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The Magician's Choice

HOWIE CHEN

AN ART CURATOR and a magician have more in common than you might think. Tasked with organizing an exhibition of artwork by talented contemporary art students at New York University (NYU), I discovered this truth through an encounter with an uncanny painting I saw in an artist's studio, depicting a suited magician in high heels performing the Zig Zag Girl illusion onstage. In the foreground of artist Chloe Rady's *Step Right Up* (2026), an angel figure appears at once entranced and shocked by the scene of a woman being taken apart in cabinet segments by the magician. The characters create a circuit of gazes that ends with the viewer self-consciously looking from the perspective of the audience.

All of the paintings I saw in Rady's studio, which included beguiling portraits and theatrical tableaux of women in scenarios that reference both classical art and the pulp noir genre, shared a psychic charge rooted in the dynamics of freedom and control. As a contemporary art curator, this theme is central to my interest in how artists respond to culture and society across mediums such as painting, sculpture, moving image, and performance. At its best, art acts as both mirror and clue, giving form to abstract ideas and shared feelings that we experience together.

The sleight of hand that *Step Right Up* performs is to draw a parallel between painting and magic, presenting them as sharing similar devices that pull in the viewer through artifice while revealing something about reality and the impossible. Both visual art and magic rely on staged encounters where perception, belief, and attention are carefully directed. In each, the artist creates a form of equivocation in which the spectator feels free in their engagement. Among the classic techniques in magic is the magician's choice, a method that is

used in many forms—from theatrical illusions to card tricks—in which a spectator appears to choose freely while the outcome remains predetermined.

This connection became the inspiration for *The Magician's Choice*, a group exhibition I curated at NYU, presented at the 80 Washington Square East Gallery and Broadway Windows, featuring work by nine BFA Studio Art majors in their final year at NYU Steinhardt: Sierra Cole, Kaveh D'Rosario, Alice Ningci Jiang, Kangju Lee, Yuxi Ma, Tech Nix, Cassie Pina, Chloe Rady, and Owen Roberts.

In contemporary life, the illusion of freedom operates in a similar way, masking the gap between individual agency and the invisible systems that shape our actions. The logic of the magician's choice echoes throughout modern life. Think of how participatory democracy, consumer capitalism, and digital platforms promise agency through choice while quietly structuring the conditions of that choice.

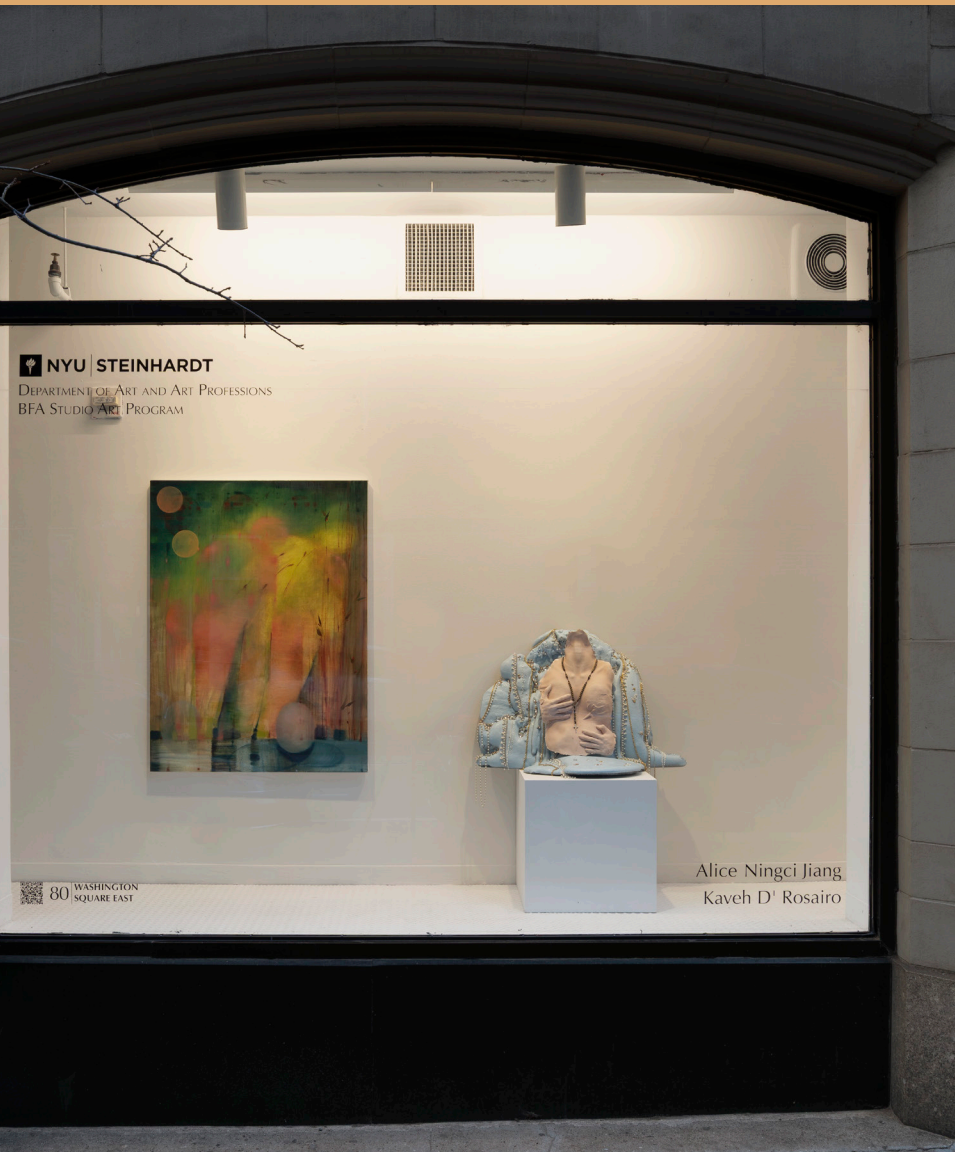
Drawing on familiar apparatuses such as boxes, frames, and invitations to engage, the artists reflect on the tension between constraint and freedom they each navigate. The works in the exhibition engage themes of feminism, queer subjectivity, diaspora and memory, digital life, and spaces of participation. Presented across five gallery spaces visible to the public 24 hours a day, the exhibition invites viewers to encounter works arranged in discrete groupings that evoke mystery and a shared desire for transformation.

As the curator, I am aware that I am practicing a kind of equivocation—staging artworks in ways that guide how they are seen and understood within a conceptual frame, a magician's choice. In the end, the curator's wand is to point to the magic of art.



Yuxi Ma
Chloe Rady

Tech Nix
Owen Roberts



NYU STEINHARDT
DEPARTMENT OF ART AND ART PROFESSIONS
BFA STUDIO ART PROGRAM

80 WASHINGTON
SQUARE EAST

Alice Ningci Jiang
Kaveh D' Rosairo





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP
LEFT: *Step Right Up*, *Chloe Rady*; *I cried because I said nothing*, *Owen Roberts*; *Cache Dollz_matrix*, *Sierra Cole*; see where there are teeth, *Tech Nix*.

