

"DEEP S.E.A.": Singapore artist Ruben Pang's search for "melody in white noise"

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Layers of paint are added as often as they are sanded away in Ruben Pang's unique approach to portraiture.

Singapore-born painter Ruben Pang talks with *Art Radar* about his unconventional way of approaching painting in the second of a short series of posts on artists in "DEEP S.E.A.", an exhibition that opened in November 2012 at Primo Marella Gallery in Milan.



Ruben Pang, 'Laughter', 2012, oil and alkyd on aluminium panel, 170 x 121 cm. Image courtesy Primo Marella Gallery.

Other posts in this four part series

Part 1: [read part one here.](#)

Part 3: coming soon!

Part 4: coming soon!

Part of an ongoing series of shows dedicated to Southeast Asia, "**DEEP S.E.A.**" featured work in different media by eleven artists from the region, including

- **Aditya Novali** (Indonesia)
- **Ruben Pang** and **Donna Ong** (Singapore)
- La Huy and Nguyễn Thái Tuấn (Vietnam)
- **Isabel & Alfredo Aquilizan** (Philippines)
- Aung Ko (Myanmar)
- **Sopheap Pich** and **Khvay Samnang** (Cambodia)
- **Nithakhong Somsanith** (Laos)
- **Natee Utarit** (Thailand)

A newcomer to Italy and the youngest artist taking part in "DEEP S.E.A.", 23-year-old Pang showcased five of his distinctive paintings on aluminium, where ghostly figures emerge from bursts of coloured sparks.

Painting as visual syncopation

A 2010 fine art graduate from **LASALLE College of the Arts** in Singapore, Ruben is a rising talent. His chosen mediums are oil and alkyd resin on aluminium panels, which he finds more flexible than canvas as they allow him more freedom to change direction in a painting's composition. Pang builds up his images by blending colours and shapes with his hands, palette knives and sand paper.



A musician as well as an artist, Ruben uses a musical metaphor to describe this procedure. He says,

The process alternates between layering and sanding down in search of a point of opportunity, allowing a motif to surface spontaneously. It's a kind of visual syncopation... like searching for a melody in white-noise.

I lay the initial marks onto the metal surface with my hands and, chances are, the paint that I put down is already altered or 'contaminated' with the paint from previous paintings (as the studio is very messy, there's wet paint on the many palettes everywhere), so there's a lot of interesting interactions between random colours; that's my starting point. Then, once this initial layer is dry, I apply new strokes and layers of what I think would create an interesting reaction and also, at the same time, cover and remove what I think has become unnecessary. Occasionally, I might think that something I've buried has become relevant once more, so I will allow it to surface again, in a more crude form by sanding away the paint which has covered it.

There are also ghost marks on the surface due to the sanding process; they reveal the insides of a painting. These marks are the traces left behind by transitory layers of the painting. I use these 'opened wounds' as part of the composition, creating a compound mark, a combination of a damaged surface and a healing layer. These are unpredictable scenarios ... and relate to the difficulty and potential in dealing with surfacing memories and harnessing the subconscious in painting.

Penchant for portraiture

Pang feels particularly drawn to portraits in which the sitters' features are blurred or barely recognisable. As he explains,

I find myself drawn most to Gerhard Richter's portraits that just barely resemble a figure, the phantom image of Dieter Kreutz among all, and Glenn Brown's paintings that deviate very far from the initial subject matter [as in] his interpretation of Pope Innocent X, 'Nausea', when he omits the element which made it famous, the head. This lack of a recognisable figure was the starting point [in painting portraits] for me as it was one of the first instances I experienced this sense of connection with portraiture.



Ruben Pang, 'At the Heart of the Sun', 2012, oil and alkyd on aluminium panel, 151 x 94 cm. Image courtesy Primo Marella Gallery.



Ruben Pang, 'Painless', 2012, oil and alkyd on aluminium panel, 151 x 94 cm. Image courtesy Primo Marella Gallery.

Composition hamburger

Spontaneity comes through in Ruben's aesthetic language as much as it does in his character. As curator Jim Amberson notes in the catalogue that accompanies the exhibition, Pang once compared the composition of one of his paintings to a hamburger, in which distinct visual components fulfil an essential purpose in the completion of the work. When the analogy got *Art Radar* curious, Pang wittily clarified,

I had a feeling I was going to regret that joke! This is going to be such a terrible analogy... It's about simplifying complicated ideas... The background is the context, the buns; the motif, the patty, is established by a piece of meat with just the right amount of 'something people don't really notice until it isn't

there'; lettuce, that's the sanding away of layers, trimming and dulling things down so the painting sits nicely. After all, the viewer won't miss what they never saw.

Hiding messages in dirt

Despite this playful analogy, Ruben's painting style is in fact a time-consuming, complex technique, in which there are no preconceived ideas of what the final result will look like. He says,

If I commit to a composition prematurely, the final composition lacks vitality, perhaps the same vitality which Bacon wanted to preserve by painting on the reverse side of canvases. In my explorations, the figuration is either very crudely planned or not at all, and occurs spontaneously. For example, I could have built up a mix of different shapes and colours which suddenly remind me of a certain painting's framework which could work as a motif. It may be a famous painting, or a photograph I took of a friend or a newspaper cutting... the composition is not really planned, sometimes I have an idea, but I am always prepared to let it go if something more interesting comes along. Chance is an important part of the process.

Apart from the visual stimulation, in a painting developed over a series of choices the resonance beneath the surface is autobiographical. In this sense, I believe that if the painter finds the process exciting and decides to hide some messages in the dirt, the viewer experiences some of that in their own way.... In this sense, one interpretation could be a two-way theatre, where both the artist and viewer are projecting into one another through the painting, trying to find a point of sync.



Ruben Pang, 'The Storm', 2012, oil and alkyd on aluminium panel, 75 x 60 cm. Image courtesy Primo Marella Gallery.



Ruben Pang, 'Stargazers', 2012, oil and alkyd on aluminium panel, 75 x 60 cm. Image courtesy Primo Marella Gallery.

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More on Ruben Pang

Ruben Pang was born in Singapore in 1990, and studied Fine Arts at **LASALLE College of the Arts** in Singapore. In 2009, he received the National Arts Council's **Georgette Chen Arts Scholarship** and won the **Winston Oh Travelogue Award annual grant** in 2010, which allowed him to travel to Yunnan, China for two weeks. In 2011, he presented his first solo exhibition, titled "**Angels**", at Chan Hampe Galleries. He was named a **Sovereign Asian Art Prize finalist** for the second time in 2011 and Singapore Art Museum featured his paintings in the exhibition "**The Singapore Show: Future Proof**" in 2012. In 2013, Ruben will **hold his first European solo exhibition** in the Swiss town of Lugano.

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