

Between Home and Departure: Hayley Chi Hay Chiu at the Varley Art Gallery

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“Emerging Artist Spotlight”

Hayley Chi Hay Chiu

Curated by Anik Glaude

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The idea of belonging is often presented as a question of where one comes from. In “Emerging Artist Spotlight”, however, Hayley Chi Hay Chiu’s paintings suggest something less settled. The exhibition presents two large oil paintings, *Heavenly Horse* and *What does the cicada know of ice?*, in which the artist places the body between familiar environments and fantastical encounters. Both works can be read through the language of identity and inherited cultural memory, as the gallery’s wall text proposes, but the paintings themselves are less conclusive. Rather than depicting home as a stable destination, Chiu’s figures appear suspended between staying and leaving, familiarity and imagination.

On 21 August, I encountered *Heavenly Horse* first. The painting depicts a young girl in striped pyjamas lying across a luminous blue horse that appears almost crystalline. They move through a dark, star-filled sky above a row of snow-covered houses. The contrast between the saturated deep blue of the sky and the much lighter blue of the horse gives the central figure an almost weightless quality. White highlights across the horse’s body, its flowing pale mane and the snow below further connect the animal to its wintry surroundings. Against this predominantly cool palette, the girl’s skin and black-and-white clothing provide a sharper visual contrast.



Fig. 1. Hayley Chi Hay Chiu, *Heavenly Horse*, 2026, oil on canvas, 121.9 × 152.4 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

The composition establishes a clear hierarchy. The girl and horse occupy most of the canvas, while the houses are compressed into a narrow band along the bottom edge. The houses are individually coloured, in green, blue, red, pink, purple and brown, and vary in size and decorative detail, giving them a sense of recognisable domesticity. Yet they remain physically distant from the girl. Rather than returning towards these homes, she appears to be moving above and beyond them. The image therefore initially suggested escape more strongly than belonging: freedom seemed to come from leaving the place represented below.

This tension is important because the gallery's wall text initially places Chiu's work within questions of "identity, belonging, and imagination", describing *Heavenly Horse* as a scene in which the artist is carried through a dream-like night. The text offers a useful entry into the work, but it also creates expectations about how the image should be understood. The visual relationship between the girl and the houses is more ambiguous. If the houses represent home, their small scale and position at the bottom of the painting do not necessarily suggest a destination. They may instead function as a point of departure. Belonging, in this image, could therefore involve distance as much as attachment.

The second painting, *What does the cicada know of ice?*, shifts from a nocturnal fantasy into a bright, open landscape. A girl in a white T-shirt and shorts sits barefoot on green grass, holding a blue ice lolly. A second ice lolly lies on the ground beside her. Behind her is a large green tree surrounded by bright blue sky and thick white clouds. At first, the openness of the landscape creates a feeling of ease. The white of the girl's clothing echoes the clouds, while the blue ice lolly connects visually with the sky. The image appears spacious and uncomplicated.



Fig. 2. Hayley Chi Hay Chiu, *What does the cicada know of ice?*, 2026, oil on canvas, 121.9 × 152.4 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

That impression is interrupted by the enormous green cicada occupying the foreground. Its scale is disproportionate to the girl's body, and its legs and wings extend across her lower body, turning what might otherwise be a peaceful scene into something more uneasy. The cicada is not simply another surreal detail: its physical proximity to the girl makes the boundary between her body and her environment unstable. Chiu's precise rendering of the insect's body and transparent wings contrasts with the softness of the clouds and foliage, making the creature particularly visually insistent.

The title initially seems to make the blue ice lolly an incidental detail, but the wall text reveals its connection to the Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi. It refers to the parable in the “Autumn Floods” chapter in which the summer insect cannot be spoken to about ice because it is limited by its season. The important idea is not simply that people cannot understand what they have never experienced. The phrase *du yu shi* (笃于时), roughly “bound by one’s season”, points to a more structural limitation: a being’s understanding is shaped by the time and conditions in which it exists.

This changes the way the cicada can be read. Its presence beside the girl becomes more than an unusual encounter between human and insect. The cicada occupies a world bounded by its own conditions, while the ice exists outside that experience. The girl, meanwhile, sits between the two. She can hold the ice, but she cannot simply become the cicada. The painting consequently turns an apparently open landscape into a meditation on the limits of perspective. What first appears to be freedom is also a reminder that every perspective has boundaries.

The wall text is therefore central to the experience of the exhibition. Before reading it, *What does the cicada know of ice?* allows for several possible readings: a surreal encounter, a childhood memory, an image of nature, or simply a playful juxtaposition of scale. After reading the reference to Zhuangzi, however, the cicada and ice become almost impossible to separate from questions of perspective, cultural inheritance and lived experience. The text genuinely expands the painting by introducing a philosophical framework that may not be immediately accessible from the image alone. At the same time, it directs the viewer towards a particular route through the work. Rather than merely opening interpretation, it teaches the viewer how its seemingly unrelated elements can be connected.

This becomes particularly significant in the context of the Varley Art Gallery. As a public gallery serving Markham and York Region, the institution has a different role from a commercial gallery. Chiu’s identification in the wall text as a “Markham-based, second-generation Chinese Canadian painter” places her simultaneously within a local and culturally diverse context. The description is not incidental: it reflects an institutional interest in representing artists connected to the communities the gallery serves. Yet it also frames the work before the viewer encounters it. The artist arrives in the exhibition not only as a painter but as a particular kind of local and diasporic subject.

Chiu’s position can be considered alongside other younger Asian Canadian painters working in the Toronto area. Shinae Kim, a Korean Canadian painter and, like Chiu, a graduate of OCAD

University, works through migration, family history and the sensation of deracination. Their pictorial languages differ, but both belong to a generation for whom inherited identity is something to be worked through rather than illustrated, and for whom that inheritance coexists with an entirely contemporary set of visual means.

The small scale of “Emerging Artist Spotlight”, two paintings by one emerging artist, also has a particular effect on how the practice can be understood. The concentration allows the relationship between the works to become especially visible: both place a recognisable human figure within an environment that is simultaneously familiar and impossible. At the same time, two works cannot fully establish the range of Chiu’s practice. What becomes most apparent here is not a single definition of identity, but a recurring movement between the body and its surroundings.

Seen together, the paintings also changed the meaning of freedom. *Heavenly Horse* initially appeared to describe freedom as departure: the girl moves away from the houses below, leaving the familiar behind. *What does the cicada know of ice?* complicates that idea. The open landscape may look unrestricted, yet the Zhuangzi reference introduces the limits imposed by experience, environment and perspective. Freedom is therefore not simply the ability to leave home. It can also mean occupying an uncertain space between what has been inherited and what remains unknown.

Chiu’s paintings do not resolve this uncertainty. Instead, they make it visible through bodies that are never entirely settled within their environments. The girl on the horse does not quite belong to the houses below, while the girl beside the cicada occupies a world that she can observe but never fully share. Between home and departure, belonging becomes less a fixed place than a condition of movement. It is precisely this unresolved position that gives the two paintings their quiet tension.