

## City of Dreams: Where Light Lingers and Stories Unfold

*Written and photographed by Hsuan Ma, World Journal 2025*

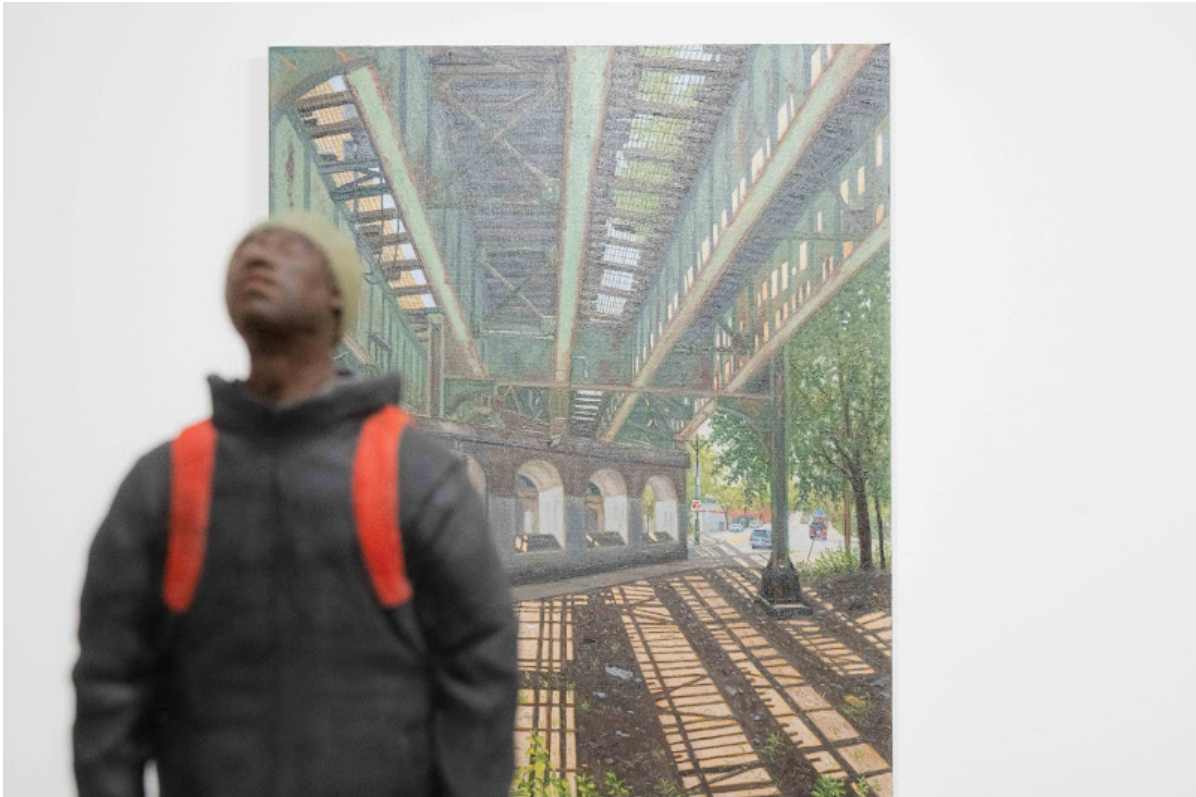


When people think of New York City, what often comes to mind is a skyline stitched with steel, the dazzling lights of Broadway, and maybe the echo of a street vendor humming “concrete jungle where dreams are made of.”

This is the so-called city of dreams—a place where people arrive with hopes of becoming their best selves, or maybe just to live a little better, a little freer.

But for sculptor John Kuo and painter Valeri Larko, New York tells a different story. Their dual exhibition *City of Dreams*, now on view at Thomas VanDyke Gallery in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, draws viewers away from the iconic and into the overlooked. Together, they weave two-dimensional brushwork and three-dimensional clay into scenes that catch the poetry in the peripheral. Through ink and earth, Kuo and Larko offer a quieter, more intimate corner of New York—a version rarely granted the spotlight, yet just as alive.

The two met earlier this year on a frigid winter day. Huddled inside a car, they found warmth not in the heater, but in a shared language of aesthetics and the unspoken rhythms of the city.



“Although our artistic expressions and processes are different, there’s still a similar philosophy,” Larko said. That shared perspective is rooted in their attention to everyday life’s nuances and the way culture—particularly immigrant identity—threads through their work. “What I found by driving over the overpass and coming into this area that hardly anybody goes into, was that there were these beautiful views of the bridge,” said Larko. “There was a world that most people never saw, except for locals and people who actually lived there.”



For Kuo, this exhibition isn't just a blend of mediums, it's more like a dialogue. Larko's paintings bring in the surrounding environment, offering context that his sculptures might not fully express. Their visual angles align so seamlessly that they created an immersive experience, where clay and canvas speak the same language. Despite working in different formats, their mutual attentiveness to people, architecture, and time knits their work into a cohesive whole.

Larko's process is rooted in presence. She paints on location, returning to the same scene for weeks or even months. It's about being there long enough to notice everything: how the light shifts, how rust creeps along bridge trusses, if she should slightly move the traffic cone.

"If I just took photos and went back in the studio, I would never have the rich experience being there and learning from the people who live and work in these areas," she said. She recalled one memory in particular: "On the weekend, there was this son and father who would come down under the bridge, they'd have some shade because it was hot in the summer, and they'd bring a little grill, make lunch, sit there and chat—it was just the coolest thing."



Kuo, on the other hand, builds his sculptures from moments he observed. Sculpting lacks the mobility of painting, so he collects visual impressions through sketching subway passengers mid-nap or delivery riders zooming past on mopeds. These raw fragments are layered with imagination until they crystallize into scenes between reality and dream.

"I see the city as a fish tank," he said. "And I'm one of the fish inside. Only from within can I truly observe it." His previous work often centered around New York's homeless population. But this new series shifts the lens toward home.

Kuo spoke of being drawn to the warm, dim glow spilling from apartment windows at night, always wondering about the lives behind the glass.



In this new series, he deliberately sculpted windows lit with a soft, buttery yellow, hoping to lend each piece a sense of comfort, of narrative, of someone quietly being inside.

The exhibition's name, *City of Dreams*, speaks to both artists' shared identity as immigrants and their shared reverence for the city's underrepresented. In their eyes, New York is not just a backdrop for ambition, it's a living, breathing mosaic where everyone, no matter how visible or invisible, contributes to its rhythm. Kuo's sculptures lend gravity to the unnoticed figures we pass every day, while Larko's paintings cast long, cinematic shadows across forgotten alleys and rusted scaffolding.

Their work, like the city itself, doesn't shout. It whispers through rust and light, through posture and absence, telling human stories in the quietest of corners.

And perhaps, as you walk through the gallery, you might spot something familiar in a clay figure's curve or a brushstroke's hue. A piece of your own reflection, tucked inside the City of Dreams.