

BA (Hons) Fine Arts graduation catalogue essay

Beyond the surface

By June Yap

We are told that first impressions matter. But often we discover the benefits of a second look.

It is always an exciting expedition to dive and delve into the practices of young artists as they navigate their subject and medium. Their processes—full of curious exploration, fresh takes and reflexive analyses of self and other—are indeed the frames through which we are invited to engage with their presentations. In enjoining us to peel back the layers and focus on what can be found at the edges and inside the folds, where things slip and disappear or easily become overwhelmed, they position us as if themselves: as adventurers and discoverers, seeking new ways of seeing and understanding.

This drive to discover and illuminate is reflected in the collective titling of the culmination of their efforts, in recognition of a recurring refrain that carries from studio, to assessment, to public exhibition. First described as *Unfolding Matters* in the midst of creative development; their title evolves into *Where Matters Continue to Unfold* at the Winstedt open studio showcase; and finally settles as *Sur//face* at the McNally School of Fine Arts undergraduate show. As student curators Emma Chong and Michelle Loh shared of this progression, it is an emphasis on the nature of works in flux, of practices in motion, of meanings still emerging, and the tensions that arise in resisting resolution. This consciousness of continuation is key, and it is a powerful claim to make, to say that this energy and the creative forces are just getting warmed up. While unfolding might appear a measured gesture, and surface read as simply an exterior or initial contact, the latter in its meaning of ‘sur’ and ‘face’ is actually forceful, for it means to breach and exceed the plane of visibility. In short, as artists, they are here to be seen, to be heard, not only as they are here, but with much more to come.

For this cohort of graduating artists, the subjects of their practice and the interests that they gravitate towards are many. They are contemporary in being of their time, as well as perennial and even eternal. In the snapshot that is their graduation exhibition, they present to us the forms, symbols, relations and methods of significance from their perspectives, and in so doing draw attention to our collective present within a continuously changing world. Of these, I will highlight a few; not by

way of having or offering a comprehensive exposition of the exhibition, as that should be uncovered and studied through each of their artworks, but as a means to illustrate the wonderful breadth and depth of exploration and experimentation that is on show.

Unmoorings and possibilities

Flowers make a generative return as subject, symbol and space for a redistribution of the senses; the riff off Jacques Rancière tangentially meaningful in view of art school graduation being an artistic threshold. However, the floral choices presented are particular.

For **Nehal Agarwal**, it is the tuberose; incidentally, not a rose but a relative of the hyacinth. Historically popular and symbolically significant, it is often associated with passion and desire, and equally found at weddings as it is at funerals. Here they are figured in magnified form, prompting an inspection of these purported qualities. Alongside are the abstracted lilies of **Siti Sara Binte Mohamad Zahidi** painted in vividly preferred pink, and scaled to prevent the viewer from knowing exactly where they stand in relation to these floral parts. Instead of the presumed exhausted symbol, these paintings arrive strikingly as studied attempts to find other ways and positions of interpretation, like a *Vanitas* flower revived, proposing that there is still more to mine from their shapes and visual intensities.

This destabilisation of historical meaning continues in the work of **Khin Sit Thway**, where the past is encountered as a minefield with archives simultaneously precious and painful. Using the documents of colonial survey and, ultimately, of exploitation, Khin addresses history's power and vulnerability in material erasure and obscurity. On the other end, the ordinary as documented by **Zhong Rui**, in a compilation of her daily life, her commute and sights encountered, is made weighty with potential and portent. Transferring these fleeting moments to fabric, the nature of memory is presented as embracing its inevitable transience as much as the possibilities of mnemonic reconfiguration.

There is a sense of freedom within these works, allowing for processes to find their own levels, with this sensibility encapsulated in the fluid and flowing speculations of unscripted doodled patterns painted by **Nur Asherina Binte Ashari**. Returned to the real in video editing, these subconscious doodles released from the mind enliven the ground below one's feet and also the skies above.

Embodiment and contest

Inevitably the body surfaces, its immediacy undeniable, and its modes of articulation expressive. Exploring the body as performed in movement and in memory through sewing and dance, **Erny Ellyssa Binte Munir** uses the humble stitch as marker and bridge to simultaneously extend and lay bare the threads of cultural transmission. Incorporating organic materials into customary designs, she demonstrates the delicacy as much as the strength of these traditions and their passage over time.

As a vehicle of transformation, the female body may be said to be a paragon, with this capacity central to **Emma Chong Ai Chzer**'s exploration of the journey of motherhood and of the intimate relationship between mother and child. Reflecting upon the subjective experience as much as the objectification of the body, its identity and representation, Chong constructs a personalised glossary in a reclamation of both knowledge and power.

Needless to say, the body is not always left whole, as self and identity come under attack. Reflecting upon the fragmentation wrought by the institutionalised identity, **Winona I Tong** meticulously dissects the documents of citizenship and border-crossing that claim, classify and control who we are to the system, thus unveiling the brutality of bureaucracy that has become so normalised.

This contestation of identity is also an obliteration of voice; an absence that, gratefully, poetry rushes in to fill. Poetry's meaning is as often in what is said, as it is what is not. This power of language comes to the fore with **Hee Ker Ru**'s use of the twin cinema format, its doubling also representing the tussle and negotiation for choice and control of the body and who it is for. In the battle for the body, violence is not always visible, and its visibility not always violent. The appeal of the gay colours and delicate drawings by **Khushi Khandelwal** conceal the truth twisted in the hairy crochet forms and bindi as bruises, underscored by hidden texts and tales of violence upon the abject female body under patriarchy and gender politics.

In transience and empathy

Intrinsic to the body is a sense of being and a reflexive consciousness from which actions arise and motivations manifest. These inner workings are examined in the following works that explore these interior moments in revealing ways. On first look, the colourfully-neon resin figures of **Justine Francesca Carino Enriquez** appear

as playful avatars reflecting the familiar sight of contemporary toys marketed to both young and old. However, multiplied and repeated, they go beyond a simple satisfaction of the inner child, to point to a deeper desire and need to fill a void that is rationalised in achievement, identity, social capital and even nostalgia. For better or worse, in accumulation, transience is exposed, with this fragile hold meditated upon in the paintings of **Michelle Loh** focusing on the domestic object. In this instance, it is absence that the object presents; its utility so commonplace, yet so poignant, in defining a life lived. Pictured as if they were archaeological sites, the buried or unearthed objects may have been separated from their emotional context, but their detail of use quietly serves to remind us of the profoundness of life and our relationships. That said, these reminders are perhaps necessary given the difficulty of truly capturing and presenting affect.

The challenge of representing these inner sensations is then tangibly taken up in **Wang Runxin's** somatic and kinetic sculptures that uneasily writhe, apparently in turmoil and almost self-consciously, bringing these visceral internal states to vivid and articulate form. Empathy and the ability to connect with another is arguably the most positive aspect of discomfort. This awareness is formalised by **Serene Lee** in oil portraits that go beyond the human in their feature of rescued creatures that include crows, kittens and even a bat. As mementos of care and attention, this illumination is subtly conveyed within these paintings in their fleeting capture of the gentle gaze of a creature feeling cosy and well cared.

New vibrations

In observing the range of artworks created and the practices of the graduating artists—again, many not mentioned here and awaiting your discovery at the exhibition—one cannot but be impressed by their creative energies and the urgency of their intentions. Together, they produce a strong sense of hope of what is possible and what is to come, especially against any odds that might arise. These are practices that are in tune with their time, and literally so in the case of **John Leong's** paintings inspired by the vibrations and frequencies of string instruments such as the guitar. Like the snapped cord with its stored tension channeled into movement and action, these artists have found within themselves deep resources for their art and their being. As **Sonya M Pillay** describes of her oil and pesto graphite painting with its petals representing fluctuating emotional states, it is not the single moment or petal in itself, but the mindful observation, grit and perseverance from which a final form can emerge in its multitude of tones and textures.

This willingness to let curiosity lead the way is at the heart of **Zhen Hong Toh's** phenomenological approach that defies anthropocentric hierarchies. Eschewing assumptions and expectations, he asks how one might return to nature and experience it anew, how to create with nature on its own terms in a space of entanglement. Similarly, a new vocabulary bursts forth from a constructed Jawi-inspired language developed by **Yuni Sara Binte Hussaini**. In swirls and spirals, pushing against the limits of expression and cultural expectations, hers is a visual voice that both fearlessly rewrites and carefully encrypts its world.

Going beyond

I would be repeating myself in stating how thrilled I am to see the artworks and efforts of the graduating artists, and I hope to see more of them in time to come. I have no doubt that they have found themselves within those metaphorical folds and gone beyond the surface or limits of their medium and subject.

In closing this text, another comes to mind from the play of theatre doyen Kuo Pao Kun (1939–2002) who is characterised by C.J. Wee Wan-Ling and Lee Chee Keng as having consistently exceeded the limits of his identity and culture within his groundbreaking works. The play is of the Admiral Zheng He that was first produced in Mandarin by Kuo with The Theatre Practice at Victoria Theatre on 10 August 1994, and then in English by Ong Keng Sen with TheatreWorks (Singapore) at the same venue on 3 June 1995. Featuring the august admiral and diplomat with his legacy of naval expeditions that included connecting the Ming Dynasty with our own region in Southeast Asia, and who is simultaneously famed for his equally great personal sacrifice, in this scene, Kuo invites us to consider this historic and storied figure in a slightly different light:

“I have often wondered what Zheng He was thinking when he was alone on deck in the South Seas, in the Indian Ocean, sailing away to the distant lands, in the middle of nowhere... In his loneliest moments, which probably were also his freest moments... Was he more than the eunuch that we have generally imagined him to be, or less than the hero which the historians and legends have portrayed him to be?”

Here the well-travelled admiral is portrayed as unexpectedly and intriguingly relatable in being simply human and on his own journey of discovery. Even into the final scene, Zheng He keeps “dreaming, hoping, searching, struggling”. In spite of

how far he has come, his life continues to unfold, a condition that he accepts, for he continues: “Departing is my arriving / Wandering is my residence”.¹

May this celebration of achievement be the beginning of the next.

About the writer

June Yap is an independent curator based in Singapore with institutional and curatorial experience at the Singapore Art Museum, National Gallery Singapore, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (New York) and Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore.

She has also curated exhibitions and projects at Tai Kwun Contemporary, Hong Kong; Esplanade Theatres on the Bay, Singapore; the Singapore Pavilion at the 54th Venice Biennale; Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen (ifa) Stuttgart and Berlin; National University of Singapore (NUS) Museum; and Galeri Petronas, Kuala Lumpur; as well organised collaborations that toured to Kunstmuseum Thun, Switzerland; Asia Society, Hong Kong; NTU-Centre of Contemporary Art, Singapore; Galerie Nasional Indonesia; MAMAM Contemporary Art Museum, and Nationalgalerie – Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.

Amongst these projects are solo presentations of artists Heman Chong, Ho Tzu Nyen, Ming Wong, Yee I-Lann, Ang Sookoon, Wong Hoy Cheong, as well as survey exhibitions featuring artists from Singapore, South and Southeast Asia, and around the world. She has authored a variety of essays and the publication *Retrospective: A Historiographical Aesthetic in Contemporary Singapore and Malaysia* (Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre (SIRD), 2016).

¹ *Two Plays by Kuo Pao Kun: Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral and The Spirits Play*, C.J. W.-L. Wee & Lee Chee Keng (eds), Singapore: SNP Editions, 2003, p. 52, 66. With reference to C.J. W.-L. Wee & Lee Chee Keng, ‘Breaking Through Walls and Visioning Beyond - Kuo Pao Kun Beyond the Margins’, p. 24.