internationally including San Francisco, Philadelphia, Houston, New York, Los Angeles, Paris, London, Zurich, and Berlin. Her work has been reviewed in ArtForum, The Week, The Philadelphia Inquirer, The San Francisco Chronicle, Artweek and ARTnews. Her work is included in permanent public collections: the Achenbach Foundation at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco; Berkeley Art Museum; Blanton Museum; Fogg Museum; Hammer Museum; Menil Drawing Institute; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; the Whitney Museum of American Art, among others.