



Ruben Pang

NOW TALK ABOUT A VISUAL EXPLOSION. RUBEN'S WORK IS STRIKING AND EERIE AT THE SAME TIME. BEAUTIFUL LAYERS AND LAYERS OF SOFT COLOURS, JUXTAPOSED PERFECTLY ON DARK BACKGROUNDS. RUBEN PANG'S WORK NOT ONLY INSPIRES BUT DAZZLES THE VIEWER.

Bizarre Beyond Belief:
Your work is unbelievably innovative and in a way, very abstract. How would you describe your work to a blind person?

Ruben Pang: We could describe a painting through its materiality and symbolic properties. The painting is essentially module (pigment) within vehicle (solvent and oil). The variety of pigments embody a various essence. Carmine Red from crushed Cochineal bugs; Indian Yellow from cow urine; and Black Asphaltum from ground up Egyptian mummies were all pigments of sacrifice. Volatile pigments like Cobalt, Lead and Emerald Green represented the thrill of synthesis and distillation—a search for purity in both the medium and the surface. Today’s staples, Phthalocyanines, Quinacridones and Perylenes are luminous colors, reflecting the fluorescence of our times. The vehicle medium which carries the pigment comes in a variety of viscosities. In a sense, this is the glue between thought and process. Linseed Stand Oil feels like liquid amber, concealing traces of movement; Alkyd Resin slides around like gelatin, drying

quickly without luster and Oil of Spike Lavender is the only solvent which encourages restraint (maybe its the scent). When mapping the painting in the mind’s eye, the physicality of painting (texture, tactility, size) is not so important. Instead, the layers and combinations of pigment and medium are signals of impulse, nostalgia and even irony. We create fiction to focus on describing the painting verbally. As a painter, my self consciousness, uncertainty and a mistrust of absolutes means that I fumble with allegory, humor and drama to express promises. The titles are how I always begin these descriptions; they say what I can say with most conviction—to the blind and the seeing alike: (I had) Breakfast with Ectoplasm, and You’re so Special I Ignore You. After all, the irony is that the gift of sight in today’s saturated environment means that we are inclined to read images like braille anyway.

BBB: Being an artist from Singapore, how do you feel this has contributed to your artistic practice?

RP: This place makes you hypersensitive—constantly

agitated. Especially when plugged in to a large city, one needs a vessel that provides solace—a place to nourish art with art, be it the remnants of your own failed paintings, stills from tormented movies, or the works of your heroes, sourced from the net. The excess of information and the resulting lethargy of appropriation is hard to deal with, everything is some kind of shit as well, you can’t live without it so the only way is to process it. In his book *What Painting Is*, James Elkins uses the alchemist’s circulation vessel as a metaphor for creative regeneration. “The alchemists called such vessels pelicans, since that bird was supposed to nourish its young by pecking at its own breast and letting the blood spurt into the open mouths of its chicks ...The only nourishment must come from the refuse of the painting itself. Nothing new enters the studio, and nothing is wasted: everything goes into the work, and comes back out again.”

BBB: There’s not too many artists from Singapore that people are aware of, how would you describe the artistic community in Singapore?



RP: Its small but growing scene, you can be familiar with the art districts within a week. I'm pretty sure everyone is already somewhat acquainted. It's a really small city. After a

while you bump into the same people on the street and at openings. When you get home, they're on your Facebook chat bar and you're reading each others' updates on the

homepage. Still people tend to find comfort zones; small groups sharing the same work environment, study together or have a similar approach in their practice. Even in such close proximity, unless you make an effort, people are going to remain familiar stranger at most.

BBB: Furthermore, how would you describe the aesthetic vision of artists in Singapore?

RP: Artists find salvation in Singapore's lack of art history. Every movement and resurgence is a potential source of expansion. Especially for the new generation of artists, there isn't a distinct East-West divide. Romanticism, Greenbergian formalism and the Neo Rapphealites are just as accessible/acceptable as the Tao of Aesthetics and the Shurangama Sutra (Buddhist philosophies on the nature of seeing and levels of consciousness). We tend to celebrate and metabolize history as a matrix—Modern and Postmodern ideas are explored simultaneously, there isn't a passionate hatred of Social Realism (aren't they comics?) and Salvador Dali doesn't have the reputation of

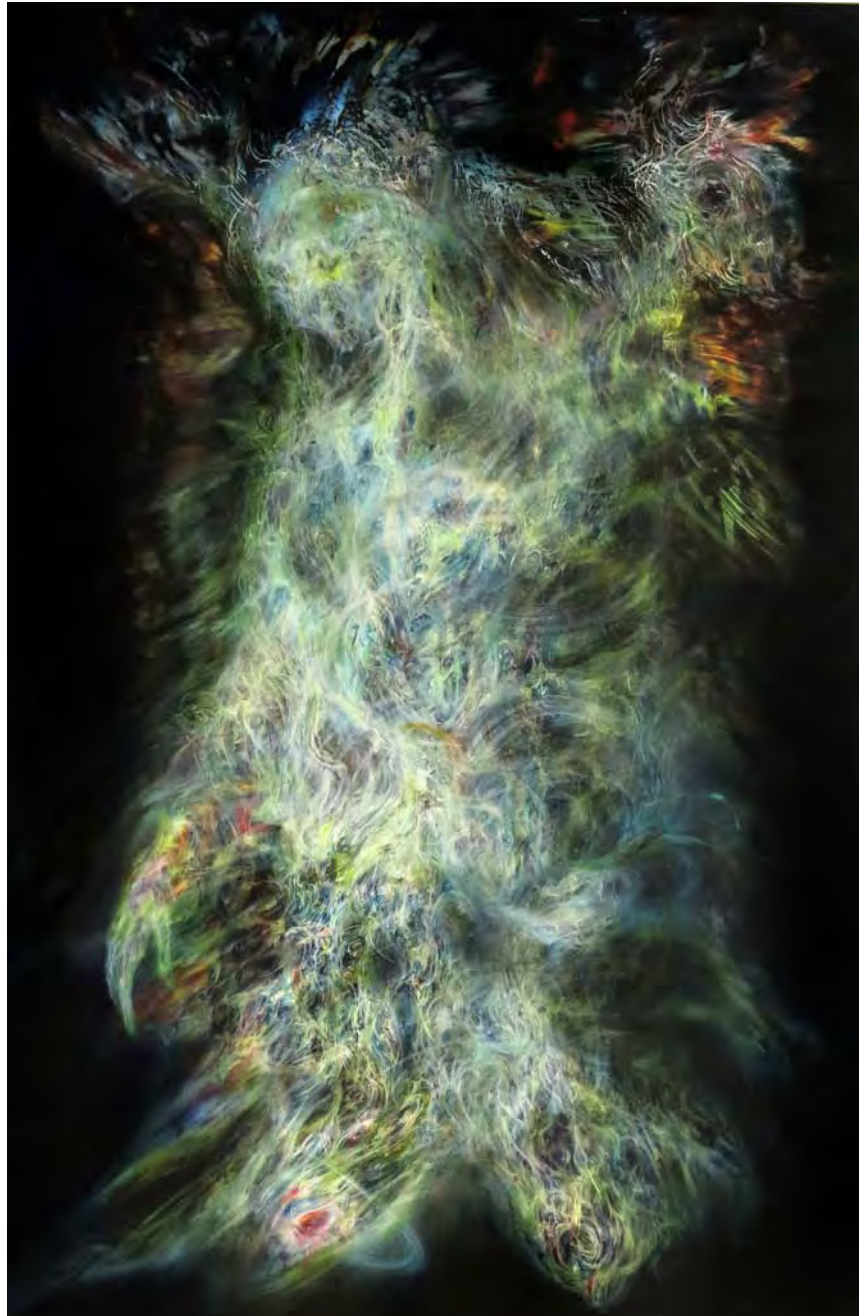




being an outdated charlatan. This inquisitiveness has become ingrained since artists brought back influences from all over the world. When my dad was studying in Baharuddin Vocational Institute in the 70s (today's Temasek Design School), there were painting tutors preaching German Expressionist values and ceramic tutors influenced by Japanese Seto Ware. International artists who settled in Singapore have also accelerated the imagination of art students. Since arriving in 1981, Gilles Massot's participation in some of the earliest performance festivals, spiritual approach to photo journalism and tutelage at the Lasalle College of the Arts has captivated students with an affinity for the cerebral. He embraces eccentricity, and his love for performance is infectious, he's turned introverts into method actors. Many artists will agree that for a while, there was an unnecessary obligation to pick up either eastern or western art historical baggage. For painters Milenko Prvacki and Ian Woo, an artist's baptism in his/her chosen medium should come before taking on existential or identity crises—you're a painter first

and foremost. Students were encouraged to take the medium as the conduit between thought and process, entertain abstract metaphors

and allegories in painting, and through experience, find a sense of individuality. Two of my favorite painters who are Lasalle alumni are practicing



artists Jeremy Sharma and Jane Lee. Recently, the combination of photography, video and multimedia is explored more extensively: Robert Zhao's dexterous manipulation of photography produces alternative visions of natural history under the fictional name of the Institute of Critical Zoologists and Ho Tzu Nyen's psychedelic Cloud of Unknowing, an installation of sound, land and dream scape all at once, was selected for the 2011 Venice Biennale. I'm a struggling technophile, picking up new media slowly ... so its especially exciting to be in the company of mulch-disciplinary peers like Debbie Ding, Geraldine Kang and Zai Tang. Their adventures, circuit bending and digital documentation include The Singapore River as Psycho-geographical Faultline, Portraits of a Young Artist and Drive-An installation and performance on wheels. We're still at the beginning, and at this point of time. I think all of us find common ground in the prospects of individuality, evolution and synthesis.

BBB: As a graduate from La Salle College of Arts, how would you describe your experiences at this institution?



RP: Lasalle is a place to experiment, fail, fail horribly, and pick yourself back up again, all in good company. I've made some of my best friends here and met some of the most inspiring artists and lecturers.

BBB: Your work is created by using layers upon layers of

paint, how would you describe your approach to a piece?

RP: I often start by laying down a solid color to break into the surface. As the layers progress, I work light and transparent paint onto a dark background because the line-work has a sense of immediacy, much like drawing.

**I BELIEVE PAINTING IS A RECORD OF SOMETHING WHICH
CANNOT BE ARTICULATED THROUGH OTHER MEANS.**





Paint is put on intuitively. There's no weave to even out the brush marks, so the dynamics of paint are amplified. I like illusionistic effects and tend avoid images that give away the two-dimensionality of the surface in a predictable way. Sanding down or removing overworked layers with solvents are substitutes for the undo button. The mix of additive and subtractive layering adds a new dimension, decisions are essentially made half-blind and its hard to predict how things will resurface. The ghost-marks and other traces that reveal themselves through reduction are more than nuances, and affect the composition's structure in unexpected ways, . The painting process is always a negotiation between color and form—a lugubrious game (sorry I had to bring up that Dali painting title). The climax is when you've painted yourself into a corner and then find a way out of the mess. Timing is also important; it determines how layers react with each other. For example, in indirect painting techniques which require the layering of complementary colors, committing to a color scheme too early may narrow glazing choices, making the rest of the process feel a bit banal.

The act of creation itself determines how the painting progresses, one additive or reductive mark at a time. David Reed the abstract painter who created what has become known as “Technicolor” paintings had mentioned that oil paint is a sensitive medium; it will tell you what it wants to become. I believe painting is a record of something which cannot be articulated through other means. Adding and peeling back layers creates wormholes to go back and forth in time and memory, this process perpetuates until the decision is made to end the game, or there is nowhere else to go.

BBB: Can you describe why you feel your choice mediums, aluminum helps you complete your pieces as opposed to other more conventional surfaces like canvas or board?

RP: Aluminum is a very forgiving surface, it can take a lot of abuse, from brushes, solvents, rags, sandpaper, scrapers etc... On aluminum, colors come out looking colder but more intense. Painted tungsten and halogen lights as the cold surface balances out the tint and reflects light back in a different way (without a

white undercoat), it projects an image at the viewer with a screen-like consistency.

BBB: As an artist who has exhibited in a number of galleries, can you describe your process in preparing for a show?

RP: I choose paintings from what I already have completed, as opposed to deciding on a theme and working everything in one direction, I think the process becomes too daunting and the adventure of painting might be reduced to labor. It is easier to approach the exhibition as a well curated set of diary entries, it builds a tension between paintings that almost don't sit well next to each other.

BBB: As a very young artist, what plans or projects do you have on the go and how do you see your artistic practice developing?

RP: I'm preparing for a solo show in Singapore this October. There a million things I want to do, going back into music production is not too far down the list. But for now, its just one painting at a time, that's all!

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