

## ***Discrete Encoding***

Essay by Khim ONG

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### **Essay**

Humans have pondered over questions of perception for as long as they were conscious of their ability to see and attempt to make intelligible their visual experience of the world. Thinkers have long argued over ideas of perceptual experiences, the relation between appearance and reality, how we could possibly gain knowledge of the real world as perceived through the senses, oscillating between analytical and empirical theories. It is the indeterminacy of the senses that problems in perception arise and continues to intrigue. How do we capture visual impressions that are fleeting, subjective, contingent on the conditions at the moment of perceiving, and translate them into knowledge about the world and ourselves?

Computer vision, developed since the 1960s with the intention of automating the functions of the human visual system, may offer one illustration of how this is performed. A methodological process that involves developing theoretical and algorithmic systems to obtain visual understanding through acquiring, processing and analysing visual data, fields and shades of colour are analysed according to their spatial relation, scale-space, textual and through extraction of edges and lines. These encoded data simulate a visual field through which numerical, and other information can be obtained and serve as data source for further analysis and use, for instance, in related fields of artificial intelligence, information engineering, neurobiology, and so on. Such a scientific model of acquiring visual data opens up new understandings of how we see and the way we comprehend what we see, making them concrete, describable, and manipulatable.

The human visual system, however, is beyond capturing things we see but also of how we feel about what we see. A produced image is thus not just mimetic but also expressive and personal. How then does visual perception translate into visual impression which often is particular and ambiguous? And in what way does the process of representation and expression in works of art engage in a system of acquiring and analysing visual data to produce images and objects that attempt to capture the unintelligible part of experience? The exhibition, *Discrete Encoding*, brings together a selection of works by four artists—Bea Camacho, Donna Ong, Grace Tan and Savanhdary Vongpoothorn—that participate in the process of encoding perception, in turn translating these sensory data into images or objects that embody a system of cultural and linguistic signification.

That pictorial signs and symbols possess potent powers and are devices to connect with the spiritual world of gods and ancestors is deeply rooted in many cultures across the world. Rituals around where visual codes, believed for their power to connect to spiritual realms, are used to perform various functions of healing, warding off evil, bestowing blessings and so on. Often applied onto or woven into the clothing of the shaman or spiritual medium, the inscribed vests are a form of protection for the

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wearer and in some cases, signs, discernible only by the shaman, are hidden amidst benign patterns in order to catch the evil spirits off-guard and thus purge them. In everyday life, patterns that are symbolic of spiritual harmony, mythical protectors, epic stories and moral values find their way onto daily wares such as textiles, pottery, tools. Such spiritual expressiveness is prominent in the works of Lao-Australian artist **Savanhdy Vongpoothorn**. Having fled Laos for Australia at a young age, there is a degree of estrangement to the culture of her country of origin, yet through her parents and her travels to various parts of Asia, a deep sense of connection to her birthplace propelled the artist to create works that are guided by her intuitive responses and reflect an affinity with the region's religious and aesthetic traditions. In the process of researching the cultural life of her birthplace, Champaasak, a province in southwestern Laos, near the borders with Thailand and Cambodia which was part of an Indianised kingdom under Khmer rule, Vongpoothorn discovered *Rama Jataka* or *Phra Lak Phra Lam*, a Laos retelling of the Hindu epic *Ramayana*. The *Rama Jataka* reveals a fascinating process of cultural transformation where the stories in the Hindu epic, present only in a small part in this retelling, converges with Lao-Buddhist stories—the *Rama Jataka* “dwells more on Lao-Buddhist customs, birth and marriage rites, love poems and explaining about the symbolic meaning of local flora and fauna.” In this retelling, attributed to Valmiki, the relationships between the protagonists (Rama, Lakshmana, Ravana, Sita and Santa) are transformed or inverted and in the end, Rama, here a manifestation of the Buddha in a past life, is triumphant and establishes a benevolent kingdom guided by Buddhist values. This process of trans-culturation is beautifully encapsulated in Vongpoothorn's works, *Rama was a Migrant (I)* and *Rama was a Migrant (II)* (both 2016). In the works, the artist borrows from various traditions: the bamboo weaving technique she learnt in Vietnam, the narration method of Indian miniature paintings and pictorial styles in Laotian textile, all converge to depict Rama's and Lakshmana's journey to rescue Santa. The scene is set along the Mekong River which is denoted by repeated patterns of the Naga framing the top and bottom of the image while the overall composition uses a mirroring device to represent the relation of Rama and Lakshmana who are believed to be twins or the “solid mandala”. The works mark a key moment in Vongpoothorn's research “into the connection to Indian culture through Lao literature, the *Rama Jataka*.”

The signification device in pictorial language has a counterpart in the relational qualities that produce meaning in word language, itself a sign system. **Bea Camacho's** *Sartre, Jean-Paul, “The Imaginary”* (New York: Routledge, 2010) series (2010) deconstructs the conceptual scheme of word language and instead presents them as a formal arrangement of characters. The work is based on a print edition of Jean-Paul Sartre's *The Imaginary: A Phenomenological Psychology of the Imagination (L'Imaginaire: Psychologie phénoménologique de l'imagination, 1940)* where Camacho counts all the characters in selected pages of the original text and re-arranges them in alphabetical order, stripping the text of its meaning. Maintaining the page layout of the original text, content is transformed into form and language's implicit expression is emptied out. What is retained that is still intelligible are the page numbers and headings, keeping the reference to the original text. In *The Imaginary*, Sartre posits a

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clear distinction between perception and imagination: perception involves observation of particular objects with our senses and is necessarily incomplete, while imagination completes the awareness of the object but is “irreal”—we fill in the blanks with knowledge from past experiences and base on our intentions toward it. All images (and perceived objects) are thus “irreal” in order to be conceivable. The world is constituted according to how we ascribe it. Through re-presenting text as an image composed of a systematic arrangement of alphabets, Camacho’s *Sartre, Jean-Paul, “The Imaginary”* (New York: Routledge, 2010) series removes the intention of the author and invites re-imagination. The work in this way becomes a perception that allows imagination to take place. In another series shown in the exhibition, *Self-Portrait* (2010), Camacho represented her body as a series of measurements of its circumference taken at half-inch intervals and presented as line lengths. This process of quantifying reduces an impression of bodily form into an abstract image and again, the viewer is asked to imagine the subject of this representation. Both works are characteristic of Camacho’s artistic practice which explores the indeterminacy of notions of time, memory, space and distance through attempting to manifest them in visible forms.

That the image is an imagination of the world and a projection of intentions finds resonance in the work of **Donna Ong**. Since 2015, the artist has been researching representations of the tropical forest. The visual tropes she discovers in vintage lithographs and other found images of the tropical forest reveal very specific characteristics in representation strategies that are often ‘inaccurate’—several trees (especially palm and rain trees), lush greenery, sunlight shining from just above the horizon, seeping through a thick canopy and a perspectival view that leads one deeper into the wilderness, all conjure an impression of the tropical forest. Such depictions have a correlation in animation industry where basic geometrical shapes provide an outline of flora and fauna and once arranged in particular spatial relation, suffices in producing an image of the forest. This on-going research of Ong’s has resulted in a number of works that aim to “unpack and interpret existing pictorial conventions and symbolism” as well as explore alternative ways of representing nature in the tropic that bridges the gap between idealised narratives and imagery and the realism and depth of experience. Her works in this exhibition were motivated by the imagination of the forest as a place of refuge and concealment, of resistance, vice, and of contestation and war. This frame of reference led to an interest in camouflage patterns, developed as part of a strategy in warfare to disguise and deceive. The development of visual camouflage is a rigorous discipline that involves professionals like scientists with a knowledge of optics and physiologists, physicists, engineers and architects. But probably of greatest contribution is the artist whose “understanding of the subtleties of colour, tone and texture and his [or her] ability to draw on visual memory.” (Guy Hartcup, *Camouflage: The History of Concealment and Deception in War*, 2008). Camouflage patterns produced varies according climate, terrain and the type of warfare. In the series *Four Colours Make a Forest* (2017), Ong is interested in investigating the typology of the forest landscape of Southeast Asia, and through taking the colours of military camouflage uniforms found in the region and presenting them as grids, she invites the question: “If you could choose only four colours to represent the forest, what colours would you choose?”

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Both the works of Donna Ong and Grace Tan in the exhibition are inspired by observations of the natural and built environment that lead to the creation and strategic applications of visual patterns. Core to **Grace Tan's** practice is an interest in principles of architecture, and the methods and materials applied in construction. *Pentahedron [Prism and Pyramid]* (2018) is a sculptural installation of machine-cut I-beams and belongs to a body of works where she tests "theories and processes of construction, and examine[s] properties of a given material, while documenting their progression and transformation". The work consists of a set of I-beams and a pyramidal structure and explores what happens when two pentahedrons (geometrical form with five sides) are intersected: a prism, composed of ten upright I-beams is intersected with a pyramid. This process slices the prism into positive and negative sections which are taken apart and arranged in various configurations in response to the site of its display. As the 'spine' of built structures, the twenty I-beams produced from the interaction of two geometrical shapes create an interesting display of an odd-looking construction framework which suggest volumes of space but yet is porous and fluid. The pyramid remains as a solid form, as an axis and testament to the work's process. On her recent travels to Japan, Tan was captivated by the shapes and interlocking pattern of breakwater armour units, common along the country's shores, as well as the related idea of an artificial shoreline. Seawalls were originally mostly built of quarried rocks. With the advance of new construction materials, concrete armour units quickly became a crucial alternative. The first artificial armour units were parallel-epipedic concrete cubes which soon developed into more complex shapes that were more economical to produce and had higher interlocking capacity. Fascinated by this process, Tan's latest work, the *Particulate Studies* series (2019), adopts this process of transforming the cuboid into slender forms. While efficiency and effectiveness of their function as armour units were not the consideration here, Tan worked systematically: points were connected to obtain lines which suggested planes such that mass can further be imagined. For the exhibition, six *Particulate* were created alongside six sets of prints (each a different perspectival view) of their schematic drawings. As with *Pentahedron [Prism and Pyramid]*, the structures are not constructed as solid forms. The artist chose industrial fin and splice plates, held together by nuts and bolts, to create a frame and layers the plates to thicken this structure. The entire design and construction process reflect Tan's interest in how objects or particulates designate the 'line'. As she puts it: "in a way, [the work is] scaled up particulates of matter and they have an additional role as reinforcements/'armour units' [that resist being shifted or changed]. Actually, the 'line' is not finite, it is unstable. I like how 'line' is one dimensional—it has length but no breadth."

The works in *Discrete Encoding* reveal ways of understanding representations of the world. Underlying these artistic approaches is a process of worlding stimulated by the synthesis of visual impressions with logical structures of interpretation in creating a picture of the world. Here, a systematic production process and subjective reflection are co-presented in the final product of artistic imaginary.

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**About the writer**

**Khim ONG** is an independent curator based in Singapore. Until recently, she was Deputy Director, Curatorial Programmes at NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore. At the Centre, she co-curated solo exhibitions of internationally acclaimed artists Tarek Atoui, Amar Kanwar, and Yang Fudong, as well as research exhibitions *Trees of Life – Knowledge in Material* (2018), *Ghosts and Spectres – Shadows of History* (2017), and *Incomplete Urbanism: Attempts of Critical Spatial Practice* (2016). Previously, Ong held curatorial positions at the Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore, LASALLE and Osage Gallery, Hong Kong. She was also curator of the Southeast Asia Platform at Art Stage Singapore in 2015. Ong is also one of the curators for the upcoming Bangkok Art Biennale 2020.

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