



Reimagining Paper

From the Linda Neo and Albert Lim Collection



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Introduction : *Reimagining Paper*

Drawings are only notes on paper. The secret is the paper.

by John Berger in *To Take Paper, To Draw: A World Through Lines*.

Reimagining Paper presents a collection of works by artists working towards the realization of the medium's potential through their respective period and practice. Spanning two periods of artistic experimentations, modern-era artists who were previously faithful only to figuration, are seen taking on abstractions mediated by the medium. On the other hand, the contemporary artists elevate the medium of paper either through employing industrial techniques, or through the overlaying of complementary materials to extend the reading of their works.

This comparative dialogue of works from the Linda Neo and Albert Lim collection investigates the nature of paper in art making, and blurs the boundaries between the techniques and processes of what constitutes the modern and contemporary – imagining, and reimagining the value of this material in the practice of artists across time.



The Contemporary

How does the wider world of lingering visceral objects and tactile experiences haunt us in this digital age? Pablo Picasso's and Georges Braque's experimentations with collage, and layering fragments of paper onto paper resulted in compositions which exceeds the illusory pictorial plane, exuding dense material presence. In the midst of technology forcing the re-evaluation of the medium, paper has become a viable material for three-dimensional forms: sculpture, objects for everyday functions, or even architecture. This exhibition presents a glimpse of the contemporary attitudes and approaches towards paper as an artistic medium.

In the two editions of Suzann Victor's *I was like that myself...we all held each other's hands*(2015), Victor lays a pattern of circular Fresnel lenses over silkscreened images of Singapore inhabitants. The population is sampled from the island through the ages—and set amidst Chinese papercut motifs. Seen through the lenses, this patchwork composition which suggests a portrait of a family or

nation, appears distorted, fragmented and dislocated. Where Victor magnifies, Jane Lee's *Unfolded Dream* uses a pinhole to draw individuals into a narrow focus. Both works tap into perception using different approaches. Yet, they play into the subconscious by intertwining dissonantly familiar scenes, with the fantastical. Much like Victor and Lee, Genevieve Chua's experiments with broad gestural strokes on Japanese Kozo paper reverberate with deep psychological undertones. They seemingly reprise latent narratives, of the jostling between nature and wilderness. Victor, Lee, and Chua created their works while on separate residencies at the Singapore Tyler Print Institute (i.e. STPI- Creative Workshop & Gallery), a collaborative facility that fosters new possibilities in the global advancement of paper and print practices. Thus, initiating works with an inventive mix of contemporary and traditional paper and printmaking techniques.

Promthum Woravut and Melissa Tan have engaged paper not only for its materiality, but also for its innate lyrical





qualities. Both artists attune their craft with the unhurried rhythms of paper by employing slow laborious methods to process the material. For Woravut, the result is a pair of quirky portraits (a boy and a girl) teased out through the artist's inventive chiaroscuro: by meticulously shading within the ovals on a form efficient for recording and processing answers of multiple-choice question examinations. The form evokes bureaucratic paperwork, yet the tensions between work and play are dispelled when human nature is revealed from within the grid structure

of administration. Similar forces are at play in Tan's work, with the artist employing a combination of paper and metal to produce complex forms. Tan painstakingly cut each section of *Arc of Uncertainties* by hand to express a physical terrain. Juxtaposed against metal (a material that is characteristically cold, hard and reflective), paper's malleable and organic characteristics are enhanced.

Tang Da Wu is best known for his performances, in which the artist and his body are mediums that channel

art to the audience. Read in relation to Tang's oeuvre, his works on paper appear freighted with his lingering presence. They could be seen as relics after the action of painting. Tang's ink paintings are highly unconventional; paper is first dampened to prolong the duration in which he can manipulate the ink. Then through a series of intuitive gestures rooted in day-to-day activities, such as pouring, scooping or wiping, Tang creates marks that are in ceaseless flux, charged with dynamic energy. Through this play of ink, phantom forms emerge or evade. These duelling spirits of the ephemeral and the cyclical are embodied in the newspaper classified-advertisement sheets featured in Chun Kai Qun's installation. The sheets are threaded through with hundreds of raffia strings which are often used by *karung guni* (rag and bone) men to bundle up newspapers for recycling. To Chun, newspaper is a material constantly changing in states, recycled and often reborn as itself. By withdrawing newspapers from this cycle and repurposing them in art, the material transcends its ordinary state, and enters into a new circulatory realm,

immortalised as art. Over time, classified advertisements expire and the activity of commerce is suspended. As a twist to an old adage, the artist proposes: is time always money?

The defining trait of humanity has been to ground our immaterial ideals as material forms. Paper as one of the earliest inventions in human history, will continue to inform us of how material realities grip and shape human societies. This selection of works from the Linda Neo and Albert Lim collection hopes to provide insight into a medium-specific approach to private art collecting, exploring paper as both material and theme. By looking through the lens of materiality, perhaps we move a step closer to greater discussions on the significance of contemporary artworks in mapping an expansive art history in Singapore.

Chun Kai Qun

the paper, some paper, (RGB), 2019
Classified newspapers, raffia strings
Dimensions variable



Breaking: Classifieds Make the Headlines: Chun Kai Qun's *the paper, some paper*

by Ivy Lam

In its most ideal state, journalism serves as the watchdog of the government, the hard hitting voice that surfaces the justice of stories that should be told, and issues calls for public action. What appears in the news ultimately informs the thinkers of our nation, the writers of world history, and the future we want to create. In Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites' exposition about the mass media in *The Public Image: Photography and Civic Spectatorship*, they posit that this ideal of journalism saw a shift at the turn of the twenty-first century, and has been dampened by the competing forces that churn media stories today. With the variety of media outlets and information overload, news stories lose their impact on the individual, and the medium merely feeds content, but effects little space for reflection. To counter this dearth of impactful news, Hariman and Lucaites called for the need to reposition journalism in another space for consideration of its efficacy. This space, they suggest, is the gallery or museum space.¹

It is thus in this gallery space that we see Chun Kai Qun's newspaper installation, *the paper, some paper*, suspended loosely by pink raffia strings, and stacked in sections

that resembles pillars attached from the ceiling. When placed on a newsstand, it exists in the functions of its dissemination daily – parading advertisements of services and products, or announcements of what readers can expect. Its presence often dismissed unless when absolutely necessary. At a glance, these papers seem nothing more than a huge stack of newspapers. However, on closer inspection, these sheets are carefully lined above one another in thoughtful distances, revealing the raffia strings weaving through them in clean and measured angles. The artists' precision is apparent here – that to achieve a clean and weighted line with a very light raffia string, and even lighter and easily torn newspaper is no mean feat. A slight mismeasurement or misalignment would have thrown the pillar off-centre. Such precious treatment of two seemingly underwhelming material adds curiosity to the almost absurd intent of this labour. It is however, important to note that this inconspicuous newspaper section, is its main artery and lifeblood, with each small advertisement generating income to sustain the paper. The choice of using only classified ads in this highly technical installation thus also repositions the importance of the classified pages as

the reason for the newspaper's existence, instead of them being merely "some paper".

Positioned in the centre of *Reimagining Paper* of Chun's work calls attention to this peculiar material – familiar, yet jarringly unrecognizable. This presentation of *Found Objects* in art harks back to the early twentieth century's practices of Marcel Duchamp and Pablo Picasso, who, in their respective art movements, presented "ready-mades" or everyday items in peculiar modifications. They called attention to the use of the gallery space as an intellectual frame that defined art. In the tradition of Dadaism², an essentially anti-art art movement against the logic of capitalist society, Chun questions the structure of mass media, information dissemination, and the consumerist cycle that profits from the classified pages which fed journalism and society's materialism. Placed as a centre piece, one encounters Chun's work at every angle in the gallery, allowing its discourse to permeate the many re-imaginings to come – what news can these classified pages tell us? How many cycles and states has this batch of classifieds stepped out of after being exhibited, repacked, transported, and placed into a private collector's space?

¹ John Hariman and John Louis Lucaites explain how documentary, particularly photojournalistic works, should be read as public artworks for the democratic citizen to participate in social thought, and contemplate the problems of collective living. Thus, in the process of documenting what the journalist has witnessed, journalism also surfaces as an art to be read and considered by a civic audience.

² Coined in the early 1900s, Dadaism is an art movement that arose from a reaction to society after World War I, with Marcel Duchamp's ready-made, *Fountain*, as the most iconic work of the movement. The movement was critical of capitalism and the bourgeois, which Dadaists believe were contributing factors to the war. In Duchamp's work, he reacts to the intellectual by presenting a urinal as a piece of art, ridiculing the process of meaning making amongst the bourgeois.

Reference:
Hariman, Robert and Lucaites, John Louis. *The Public Image: Photography and Civic spectatorship*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2016.

From the Embers *Tang Da Wu's Untitled Black/White, 2014*

by Elaine Teo



Tang Da Wu

Untitled – Black/White, 2014
Ink on paper
140 cm x 250 cm

For close to a decade, Tang Da Wu has single-mindedly focused on the aesthetics of myth-making, and the unequal attention that the powers-that-be behind the art historical canon bestows on its hero figures. Tang's place in art history is itself without question. Heralded, and to some, paraded as the pioneer of performance and contemporary art in Singapore, one

would also expect that he would sit content with the acclaim. However, what we are witnessing is a resistance, a sustained refusal to sit on the side-lines as the arts community in Singapore encounters its own battles today. The first glimpses of this shift in Tang's oeuvre occurred in an exhibition titled, *The First Arts Council*, back in 2011. He has continued exploring

this in subsequent exhibitions at the Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore with *Situationist Bon Gun* in 2014, and in the NAFA gallery with *Our Children* in 2017. What then are we to make of this piece, *Untitled Black/White*, created in 2014, in the very midst of this singular focus?

In *Untitled Black/White*, Tang returns to his distinctive method of ink painting. Tang has frequently employed the "wet-on-wet" technique, laying ink on paper soaked with water. This allows the ink to diffuse, creating forms with natural movement. Tang is deliberate and precise with this technique intervening at key moments to direct the ink flow. The result is an artwork imploding at its core. There is a sense of deep tension within, just barely on the knife's edge, waiting for the right moment to manifest. A viewer following Tang's works closely can largely recognise the human figure on the left. Seen in *Situationist Bon Gun*, this figure rendered in profile bears more than a passing resemblance to mythological figures of retribution that he displayed in the previous exhibition. His *arts council* series of works explored the eco-system in which contemporary artists of today's Singapore have had to survive in. Making frequent references to Van Gogh, Tang ruminates on society's refusal to see artistic talent as it

exists in their lifetime. A sharp line is drawn in the sand in this respect. For an artist of his stature to examine the landscape, and find it wanting, is an indictment of the entire structure. The ink painting explodes with emotion as the figures are concentrated in the middle. Tang's skilful manipulation of the ink as it was first laid on paper, allows for each of the three figures to be outlined in almost a halo of radiating energy. The drips overlaid suggests that even the medium cannot hold in this well spring of disappointment, and rise of these cloaked figures. *Untitled Black/White* is brimming with a force that is impossible to overlook, as Tang takes up arms alongside the new generation of artists in Singapore.

Reimagining Paper features Tang Da Wu in both sections, the moderns, and the contemporary. Tang's prolific body of work always seen as contemporary, belies the length of time that he has been involved in the art scene. Tang, in his unyielding effort at sustaining the contemporary arts community in Singapore, serves as a vital bridge connecting two fast-moving periods of art in Singapore. In this respect, *Untitled Black/White*, perfectly encapsulates the dual positions that Tang continues to occupy.

Freely, Really?

by Albert Lim

How does an artwork encapsulate both freedom and entrapment?

Come Closer. Look Harder.

Jane Lee's exhibition entitled *Freely Freely* took flight from 17th January to 5th March 2016 at STPI. Known for her uninhibited processes and unconventional materials, Lee confronted a lesser familiar material - paper. Departing from her tactile familiarity with oil, she worked with the team of experts at STPI to produce stunning prints and installations that challenge the viewers' sensorial experience of entrapment and freedom.

By lifting off the weights of convention and norm, Lee likens herself to a bird flying freely. On display in this exhibition, *Reimagining Paper*, Lee invites the viewers to peer into the peep box constructed of stacked cotton paper to encounter birds in full flight in *Unfolded Dream*. The viewer enters into a world of silhouettes of chirping birds in flight, metaphoric of the spectrum between freedom and escape.

Her residency at STPI orientated her towards an intense and detailed study of paper, a material usually available in huge volumes. This granted her the freedom to "play around with" the equipment and papers at STPI, yet, at the same time, presented her with a myriad of complex challenges. She is at once breaking away from her traditions by crafting a new narrative with this new material, holding on to her audience's gaze with her quintessential mode of expression. To do so, she questions – how can she make a viewer confront his unhappiness (entrapment), and then be set free when he encounters images of birds flying freely? Lee departs from doing paintings to becoming a storyteller – using metaphors of nature to engage her audience in dichotomous states of liberty and captivity.

Freely, Freely is a landscape of sight and sound, a staged platform of contradictions.



Jane Lee

Unfolded Dream, 2015

Stacked handmade cotton paper, button magnets, built-in multi-media peep box, animation

From left:

43 seconds (on loop), 60.5 cm x 23 cm x 13 cm

2:09 minutes (on loop), 23 cm x 31 cm x 10 cm

43 seconds (on loop), 33 cm x 26 cm x 12 cm

43 seconds (on loop), 23 cm x 31 cm x 13.5 cm

Genevieve Chua

From left:
Bloom 7.4, 2011
Bloom 1.4, 2011

Lithography and monotype on Japanese Kozo paper
141 cm x 76 cm per panel



The Delicate Science Behind the Art of Genevieve Chua

by Ivy Lam

Perception is not only an indicator of sight and thought, but also a sign of life and gratitude. The gratitude that amidst all the planets orbiting around the sun, it is just the right amount of light and heat that infiltrated the earth that gives us the possibility of life... and perception of colour.

Sir Isaac Newton in 1665 explains that the reception of colour is a translation of light bouncing off a surface and entering the receptors of our eye. With the individual's sensitivity to colour perceptiveness, colour then etches its linguistic form, and subsequently, gains psychological meaning. Surfaces in itself, thus embodies its coloured form through the mercy of light and our inherent biases. Working in grey tones thus strips bare the biases of light receptivity, where the focus is on the ambiguity of what ensues when it is the flatness of the surface that is read. When one first encounters Genevieve Chua's repertoire, and how she refers to her body of work (coupled with her online user identification as "grey tones"), it is strikingly clear that her palette focuses on the hues between black and white – a move that when examined closely, and when referencing the science of colour, says more about colours than the lack of it. Working predominantly in monochrome and duotone, Chua explains that "in painting,

grey can exist on a warm or cool spectrum, and that speaks of different neutralities that adds dimension to form", yet at the same time, she expressed that she is careful about the dimensions that arise from her art, as the abstraction of forms in paintings is a trajectory she is constantly evolving in her processes.

Abstraction, which is fathered by major art movements like Cubism and Expressionism, seeks to encapsulate the essence and the big idea of an artist's muse, instead of the realistic depictions of the inspiration. Chua terms these as "distractions", which she is careful to avoid in her process. Working within the traditions of abstraction and integrating her unique style, *Bloom 1.40* and *Bloom 7.40*¹ thus appears like raw gestural of calligraphy ink on rice paper, free from representational qualities. The focus is embodied within the circularity of the ink swirls within the paper space, forming a lingering imprint of ink that once interacted with the surface, yet never fully melded its presence.

Upon inspection however, the sturdiness of the paper shows through with the grain of the paper's fibre surfacing beneath the ink, hinting that the work is appreciated for its form as much as the paper which carries it. Indeed, this pair of work was

created by Chua during her residency at the Singapore Tyler Print Institute (STPI), a paper mill characterised by its unique residency programme which invites non-printmaking artists to create paper and print works in the studio. Recounting her process, Chua revealed that she continually tries to question what makes a "good print", and tried to push the limits of the paper. She had initially picked the Kozo² paper as an experiment, and although at first, she struggled with the inconsistencies of the surface, she soon fell in love with it. So much so that she has continued using the material beyond her residency. She shared that the grey quality "accentuates" the paper, revealing even more clearly, the fibres that make up the material. Thus, while working with abstraction in her content, the essence of the Mulberry branches that made up the essence of the plant is also abstracted into the medium. It is thus through Chua's process that John Berger's critical essay on paper³ and drawing comes to mind, he writes,

Paintings with their colors, their tonalities, their extensive light and shade, compete with nature. They try to seduce the visible, to solicit the scene painted. Drawings cannot do this. They are diagrammatic; that is their virtue. Drawings are only

notes on paper. The secret is the paper. It is indeed apt that Chua's masterful pieces frames the introduction to the exhibition, and is contrasted against the vibrant, brightly painted yellow walls. While catching the yellow which light had refracted into our vision, Chua's monochrome work stands out as a reminder that colour in itself is bias, and leads our eyes back into her oeuvre, which inadvertently reveals the star of the show – the Paper which carried the art.

¹ Like a scientist making observational studies, Chua titles her works in a serial fashion and that involves numerical values. In this pair of works that appears in her series titled, **Bloom**, the works were assigned times in the morning when the fronds of the staghorn fern ruptures from its mound. Chua explains that this way of titling references the subject matter in its environment. These monotypes were titled hourly from 1.40 to 7.40am. What we see in the Linda Neo and Albert Lim collection are the first and last of the timeline.

² Kozo paper is made from a type of mulberry used in Japan for traditional papers. Though lightweight and fine, this premium paper is strongly bound by the Kozo fibres. Despite its translucent nature, it is able to hold deep colour saturation, carrying the luminosity and vibrancy of colours that artists hope to pursue. The Kozo paper has also been use in Japanese screens, calligraphic scroll paper, or paper windows.

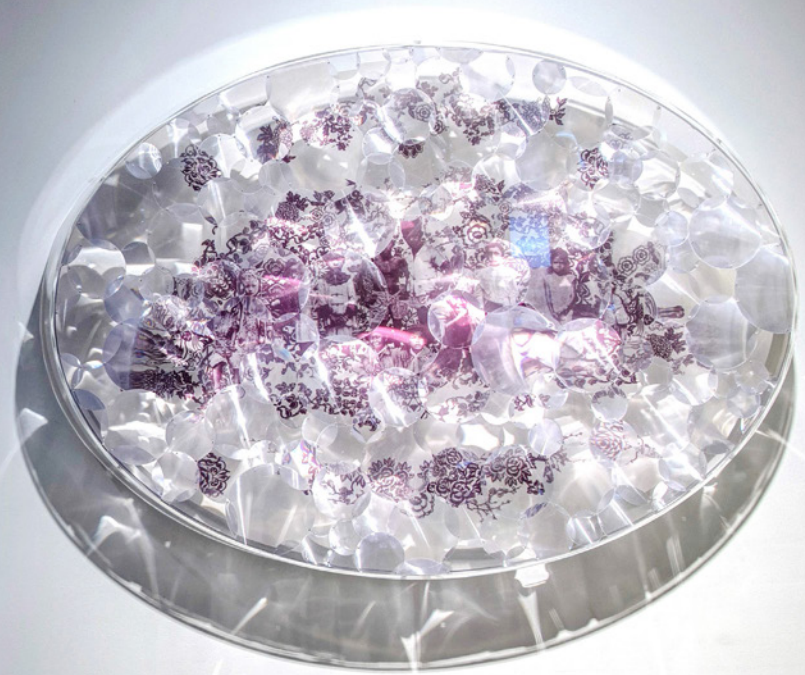
³ John Berger, *To Take Paper, to Draw: A World Through Lines*, 2005.

I would like to thank Genevieve Chua for her generosity in sharing the insights into her works, and for her time to address my questions.



Suzann Victor

I was like that myself...we all held each other's hands (No. 1), 2015
Screenprint, fresnel lens, acrylic frame
71 cm x 101 cm x 8 cm per panel



Suzann Victor

I was like that myself...we all held each other's hands (No. 2 Purple), 2015
Screenprint, fresnel lens, acrylic frame
71 cm x 101 cm x 8 cm per panel

Magnification and Memory in Suzann Victor's *I Was Like That Myself... We all Held Each Other's Hands*

by Ivy Lam

In the study of Optics, Iraqi mathematician Ibn Al-Haytham was the first to conceptualise that the behaviour of light, and in turn vision, is magnified through a spherical mirror. This reflection of light however, reaches a blind spot when light is tilted at a specific angle, revealing that even in the possibilities of an all-reflecting surface, vision could still be naturally biased and limiting.

These experiments in vision is at play in Suzann Victor's installations, *I Was Like That Myself... We all Held Each Other's Hands*, where Fresnel lenses in varying sizes are installed atop a screen print, obscuring yet magnifying the subjects she has rearranged to form a seemingly united family portrait of the denizens of Singapore. These anonymous individuals, though at one point a stranger to Victor, now comes under the magnifying lenses as a doorway to experience her adoptive father's life during the time which she terms as the "Coolie Days", where she imagines his memories, be with him "virtually, digitally, imaginatively, posthumously", and witnessing his "sacrifices, selflessness, and exemplary form of masculinity" that has set the barometer of paternal love for Victor. This method of recollection, magnification, and subsequent displacement of herself into the imagined memories in these collected photographs mirror Victor's visits to the

evolving geographies of Singapore, once her home, and now, a home which she recalls more than she inhabits. Extended by Chinese paper cuts patterns in the background, the grouping of her subjects and motifs forms the faint outline of the geographical boundaries of Singapore, in which she looks on, yet magnifies and distorts from afar.

The quintessentially Chinese patterns of the paper cuts were derived from Victor's visits to Singapore during her residency at the STPI in 2014, where she attempted to inaugurate herself into the socially constructed space that defined her ancestry. This Chinatown in Singapore however, as Victor related, exists in her home, memory, and thus "does not operate as the exotic, but as the self." The process of combining these paper cuts and the images she had sourced and repositioned, and with the overlay of distorting lenses, would thus be an adequate representation, if not inquiry, about the fragmented memories she tried to conjure in this residency.

This inquisition into the "self" also proves to extend beyond Victor, and attempts to speak to a familiarity that a Singaporean viewer could immediately come to relate to. With reference to the "self", Singaporean art historian, T.K Sabapathy, indirectly offered

up the title while studying the work. "I was like that myself", he related to Victor, pointing at the young Indian boys in the frame, "we all held each other hands". The delivery of the work, with a response to it chosen as a title, allows the work to be seen as a persistent national portrait, with each citizen attempting to magnify, and find themselves in the generation that once was.

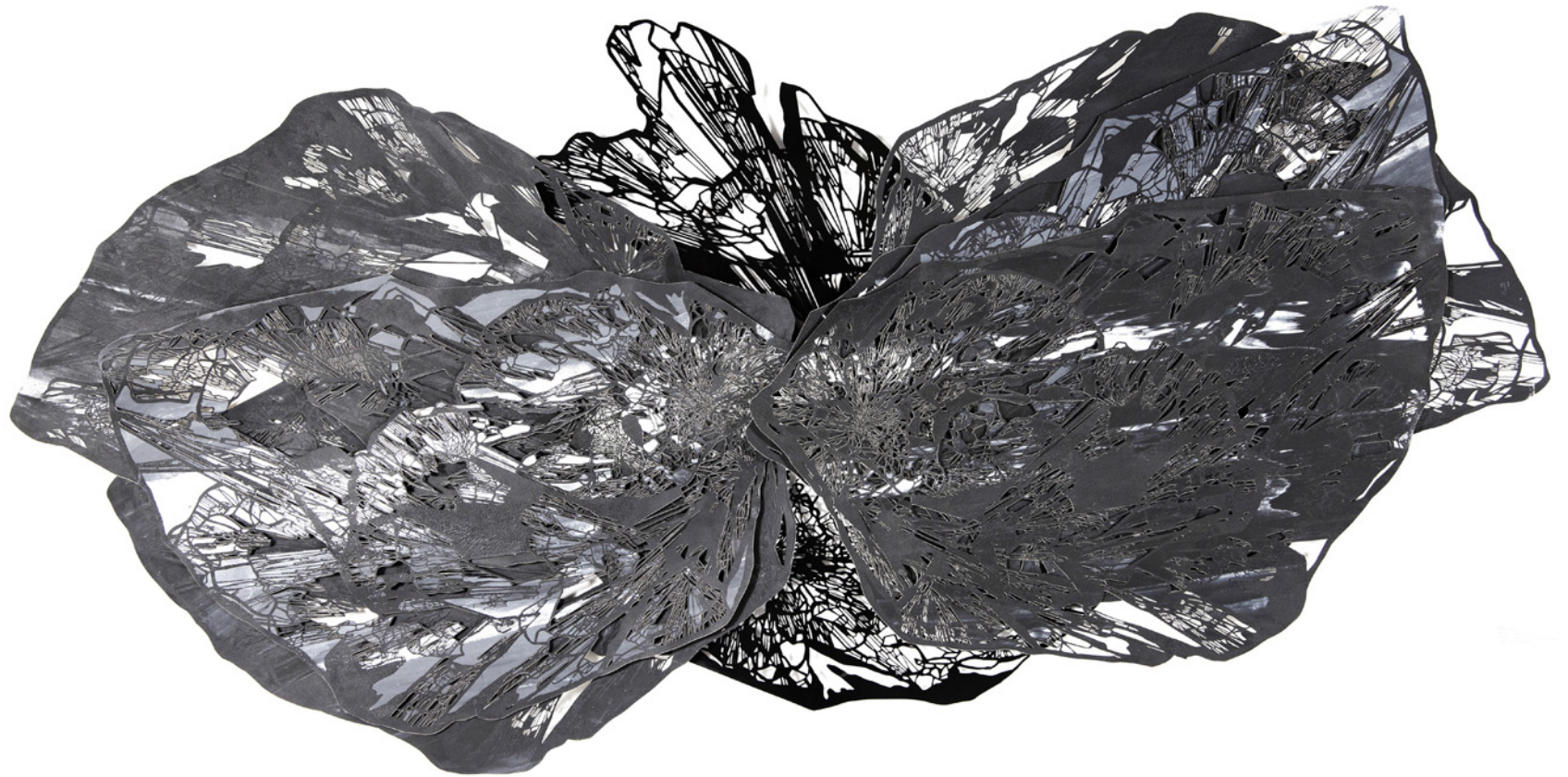
A double obfuscation is revealed in the looking – firstly through the graininess of the photographic archival images etched in print, and the overlay of lenses that redirects the behaviour of light's natural pathways. Victor presents the optical possibilities of the perception of ancestry, family, and memory – that the perception of home, belonging and lineage could be perceived and blinded through our perspectives in vision. The persistent loss through the distortion nudges at our inherent limitations of vision, which in turn lends our bias in perception, and our often unreliable treachery of memory.

During Victor's residency at STPI, she relates that the studio adopts a "counter-intuitive" approach, placing an artist without prior experience in printmaking to work with master printmakers. Together, they collaborate on a body of work for public presentation. This unfamiliarity, of home,

material, processes, and self, is the breeding ground for a metaphorical "blindness" to manifest, an inherent space in our vision that eludes us despite its existence. This anxiety of the unknown or the unfamiliar has the potential to either encourage avoidance or confrontation. Victor chose to see that this "state of ignorance induces its very own antithesis – that lack of knowledge is also the very site of creativity where fresh, often unpredictable ideas or highly customized techniques or processes for her [my] own ends – arise absurdly, yet coherently, all by being lost to begin with."

Stepping back and forth to study the work of Victor, it appears that the overlay of lenses harks back to Victor's performative practice; where the act of looking at her print is constantly evolving, and her subjects though stagnant, is constantly in malleable, dynamic fragments. The fluidity of paper and print, mediated through lenses, is thus reliant on the viewer, where looking and reading is laboured yet rewardingly aestheticized.

I would like to thank Suzann Victor for taking the time to respond to questions regarding this series. This essay is supplemented with her responses to her artistic processes.



Melissa Tan

Arc of Uncertainties, 2016
Acrylic on watercolour paper and powder-coated steel
210 cm x 125 cm x 4 cm

A Chance in the Dark : Arc of Uncertainties - Melissa Tan

by Elaine Teo

“Even now, your features, joys, speech, house, trade, manners, troubles, follies, costume, crimes, dissipate away from you”
To You, Leaves of Grass, Walt Whitman.

As we speak, an innumerable number of asteroids are revolving around the sun. These remnants, from the formation of our solar system billions of years ago, continue their orbit undisturbed. Most asteroids in our solar system exist within the main asteroid belt between Jupiter and Mars. On occasion, these fragments of a beginning which we still know so little of, collide, and form whole new entities. It is this precise accident of chance that Melissa Tan’s sculptural piece, *Arc of Uncertainties*, so brilliantly crystalizes. This happenstance, and epitome of the very fortuitous nature of our existence is offered to us to contemplate.

Arc of Uncertainties is the titular artwork from an exhibition Melissa Tan displayed in 2016 at Richard Koh Fine Art Gallery. Her previous works focused on a geographical study of the landscapes and concentrated on precise locations that Tan was based in. In this series, Melissa Tan embarks on a study on something far more intangible, and looks to the distance into vastness

of the unknown. The series builds on her previous works with paper, and her intimate knowledge of the medium. The contrast between the absolute assurance of the artist’s hand, and the subject matter is particularly salient. This artwork with its layers of carefully overlaid hand-cut paper, forms an almost impregnable façade. Where the other works from the exhibition features lone, isolated asteroids, this particular piece resembles the moment of a collision between two solitary fragments. That is piece anchors the exhibition is quite a thing to consider. The coming together of two disparate objects to form a new whole reflects a deep sense of hopefulness in the face of the staggering unknown.

In an interview with the artist Melissa Tan, conducted in tandem with the current exhibition, *Reimagining Paper*, what is particularly striking is her resolve on this minute possibility of chance encounters. In fact, when asked about the apparent darkness of the series, Tan offers a quick counter-reading. She directs focus toward considering serendipitous moments in life. That disparate lost objects such as asteroids, could collide and form a unique entity is a testament to the possibility of chance.

Tan expands on this by referencing a well-loved novel by Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*. The book though considered by some as a dystopian meditation of the possibilities of technology, is largely a masterful interplay of empathy, and romance in the face of the unknown. In the novel, the characters find themselves constantly looking back at their time in a boarding school located in an undisclosed far-off corner of England. Readers quickly gather that these children, though seemingly privileged, spend their days looking forward to receiving hand-me-downs from the outside. The children value these objects with each child developing their own collection of “treasures”. At its root, these children are lovingly curating their very own collection from items discarded by the wider society. These items though deemed relatively worthless by some, are embraced wholeheartedly, and given new meaning. Similar to how lost asteroids find each other as they collide, these students have created a whole new trajectory for these discarded objects. Much like these repurposed items, and new asteroid forms, in the span of our lifetimes, all of us are in some ways, in the dark as to the trajectory of our own lives. How it can veer off in unpredictable ways, with its own unique outcomes.

Arc of Uncertainties presents an unyielding belief in serendipity amidst distance odds, and seemingly unreachable horizons. The use of paper, a medium at once thought of as light, yet crafted by the steady hand of the artist to develop substantial heft, adds to a sense of implausibility. However unlikely that this scenario is, Tan makes it manifest by featuring this particular moment of collision, and formation.

The author would like to thank Melissa Tan for the extremely insightful interview regarding her oeuvre.

Putting the Paper-chase on Paper

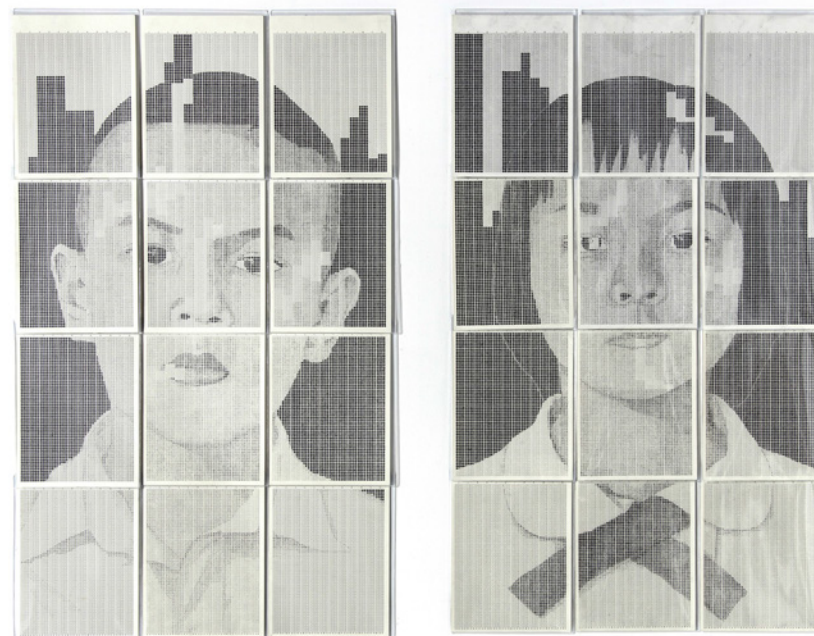
by Ivy Lam

Answers Revealed.

Promthum Woravut bares his battle scars in this pair of works following his years of paper chasing – on paper. Using the familiar multiple choice sheets as a template and backdrop to illustrate his portraits, Promthum’s repurposing of the material repositions the functionality of this prosaic and lifeless form into a façade that elevates the vibrancy of two young lives emerging out of its contours. In Woravut’s body of works, he is critical of how children were used in urban societies as trophies to extend what parents could not have achieved otherwise. He related his childhood where he was not only forced to attend supplementary classes in the evenings after school, but was also made to develop his “competitive edge” by taking classes to realise his other “talents”. This childhood that he led seemed to solely serve a functional need in his adulthood - to survive in the rat race. This process subsequently nudges a sense of loss in Promthum’s childhood - a lost sense of wonder, alternatives, and realisation of happiness unique to him.

The title of this pair of works, *This is My Boy* and *This is My Girl*, reveals the pride that parents display when speaking about their children. The determiner, “this”, renders the subject exclusive to the speaker’s possession. This possession is at once precious to the parent, yet also hints at the desire to mould and form-fit their children into clearly defined numbered boxes. The sitters in the portrait are also nameless, referred to only by their gender – a generic and scientific classification method that is further reinforced through the rigidity of the uniformed circles on the medium.

Graphite on paper is perhaps the most traditional mode of mark making in artists’ sketches and studies. The material allows for erasure, possibilities in tonal qualities, and flexibility in expression. While Promthum etches a dismal future for these children, he also invites us to imagine the possibility of its erasure, and to redraft and re-pulp this canvas for what should have been. As a concluding piece in *Reimagining Paper*, this pair of work closes the show with an invitation for continual imaginations about the form and function of the material.



Promthum Woravut

From left:
This is My Boy, 2010
This is My Girl, 2010

Graphite on paper
118 cm x 69 cm



The Modern



Reimagining Paper, invites audiences to consider how Singapore's modern masters were working against the strictures of the norm set by their predecessors. Much like the new wave of artists in present-day Singapore, Cheong Soo Pieng, Goh Beng Kwan, Wong Keen, Tay Bak Koi, and Tang Da Wu veered off, and opened themselves up to experimentation.

Of all the artists on display, Cheong Soo Pieng's reputation appears to loom heaviest. A quirk of the narrative strength of the 1952 Bali trip, and the emergence of the Nanyang Style has often led to his abstract works being overlooked. Though his studies of Balinese, and Sarawakian lifestyles were themselves of note, it is impossible to examine Cheong's oeuvre without focusing attention on his works of abstraction. In 1963, Cheong left for a seminal trip to Europe. While he already embraced abstraction early in his career, the aftermath of the trip resulted in an outpouring of highly experimental abstraction works. What sets Cheong apart from artists with brief forays into exploring varied formalist styles, is the fact that this study in abstraction informed his later figurative works. Additionally, Cheong never abandoned his eye for composition, his abstract works were rich with detail, with many centred around bringing balance to the canvas. *Untitled* (1970) contains many of the hallmarks that defined Cheong's abstract period. Cheong

overlaid multiple layers of cut-out paper, to form a compositionally elegant whole.

Much like Cheong, Goh Beng Kwan's paper collage works displays a sensitivity to the overall balance of a work. In *Reimagining Paper*, two of Goh's works are on display, *Thailand Palace*, and *Homage to Mai Mao*. Goh carved his place amongst his contemporaries by working with mixed media and integrating it into a well-composed whole. What is often overlooked is the trip to New York that Goh made along with Wong Keen, both of them were students of Chen Wen Hsi. Trained formally, both pursued their own paths, producing works of exceptional elegance. Wong Keen's *Dancing (lotus abstract)*, uses the medium of the paper as a vehicle to display his academic studies of movement. Combining styles of Abstract Expressionism, and the fairly eccentric ink painter Bada Sharen, the brushstrokes in *Lotus* demand attention. Where Goh played with a muted, and calmer palette, Wong Keen's abandons restraint, and pursues a fully exuberant fluidity in his work. The vastly different paths these artists pursued is a mark of the persistence and dedication to individuality.

Similar to his contemporaries, Tay Bak Koi was also a student of the pioneer artists, chiefly studying under Cheong Soo Pieng. Evident in Tay Bak Koi's much celebrated series on Buffalos is his careful use of lines to delineate areas of the canvas. Cheong's

influence is pronounced here, as a large proportion of Cheong Soo Pieng's body of works contains vertical and horizontal lines which subtly cut across the canvas to achieve compositional balance. However, Tay's approach takes a sharp turn away from his mentor, as he adopts a far more focused study on linework. Tay's *Landscape Abstract (1964)* reveals an artist working at his very peak, unafraid to embrace a studied approach. The artwork sits at the apex of his intimate understanding of linework. Tay's considered approach has resulted in a lattice-work of lines interlaced with calculated areas of free-flowing ink diffusions. The contrasting techniques obscures the hand of the artist, yet it welcomes consideration of the medium's specific physical characteristics. The inclusion of colour in a careful few select areas in the ink-grid allows for tension within to disperse, and eases the gaze.

Tang Da Wu grounds the modern section within the contemporary. Tang best personifies how the easy categorisation of artists into age cohorts can conceal a multitude of diverse practices. Very much a peer of the other modern masters, Tang stands apart for his prominence in the contemporary arts. In this section, Tang's *Sembawang West*, and *Sembawang East*, weaves in the stories of the Heng, and Ha warriors with The Artist Village (TAV).¹ The artworks reference the Seletar river that runs along Sembawang, an area where TAV was

located. The guardian figures, Heng, and Ha, are often placed at the entryway to Buddhist temples. Symbolically, Tang extends their reach into the contemporary art sphere. With his decision to anoint them with guardian status of the Seletar River, he elevates the position of contemporary arts into the sacred. Where TAV is celebrated in art history canon, the current iteration stands in its dying embers. The declaration is clear, the battle was lost, but contemporary art lives on.

At every step, these artists were simultaneously craving for a refinement of their techniques, yet they were willing to cast aside assumed styles. The eventual mastery gained from this openness to new approaches have come to define them. Time and a commitment to individuality has allowed this set of artists to bloom into their careers. The willingness to experiment has picked away at oppressiveness of the art establishment, and its myriad expectations of formalist conformity. What remains is an open slate for the present-wave of artists to seize what they must.

¹ Founded in 1988, The Artist Village was an artist colony located off Lorong Gambas, in Sembawang. Known as a rural haven for artists to gather, and experiment with new ways of producing art, the original members of the collective would go on to produce seminal contemporary artworks. The repossession of the land for urban redevelopment signaled the beginning of the end for the collective in the 1990s. The ban of performance art funding in 1994 following the *Artist General Assembly*, a week-long arts event TAV organized in collaboration with another emerging artist collective, 5th passage, effectively put an end to this period of artistic resurgence.



Tang Da Wu

From Left: *Sembawang West*, 2015
Sembawang East, 2015

Ink and colour on paper
246 cm x 136 cm each panel



Tay Bak Koi

Landscape Abstract (1964), 1964
Ink on paper
55 cm x 76 cm





Goh Beng Kwan

Thailand Palace, 1989
Mixed media on paper, 69 cm x 49 cm



Goh Beng Kwan

Homage to Mai Mao, Myanmar, 1992
Mixed media on paper, 77.5 cm x 60 cm

Wong Keen

Dancing (lotus abstract), 1999
Acrylic and ink on paper
152 cm x 81cm



Cheong Soo Pieng

Untitled, 1970
Collage on paper
96 cm x 68 cm



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