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Jon Chan
Un Cheng
Chris Huen Sin-Kan
Noor Mahnun
Tang Dixin

Curated by
Jonathan Nichols

Drill Hall Gallery, ANU
Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts

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FOREWORD
Hannah Mathews and Tony Oates

Hannah Mathews is Director/CEO of Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts.

Tony Oates is Director of the Drill Hall Gallery and ANU Art Collection, Australian National University.

Painting Itself/绘画本身 is an exhibition of five painters – Jon Chan, Un Cheng, Chris Huen Sin-Kan, Noor Mahnun and Tang Dixin – working respectively in Singapore, Hong Kong, London, Malaysia and Shanghai. Brought together for the first time by exhibition curator, Jonathan Nichols, the work of these painters may feel new to Australian audiences, yet it also feels persuasive, potent and entirely relevant to the present. In their complex practices, Nichols finds a 'horizontal culture,' where ideas of contemporary painting are revitalised by actions, traditions and histories that are both interwoven and divergent from our own. In *Painting Itself*/绘画本身 we come to acknowledge that the many languages of painting, while far from universal, do not exist in isolation.

In her insightful introductory essay in this catalogue, Melanie Pocock, Artistic Director (Exhibitions) at Birmingham's Ikon Gallery, begins by addressing the question, why painting? Why are artists still choosing to paint? What is it that makes painting compelling? And how are we to calibrate new threads that come into view? In her search, she acknowledges painting's singular nature while celebrating this moment in which painting's own image can be better understood through its variety and shifting horizon.

Pocock's probing questions mirror those posed by Nichols in his judicious selection of artists and the paintings he has brought together. His concerns are those of the artists. The words of another artist, the painter's painter, Philip Guston, may guide us closer to Nichols' motivation. In a talk at the University of Minnesota in March 1978, Guston reflected on the mystery of painting:

> I don't know what a painting is; who knows what sets off even the desire to paint? It might be things, thoughts, a memory, sensations, which have nothing to do directly with *painting itself*.

Nichols, himself a painter, brings to the curatorial frame the rationale of studio practice that has all too often been sidelined in the linear logic of art historians. As he is fully aware, the studio is fluid, porous, intuitive and disruptive. It opens out to a broader sphere of influence, finding its raisons d'être in correspondences that either have very little to do with the traditions of painting, or draw on alternative histories, questioning hierarchies so as to revel in the possibilities of the medium.

As Nichols notes, each of the artists in *Painting Itself*/绘画本身 lets their work 'set its terms, following where it leads rather than forcing an outcome.' Is it, then, from within the painter's studio that painting's meaning and motivation are to be found?

Through a series of artist interviews and a discussion with Australian writer Quentin Sprague, Nichols seeks to return the artist's voice to its rightful place as primary source. Across these texts, the question of painting is taken further, alongside the artists' own questions and concerns. Nichols' searching, forming approach to each interview is enlightening rather than declarative.

In the collection of interviews, as with his 2022 publication, *Walking with Ghosts*, Nichols seems to parallel Guston's vision of the studio as its own generative, self-reflexive practice, predicated on histories but beholden to none. As Guston noted on numerous occasions:

> When you start working, everybody is in your studio – the past, your friends, enemies, the art world, and above all, your own ideas – all are there. But as you continue painting, they start leaving, one by one, and you are left completely alone. Then, if you are lucky, even you leave.

Is it here, in the present, that we may realise painting itself?

Painting Itself/绘画本身 opens up a way of looking that unsettles familiar art-historical pathways and lets other centres of making come into view. For this, and for his distinctive curatorial vision and close work with the artists, we are deeply grateful to Jonathan Nichols. Equally we are thankful to Jon Chan, Un Cheng, Chris Huen Sin-Kan, Noor Mahnun and Tang Dixin for their participation and contributions, and those of their galleries and lenders, for making this unique exhibition possible for audiences in Australia.

Painting itself – while singular – holds a multitude of intentions, conversations, attitudes and instincts that are at once visible and invisible. *Painting Itself*/绘画本身 makes tangible the medium's capacity to shuttle between geography, culture and time – connecting artists through paintings that appear both new and familiar.

NINE NOTES ON *PAINTING ITSELF*

Melanie Pocock

Melanie Pocock is a curator, writer and Artistic Director (Exhibitions) at Ikon Gallery in Birmingham, UK. Before joining Ikon, Pocock was Assistant Curator at the Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore (2014–19), where she organised more than 60 exhibitions with Southeast Asian and international artists. Pocock's essays, articles and reviews have been widely published. She is a member of the curatorial team for the 5th Bangkok Art Biennale, *Angels and Mara* (2026).

1.

Painting Itself. At first glance, a straightforward phrase. The pronoun (itself) there to emphasise the noun (painting). It's *painting*, this exhibition insists. A title that is attractive in its simplicity, signalling to viewers the promise of an authentic encounter with painting. Painting by itself.

2.

Exhibitions purely focused on contemporary painting are hard to find in public museums and galleries nowadays. When they appear, it is often under the guise of a survey or prize. Carrying titles like *Painting Now*, they either present a snapshot of salient tendencies or selections based on popular themes.[1] As such, they tend to tell us less about painting and more about their agendas as taste-making exhibitions, designed to feed the vagaries of the art market and public opinion. In *Painting Itself*, neither of these motivations feels present. The time span during which the paintings in the exhibition were made (2013–25) indicates their contemporaneity. However, many of their formal qualities and palettes harbour echoes of painting's past: the terracotta hues and perspective of 15th-century Florentine painting in artist Noor Mahnun's earth-toned scenes, for instance. This exhibition is unusually sensitive, teasing out recurring themes in the paintings – the interior, the gesture, the figure – while highlighting their aesthetic contrasts.

3.

Apart from surveys or prizes, there are an increasing number of exhibitions that feature painting with other contemporary media. From installation and film to digital media and performance, the presence of these media serves to underline the significance of painting – one of the most historical forms of visual art – in the present.[2] Reflecting young painters' dialogue with these media, multi- or interdisciplinary presentations arguably reflect how most of us experience painting today – as visual material amidst a range of dynamic media, as an image filtered through a screen, or as a search result following the algorithms of the internet. But if such exhibitions justifiably expand our notion of painting, they can also feel contrived, transposing onto it ideas and methodologies that fail to articulate its specific history and nature. When accompanied by overarching themes, they also end up imposing the task of representation onto

painting – a particular obsession within contemporary culture, which demands that art signifies something other than itself, about the world we live in. And while painting is certainly capable of fulfilling such representational tasks – by presenting socially relevant issues, for instance – these rarely form its reason for being *as* painting.

4.

Ask a painter why they paint and they will often say that it is because they have an intuitive connection to the medium. This affinity for painting can relate to the tactile qualities of different paints (e.g. the thickness and pliability of oil, the vivid character of acrylic, the softness of gouache), a visual draw to its antecedents across millennia and continents, and an inescapable and enduring captivation with these historical precedents. For the painter, herein lies painting's enigmatic nature – a physical and mental process propelled by its own material momentum, more or less knowingly shaped by visual references across time and space.

5.

In *Painting Itself*, the poeticism of painting's singularity extends to the exhibition's display. Lining the walls of Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts and, later, the Drill Hall Gallery, are groups of canvases, each contrasting in colours, mood and style. In both locations, the overall presentation is concise – 13 individual paintings – a precision which reflects curator Jonathan Nichols' seasoned eye as a painter. Less is more, the blank wall space between each painting helping us to see their nuances more clearly. In PICA's atrium architecture and the Drill Hall's naturally illuminated space, this minimal approach feels like a form of spiritual asceticism, decluttering the viewer's mind so that they can contemplate these paintings in a visually quiet environment. Here, curator Nichols invites us to adopt a certain humility – to let these paintings speak before we do. As a result, the viewer becomes an active witness, attentively observing how each painting unfolds.

6.

It is not unusual to hear artists and curators describe paintings as if they were humans. To claim that paintings 'speak' – and that we can communicate in their language – is both a metaphor and genuine endeavour to give these objects a sense of agency. In *Painting Itself*,

this desire surfaces in the exhibition title. Reading it again, we realise that the noun is also a verb, performing an autonomous action on itself. The 'self' in the pronoun further anthropomorphises painting, as if it were a person capable of self-creation.[3] For Nichols, the suggestion that these paintings have somehow played a role in their own making is not a figment of the painter's imagination. It is rather an argument which stems from the internal logic of painting's process; a grammar in which each painted mark informs the next. Painter Chris Huen Sin-Kan likens this logic of painting to walking – a learned, yet automatic, reflex, whose pace, rhythm and distance can only be determined from one footstep to the next.[4] Artist Tang Dixin similarly alludes to the intuitive path of painting, one which often leaves him unable to describe why his paintings end up with the forms that they do.[5] Perhaps the analogy of the journey enables us to better understand the trajectory of painting as a series of 'informed coincidences,' in which each painted mark triggers a physical, intellectual and/or emotional response capable of opening a new fork in the road of a painting.

7.

While each painting's journey is different, they often cross paths. In *Walking with Ghosts: Six Conversations about Painting* (2022), Nichols describes the presence of other paintings within a painting as a kind of spectre; a melting pot of visual memories shaped by the painter's past encounters with other paintings.[6] This is why in every painting it is possible to see another painting: echoes of the deliberate yet swift lines of Chinese ink painting in Chris Huen Sin-Kan's brush strokes; the sublime, misty landscape of Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (c. 1817) in the white-capped, rugged contours of Tang Dixin's *Human Mountain* (2016–18); or even Edward Hopper's paintings of night-time America in the dusky-blue Singaporean scenes of painter Jon Chan.[7] Exactly how the apparitions of other paintings surface in these artists' works, however, is ambiguous, often unconscious and never literal. Just like the unstable mechanisms of memory, the vestige of a painting within another is infused with the artist's lived experience – the physical environment and culture in which they grew up and now reside, how these intermingle because of migration – as well as their individual relationship to that painting. But while these links might appear obvious to a curator or viewer knowledgeable about painting,

they are not always so apparent to the painter. For example, when responding to Nichols' observation about the visual connection between Friedrich's painting and his own, Tang Dixin shares that he vaguely recollects having seen this painting, yet cannot corroborate whether it directly influenced his thinking while painting it.[8] Perhaps, we could speculate, he has seen works painted by artists who have seen Friedrich's work, and channelled its mood, palette and/or perspective. In either scenario, there is no real way of knowing – even our own memories can trick us into believing we have seen things we have not. Is this where the phenomenon of painting's 'ghost' is most intriguing and manifest? When the web of painting's cross-references becomes so entangled that it no longer becomes possible to unravel one influence from another?

8.

Living in-between cultures often amplifies feelings of ambiguity – of memory, how we feel about a given subject, what we hope to express. As a half-British, half-Chinese Malaysian curator, conversant in French and not fluent in Cantonese (my mother's native language), I know these feelings well. I also feel them in several of these paintings: the fraught brush strokes with which Un Cheng conjures unstable figures in a transitioning Hong Kong; Tang Dixin's wry visual depiction of anti-Asian racism in *Yellow Peril* (2013); and Jon Chan's strange-yet-familiar images of Singapore. In the latter, scenes within scenes – painted into place like postcards – increase the sense of dislocation, the figures that populate them equally disjointed in their poses. While brought together in his canvases, each figure appears in their own world. Painted from memory, their vagueness alludes to the kind of amnesia that is often associated with Singapore, whose shapeshifting landscape is constantly in the process of redevelopment. It also evokes the unease of the island city's highly manicured and surveyed environment, where little evades the state's omnipotent gaze. But if Chan's figures evoke the alienation of hybridity – where one never fully feels part of one culture or another – Chris Huen Sin-Kan's fond portraits of family, pets and friends have an equally ambivalent atmosphere, with each subject gazing somewhat vacantly towards the viewer. For these artists, the tensions within migration, regeneration and transition create a kind of living, cultural patchwork, manifest in the contrasts, textures and constructed worlds of these paintings.

9.

If there is one thing that most of these painters share (apart from their affinity for painting) it is their ability to read, speak and/or write another language. For the majority, that other language would be Chinese and its various spoken dialects. For Noor Mahnun and Jon Chan, this also includes Malay and vocabulary from other South and Southeast Asian languages common in everyday speech in Malaysia and Singapore. In recognition of this multilingualism, the exhibition's title includes its equivalent in Chinese, 绘画本身. While translating each component of the title (e.g. 绘 [huì], 'to paint'), several of these characters carry other meanings; 本 (běn), for example, can mean 'root,' 'fundamental' and 'itself,' while 身 (shēn) refers both to the body and a more abstract idea of the self. These various meanings echo the different ways in which the English title can be read: as a statement foregrounding painting's essence, painting as a human metaphor, or as an object with its own agency. By including the Chinese with the English title, Nichols not only acknowledges the artists' multilingual frames of reference, but also unpicks the hierarchy of western painting, arguing for the equal importance of Chinese and more broadly Asian ways of looking at the medium. A gesture towards decolonising the largely Anglocentric purview of painting in Australian art institutions, this curatorial choice also holds a space for the multiple formal, cultural and artistic voices present in these paintings. While vindicating painting's singular vocation, Nichols' exhibition also advocates for the medium's subtle, yet extraordinary variety. A paradox that can only be understood when contemplating each of the paintings that make up *Painting Itself*.

1 Recent examples in the UK include *Mixing It Up: Painting Today* (2021) at the Hayward Gallery, London, a survey of contemporary painting whose aim was 'to bring together diverse images and ideas, and encourage us to see the world around us in a different way' and *Radical Figures: Painting in the New Millennium* (2020) at the Whitechapel Gallery, London, which showcased 'a new generation of artists … revitalising the expressive potential of figuration.' See www.southbankcentre.co.uk/magazine/mixing-it-up-an-introduction-from-ralph-rugoff and www.whitechapelgallery.org/exhibitions/radical-figures. In Singapore, UOB Painting of the Year is one of the country's most significant painting prizes accompanied by an exhibition that seeks to 'uncover the next generation of great Southeast Asian artists;' www.uobgroup.com/uobandart/uncovering-talent/uob-painting-of-the-year.html.

2 A relevant example here is *Foreigners Everywhere*, the main exhibition of the 60th Venice Biennale (2024) curated by Adriano Pedrosa. While always multidisciplinary in scope, Pedrosa's biennale featured significant presentations of modern and contemporary painting by artists from countries of the Global South. Many of these were juxtaposed or interspersed with works in other media, including textile, sculpture and video, in a non-chronological exhibition format that, while seeking to draw aesthetic parallels between artists and artistic traditions across the Global South, also limited interpretation of painting traditions from these areas to arbitrary, simplified and arguably Euro-American-centric notions of foreignness. See Ben Eastham, '60th Venice Biennale, "Foreigners Everywhere,"' *e-flux Criticism*, 19 April 2024, www.e-flux.com/criticism/603719/60th-venice-biennale-foreigners-everywhere.

3 See the conversation with Noor Mahnun on pages 71–72 of this catalogue, where she makes similar observations about the semantics regarding 'painting itself.'

4 See the conversation with Chris Huen Sin-Kan on page 103 of this catalogue.

5 See the conversation with Tang Dixin on page 114 of this catalogue.

6 Jonathan Nichols, *Walking with Ghosts: Six Conversations about Painting: John Spiteri, Boedi Widjaja and Audrey Koh, Christoph Preussmann, Noor Mahnun Mohamed, Moya McKenna, David Jolly. Talking with Jonathan Nichols* (Melbourne: Jonathan Nichols, 2022).

7 See the conversation with Jon Chan on page 98 of this catalogue.

8 See the conversation with Tang Dixin on pages 117–118 of this catalogue.

PAINTING IS MEMORY
Jonathan Nichols in Conversation with Quentin Sprague

Artist and curator Jonathan Nichols is based in Naarm/Melbourne and Garramilla/Darwin. He began painting in the early 1990s after originally studying sculpture, and completed a PhD at the VCA, University of Melbourne, in 2023. Following a year-long residency in Kuala Lumpur in 2012–13, Nichols lived and worked in Singapore for six years. He has exhibited widely since the early 1990s and curated several thematic group exhibitions for public galleries. Nichols is represented by Yeo Workshop.

Quentin Sprague is an Australian art critic and writer based in Kamberri/Canberra, where he is the Hassall Writers Fellow at the Australian National University's Drill Hall Gallery. His books include *What Artists See* (2025) and *The Stranger Artist* (2020), which won the 2021 Prime Minister's Literary Award for Nonfiction. His essays appear regularly in *The Monthly* and he has contributed to major publications from the National Gallery of Australia, the Art Gallery of South Australia, the National Gallery of Victoria and the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, among others.

This is an edited record of email conversations from December 2025.

QS I want to start by throwing the net wide here, Jonathan. Although this exhibition, *Painting Itself*, features five painters from Asia – Jon Chan, Un Cheng, Chris Huen Sin-Kan, Noor Mahnun (known as Anum) and Tang Dixin – who have been selected for specific reasons, it is, I feel, an exhibition first and foremost *of* painting and *about* painting.

So let's begin there. Before we speak about the artists themselves, or what you were hoping to achieve by drawing them together here, let's look at the practice they share, and which you also share as an artist.

JN Okay, sure.

QS One of the most compelling ideas that you've introduced to me over the years in relation to painting comes from the late French writer and artist Pierre Klossowski. He sets it out in his influential, but little-read, essay, 'On the Collaboration of Demons in the Work of Art,' from 1981, which I know you've returned to a number of times during your work as a painter and curator.[1] But I suspect you were at some level carrying Klossowski's ideas for far longer: the essay appeared in translation in a special edition of the journal *Art & Text* in 1985, during your studies at art school.

There's a rich vein of writing and theory that frames creative practice, and particularly painting, as a collaboration with forces outside the artist's strict control, but I'm interested in why this essay in particular resonated so strongly, and also your understanding of why Klossowski speaks of demons rather than, say, angels?

JN At art school you are searching around for frameworks and methodologies that might help you carry your own motivations and instincts. This is where Klossowski became interesting to me. In his essay, he pushed back against Walter Benjamin's well-known idea that the work of art was losing its 'aura' – this was Benjamin's essay, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1935), which famously uses the image of the so-called 'angel of history,' in turn taken from Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*.[2]

At the time I came to Klossowski's essay, the reigning critical view was that, in the past decade or so, painting had become delinquent and unreliable, and painters should leave the studio and find something more productive to do. Klossowski's account was part of an older story. In the context of painting, he didn't presuppose a strict modernist historical order – in fact, he seemed to ignore it, which I liked. Nor did his essay reinforce more recent art historical accounts. I also liked that he was an artist and that you could understand key aspects of his writing more fully by looking at his artwork. There were different things you learned from each.

What I still find particularly interesting is his proposition that an artist is not alone in the studio, that there are outside forces at work in making artworks. And yes, like you say, he uses the analogy of demonic forces – these are those you can't control, and which may even work against you. All sorts of unconscious energies and designs are at play. His point is also as much about utility – he's interested in how a 'work of art' actually 'works.' This is what his writing is often about. The artwork's and, specifically for Klossowski, painting's viability, is completely linked to the pragmatic knowledge and experience of an artist/painter.

In his thinking, the studio processes and the material processes of making, even where these are symbolic or conceptual (or shared between artists in certain ways), are key to any collaborating with outside forces. It's this formal/physical relation that interconnects the artist with the forces of the world around them.

QS I always find it interesting that in the age of contemporary art – an age arguably characterised first and foremost by cross-disciplinary practice – there's been, and still is, this ongoing preoccupation with painting as a specific medium with specific concerns. I feel that many painters certainly work from the idea that painting is still viable – there's things to learn, and ways to add to its history. Yet there's also an attendant sense that painters must constantly justify their decision to paint.

Which is to say, the anxiety that characterises the 'death of painting' debate (what you refer to via Klossowski as its 'delinquency') hasn't so much dissipated, as it has been replaced by another anxiety. This one is expressed in questions like: Why painting? Why now? A number of commentators have become quite influential in this space, particularly the art historian and writer Isabel Graw and the art historian-cum-theorist David Joselit. They speak of painting in terms of 'agency' or (more convolutedly) 'indexicality.'

What you take from Klossowski – this idea of painting's 'utility' – is clearly related to this more recent turn, but it's also useful because it's different. Utility is a very practical term, and in the context of painting is far more suggestive of making things, in this case paintings, by hand. And although you are referring to a kind of material utility, my understanding is that it's also directly related to painting's social utility: how the medium's specific utility both shapes and is shaped by the immediate social conditions surrounding artists at any given time.

In this exhibition, there's clearly something of this at play. If we ask why these painters, and why now, it's hard not to think that the utility of the medium begins to provide an answer. Do you agree?

JN Yes, for me these five artists/painters do collectively model a kind of thinking about painting that makes sense. In the brief for the exhibition, I described the interaction of painters at this level of making (which is crucial in Klossowski's terms) as a 'horizontal culture.' It's a kind of shaping – and, in turn, being shaped – that operates primarily painter to painter, and from painting to painting. It's not that these five painters have known each other closely or been friends, so it's not the same as the more intimate context one might identify in a small, close-knit scene (like, for example, the Melbourne art world a generation or so ago, which is when I first came to experience it). But expectations around painting's mythologies and clichés, as well as the particular kind of knowledge it constructs, shift and adapt across what are otherwise very different geographies. And that's particularly interesting when we think about Asia and where we are here, in Australia.

As you say, contemporary art historians do pick this stuff up. Figures like David Joselit and Isabelle Graw who you mention, or the art historian Barry Schwabsky, have proven willing to consider notions of agency and indexicality as characteristics that extend between artists/painters and are at one level shared. And there are other technical aspects to this around how time works in painting, where there is a common acceptance now that painting is both synchronic and diachronic.[3]

The contemporary art question of why (painting) now is more obtuse. I doubt any of the painters in this exhibition are thinking about a choice between painting and other kinds of contemporary art-making for instance. Chris Huen Sin-Kan makes the point that he is interested in a living painting experience, not one articulated by special themes. He entertains the idea that it is more like a 'script' that you might follow and describes his practice of painting as 'walk[ing] with two feet' – one in life, one in art, in sequence.[4] Each of the artists would be thinking more along these lines … or at least that with painting it isn't quite so easy to control and direct exclusively.

QS Let's look at one of Chris Huen's paintings in the exhibition, then: *Joel, Tess, MuiMui and Balltsz*, from 2023 **[P. 52].**

The painting immediately prompts certain assumptions, especially when one takes into account that quote of Huen's you've just shared, that he approaches painting as partly in life, and partly in art. The first assumption is that we are looking at a family scene – a domestic interior with two children and two dogs: that's life, one assumes. Specifically, the artist's life.

But the scene of course immediately evokes a rich history of painting – I think, with my western eyes at least, of the rich interiors of Bonnard, or the studio paintings of Matisse. But then, the scale strikes me as evocative of more contemporary painting, while the mark-making and line work – the overtly painterly qualities – draw attention to themselves

in a way that brings to mind the history of abstraction. Is this what you mean when you say that paintings are implicitly interlinked, not just across a practice, but in this case across time? If so, where might we read Huen's specific agency in sorting and selecting these kinds of references?

JN I also see Édouard Vuillard in Huen's work. Vuillard's work was close to Bonnard's. Not in the painterly handling, which is not the same, but in the way he also painted unusually intimate family scenes. Chris Huen's interiors also remind me of apartments when I used to live in Singapore – but of course in *Joel, Tess, MuiMui and Balltsz*, the apartment is in his then-home city of Hong Kong. When the picture was painted in 2023, it was actually just before he relocated with his extended family to the UK. So, interestingly, with the more recent paintings undertaken in his studio outside London, there are no more Hong Kong interiors; in fact, there are no interiors at all, at least not yet. His recent paintings are still of his two children (each a little older of course) and his dogs, but now they are walking in the English countryside: there is a forest close to their new home in West Sussex, and it's the trees of that landscape that dominate his new work. It's been important for me to realise how the subjects themselves age as they move from one painting to the next in this way.

It's a concern for time that operates in Huen's painting in another way as well. To me, the figures – his kids and the dogs and his wife – can often seem present in the painting only fleetingly. They are not resolved in a fixed sense, so your eye doesn't see them all at once. The process of painting marks out a passage of time, and Huen's painterly awareness of this is a defining aspect of his work. You might remember you and I used to talk about the early paintings of [Melbourne-based artist] Moya McKenna along these lines. She would undertake her still-life paintings over a set period of time, capturing a distinct sense of duration in her pictures. In my understanding, the Belgian painter Luc Tuymans achieved something similar in the way he painted in the 1990s.

I think Chris Huen is also doing something like this, but in his case it is closer to the work of Chinese traditional ink painter Wu Guanzhong, for example. Wu, who is a household name in Hong Kong and Singapore but largely unknown in the west, studied oil painting in Paris in the late 1940s. He then returned to China, where he taught himself traditional ink painting years later. You can really read Wu's paintings in terms of duration: how each painterly mark is laid down, and its speed and decisiveness.

In Huen's work, you might describe this effect as a kind of time-lapse quality. Each brush stroke is laid down without alteration, one layer upon the next. It's distinct – there is no over-painting or covering up 'mistakes.' In this sense, a painterly mark is a mark in time. It's a method he understands as in part traditionally Chinese, and we discuss this in our conversation together [PP. 105–107]. But, as you describe, it also evokes much contemporary western painting – so-called 'abstraction' – which is also an effect of the scale he works at. My feeling is that Huen is not keen to close off either of these histories in his work, neither western nor eastern.

QS I'm glad you've brought up Huen's move between Hong Kong and the UK, because it highlights one of the most interesting aspects of the exhibition, which is this movement of ideas and practices between European and East Asian contexts. The time you spent living in Singapore between 2014 and 2019 is obviously key to how you've come to view the work you've included, but so too is each artist's specific connection to other places. I feel like there are aspects to the pictures that touch common ground: this is part of what has enabled you to find a dialogue.

In a 2021 conversation with Noor Mahnun (Anum), for instance, you spend quite a bit of time talking through the dual context for her work: Malaysia, where she was born and now lives, and Berlin, where she lived and studied between 1984 and 1997.[5] It describes a kind of 'shuttling between' – between cultural spaces and traditions – that painting, like literature and other cultural forms, is particularly good at. Can you describe how this works in relation to Anum's paintings?

JN Anum is from Kelantan, which has a very old history, and I know that she is always super cautious about over-reading cultural markers in her painting. She often says that

she is painting simply what is around her. And although this does of course mark certain things out, she is not attempting to blur cultural lines or play into cultural gaps, which has been a strategy for numerous contemporary artists over recent years.

What I'm trying to get at here is that the paintings in this exhibition, including Anum's, begin at a different point. In the wall text for the exhibition, I write that these artists look for the 'face' of their work. It might sound strange, but it's not an uncommon idea that at a certain point in making a painting, painters can recognise an aspect in their paintings that looks back at them, so to speak. They see a completeness or comportment in the painting that has an effect like seeing a face or a character. It's this sensation of looking back at themselves, as though from outside of themselves, that catches them and holds. Certain cultural markers may be present, but they aren't foregrounded.

Anum's paintings especially lend themselves to this kind of reading, where the character of the painting is of primary concern. Her paintings are domestic and figurative. In our conversation [P. 74], Anum recounts the story of recently being in Paris, where she recognises the smile of her cousins in the faces of the Khmer temple figures on the ground floor of the Guimet Museum. These stone sculptures must be thousands of years old. A little later in our conversation we talk about the face in an image. She asks: Is it the physiognomy? Is it expression? In her paintings – the figure, the face, the entirety of the painting – it is not realist, nor is it realism. As Anum describes, 'I was trying to get an expression. Like an attitude, in a way – yes, it's the attitude.'

QS I love this idea that a painter tries to recognise an attitude in the painting that they can then work to articulate. Perhaps that's the real task of a certain kind of painter, and, by extension, a certain kind of artist.

It's also interesting that you aren't really giving oxygen to the specific cultural angle here, even though all the artists, broadly speaking, are from Asia. This is of course a very conscious decision on your part – and I assume reflects an awareness of how this exhibition *could* be framed.

From that perspective, can you describe the Tang Dixin painting *Yellow Peril*, from 2013 [P. 59]? Why was this painting so important for you to include in the exhibition, and how does it relate to the other painting by Tang in the exhibition, *On the Lake*, also from 2013 [P. 57]?

If we're talking about attitude, it strikes me that the attitude of these two paintings is quite aggressive compared to the other paintings in the exhibition: they seem to purposefully unsettle it. Is that your intent in including them?

JN I agree *Yellow Peril* is unsettling. It is one work in the exhibition that does push out quite forcefully, by which I mean it implicates the viewer very directly. Is it just about us westerners though – about a racist fear of Asians? I don't know. It's unlikely the work has been shown outside of Asia before. And in painting, attitude is a complex thing. Consider the way, for example, that Anum is 'seeing' attitude in stone sculptures thousands of years old. Here, with *Yellow Peril*, it is indicated as much with each painterly mark and its completeness. It's a smallish painting, close to life-size, or the same scale as when you look at yourself in the mirror. To me it feels very calm and thoughtful rather than aggressive. This is in spite of the gesture – the Asian face making the racist gesture of 'Asian' eyes – that Tang is painting.

A challenge I had in curating this exhibition (and maybe still have) is being aware that the art economies of, for example, Shanghai – where Tang Dixin lives – and Australia, are nearly alien. They barely touch, and this is a problem. But for his own part, Tang would discourage the idea of categorical distinctions in painting, especially any in which east and west are cast as exclusive. He would more likely agree that painting is a porous and polymorphic idiom and it slips designated contexts far more than it reinforces them. Maybe this is closer to where we speak about the medium in terms of utility, and its capacity to shuttle between cultural spaces and traditions.

The second Tang Dixin work, *On the Lake,* is completely intriguing. It's a hugely unusual painting. Its narrative reminds me of British art historian TJ Clark writing famously about two Nicolas Poussin paintings,

Landscape with a Calm (1650–51) and *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake* (1648).[6] According to Clark, these two paintings convey different realities, one a world with a prevailing sense of 'calm' (and order) and the other defined by 'fear' – the man being killed by a snake. Tang paints into this kind of drama too. We talk about this in our conversation together **[PP. 113–115]**, and if these works stand out and unsettle, then that's just such a very rare thing.

QS I feel that this ties together much of what we've been speaking about – the idea that there are certain characters that artists, and in this instance painters, cultivate in their works. It once again brings to my mind the notion of painting's social utility: how the medium itself forges a kind of social connection.

This aspect is particularly interesting to me. I'm sure some of the painters in the exhibition know each other, or at least are aware of each other's works, but they practice in different places, quite independently of each other.

JN Yes, that's right. What you're calling 'the medium' is doing the sharing; it is this that links the artists.

QS So, in introducing the two artists we are yet to speak about – Jon Chan and Un Cheng – I wonder if we can go back to this idea? Chan's paintings strike me as composite images that push together social and interior worlds, while Cheng, at least in her two paintings in the exhibition, seems to foreground the body of the artist. Her works seem to position the body as the generative site through which the work runs.

There are differences between these two practices, of course, but there is also this sense of fraternity: a sense of the character of each practice, and even the specific paintings that you have selected, sharing a life. It's true across the exhibition. Would you like to further elaborate on this idea that it's the medium's social utility that really binds the works – and, by extension, the practices – you've brought together?

JN You're right – Cheng does very much use an interior framing. The weight of her painting processes reflects her own psychic state – it's the point of impulse and reflex in her work. She doesn't usually paint her own body in the paintings, at least not as a corporeal 'body.' However, the larger of the two paintings in the exhibition, titled 啤酒 大麻和菠菜 (*Beer, Weed and Spinach*) **[P. 45]**, is a kind of self-portrait. It was painted in 2020 after months of the democracy marches in Hong Kong and their eventual winding down. Here, the broken figure contorting over the toilet is Cheng herself. It is a personal collapse and exhaustion. In our conversation she explained, 'this was my life at that time' **[P. 87]**. It was five years ago now, and Cheng was not long out of art school when she painted the picture.

I mentioned Vuillard when talking about Chris Huen's interiors of his apartment and family, but I think Vuillard's intimist painting style is actually much closer to Un Cheng's. Same with Bonnard. I'm thinking of the paint application: it's scumbled and layered. And also her super high-key colour palette. The small work of hers in the exhibition, 唔願平十蚊! (*NO BARGAIN $10!*) **[P. 43]**, from 2023, is more typical. It is like a jewel. The intense colour was initially a surprise to me. It's an imagined scene of a Hong Kong street vendor – but there are none of the grey tones or concrete or claustrophobic effects that I associate with HK. The figure is bending over from the hip and casts a distinctive shape that is recognisable if you have an experience of East Asian cities.

A question might be: do we only see Cheng and her immediate context in these paintings? Or can we look beyond her? At what point does *Beer, Weed and Spinach* become (if this is the case) more than just a record of her own specific experience and capture something more general? To me, Cheng herself is not interested in 'constructing the world,' or in 'instruction' for that matter – if nothing else, the recent lessons of Hong Kong are still disorientating and I imagine very isolating.

So, if we accept that there are in fact other kinds of independent relations at work in painting in general – and beyond Cheng herself in this specific painting – well, this only works where painting itself is 'speaking' too. It (this painting and its history) is speaking, no less than Cheng.

QS Interesting … and Jon Chan? How does he forge a 'social connection' in painting?

JN I think Jon Chan comes at this idea of the medium's social utility quite differently from the other four painters. I would say he is a kind of 'history painter.' You're right when you say that he and Un Cheng share an affinity, or fraternity, and I think this is to do as much with the two cities of Singapore and Hong Kong where they respectively live. Both these cities self-identify (or did) as city-states, and Jon Chan very much centres his paintings on Singapore – he calls Singapore a 'paradise.'[7] Two of the works in the exhibition are from his *Hong Lim* series from 2022, which comprises perhaps 10 or 12 paintings overall. Hong Lim Park is a civic 'speakers' park in the centre of Singapore that was named after an ancestor of Chan's, a distant great-grandfather. It's a place where small demonstrations and public speaking are legal; an old British colonial hangover in the context of Singapore.

At the centre of Chan's *Hong Lim* series is a feeling of anxiety, or complicity perhaps. In the context of the paintings, he remembers his ancestor Hong Lim as a business trader and successful entrepreneur, which included opium trading. In one of the two paintings from the series in the exhibition, called *Tochi's Ghost* [P. 46], he juxtaposes the memory of his Singaporean ancestor (and the civic history of Singapore), with the image of four lonely people who had come to the present-day Hong Lim Park to demonstrate against the hanging at Changi Prison of a convicted drug trafficker whose name was Iwuchukwu Amara Tochi.

In the second work from this series included in the exhibition, *White in Blue* [P. 48], and other paintings in the series [see *Platforms and Archetypes*, FIG. 3.3], Chan paints gestures and shapes of figures that feel familiar to the streets and housing estates of Singapore. Not just this though, the figures and faces he paints in some ways recall earlier Singaporean painters like, for example, Chua Mia Tee (born 1931) [see FIGS 3.1 and 3.2]. For Jon Chan, painting is 'not about one thing, or one sense, only.'[8] With that in mind, I look at these works and see how paintings have the means to insert themselves in time.

So, from that perspective, we get to another of this exhibition's overarching ideas, one about history and how we perceive it. Actually, I think it's a good idea to end on. Rather than just one constant unbroken flow, in painting, history operates like memory: it constantly circles back.

1 Pierre Klossowski, 'On the Collaboration of Demons in the Work of Art' (1981), *Phantasm and Simulacra. The Drawings of Pierre Klossowski*, ed. Paul Foss, Paul Taylor and Allen S Weiss, *Art & Text* Special Issue 18 (July 1985): 9.

2 Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn, from the 1935 essay (London: Fontana, 1973), 219–53. Pierre Klossowski also collaborated with Benjamin on the first translation of Benjamin's essay into French in 1936.

3 'One paints today according to a double perspective for which one might borrow the Saussurian terms "diachronic" and "synchronic." Or perhaps it would be just as well to speak of historical and contextual aspects.' Barry Schwabsky, *The Observer Effect: On Contemporary Painting* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2019), 96.

4 See the conversation with Chris Huen Sin-Kan on pages 103 and 105 of this catalogue.

5 Jonathan Nichols, *Walking with Ghosts: Six Conversations about Painting: John Spiteri, Boedi Widjaja and Audrey Koh, Christoph Preussmann, Noor Mahnun Mohamed, Moya McKenna, David Jolly. Talking with Jonathan Nichols* (Melbourne: Jonathan Nichols, 2022).

6 TJ Clark, *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006).

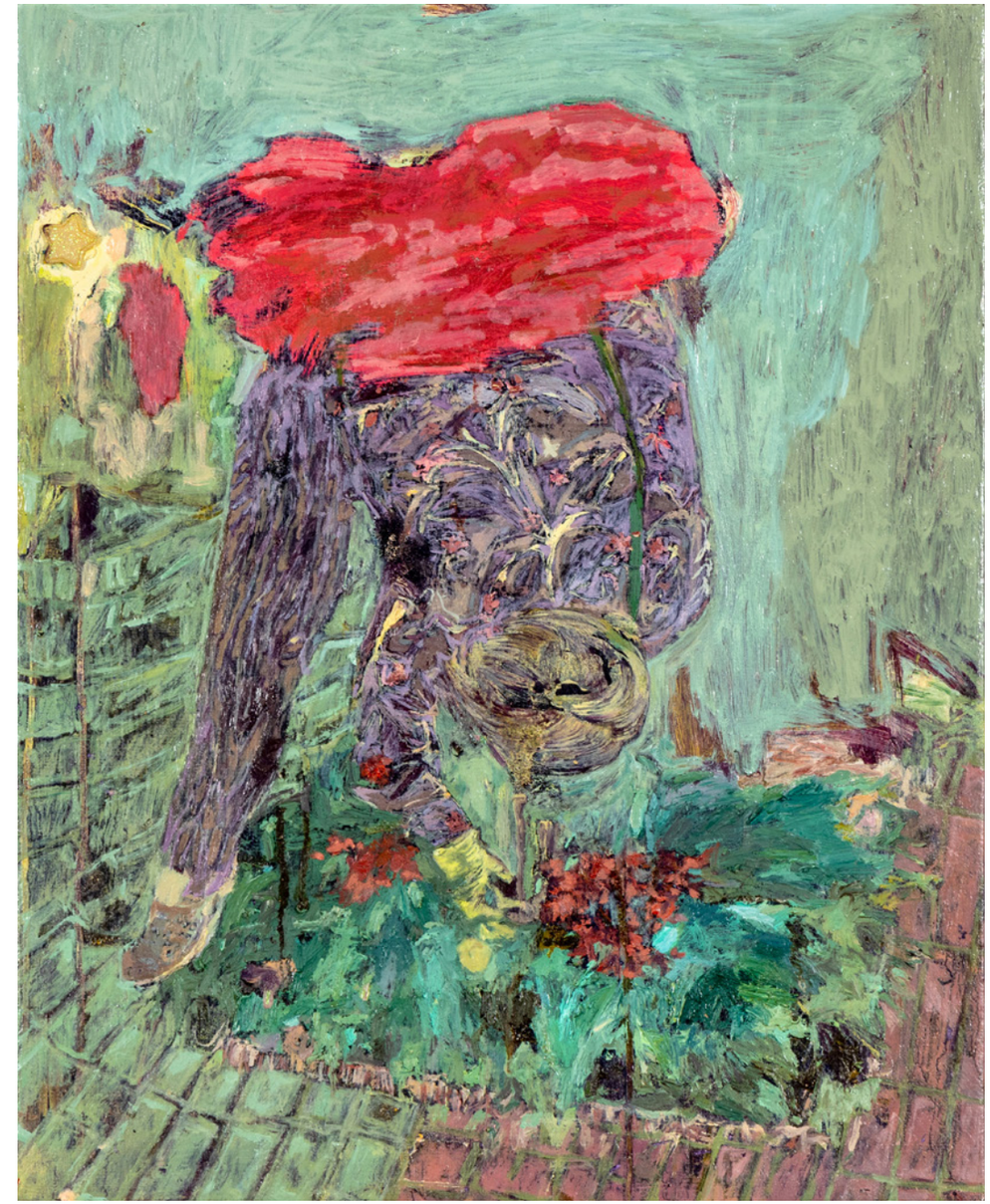
7 See the conversation with Jon Chan on page 100 of this catalogue.

8 See the conversation with Jon Chan on page 99 of this catalogue.

Noor Mahnun, *Homework*, 2024

Noor Mahnun, *Baju Kurung*, 2025

Noor Mahnun, *Recorder*, 2025



Un Cheng, 唔願平十蚊! *(NO BARGAIN $10!)*, 2023

Un Cheng, 啤酒 大麻和菠菜 *(Beer, Weed and Spinach)*, 2020

Jon Chan, *Tochi's Ghost*, 2021

Jon Chan, *White in Blue*, 2021

Jon Chan, *Higher*, 2025

Chris Huen Sin-Kan, *Joel, Tess, MuiMui and Balltsz*, 2023

 Chris Huen Sin-Kan, *Joel, Haze and Tess*, 2023

56 Tang Dixin, 在湖上 *(On the Lake)*, 2013

58 Tang Dixin, 黄祸 *(Yellow Peril)*, 2013

60 Tang Dixin, 人山 *(Human Mountain)*, 2016–18

Tang Dixin, 凝固 *(Solidify)*, 2023

LIST OF WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

All dimensions
height × width

Jon Chan

Tochi's Ghost, 2021
oil on canvas, 48 × 66 cm
Gift of Hwang Yin, collection of NUS Museum, National University of Singapore
P. 46

White in Blue, 2021
oil on canvas, 48 × 86 cm
Collection of Richard Koh
P. 48

Higher, 2025
oil on canvas, 54 × 146 cm
Courtesy of the artist and FOST Gallery
P. 50

Un Cheng

啤酒 大麻和菠菜 *(Beer, Weed and Spinach)*, 2020
oil on canvas, 150.2 × 100.2 cm
Courtesy of Blindspot Gallery
P. 45

唔願平十蚊! *(NO BARGAIN $10!)*, 2023
oil on canvas, 52.1 × 42.2 cm
Collection of Jon and Eliza Lewis
P. 43

Chris Huen Sin-Kan

Joel, Haze and Tess, 2023
oil on canvas, 200 × 240 cm
Courtesy of the artist
P. 54

Joel, Tess, MuiMui and Balltsz, 2023
oil on canvas, 220 × 320 cm
Collection of Soichi Suzuki
P. 52

Noor Mahnun

Homework, 2024
oil on linen, 83 × 123 cm (framed)
Collection of Amy Gould
P. 36

Baju Kurung, 2025
oil on linen, 123 × 153 cm (framed)
Courtesy of the artist and Yeo Workshop
P. 38

Recorder, 2025
oil on linen, 83 × 63 cm (framed)
Courtesy of David Wong and Yeo Workshop
P. 41

Tang Dixin

在湖上 *(On the Lake)*, 2013
oil on canvas, 80 × 80 cm
Private collection, Japan
P. 57

黃禍 *(Yellow Peril)*, 2013
oil on canvas, 50 × 40 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Ota Fine Arts
P. 59

人山 *(Human Mountain)*, 2016–18
oil on canvas, 150 × 150 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Ota Fine Arts
P. 60

凝固 *(Solidify)*, 2023
oil on canvas, 180 × 250 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Ota Fine Arts
P. 62

NOOR MAHNUN

Noor Mahnun (Anum) is a painter who has worked in Malaysia since 1999. Born in the north-east Malaysian state of Kelantan in 1964, Anum studied art at the Hochschule für Bildende Künste (HBK) Braunschweig, Germany, for seven years from 1989. She lived in Berlin from 1984 to 1997 and has exhibited widely since that time. Anum is represented by Yeo Workshop.

This is an edited transcript of Zoom conversations with Jonathan Nichols during November 2025.

JN We've been here not so long ago, talking between us for the conversation published in 2022.[1] We don't have to revisit that material. This time we can be quite informal – hopefully catch your voice a little. That's the main thing.

A Sure.

JN The title for this exhibition, *Painting Itself/*绘 画本身, alludes to a kind of collective dynamic and capability in painting. That is the focus of the exhibition. We've talked about this kind of thinking around painting. Isabel Graw says something like painting 'thinks' for itself, she says that it is 'a discourse producer that arrives at its own insights.'[2] And TJ Clark maintains that paintings can literally 'speak back.'[3] These are very human analogies. I'm interested in how artists/painters working in different Asian settings think about this. Joy Chew [Ota Fine Arts, Shanghai] gave us the translation in Chinese that we're using in the title. She thought that there was an awareness or meaning within Chinese traditions.

A Because you're using English, then, 'itself' is kind of loaded first off – you know, 'it' and then 'self.' And then, the word painting is both a verb and a noun. So, it gets complicated. In Malay, painting translates as *lukis*, but a lot of the Malay words when it comes to visual arts, a lot of these words are from Sanskrit. So, we are more aligned towards the Indian world. Even colour in Malay is *warna*, which is the same as in Sanskrit. *Rupa* – appearance – and *seni* [art] are both Sanskrit. So, it's similar to Indonesian.

JN It's the same influence as in Indonesian.

A In Malay language, yes, it's Sanskrit when it comes to visual arts. When it comes to shoes [*sepatu* in Malay], it was the Portuguese [*sapato*] or the Spanish [*zapato*]. They're the ones who brought shoes to Southeast Asia, I guess.

JN [*Laughs*] And if you said 'painting itself'?

A Well, painting is *lukis*. And *lukisan* will be the noun.

And *lukis*, or *melukis*, would be the verb to paint.

JN And then to translate 'itself' would be –

A Yes, that would be, like, an hour-long discussion. All of this falls under *seni rupa* – *rupa* is to do with face, to look or face. So, *seni rupa* is visual arts. But *rupa* will be the visual – visage – and *seni* is arts.

JN You're saying it's a derivation of 'face.'

A Yes, I think you need to go and have a crash course in Sanskrit.

JN Face, really?

A Hoopla [*laughs*].

JN That's really cool. I like that a lot.

…

JN You've just come back from Paris?

A Singapore.

JN But earlier it was Paris, for Asia NOW?

A In October. And before that, I was in Seoul for Frieze and Art Dubai and Miami. Too many.

JN You've been busy. How did it go?

A I think it was good in terms of networking. Because all these galleries in Paris were presenting Asian artists. Actually, this year they also included Middle Eastern artists but I don't think the dealers were comfortable being described as Asian.

And there were some galleries from Berlin which I knew from my previous life [living in Berlin between 1984 and 1997]. Carlier Gebauer represented Maria Taniguchi

from Manila. I knew Carlier Gebauer when it was Gebauer and Günther in the 1990s. The gallery has changed and evolved. He brought two artists to Paris. I knew Ulrich because his first gallery was in the same building as John's [Anum's late husband] architecture office. Right beside the Spree, a beautiful factory warehouse. In Paris, they had Iman Issa as well as Maria Taniguchi. Maria Taniguchi is the one who paints the bricks.

JN Yes, I remember; she went to Goldsmiths. That would have been exciting, to see everyone?

A But Ulrich Gebauer didn't come. He sent his partner in his place, because I was hanging around hoping to meet him [*laughs*].

He couldn't attend because he was not well, they said. I think there were a few other art fairs happening as well. A lot of people were at Art Basel, it paralleled. And then there was the Ceramic Art Fair, which sounded interesting. I didn't have time because I was studying one museum or one outfit per day [in Paris]. [I thought] I shouldn't overburden myself and in-between I also had to attend the Asia NOW booth. But in Paris, I think the highlight was seeing the Musée Guimet which has the amazing Gandhara Buddha collection and the Southeast Asian art – the Khmer sculptures.

JN I don't know this one.

A I've seen one or two [Khmer sculptures] a long time ago in Berlin. And I've got this catalogue I bought at König's in Cologne [around 1989], because they had a show of these sculptures.[4]

My aim in Paris was to see this museum. Oh my god! I was glad to walk from where I was staying. I had to pass the Palais de Tokyo and the Musée d'Art Moderne – tempting, but I didn't have time. I walked straight to the Guimet. I'm so glad, because I spent a lot of time in the Southeast Asian section. I was taking so many photos. I thought, well, I could buy the catalogue. And then later I found out that the shop was closed, renovating, so I'm glad because of – just

walking in, when I saw all these big sculptures – the sense of connection. I got a bit emotional.

JN You mean because Kelantan connects back through that way – all those years ago? [Kelantan, Anum's home state in north-east Malaysia, was historically close to the ancient Khmer Empire.]

A Yes. Looking at the faces, I kind of recognised them. Not the physical look exactly, but the expression.

JN Oh, wow.

A I remember, years ago, taking photos of my relatives. You would have photo albums, with prints. So, I had this photo album with all my cousins and then I remember one of my German friends would look at the faces and say, oh, they're actually quite different, because he was used to going to Thailand or Indonesia. He would notice a difference and make the connection with, like Cambodia, Vietnam, Indochine. Is it the physiognomy? Is it the expression?

You know, 'the smile,' the famous Khmer smile – just a twitch of the muscle [*laughs*]. There's a Bangkok smile or Thai smile. There's a Khmer, Cambodian smile – so, I see my cousins' faces. I see them!

JN Wow, that's quite something. One of the paintings you were exhibiting in Paris, it was your niece, wasn't it? She was modelling for you. It was her face in the painting [*Lithe*, 2025, **FIGS 1.1** and **1.2**]?

A Yes, my niece, the one that I'm using. So, I think that's when suddenly things started to click. Because when I was painting the portrait, I wasn't trying – I mean, sure, [there is] a bit of similarity, but not super similar, like [Lucien] Freud would do, say. I think it's better to say I was trying to get an expression. Like an attitude, in a way – yes, it's the attitude.

JN Physiognomy, meaning the face, it's the countenance or character, isn't it? Rather than a simple likeness.

[FIGS 1.1 and 1.2] Noor Mahnun, *Lithe*, 2025, oil on linen, 84 × 76 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Yeo Workshop

A Yes. When I saw the sculptures at the museum, I could see the connection with all these dance sculptures. There's a lot of dancing. In Malaysia, we too have this dance culture. One is in the palace, which is very specific. And then there's also a more common – what do you call it – folk dancing.

Growing up, I learned a bit of all of that. Because I was one of the school dancers. Too bad I don't have photos. But there are steps that were taught to us. When I saw the celestial dancers, all these sculptures adorning the walls like in a temple, it made sense. Dance is a form of – not prayer but – ritual, actually.

I mean, it makes sense why dancing or going to the disco, it's all connected [*laughs*].[5]

JN Yes, I can see what you're saying.

…

JN Could you talk us through the works, the ones that will go to Perth and Canberra? The first painting is called *Homework* [2024, **P. 36**]. It's from 18 months ago I think, and it was in the Yeo Workshop [Singapore] exhibition.

A Well, yes, I have some notes, you know me – especially for *Baju Kurung* [2025, **P. 38**]. I'm kind of interested in making my own *baju kurung*, planning to write something about it myself.

JN And the words *baju kurung* translate as the kind of dress that is being fitted or measured in that painting? It's a Malay term meaning all-around dress?

A Enclosed.

JN And it can mean like a prison? Is that too much?

A Well, on the other hand, it's actually a very loose, very comfortable kind of dress. Not tight-fitting at all. To me a kebaya would be more of an entrapment. It's another type of dress that's very popular nowadays. A *baju kurung* is more traditional and not really Instagram friendly.

JN [*Laughs*] Let's not get ahead. Can you walk us through the first one [shares screen, showing *Homework*]?

A I think the idea to do this painting first [came to me] when you were introducing me to Audrey Yeo and you came to my studio. It was in my old studio in Ampang [an old Kuala Lumpur neighbourhood] and it's become the setting for the painting. Audrey was talking about a solo [exhibition] and we agreed on 2025. So, this was 2023 and I needed to plan how many paintings etc. I always plan my time according to how many paintings I need to paint. So, I constructed a model of the gallery which is on that table in the painting.

JN It's there on the left, I remember.

A Yes, that's the model of the gallery in Singapore. I was thinking about the walls and maybe each could be a different colour.

JN And that's the plan view of the gallery space itself?

A Yes, it's an axonometric view. So, I have it in a book with all the layouts and okay, the first painting, because the wall is that size, it would be this size etc., I knew. And then, I thought, oh – me – this is about me painting.

JN So, this was the first painting you made for the exhibition? It has the painting tools. It is a picture of a painter, isn't it?

A Yes. So, the person there is a surrogate.

Previously, I had already worked on a small study of another girl in a pinafore and she's wearing yellow cleaning gloves. I had this study and I was thinking that I needed to start cleaning the studio before [I began] a whole new series. The small study was called *Homework*. You know, it was about cleaning, so I thought I could call the new painting *Homework* as well. [In Malay, *kerja rumah* – homework and housework – are interchangeable.] I put the study in the painting – I put it on the easel, in the centre there. I started painting this and using the studio as the setting, drafting it onto the canvas.

So, I had this base [the premise for the painting], with the easel, the studio and cleaning. So, I just let the painting sit there in the studio. That was the starting point. That was still in Ampang. Do you remember?

JN Yes, I remember Ampang. I liked it there.

A And then, I just said, why don't I have her painting the homework? The painting would be about what I do in the studio. What do you call the stick? The tool there – the *Mahlstick*? I don't know what it is in English. It's called *Mahlstick* in German.

JN Mouse stick?

A Yes. I associate it with a mop. I fetishise my cleaning tools in the house, if it's not obvious already [*laughs*]. They're all Muji. They have to be perfect. So, similar to my painting equipment. Anyway, this became the rationale. Instead of cleaning tools, it was the tools in the studio and the studio itself. I put the easel in and the pastel drawing of the girl with the yellow gloves on the easel. And I have this window, overlooking the balcony and the jungle behind. So, the painting evolved.

On the right is a painting of a goldfish lantern. In that space, I called it Studio Ikan Emas [Studio Goldfish], I always felt like I was in an aquarium. It was three rooms facing this jungle. And it's all floor to ceiling glass. I felt like the monkeys, the birds and everyone – they were looking at me and I'm the goldfish.

…

A Thinking back to *Recorder*, you have that picture [2025, **P. 41**].

JN Yes.

A Rousseau was one of the painters I wanted to see in Paris, the one with the girl in the jungle playing the flute **[FIG. 1.3]**.

JN Which one? I'll find it [*shares screen*].

A I knew it, and I don't always have to, but that one, I think I did because I did some watercolours of a girl playing the flute. I grew up thinking in primary school that, for the whole world, to learn music, you play the recorder, right?

JN Yes, that's right.

[FIG. 1.3] Henri Rousseau, *The Snake Charmer*, 1907, oil on canvas, 167 × 189.5 cm. Musée d'Orsay

A I had two studies also. I think I called one of these watercolours *Snake Charmer*, and then I used the snake plant [the plant depicted in *Recorder*]. He [Rousseau] doesn't know what a jungle is. He knows how to paint it. It's weird. Later, of course, I realised his painting was also called *Snake Charmer*. When I was painting [*Recorder*] I was thinking of the snake charmers in India and things like that – you've seen them.

JN I didn't know the pot plant in your painting was called a snake plant. You have to be smart to keep up.

A Ha ha.

1 Jonathan Nichols, *Walking with Ghosts: Six Conversations about Painting: John Spiteri, Boedi Widjaja and Audrey Koh, Christoph Preussmann, Noor Mahnun Mohamed, Moya McKenna, David Jolly. Talking with Jonathan Nichols* (Jonathan Nichols: Melbourne, 2022).

2 In this account, art historian Isabelle Graw follows the artist Paul Klee and philosopher Theodor Adorno. See Isabelle Graw, 'Adorno Is Among Us,' in *Adorno Vol. 2: The Possibility of the Impossible*, trans. Steven Lindberg and James Gussen, ed. Nicolaus Schafhausen, Vanessa Joan Müller and Michael Hirsch (New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2003), 13–14.

3 Clark writes that his motive for the book was bound up in thinking about 'the ability of painting to speak – to speak back, to my mind irrefutably' from the past. TJ Clark, *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), viii.

4 Museum für Ostasiatische Kunst der Stadt Köln, *Entdeckungen: Skupturen der Khmer und Thai* (Cologne: Museum für Ostasiatische Kunst der Stadt Köln, 1989).

5 Anum is jokingly referring to *Disco Lombok Still Life*, her solo exhibition at the Edge Galerie, Kuala Lumpur, in 2017.

UN CHENG

Painter Un Cheng lives in Hong Kong, where she was born in 1995. She has exhibited regularly in Hong Kong since graduating from Hong Kong Baptist University with a Bachelor of Arts (Hons) in Visual Arts in 2017. Her recent exhibitions include a major presentation at Taipei Dangdai in 2023. Cheng undertook a Gil Artist Residency and held a solo exhibition at the Gil Society Deiglan Gallery, Akureyri, North Iceland, in 2018. She is represented by Blindspot Gallery.

This is an edited transcript of a Zoom conversation with Jonathan Nichols on 22 September 2025.

JN I don't have a list of prepared questions, it's more a sense of your voice that I'm interested in. If we start and see where the conversation goes – is that okay?

UC Yes, sure.

JN Looking behind you, I can see it's the studio **[FIG. 2.1]**. I wonder, to begin, if you can show us around? And, by way of background, you're in Hong Kong?

[FIG. 2.1] Un Cheng's studio/living room, 2025. Courtesy of the artist

UC Yes, it's my home in the New Territories, in village buildings. We have three different kinds of buildings in Hong Kong. One, public housing, one, private, but where I am is something like village buildings, with only three or four floors. I live on the ground floor.

Okay, a quick look around [*pans the mobile phone*]. This is the living room, it's not really a high ceiling but two months ago they set up the light track for me. This is a display wall. I'm working on this painting – I guess it's 1.2 by 1.5 metres. This room is my storage and my study with all

the books. Mimi [Chun, director of Blindspot Gallery] always says studio visits are not very convenient for me because I live in my studio. It's my home as well as a studio.

JN And the New Territories? Ah, Hong Kong Island is in the south?

UC Yes, the New Territories are north, ah, honestly, I'm not sure. My area is close to Shenzhen [in mainland China]. I'm only four stations from Shenzhen.

JN The paintings you are working on, these are for your solo exhibition at Blindspot soon?

UC Yes, it's in November. All the paintings now are for the solo. I'm still working on three to four medium-sized works – this is medium-sized [*gestures*]. This one will be at Blindspot. I've already finished perhaps 15 small paintings and one large painting. The large painting is 2 x 2.5 metres.

JN Wow.

UC This is one of the small ones, I think it's 50 x 40 cm. So, a few of these will be shown in the exhibition. This is still in progress [*gestures*]. This is finished.

JN At what stage is this painting, with the aqua colour **[FIG. 2.2]**?

UC Oh, I'm doing the layers.

JN What do you mean?

UC Most of the time when I start paintings, I've got no idea so I will just randomly put down colour. Cautiously, or subconsciously, I just put it there. And then I try to use different tools, different brushes, some scratchers, sometimes I use a wood block to scratch the texture. You can interpret it in a very abstract way.

I'll mix all the things up together until I get a feeling, so I get the colour tone. Then I start to think, okay, what am I

[FIG. 2.2] Un Cheng, unfinished aqua painting, 2025. Courtesy of the artist

going to do, what am I going to draw? I'll follow this [*points*]. What do you call it in English? Yes, the brush strokes, the vibe. But right now, with this painting, at this point I only have an idea of the main colour tone. For the composition, and the layers or texture, I have no thought about what this is going to do yet.

JN Okay.

UC You will see I use different kinds of blue [*indicates*]. If I want something dark blue but I don't want this being too heavy, I will put down some brown or some red colour beforehand, and, once it has dried, I will then put down the blue colour. It will be blue next to some red or brown together. That's why I call it layering. Here, for instance [*gestures towards another unfinished painting*], you can see the texture of a blue colour behind the pink. And here [*indicates*] – I enjoy this and want people to see this – you can see the green colour scratched behind the pink, one layer over the other **[FIG. 2.3]**.

[FIG. 2.3] Un Cheng, unfinished pink painting, 2025. Courtesy of the artist

JN With this work, the image, you're painting a window.

UC Oh yes, so smart. Most of my works are inspired by photos I take daily. I will just tease [*make up*] a story. I will start or get a reference with the photos or with drawings I've made. But when I am painting, in the process, I feel it is optical. I cannot just follow the whole composition. In the process I just remove or change things if it's not working. It's very emotional for me.

JN I'll just share the screen. This is *Beer, Weed and Spinach* (2020) [FIG. 2.4 and P. 45], which is one of the two earlier works of yours included in the Perth and Canberra exhibitions. This work is from five years ago now.

UC Yes.

JN I read it as somebody who's throwing up, being sick, still sitting on the toilet. It's an unusual thing to paint.

UC This one is quite sensitive. It was from the first solo exhibition at Blindspot Gallery. It was a summer residence program and 2019–20 was the time of the social movements in Hong Kong.

JN I remember, there were all kinds of reporting.

UC Yes, I think this one is a kind of self-portrait from that time. Just before, I'd stopped painting for over half a year because of my personal life and the social changes [the newly introduced laws that have reshaped Hong Kong]. I'd always go out for the protests and would see different things happening. I'd try and capture different situations that I'd noticed in the streets but then I was very depressed. This picture is talking about how I was frustrated and how I was messed up and suffering personally. The title *Beer, Weed and Spinach* – this was my life at that time.

JN This is a distraction, but you would know how the toilet is of course this magic item in art history since Marcel Duchamp put his urinal in the gallery.

UC Oh, yes!

JN And yet here you are, in the most prosaic way.

[FIG. 2.4] Un Cheng, 啤酒、大麻和菠菜 *(Beer, Weed and Spinach)*, installation view, Blindspot Gallery, 2020, oil on canvas, 150.2 × 100.2 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Blindspot Gallery

UC Yes.

JN This [唔願平十蚊! *(NO BARGAIN $10!)*, 2023, P. 43] is the smaller, later work we are including in the exhibition [*shares screen*].

UC Ah, yes.

JN This is called *NO BARGAIN $10!* It is somebody you saw in the street? To me the painting has something of the extreme scales you experience in Hong Kong. You know, small confining experiences up against the huge metropolis, all squeezing and pushing together. Is this a reading you can relate to?

UC Yes, but I hadn't thought of that with this work because it's from a series I made in 2023 for Taipei Dangdai. I painted 15 or 16 small-scale paintings like this one. It's quite finished and about a kind of Hong Kong style. Yes, it was the small spaces and intense dynamic of Hong Kong situations.

JN It's very recognisable. But for people who are not familiar with Hong Kong, perhaps they don't see this. With this painting the colour is surely not so much Hong Kong?

UC Oh!

JN If this is from the street it would be grey? Hong Kong is super urban, full of concrete.

They're not realist colour sets or something like that. The colour is not what you see on the street, is it?

UC For me these are colours of Hong Kong. Like the purple colour. It's in the clothes of that figure, that part, because the painting was of an old lady. She's selling the flowers and plants she's grown, she's put them in the street. Old ladies in Hong Kong they have some kind of signature. It's the clothes they wear or in the patterns of the flowers. But besides that, you see in the background, the green and the yellow – yes, that's my imagination – I'm just going with the flow there. But the bricks on the floor, they're quite the signature of Hong Kong as well. And the green colour comes from my observations in the New Territories. In this part of Hong Kong, it's all trees, mountains and plants. In most of my works during this time, the colour tone changes to the grey–green or earth tones.

JN So, in this way the work involves a kind of psychic space and mood as much as it relies on the idea that it might represent something that you've seen outside. When I was first looking at your work, I was speaking with Firenze Lai [a painter also born in Hong Kong and now based in London] too. You know each other?

UC Yes.

JN With Firenze's painting I'm remembering she would paint say a series of bushes or trees, and then she would have figures that would seemingly slide or fall into the bushes. It was claustrophobic. Her figures hide in the cracks of the city. Your work is different – the colours are vibrant, not the same at all, but there is a correlation between you too. Are there other artists or painters you look at?

UC It's quite interesting that you translate her work with this idea of falling into the cracks of Hong Kong. I think with this painting [唔願平十蚊! *(NO BARGAIN $10!)*], I simplified the background. I tried not to put so much in. I was taking things out and using the green colour, it pops up the figure. But as you ask, what artists or paintings do I reference? I don't really have close references. But I quite like Mamma Andersson. I like her work because of her compositions and the figurative stuff that's her focus. I think she is very good.

JN Would Mamma Andersson be someone whose work you came to know at university?

UC No, no, I only noticed her work a few years ago. I randomly saw her paintings in a gallery. I think her work is so much about narrative.

JN Ah yes, that's true.

UC You can see the narrative. You can see the story behind it, but you don't know what it is. You just see it. But also, I think the way that I do my paintings, the method of the paintings, this reference; yes, I like Peter Doig. When I studied in university, he was my first inspiration.

JN For the last few generations, perhaps painters have been out of the habit of linking their work, speaking about the links, at least. The preference was to be silent or just see things as a solo trade. Maybe that's changing now. Peter Doig, Mamma Andersson – there is a relationship in your work. Doig is so influential. The bold red section in this painting of yours, its flatness and shape, is something that has an affinity with Doig too. Early on, he made a painting of a solitary figure sitting on top of a mountain, seen from the back and wearing a hoodie [*Figure in Mountain Landscape,* 1997–98]. Maybe it was his brother, from his time back in Canada, and he would have used photographs and whatever else. The red in this painting acts in the same way and the flatness of the colour suggests the photographic. There's a kind of boldness in that awareness that I like.

Let me introduce something else here. I've been reading the essays in your catalogues.

UC Okay.

JN They address threads of contemporary thinking, but certain words and phrases pop out. Here are a few: 'an itinerant,' 'disillusion,' 'leaderless,' 'isolated.' Hong Kong as a place is implied too in this.

UC Yes.

JN I'm remembering the contemporary German artist Jutta Koether suggesting that an artist's project these days often carries a peripatetic quality. They travel around a lot, lots of short stays. Like an itinerant wanderer peddling their wares – this is part of the character of the art world now. It's an interesting idea.

UC Most of my work and the inspiration or the topics of my work over the last few years have been about moving and the encounters of travelling. In 2020, the works were about the experience that I had with the Iceland residency and about that magnificent environment. In 2022 it was my living environment in Sham Shui Po, Kowloon, which meant that I had moved to the city centre from my parents' home. And the exhibition in 2023 was the second time I had moved, out from the city centre to the New Territories. Writers have interpreted my work as about all this moving, movement. That's why they use the idea of the itinerant artist, constantly shifting, and they pick up on some of the titles of paintings this way. But I don't think the travelling is the most important part, it's been more about being isolated and solitary and the changes in my life. Loneliness as well, I have to say.

JN Does Hong Kong come in here too, the experience of Hong Kong? Internationally people do look to this part of the world, to what's going on in Hong Kong, with some expectation, realising that it's a very dynamic city and there is a kind of leading or expectation in that. The art world does this too, as if the experience of artists in Hong Kong might offer some key to the art world. Does this sound right?

UC Yes, I think so. But I don't know if this is leading or leaderless. I take this from the perspective of the personal and focus on social status and the void in Hong Kong. I've felt very disappointed before and depressed about policy changes. I used to hope there could be some kind of hero in Hong Kong, but I'm in the system, part of the system; that's the world in Hong Kong. Since COVID, things have been very pale, very silent. You can sense that something is changing.

JON CHAN

Jon Chan is a painter based in Singapore. Born in 1982, he has exhibited regularly in Southeast Asia over the last 15 years. Chan graduated with a Master of Fine Arts from LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore, where he currently teaches, in 2008. In 2023 he was awarded Singapore's prestigious IMPART Art Prize for emerging artists. Chan is represented by FOST Gallery.

This is an updated and edited version of an earlier conversation with Jonathan Nichols published to accompany a solo exhibition by Chan at iPreciation Gallery, Singapore, in 2022. It is based on Zoom conversations in July 2022 and September 2025.

JN Last week in Singapore I went to the National Gallery to see the Chua Mia Tee exhibition – I don't think he is well known outside Singapore. Have you seen the new exhibition?

JC I haven't seen it. I've seen the paintings before – the collection.

JN Do you connect with someone like him? I'm thinking particularly about one or two of the paintings. There are a few that stand out – one is the Malaya poem [*Epic Poem of Malaya*, 1955, **FIG. 3.1**].

[FIG. 3.1] Chua Mia Tee, *Epic Poem of Malaya*, 1955, oil on canvas, 105.5 × 125 cm. Collection of National Gallery Singapore. This work has been collectively adopted by [Adopt Now] supporters. Image courtesy of National Heritage Board, Singapore

JC It's always these paintings that are in the back of your mind. In my time they were something that you saw first in textbooks because that's the way, more or less, art first comes into view – all the Nanyang painters.[1] They come first as a cultural thing. In the beginning they have a kind of iconic status that you register before you realise they're paintings. I know I've always felt these are important works and there is a certain kind of gravitas or weight to them. There is the one that you talk about, the guy doing the protest, standing up and giving a speech.[2] The other, much more famous, is the one in a classroom setting [*National Language Class*, 1959, **FIG. 3.2**].

[FIG. 3.2] Chua Mia Tee, *National Language Class*, 1959, oil on canvas, 112 × 132 cm. Gift of Equator Art Society, collection of National Gallery Singapore. Image courtesy of National Heritage Board, Singapore

JN It was as though Chua was trying to paint the future. He saw that role, his role as the artist, as something that could be about where the country would go.

JC The history is quite complicated. Initially these paintings were connected to Singapore being part of Malaya. We were all wrapped up in that idea at one point. But there were a lot of shifting positions. In the end we got what we got.[3] But I see what you mean. Which other countries get to create their identity in such a specific way? It's a poem though, it's alive in that way.

JN That's right, these were painted very early. You don't see history paintings like these very often, but this dialogue with Singapore is at the forefront of your Hong Lim paintings **[PP. 46–49]**. Hong Lim [Cheang Hong Lim, 1825–1893] was your great-grandfather, was that it?

JC He's my third great-grandfather. It's a few generations down. He's an ancestor.

JN In each of your paintings the ground is fractured slightly. The flat grassy park is broken up. And the green you use – where does that come from? I'm thinking of the slightly yellow green that is in a few of the paintings.

JC The green is strange, isn't it, but I let that come into the work. I have noticed this green colour before in Lois Dodd's work, the American painter. It has a slightly hyped-up quality. What you paint is not quite 'true.' I like that because there is a kind of space between you and the canvas.

JN The figures in your paintings are very recognisable, as though they were really there [at Hong Lim Park in downtown Singapore], but in fact you get them from different media. Is that right? You are not literally in the park painting the scenes. How do you make the paintings in the studio?

JC In the studio I always stand, I don't allow myself to sit down. I like to face the canvas and have an iPad in my left hand, painting from that, relying on that for different details, but it's quite open. And I'm always taking off excess paint. I paint quite thinly – too much is not my thing. I definitely use media. I have my own photographs but have not really used them [in these works]. Mostly, with the lockdown when I was painting these, I didn't get to go to Hong Lim often, so images are taken from other media, social and news media. It's a public park – I don't really see a difference.

JN Are all these figures in the same park?

JC They were all mostly in the park. What makes it different is actually that the ground they are on is broken and cut. The space, or as I like to refer to it, the terrain – sky, grass – it's all terrain for me. These are from being there myself and then I insert details. It's a Frankenstein sort of thing, the way I piece it all together.

JN I'm vaguely remembering there is a theorist who uses the word 'terrain.' Have you got someone in mind?

JC I got it from [American art critic] Barry Schwabsky. It was his take on Rosalind Krauss' expanded field [of sculpture].[4] He unpicks the origins of the medium in art-making, making the case that, rather than being about medium, painting is a kind of terrain itself. Krauss'

argument leans a lot on the legacy of Clement Greenberg, where painting should be about the formal properties of painting. Whereas Schwabsky is saying terrain encompasses the painterly field more broadly as an idea not a medium. Something like that. I'm thinking terrain is not just the ground, it's the sky as well – the whole thing is terrain. It's not limited to painting.

JN Hong Lim was a businessman and civic figure supporting Singapore in many ways. Last time we talked, you also commented on how part of this was where he made money trading opium and was a man of a different era in that way. Can you explain that story again?

JC He didn't just trade opium, he traded other things. He traded many things. He's part of the whole Peranakan culture and the Peranakans were known as intermediaries between the Chinese and the colonialists. He's kind of a middleman, fluent not just in English or Chinese but Malay as well. He was obviously clever and very intelligent, but it's a Chinese thing really. I read for instance that he was just very good at picking the right person for the job. Things like that, and expanding his business. With Hong Lim I was just thinking about this idea of hierarchy in Chinese culture. The one who is really on top is the intellectual and that includes someone like a poet. The intellectual is at the top whereas Hong Lim is much lower on that ladder, he is just a merchant. But, in Singapore, when the Chinese came in, there were very few intellectuals or poets, they were all mostly merchants. Because that's what kept the whole thing going. So, the reason I'm interested now is because it's almost endemic in our culture. We have always struggled with this identity of being a service-orientated society. We put art away in a box in a corner.

JN This is the terrain you mean.

JC Yes. I don't think these politicians or protesters or the other figures would see it my way. Because really it would be about what gets done. What's the next thing. This is the rhetoric; we don't have time to look at the clouds.

JN You can sense the indeterminacy between the different groups and solo figures [in the paintings]. It takes belief to step up on a box in a public park to speak, and we know Singapore has a history of problems there. Other figures are seemingly unaffected by any of that.

JC Many of the figures are not protesting. They are not speakers, they are bystanders. It's not just a place for politics. It's a place where you can have a picnic. It's kind of haphazard. I think we often automatically attune to the political. It's hard to tie it back otherwise.

JN The paintings change in the way you have undertaken them. Some are quick or familiar, whereas others are much more layered and closely worked. But this doesn't disentangle what is going on.

Do particular paintings stand out for you? The figures are people so recognisable and ordinary, even the guy sitting in the lounge chair [*Platforms and Archetypes*, 2021, **FIG. 3.3**] feels this way and he's obviously not really in the park. In the same painting there is another, older, guy, putting his hand to his head, pointing or gesturing.

[FIG. 3.3] Jon Chan, *Platforms and Archetypes*, 2021, oil on linen, diptych: 56.5 × 132 cm. Courtesy of the artist and FOST Gallery

JC [*Laughs*] I do look out for these little gestures – mannerisms. Things like that. He's [the man gesturing in *Platforms and Archetypes*] like an uncle or someone. This guy's crazy, you know. He's probably talking about the government. He's probably saying, think about it, think about it, have you considered this? Use your brains.

I'm really trying to hone in. It's the first time I have been doing these multiple panels. But really, I'm still waiting for the paintings to tell me what they are about. I'm still trying to understand. It's harder to piece down [unpack everything] in words. I'm still more familiar with the first ones I made. I'm still more familiar with thinking about the painting when there is less going on.

There is the one called *Tochi's Ghost* **[P. 46]**. It's one of the tighter paintings with the woman sitting on a small mat in the centre. It's not the sort of painting where you see [what's going on] immediately. They are a bit like Edward Hopper paintings in this way, where certain things just linger in your mind.

JN I'm remembering the story you told me about this work, where there are four forlorn people who have come and are protesting at this moment.

JC It's a ticking clock – Tochi himself is about to be executed. And, this is kind of the worst controversy of all the works I've done here. Well, it's not any more controversial than what actually happened.[5]

JN The painting represents something that happened earlier, outside the frame. And it questions the veracity of painting too. There is an emptiness in what a painter can really do, which bleeds into all of these works. Perhaps there is an overt politic or gesture to some figures, but with others it's the opposite.

JC It's more, for me too, in that it's a painting about the park itself. You remove all the figures and it is just a park, a space. I realise it's the opposite of someone like Chua Mia Tee [in *Epic Poem of Malaya*] because I've taken out the dominant figure, you have only the others. I think about Dostoevsky a lot. I like his underground man. All of these things are intermingling. It's not about one thing, or one sense, only. That's what makes it active for me. So, can you accept that there is just this emptiness? Any controversy is only that this is unfinished. It's still here in these works whereas, mostly, in the media or wherever, it's passed over and done with. In the news, time just keeps flowing. That's why it's tough to talk about without the context of painting.

JN You mean that the arena of painting allows this kind of commingling and equivocating sense of things that are nonetheless still present? The timeframe in painting is more open-ended.

JC I want to be clear because I've thought about this a great deal. I can't say the works are not political. But the problem in the way someone like [French philosopher] Jacques Rancière has it, is that you remove the subject to preserve it from rhetoric. But in all of our discussions we are very much talking about the subject; my ghosts are very important. So obviously they come attached with my viewpoints. I have my own thoughts, politically or even quasi-metaphysically or whatever. But I don't need to disclose, I don't need to make it solipsistic and all about me. What you get is the way I look at this thing, the way I organise the paint. The work is in the paint. It's not something that can be put into words.

JN At one point some time back we spoke of the sense of being in two minds, I think that was the expression we used, and that this was part of the Singaporean experience. Needing to hold two or more positions – which could even be conflicted – and make them relative – to the point where you don't get convinced of anything.

JC There is a sadness as well. That is my general feeling or my point. It's why I bring up Dostoevsky. It was kind of late when I started to become a painter. My mum would ask me, and my mum is quite a jovial person, why are your

paintings always so dark? We live in a kind of paradise in Singapore. It's a utopian setting. I draw in Dostoevsky because he rebels in front of that perfection. Maybe it's [the response of] an alienated type, but my structure has always been between rebelling and obeying.

There are good things that Hong Lim is remembered for, to bring it back to him. But there are also negatives. [French philosopher] Jean-Luc Nancy uses the Christian metaphor of scarring, or I think it's 'shattered love.' This is what connects the two. Rancière also speaks of scarring, while at the same time treating objects as consecrated objects. Paintings are not like normal objects, there is this process of scarring and consecrating. People are the same and that is why protesters, or whoever, need to be respected.

1 Nanyang style refers to the mid-20th-century synthesis of southern Chinese ink and academic oil traditions with Southeast Asian subjects, pioneered in Singapore by émigré artists such as Liu Kang, Chen Chong Swee, Cheong Soo Pieng and Chen Wen Hsi. Chua Mia Tee studied under some of these artists at Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts from 1950.

2 The painting *Epic Poem of Malaya* does not really depict a protest. The principal figure in the painting is reciting a nationalist poem from the book he is holding.

3 Singapore left the Federation of Malaysia and proclaimed its independence in 1965.

4 Barry Schwabsky, 'What Is a Medium?', lecture presented at *Care, Caring and Repair in Cognitive Capitalism*, Saas-Fee Summer Institute of Art, 2020, https://sfsia.art/2020-online. See also, Rosalind Krauss, 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field,' *October* 8 (1979): 31–44, https://doi.org/10.2307/778224.

5 Iwuchukwu Amara Tochi was a Nigerian executed at Singapore's Changi Prison for drug offences in 2007. Singapore retains the death penalty for certain offences, including drug trafficking.

CHRIS HUEN SIN-KAN

Chris Huen Sin-Kan (born Hong Kong, 1991) has exhibited widely since 2010, with solo exhibitions in Vancouver, Hong Kong, Taipei, Tokyo, London, New York and Singapore. He graduated with a Bachelor of Arts (Fine Arts) from the Chinese University of Hong Kong in 2013. In 2022 Huen moved with his family from Hong Kong to England, where he currently lives just outside London. He is represented by Ota Fine Arts.

This is an edited version of a conversation with Jonathan Nichols in Huen's studio **[FIG. 4.1]** on 9 July 2025.

JN You're very productive in the studio. I like that.

CHS-K Yes, it's because I feel like I take painting as food, it's a routine. You're part of the routine. Ever since I've had kids, I've tried to follow this, to have discipline and work on only five days a week. It will be Monday to Friday, 11 am to 5 pm.

JN This gives you the time outside the studio, so you can be with the family?

[FIG. 4.1] Chris Huen Sin-Kan in his studio, 2025. Courtesy of the artist

CHS-K Yes, for me family time is important. Once the kids have grown up, you can never turn back time. But as well my painting is about living. It's not like something up in the air. It's more down to earth. This is one of the things I take on in my painting. I've always said it's kind of like needing to walk with two feet, where my painting is one step and the other step is living in the world. If the feet are not moving together [in sequence] you are not moving well – the whole body is not moving well. So, I imagine my practice or my art and life must go together like this.

JN Is this an idea you've always thought about? Or has it become a necessity, with your family and more recently with the move from Hong Kong?

CHS-K Always, I think. After graduating from university 10 years ago, I moved my studio into my old grandpa's home. It was what we call a tong lau in Hong Kong, an older style shop building, only stairs and my studio was on the fifth storey. I moved in with, well, my first dog. My life back then was basically me and my dog. If you look at my very first painting, or the very first year of my practice, it's only me and him really. Then things start to evolve and there is one more dog, and then I met my wife and she enters the paintings. It's been very step-by-step, happening naturally. I'm painting the passage of time and the passage of my life as it occurs and passes.

Maybe it's a decision I made at a very early stage of my career, because when I graduated from school, I wanted to find a project that could flow. Something that would keep going rather than something that was more fixed. I guess this was connected to some idea of being in Asia, like studying art in Asia. We always have this discussion and basically you are always discussing what art is.

JN Last night you were joking that you only became interested in abstract expressionism when your art school professor explained that it was backed by the CIA. I'm interested in your thinking about western painting. Your work seems to consciously hold open the opportunity of Chinese historical painting and contemporary western practices. Would you agree? Such as you were saying you want to walk – or paint – with two feet. Is that the same sort of thinking?

CHS-K Growing up in Hong Kong we have these two options. Nothing is dominant in our culture. We are not really western and we are not entirely Chinese or Asian. It affects our understanding at a fundamental level and it's not a conscious decision. It's like there are two waypoints, we have these two waypoints on an uncharted map we're trying to navigate. You travel both sides. There are always two references in front of you.

JN There are other Hong Kong artists who don't do that. They seem to veer consciously one way. Whereas your

paintings keep the options open, towards contemporary or western art and an eastern historical thinking. I'm not sure, but I'd link the sense of your painting, the way you talk about walking with two feet for instance, I'd link this to an eastern reference. A painter like Wu Guanzhong is an example, but he is not well known outside of Asia.

CHS-K When you look at Chinese art, earlier than Wu Guanzhong, who painted mostly in the 20th century, they didn't really consider it as an art form in the same way as in the west. It was more like a script. Chinese painting is a practice. It's more like walking the walk, rather than producing artworks in a removed way. When they met, like friends drinking, they would just do it [make art]. It was a meditation for them. Rather than, oh, I need to make a piece to reflect on this or make a response to a certain subject or matter. For me, there is an unconscious decision in making art. People ask me about specific works – okay, but it doesn't really make sense in that way. What I'm doing is basically a whole unfinished work. The whole work is me painting rather than making individual works. This is the way I see it.

JN Can you talk about the dogs in the paintings [see *Joel, Tess, MuiMui and Balltsz*, 2023; **P. 52**]?

CHS-K The dog is like an ego in the picture. The first one was Doodood with me in my studio after university. The dog in the painting is like a personality. It's like they are present, and it's not always the same one.

JN You mean it's a self-reflection?

CHS-K No, self-reflection goes one step further than I mean. The dog is like a psychic or psychology in the painting – their eyes are always open and attentive to the viewing. It's not me.

JN They're another subjective presence?

CHS-K Yes, more that way. And also, for me, they are a cautious [circumspect] decision in the process of making

the paintings. If you look at all of the works, with most of them, the dogs, and also the humans like the kids and my wife, they are kind of looking out to this, to you looking in.

JN They are in the room with you watching you paint?

CHS-K Yes, I would say 99% of them. My guess is that in a way even at the beginning I wanted it like this. I wanted an interaction about the world inside and outside. The connecting point in the paintings for me is kind of like this eye the size of the character or the subject matter. It's like a connection point into the physical world and the psychic world. There is the effect that when the character is looking into you, you are also looking into them. In this moment we notice each other. And then everything starts to exist. Not like sometimes when I look at a painting and it's more a sense of being a spectator.

JN Such as with say an American painter like Edward Hopper where we are spectators or voyeurs, observing from the outside? We are not implicated in the paintings themselves. Whereas you are saying with your work we are kind of looking, but these subjects look back, the characters and figures in the paintings look back to see you as you're looking in.

CHS-K Yes, exactly. There are just so many moments. In any one day in life there are so many moments. What I'm really trying to do is depict these moments where we are recognised. Then we can pinpoint those moments because we have this connection that exists and things can start to light up.

…

JN On the phone we talked about Wu Guanzhong a little. In Australia he's totally unknown, anonymous really, which is very different from Singapore or Hong Kong where he's not quite a household name but good enough.

CHS-K It's a coincidence because when I was 15 or 16, Wu donated a large collection of his work to the Hong Kong Museum of Art. I was studying Chinese art when the exhibition of these works opened at the museum. It was very big.

JN Something like this happened in Singapore too with Wu. Years later there was a whole wing of the National Gallery Singapore dedicated to his work. It was exceptional, at least 60 or more of his paintings were hanging chronologically. In the early days, when the museum had just opened, there were always very few people and I could go up there and be alone with the work. I see something of Wu's painting in yours. Here [*gestures to several paintings*], right across the top. And then here [*gestures*]. You know what I mean? Each time the brush is slow and deliberate and then you stop, to let it dry and come back later.

CHS-K Yes. I really wanted this idea of accumulation, rather than just one motion.

JN Not one point in time, but an extended duration. The painting holds this.

CHS-K Yes, a thread of time.

JN This would be Wu Guanzhong's thinking as well. He would paint with a kind of temper or measure. The paint unfolds in a rhythm. He would also use techniques that interact. Sometimes he would use a wet brush like a wet stain and at other times use the same action and mark, but dry. One section would bloom wet and the other would be dry and stumpy. You could read these as alternate moments within the picture.

CHS-K Yes. This rings true, I think. I see these in a similar way.

JN What about this yellow, or the orange? Do you just choose a colour, or do you spend time finding one?

CHS-K My palette is not really clean. I seldom have a very systematic method, like choosing colour or by branding a colour. It's more spontaneous and in response to working.

JN Okay.

CHS-K And if you imagine this set of finished works [*gestures*], at the beginning it would be quite blank. When I first start to depict something, then it has something already, like maybe a line or maybe a colour. I would just sit there and look at it. From there it's kind of like playing chess. You imagine what will move and what will be the next move. But all this is just inside your head, projecting. Slowly putting something down so I can sit back and react to what is there.

JN Are you good at projecting ahead? Or is painting invariably so specific that it's not ever quite what you thought it would be?

CHS-K I always use the example that it is like when you pound the seed. Like saying you pounded a rose, a seed for a rose. Then you surely would come out with a rose, right? But what would be the shape? Or the colour for this sort of rose? But it's for the process of painting too. Along the way things will change and then I'm making a response to what happens.

JN A proposition, or a question in this exhibition is with the title, *Painting Itself*/绘画本身. The proposition or idea I'm putting forward is that there is a collective plural sense of painting that is not benign, rather it acts independently in the process of painting too, parallel with the painter. The collective form of painting has an agency in the processes of making too. It was Joy Chew [Ota Fine Arts, Shanghai] who translated the title for us. Her thinking was that this idea is apparent in Chinese traditions as well.

One question I have is that in a western context this idea can become too pervasive. I wonder truly how much this idea or explanation is really shared. In my mind, it's a way to understand how another artist's painting can creep slowly into your own painting unbeknownst to you. Earlier paintings of your own do the same, they reanimate sometimes, but so do paintings from the history of painting. I think it's also, for me, an idea that explains how the history of painting continues. It is carried along in making. It doesn't happen by writing books. It happens in painting studios as painters paint. It gives a sort of explanation for how the process of painting works without it being all conscious deliberation and full of judgement.

CHS-K When I first heard your proposition, I was thinking that when you're in your own studio working, you are subscribing to all-of-painting. It's like a network of experience and then you try to find your own way. Sometimes when I'm working in a studio, at some point you have this feeling that you understand why a painter would have done something a certain way. You can be on the same path but not at the same time. When I look at, say, Wu's painting, it gives me a kind of experience, but when I go back to the studio working on my own work, you understand why he did it the way he did. You spoke about it like there is a ghost?

JN I have described it as 'walking with ghosts' in other conversations. For me, you're not alone when you paint and there are always other people in the room so to speak, long dead or still alive. Painting is super interconnected psychologically and that's different from the rhetoric it usually comes with.

CHS-K Also, when I look at a painting – either my paintings or other people's paintings – I always try to find something that will resonate, not just with an idea, but that it's a sensory thing. It's a physical experience. We are trying to find what is seminal I think, like sense. How do we perceive, how do we see things? We're trying to know how our brain is wired. Or are we still capable when you see things in painting? Can we ever do that again?

…

JN Are there moments when you scare yourself in a painting?

CHS-K That's interesting for me. I kind of just passed through a stage like that. A picture is guided by these thoughts. The whole painting is guided by this kind of thinking. When I am making a picture it's almost that the painting cannot be less than how I relate to this person or my love for this person or something. If the painting is not as good, it's terrible. The painting has to be as good as your own relationship with these subjects. This guides the painting. Is that nonsense?

JN Not at all. I think this is what you were saying earlier, where the character or the subject in the painting is the primary connection – it's the one looking back at you.

TANG DIXIN with JOY CHEW

Chinese artist Tang Dixin (born Hangzhou, China, 1982) works mostly in painting and performance. Tang graduated from Shanghai Normal University in 2005. He has exhibited extensively since 2007 and has been regularly included in major international exhibitions in East and Southeast Asia. Tang is represented by Ota Fine Arts.

Joy Chew is a friend of Tang Dixin and the director of Ota Fine Arts, Shanghai, which has represented Tang since 2014. She is a Singaporean national who moved to Sydney in 2007 and completed a Bachelor of Commerce and Bachelor of International Studies at the University of New South Wales. Chew moved to Shanghai in 2017.

This is an edited transcript of a Zoom conversation with Jonathan Nichols on 20 September 2025, with translations by Ota Fine Arts.

JN There's a painting I thought we could perhaps talk about first, it's called *On the Lake* [2013, **P. 57**].

有一件作品我想我们可以先来谈谈，它叫《在湖上》[2013，**第57页**]。

JC I remember it.
我记得这件。

JN I find this work intriguing. It took me a while of looking to see the image carefully. The digital file I had wasn't large enough. I didn't understand it until I could get a better file. Can we talk about what's happening in the painting between these figures in the boat, where one figure seems to be holding the head of the other under the water? Whereas the painting as a whole, from a distance, feels serene and calm, with the colour and the beautiful reflections. There is a kind of playfulness. The boat reads like a toy or paper boat, with a mountain behind. But then you realise what's going on with the two figures. It's ambiguous.

Joy, can you ask Dixin how he came to paint this picture, and what is going on?

这件作品对我来说非常耐人寻味。我花了一些时间仔细看。我原本拿到的数字图像分辨率不够高，直到我后来获得了一个更清晰的文件，才慢慢看明白。我们能聊聊画中船上的两个人物发生了什么吗？看起来其中一个似乎正把另一个的头按在水下。而从远处看，这幅画又显得非常宁静、平和，色彩与水中倒影都很美。还有一丝玩味。小船看起来像玩具船或纸船，背后还有一座山。但当你意识到这两个人之间发生了什么时，这种感觉就变得耐人寻味了。

Joy，你能问问狄鑫他当初是怎么会画下这个画面的，以及画里到底发生了什么？

JC Jonathan说，他第一次看到这幅画时，收到的图像非常模糊，所以无法清楚辨认画中人在做什么。从远处看，他觉得这是一幅宁静的景象，画中的船看起来像纸船，像个玩具。当时他看不清画中人在做什么，但在收到高清图后，他仔细观察才发现，画中人其实正在把另一个人的头按入水中。这与他最初的印象截然不同，难以言表。他想知道你创作这幅画的缘由，以及你当时的想法是什么，促使你以这种方式描绘这幅画？

[Jonathan] said that when he first saw the painting, he received a very blurry image, so he could not clearly decipher what the person was doing. From a distance, he felt it was a tranquil scene, and the boat here seemed like a paper boat, like a toy. He could not clearly see what the person was doing at that time, but after receiving the high-definition image, he looked closely and realised that the person was pushing another person's head underwater. This action was completely different from his first impressions; it is difficult to define. He wanted to understand why you created this scene or composition and what thoughts you might have had at the time that led you to depict the scene this way?

TD 直觉是首要的，而作画时，你仍然会选择你之前提到的那些东西，比如白色、有点像纸的质感。所以这些东西多少有些虚假，但画面似乎倾向于某种可能发生过的事情，或许还包含一些象征元素。我不明白我自己的意图。

Intuition would be the first thing, and when painting, you would still choose what you mentioned earlier, like the white, somewhat paper-like texture. So these things are somewhat fake, but the image seems to lean towards something that might have happened, possibly with some symbolic elements. I do not understand my own intentions.

JC He started working on this composition, on this painting, based on an intuition. You are right to mention the paper. He had this impression of paper, and it is something that can be fake or superficial. Like a fake boat, it can appear fake, but what is happening is very real. What he means is that the person dunking the other person, that's something that is very real, and can happen. He thinks it could be some kind of symbolism, or it could be something that has happened in the past, and it's a symbol of that. He is not sure.

他最初之所以会创作这个构图、这幅画，是基于一种直觉。你提到"纸"这点是对的。他当时确实有一种关于"纸"的印象，一种可以是假的、虚构的东西。就像一条"假"小船，看起来是假的，但画中正在发生的事情却是真真切切的。他的意思是，按另一个人入水中的动作非常真实，也可能真的发生过。他觉得这可能是一种象征，或者过去发生过的事情的象征。他不太确定。

TD 我喜欢这种戏剧化的阶段。例如，平静的湖面，突然发生剧烈的冲突。船载的是山、货物还是其他什么东西，完全取决于观众的解读。比如，如果两个人正在开玩笑，可能是两个孩子在恶作剧，但也可能象征着人与人之间的冲突，某种残酷的事物。每个人都会有自己的解读。如果是残酷的，可能会触动你的内心，让你感到一丝恐惧。如果是孩子在开玩笑，你可能会觉得他们只是在玩笑，或许其中也暗含着某种冲突。

I like this stage where it's all about dramatisation. For example, a very calm lake surface – and then something intense happens. Whether the boat carries a mountain, some cargo or something else is actually up to the audience to interpret. For instance, if two people are joking around, it might be two kids playing a prank, but it could also symbolise a human conflict, something cruel. Everyone sees their own version. If it's cruel, it might affect you, making you feel a bit scared. If it's a child, you might think the two are joking around, perhaps with some conflict.

JC Dixin likes developing scenes that are quite theatrical. For example, a serene lake and then there's a very intense scene or interaction happening at the back. That protrusion that you see in the boat, is it a load of goods or a mountain? Or these two people that are being depicted, are they children? Are they playing or is it a struggle and fight? Some kind of aggression or horrible act between two human beings. He does not quite define them, but when the viewer sees the painting, they might see their own code, or what they hope to see. If you're looking at a struggle or a horrible act, then you might have some fear. But if you're seeing children, kind of joking around or playing around, then it could be a very different interpretation of the painting. I think he is interested in this kind of collision. A collision of ideas or contrasting ideas.

狄鑫喜欢创作带有戏剧感的场景。例如，一片宁静的湖面，但在远处却发生着一幕非常激烈的场景或互动。你在船上看到的突起，究竟是一堆货物，还是一座山？画中的两个人，是孩子吗？是在玩耍？还是在挣扎、打斗？两个人之间发生了某种争斗或可怕的事情。他并没有明确定义这些，但当观众看到这幅画时，可能会从中看到自己的理解，或者看到希望看到的东西。如果你看到的是挣扎或可怕的行为，你可能会感

到恐惧；但如果你看到的是孩子之间在嬉戏玩耍，那么对这幅画的解读就会完全不同。他对这种“碰撞”很感兴趣——不同观念之间的碰撞，或者说是对比。

JN The way you described, the painting comes across very well. It has this semblance of a beautiful scene, and yet the action can be a dangerous struggle.

If we look at these [*shares screen*], the first is [an installation view] from Dixin's 2017 exhibition in Shanghai **[FIG. 5.1]**. The second is *Human Mountain* **[P. 60]** which we will have in the exhibitions at Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts and the Drill Hall Gallery.

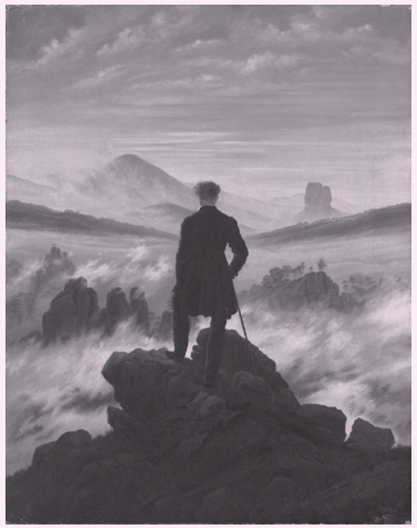
And one more **[FIG. 5.2]**. You might recognise that it's a Caspar David Friedrich painting I grabbed off the internet. It's a western historical landscape. Does a painting like this connect with Dixin? Is this kind of landscape painting relevant to his own painting?

按你所描述的方式，这幅画呈现得非常清楚。它看似是一幅美丽的风景，但其中的动作可能是一场危险的挣扎。

如果我们来看这些（正在分享的）图片，第一张是狄鑫2017年在上海个展的现场图**[图5.1]**，第二件是《人山》**[第60页]**，我们将在珀斯当代艺术院和澳大利亚国立大学钻石大厅画廊展出。

还有一张图**[图5.2]**。你可能认得出，这是我在网上找到的卡斯帕·大卫·弗里德里希的画作。这是一幅西方历史风景画。像这样的风景画会和狄鑫有联系吗？这类风景画对他的创作相关吗？

[FIG. 5.1] Tang Dixin, *Tang Dixin*, installation view, AIKE, 2017. Courtesy of the artist



[FIG. 5.2] Caspar David Friedrich, *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, c. 1817, oil on canvas, 94.8 × 74.8 cm. Hamburger Kunsthalle

JC Jonathan看过你之前在艾可展出的两幅作品，但这次不会展出，取而代之的是《人山》。他注意到卡斯帕·大卫·弗里德里希作品中有一些与你的创作有几分相似之处。他的作品主要都以风景画为主。在理解你的作品时，这些风景画是否具有参考意义？

Jonathan saw the two works you previously exhibited at AIKE but those two will not be exhibited. Instead, *Human Mountain* will be exhibited. He noticed some ideas in the works of Caspar David Friedrich that are somewhat similar to yours. The main focus is landscape. Is this landscape painting relevant in trying to understand your paintings?

TD 关于卡斯帕·大卫·弗里德里希，这种风格。这种意象是与我们息息相关的。我之前就对它有些印象。那场景依然让我感觉像是人类潜意识中的某种存在，是一种感觉。我认为这或许更具普世性。

Regarding the Caspar David Friedrich, this style. This imagery is about us. I had some impression of it before. That scene still feels very much like something in the human subconscious. It's a feeling. I think this might be more universal.

JC Okay. He is saying he has some vague memory that he has seen this before and that it depicts some kind of human condition. He feels this is something more familiar, [though] not exactly similar to what he thinks about his own paintings.

好的。他说他隐约记得以前见过这幅画，它描绘了某种人类境况。他觉得这更让他感到熟悉，但又不完全像他对自己画作的看法。

JN If I can ask about these paintings [*shares screen*]. I'll introduce them. They are not in the Perth and Canberra exhibitions but there's a similarity, at a level, with the first painting we were looking at [*On the Lake*]. For me, the one on the left seems to be a picture of a park scene, with a statue on a raised stand **[FIG. 5.3]**. It's a twist of holding figures again, but there is a sense that it is a small public statue. The painting engages the idea of civic space. I have *No Questioning* here as well, the second image **[FIG. 5.4]**. It suggests a similar impression or kind of space – or maybe it's headspace. It makes me think about empty headedness or bird brains, and public statues.

I'm working around to the very large picture we have in the exhibition, called *Solidify*, from 2023 **[P. 62]**.[1] I feel that it moves in the same direction as the other two, it's different, much less formed, but still suggesting something of the same set-up.

I understand the painting is a drawing of different friends or associates of yours – a group of your friends at the studio, friends and people you know well. The suggestion was of a group of friends, making them more permanent or fixing them somehow. I'm reading the title in this way too: to solidify is to make something solid, like fixing or casting things in place and time. Or am I over-reading the friends thing?

如果可以的话，我想问问关于这些画（共享屏幕）。我先介绍一下，它们不在珀斯和堪培拉的展览中，但在某种程度上，它们与我们刚看的第一幅画（《在湖上》）有相似之处。对我来说，左边这幅画似乎描绘的公园场景，雕像立在高台上**[图5.3]**。人物的姿态带有扭曲感，但整体上让人感觉像是一座小型公共雕像。在我看来，这幅画涉及了公共空间的概念。我这里还有第二幅《没有疑问》**[图5.4]**。它传达了类似的

印象或空间感—或者也许是一种心理空间。它让我联想到空洞的思维或者“鸟脑”，以及公共雕像。

我正在谈到的是展览中那幅非常大的作品，2023年创作的《凝固》**[第62页]**。[1]我觉得它的创作方向与前两幅画相同，只是结构感更弱，但仍然暗示着类似的构图关系。

我理解这幅画描绘的是你不同的朋友或熟人——一群你在工作室的朋友、你熟悉的人。作品是在以某种方式把这群朋友“固定”或“永久化”。我对标题的理解也是这样的：“凝固”意为使某物变得坚固，就像把事物在时间和空间中固定或铸造一样。还是我对“朋友”联想解读太多了？

JC Perhaps if I go back and look at *Curling up in a Second* and *No Questioning* **[FIGS 5.3** and **5.4]**. I think I'm going to do it step by step, if you will allow?

也许我先回过头来看一下《变球》和《没有疑问》**[图5.3和5.4]**。如果你允许的话，我想一步一步来分析。

[FIG. 5.3] Tang Dixin, 变球 *(Curling up in a Second)*, 2015, oil on canvas, 150 × 150 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Ota Fine Arts

JN Of course.
当然可以。

JC 这件作品（《变球》）并没有参展。Jonathan最初考虑过它，但最终选择了早期的作品《在湖上》。当他看到这两件绘画时，他的第一反应是，这个结构有点像公共雕像，就像

你去公园时，为了纪念某个人物、某个时期或社会某些历史事件，人们会在公共空间建造一座雕像。这是给他留下的印象。当他看到下一件作品（《没有疑问》）时，他有同样的感觉。然而，这里所谓的两个人实际上是没有头的，这让他联想到“头脑空间”。

This piece [*Curling up in a Second*] is not in the exhibition. Jonathan initially considered it, but in the end, he chose an earlier work, *On the Lake*. When he saw these two paintings, his first reaction was that the structure here is somewhat like a public statue, similar to when you go to a park and they want to commemorate a certain person, period, or some historical aspect of society, they would create a statue in a civic space. This was the impression it gave him. When he saw this next piece [*No Questioning*], he had the same feeling. However, the so-called two people here are actually headless, without heads, which reminds him of headspace.

[FIG. 5.4] Tang Dixin, 没有疑问 *(No Questioning)*, 2015, oil on canvas, 80 × 80 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Ota Fine Arts

…

JC 好的，我们来看《凝固》。

他的问题相当复杂，但我认为他想了解你在作画时的一些想法和感受。关于《凝固》，他是在问这幅画是否像你早期的作品，有点像在描绘一个结构，像雕塑一样，朝着那个方向发展。Jonathan看到的是人群的聚集和汇聚。我之前跟他讲过这个故事：这幅画从未完成。完成花了很长的时间。你的朋友们来到你的工作室，喝得酩酊大醉。第二天，你发现每个人的手上都沾满了颜料，颜料弄到了画布上，也弄得工作室到处都。之后，你说在画这个场景时，你正在思考这一幕。你想尝试捕捉这个场景。所以，是为了把它定格，做成一个纪念品，或者别的什么？他想了解你创作这些作品的灵感来源。

Okay, let’s go to *Solidify*.

His question is quite complex, but I think he wants to understand some of your thoughts and reactions when you’re painting. With *Solidify*, he’s asking if it is like the earlier works, like painting a structure, like a sculpture, going towards that direction. Jonathan sees a gathering and convergence of people. I told him this story before. That the painting was never finished and it took a very long time to finish. Your friends came to your studio, and they all got drunk. The next day, you saw that everyone’s hands were covered in paint. They had paint on them, and it was smeared on the canvas or around your studio. Thereafter, you said that while you were painting this scene, you were thinking about this. You wanted to try to capture this scene. So, to freeze it, to make it a memento, or something? He is asking about your creative approach to these works.

TD 实际上，整个绘画过程就像慢慢消逝到零。它过去了。整个绘画过程就像慢慢冻结。这不是一种运动的感觉。就像你感到恐惧的时候。这幅画慢慢地让你产生一种似曾相识的感觉。当你画画的时候，外面的世界慢慢地让你产生一种似曾相识的感觉。至于标题，我只是碰巧选的。你说得对。它有点像一座纪念碑。碰巧的是，在画这幅画的时候，这种感觉很强烈。然后，这个名字也强调了这一点。它有一种雕塑般的质感。包括我的笔触。感觉就像在创作一件雕塑作品。

Actually, the whole process of the painting was like slowly fading to zero. It passed.

The whole process of drawing [painting] was like slowly freezing. It’s not the feeling of movement. It’s like when you’re afraid. The image slowly gives you a sense of déjà vu. When you’re drawing, the outside world slowly gives you a sense of déjà vu. And the title, I just happened to choose it. You’re right. It’s a bit like a monument. It just so happens that while drawing this picture, it was quite strong. And then the

name also emphasises it. It has a sculptural quality. Including the strokes of my brush. It feels like I was creating a sculpture.

JC 那么另外两幅画呢？你当时是怎么想的？
And then what about the other two paintings? What were some of your thoughts back then?

TD 第一个就是瞬间变成球的那个，对吧？至少是十年前的事了……我记不清了……真的是一瞬间的事。最初画面里没有人物，只有风景和树。我当时正在画画，然后平台就出现了，接着突然就想到了这个画面。用直观的方式来说。
The first one is the one that turns into a ball in a second, right? It was at least 10 years ago, I can't remember – it really was an instant. Originally there were no figures, it was just scenery and the tree. I was drawing and the platform appeared, then suddenly I came up with this image. To put it intuitively.

JC 所以你觉得它和这座所谓的纪念碑，或者说雕像，有什么关系吗？或者……不太一样？它们之间有联系吗？
So, do you think it has a relationship with this so-called memorial, a statue? Or – not quite the same? Are they related?

TD 这或许只是转瞬即逝的瞬间，就像一出戏剧，突然变成了一座雕塑。是的，它从一棵树变成了一座雕塑。
It's probably just a fleeting moment, like a drama, suddenly turning into a sculpture. Yes, so it went from a tree to a sculpture.

JC Can we take a look at *No Questioning*? I'm just breaking it down, so I will translate everything to you but I think it is easier to go painting to painting.
我们可以先看《没有疑问》吗？我只是想逐步分析，我会给你翻译所有内容，但我觉得一幅画接着一幅画来看会更容易理解。

JN Yes, sure.
好的，当然可以。

JC 那，这幅画呢。
So – this painting.

TD 现在感觉还是那样，就像当年一样。那是哪一年？是的，当时就是这种感觉。对吧？
It feels like that still, back then. What year was it? Yes, that's how it felt back then. Right?

JC 这是 2015 年。
It's 2015.

TD 哇，2015年。我还记得那种感觉。那就是我们，当时的我们。两百人或五百人的感觉……这看起来很残酷，但当我把它画出来的时候……我会（直接）砍掉头。总之，这只是其中一种（绘画方式）。那是瞬间发生的变化。
Wow, 2015. I remembered the feeling. It's us, at that time. The feeling of two or 500 people. It looks cruel, but when I painted it – I'll [just] cut off the head. Anyway, it's just one kind [of painting]. That's a change that happens in an instant.

JC Okay, I'll translate.
We'll start with *Solidify*. For Tang Dixin, his state can be quite different for each painting. While painting *Solidify*, there was the sense that he was slowly freezing. The painting was in fact gradually becoming solidified. It was still and there was no movement. This was how it formed.
好的，我来翻译。
我们先从《凝固》开始。对唐狄鑫来说，每一幅画的创作状态可能都大不相同。就《凝固》而言，他有一种自己在慢慢凝固的感觉。画面实际上也在逐渐凝固。静止而没有任何动作。画面就是在这种状态下形成的。

JN Right.
明白。

JC So, in this aspect, you could say that *Solidify* is like a monument. In fact, painting itself is about making something into a monument. And he did sense that he was making a sculpture. He says that even the brush strokes [in this painting] are very similar to sculpture.

所以，从这个角度来看，你可以说《凝固》就像一座纪念碑。实际上，绘画本身就是将事物变成“纪念碑”。他确实感觉到，这幅画就像是在创作一座雕塑。他说，甚至（这幅画的）笔触也与雕塑非常相似。

JN Yes
是的。

JC Then we talked about *Curling up in a Second*. He said it was 10 years ago, so he doesn't quite remember what his thoughts were. It was originally a landscape, with a tree. Then, somehow, he painted the plinth and in the moment of a second. There's some theatrics here. This tree then becomes a sculpture that depicts these figures. So it was at that moment that he named the painting, *Curling up in a Second*.

然后我们讨论了《变球》。他说那是十年前的事了，所以他不太记得当时在想什么。起初这是一幅风景画，画里有一棵树。然后，不知怎么的，他在一瞬间画完了。这里带有一些戏剧性。于是，这棵树就变成了一件描绘这些人物的雕塑。也就是在那一刻，他给这幅画起名为《变球》。

JN It's that moment that painting changes that the title is referring to?
标题指的就是那一刻画面发生变化的瞬间吗？

JC Correct. He also spoke a little bit about *No Questioning*.
没错……他也稍微谈了一下《没有疑问》。

JN Okay.
好的。

JC So, again, he's thinking about his state when he was making this painting. He remembers a feeling. He likes to reduce the fleshy aspect of the human body, the flesh. He likes to reduce it. And sometimes when he paints them [the figures], he will try to replicate a texture that is similar to something like stone. So, in this case, the heads, they might have a little bit of that texture. And it seems like he has cut the head off. It feels a bit brutal, but it wasn't brutal really.

所以，他又一次在回想自己在创作这幅画时的状态。他记得当时的一种感觉。他喜欢弱化人体的肉感，削弱肉体的存在感。他喜欢淡化它。有时，当他画这些（人物）时，他会尝试模仿类似石头的质感。所以，在这种情况下，人物的头部可能带有一些这种质感。看起来好像被砍掉了头部一样。这感觉有点残酷，但实际上并不是真的残酷。

这不是你的本意，这并不残酷吧？
It's not your intention, it isn't cruel?

TD 并非字面意义上的。但这意在表达某种残酷之类的东西，就是……这其实很有表现力。那里有只鸟，对吧？感觉背后有个故事，它强调了那种表达。

Not literally. But this is meant to express cruelty or something, it's just – this is actually quite expressive. There's a bird, right? It feels like there's a story behind it, it emphasises the expression more.

JC Here, he was more focused on the expression. So, going back to the emphasis on expression. And there's also actually a bird. It's more like there is a story behind.

在这里，他更多关注的是表达。所以，这又回到了对“表达”的强调。而且画里其实还有一只鸟。也就是说，这幅画背后更像是有一个故事。

JN Joy, with *Solidify*, I think you said to me once that it was a group of friends in the studio. Is that Dixin's recollection? That the painting was a focus on this group?
Joy，关于《凝固》，我记得你曾经跟我说过，这幅画描绘的是工作室里的一群朋友。这是狄鑫的回忆吗？画作的焦点真的是这群人吗？

JC I'll ask what he was thinking when he created this painting. Maybe that's better?
我会去问他创作这幅画时的想法。也许这样会更好？

JN Okay.
好的。

JC 他对你画作背后的故事略知一二，就是你跟我讲过的，那个关于你的朋友们在工作室的故事。或者你当时的感受。

He knows a little about the story behind your painting, the one you told me about the friends and what had happened in your studio, or a particular feeling you had at that time.

TD 或许两者之间没有直接联系。我只是在描述，我只是在画。画本身并没有直接的关联。

Maybe there's no direct connection. I'm just describing, I'm drawing. The painting doesn't have a direct relationship.

JC 那你为什么想画一群人呢？所谓的红色。你不会这么随意。所谓的人？

So why did you want to draw a group? The so-called red. You can't be so random. The so-called people?

TD 但我认为它的创作过程更加环环相扣。这幅名为《凝固》的画作是如何诞生的？它贯穿了整个创作过程。它慢慢地凝固了。这幅画表达了这种凝固的状态。这其实是可能的。例如，像这样的场景，历史上可能有很多类似的图片。一种群像场景，杰出人士齐聚一堂。聚会的照片成为了焦点。但实际上，他们通常只是普通人。在这个世界里，只是普通人聚集在一起。一个凝固的、美丽的瞬间。一个历史的印记。

But I think its process is more connected. How did it become this painting called *Solidify*? It truly is throughout the entire process. It slowly froze. The painting expresses this frozen state. This is actually possible. For example, this kind of scene, there are probably many photos like this in history. A kind of group scene, great people gathered together. The photo of the gathering becomes the highlight. But actually, they're just ordinary people. In this world, just ordinary people brought together. There's a frozen, beautiful moment. A mark in history.

JC I asked him several questions about the painting. Why did he want to paint a group of people? Why did he use the colour red? He's saying that it's not so direct. Maybe the

story that I told you wasn't exactly the whole thing. But when he's painting, it's true that he will think about some things, things that have happened. For this painting in particular, he remembers it as a solidification process, a frozen state. The composition itself shows the process of being solidified, and he thought about the historical photographs that we sometimes see. Photos of important people gathered together to mark an occasion in history. It's like a moment that is recorded and things are remembered. But, at the same time, for the people in this painting, *Solidify* – they could be nobody or ordinary people. There's some contrast there, of course, and Dixin is interested in this aspect.

我问他在创作这幅画时的想法。为什么想画一群人？为什么使用红色？他说，这并不是那么直接。也许我之前告诉你的那个故事，并不是完整的全部。但在作画时，他确实会思考一些事情，回忆发生过的事情。特别是对这幅画来说，他记得这是一个凝固的过程，一种冻结的状态。构图本身就展现出凝固的过程，他也会想到我们有时看到的历史照片——重要人物聚集在一起，纪念历史上的某个时刻。这像是一个被记录下来的瞬间，事情被记住了。但与此同时，对于画中的人物来说，“凝固”——他们可能只是无名之辈，或者说没有特定的身份。这其中当然存在某种对比，而狄鑫正是对这一点很感兴趣。

1 It was not possible to include the painting *Solidify*, though it remains a key work for the exhibition.
虽然《凝固》仍然是此次展览的核心作品，但无法将其纳入展出。

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Jonathan Nichols

PAINTING ITSELF
绘画本身

Jon Chan, Un Cheng, Chris Huen Sin-Kan, Noor Mahnun and Tang Dixin

Curator and editor: Jonathan Nichols

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The Drill Hall Gallery and PICA acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which we work. We pay respect to elders, past and present, and extend our respect to all First Nations people of this land and celebrate their enduring connections to Country.

Painting Itself/绘画本身 is a group exhibition that brings together five painters working in Singapore, Hong Kong, London, Malaysia and Shanghai. Through key works created over the last 12 years, the exhibition explores a 'horizontal culture' in painting. It asks how dominant ideas about the history of painting and its vitality – long shaped by European and American values – are being rethought and reshaped in East and Southeast Asia.

A common understanding is that painters look for the 'face' of their work – that part of a painting that looks back at them. Each of the artists in the exhibition takes on this idea – they lean into the mood and character of their painting, with its inner constraints and struggles. The artists let the work set its terms, following where it leads rather than forcing an outcome. In doing so, each painting finds its own face, its own way of looking back.

Painting Itself/绘画本身 introduces spirited new painting practices and attitudes. In the process, it prompts us to reflect on how contemporary painting can interlink and traverse geography and time, re-positioning the western art economy through an Asian lens. It opens a different way of looking – one that unsettles familiar art-historical pathways and lets other centres of thinking and making come into view.

Jon Chan
Un Cheng
Chris Huen Sin-Kan
Noor Mahnun
Tang Dixin

Drill Hall Gallery, ANU
Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts