

Judy Chung
Cafeteria

February 13–March 14, 2025



Judy Chung, *Symbiosis (Cafeteria)*, 2025, acrylic on canvas, 72 x 49 inches x 2.

RAINRAIN is pleased to present *Cafeteria*, Judy Chung's first solo exhibition with the gallery. Featuring a new body of paintings, the exhibition turns to the social microcosm of school—its rituals, hierarchies, and quiet violences—not as autobiography, but as a framework for thinking about how identity is formed, rehearsed, and negotiated in public. The cafeteria emerges as both setting and metaphor: a place where taste, belonging, and self-presentation collide, and where everyday decisions can feel unexpectedly consequential.

Chung's practice is built around collision. Opposing forces—cute and grotesque, sincerity and artifice, control and rupture—coexist within the same pictorial space, preventing meaning from settling into a single reading. Her paintings feature archetypal figures and recurring personas that deviate from expected roles, functioning as psychological avatars and fragments of a collective self. Drawing on art-historical drama and contemporary image culture (Baroque theatricality, painterly violence, and post-internet debris), Chung's visual language is filtered through a disarming anime and kawaii surface that acts as a deflective skin. Beneath the bright palette, the work exposes both the rawness of social judgment and the strategies we develop to endure it.

This tension is mirrored in her process. Chung often begins with digitally constructed compositions before translating them into paint, allowing physical gestures, slippage, and resistance to interrupt and deform.

The thematic core of *Cafeteria* is shaped by Chung's experience of cultural displacement, having moved frequently between U.S. states and South Korea during her formative years. School social life, she notes, can feel especially unforgiving: rules are enforced bluntly, and judgments around "cool" and "uncool" are immediate and collective. Food, in this context, becomes a potent symbol. Spaghetti—comforting yet embarrassing, familiar yet abject—threads through the exhibition as fixation, threat, and anchor. Its ambiguity reflects what Chung describes as *aporia*: an object whose meaning cannot settle, oscillating between attraction and repulsion.

The exhibition's anchor, *Symbiosis (Cafeteria)* (2025), depicts a chaotic lunchroom scene centered on a three-headed student caught in an ambiguous act of consumption or expulsion. Spaghetti spills across the composition as surrounding figures, eerily uniform, recoil or stare from a distance. Referencing the theatrical gestures of Caravaggio's *Supper at Emmaus*, Chung reframes revelation as social exposure, presenting the cafeteria as a compressed world of rigid groupings and invisible borders.

Turning inward, *Spaghetti Lariat* (2025) introduces Chung's recurring Heroine figure, bound by spaghetti-like restraints and suspended between forces: compulsion and restraint, duty and refusal. Borrowing from RPG archetypes and loosely referencing Manet's *The Dead Christ with Angels*, the painting captures a state of fatigue and refusal, a body caught within expectation.

Violence is distilled in *Communion* (2025), where severed head fragments are carefully plated and consumed. Drawing on the iconography of Salome and Judith, the work collapses distinctions between victim and aggressor, where consumption becomes a fraught attempt at reassembly.

Throughout *Cafeteria*, smaller "artifact" paintings—honor-roll certificates, Picture Day images, and distorted cafeteria menus—offer intimate entry points, where institutional order and personal memory quietly unravel.

In *Cafeteria*, Chung constructs a world that is at once playful and punishing. The paintings resist resolution, holding contradiction in suspension rather than offering release. What emerges is a portrait of subjectivity shaped through friction between desire and conformity, individuality and collectivity, where survival often depends on learning how to perform, adapt, and endure in plain sight.

Judy Chung (b. 1990, Seoul, Korea) lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. She received her Master of Fine Arts from Columbia University in 2018 and her Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from Pratt Institute in 2013. Her work has been shown internationally in exhibitions including *What do Angels Look Like?* at RAINRAIN, NY [2023], *Victoriassecret* at Helena Anrather, NY [2022], *Figuring the Uncanny* at Field Projects, NY [2021], *Happy Hardcore* at Miriam Gallery, Brooklyn, NY [2020], and *there's something about PAINTING* at Tatjana Pieters Gallery, Belgium [2019]. She has contributed to publications including DATEAGLE ART, New American Paintings, and Elastic Magazine.