

SOUND & VISION

Essay by Michelle HO

Essay

That music and painting may be interconnected in some ways, is a premise that has been a recurrent proposition in the history of painting. Noted through the course of modern art history were attempts to posit affinities between depictions of image and sound, from artists drawing inspiration from music as a potential structure for developing new languages in painting, to theories of synesthesia that propose corresponding relations between sound and colour. In the essay “On Some Relationships between Music and Painting”, Theodor Adorno and Susan Gillespie acknowledged that while painting and sound cannot be equated by means of semblances, they do connect in that the two have language, and by virtue of “their renunciation of the communicative.”

“The convergence of the various media becomes evident through the emergence of their character as language. But this is opposite of linguistic gestures or speaking behavior to the extent that they are telling a story. Painting and music speak by virtue of the way they are constructed, not by the act of representing themselves... The similarity to language increases with the decrease of communication. The breaking off of intention through the creation of the artwork – making things of which we know not what they are – is what lends the work its character as a sign. It becomes a sign by virtue of a break between it and everything designated.”

Sound and Vision is not so much an exhibition that seeks to establish a systematic correlation between these two domains. Rather, it explores the notion of their language, and the complexities regarding the communication of meaning within the two. A presentation of artists working in conditions of abstraction, the show highlights the means of composition in their art-making that engage with notions of repetition and rhythm, tonality and intensity, and unity and dissonance, and how these are being interpreted in artistic practices across mediums.

Ian Woo’s presentation extends the possibilities of abstraction in picture-making through spontaneous gesture. While Woo’s works have evolved over the course of more than two decades of practice, the central approach of improvisation remains at the heart of his process, allowing for each painting to develop without prescribed convention or structure. This propensity for impromptu adaptation has been noted earlier in his practice in a 2011 survey show that recognised how the artist as a musician himself, was always interested in jazz particularly for its potential for improvisation.

“The appearance of form can be akin to how sound is being struck or triggered,” Woo ventures. “Sounds can be shortened or prolonged. A hum can be sensed as space in painting. Motifs can suggest sound being generated, like dots and lines that alludes to a tempo, or spirals as rhythms...” However, he makes the distinction that paintings inherently hold a logic of their own. His works are not an attempt to visualise music. Rather, it is the characteristics of the latter which interest him as a possible way of articulating the experience of painting beyond visual perception.

Pathlight is the artist’s attempt to consider gesture in painting as a metaphor for sound. In the work, intersecting diagonal lines have been layered with a bold horizontal ombré block that is reminiscent of a scale in graduated tones. In *Lilac Vanilla Warm Resonator*, swathes of bold curves in pastel blocks overlay preceding layers of darker accents, revealing how the repeated sweep of the brush demarcating space can present an interplay between temperature and tone.

Woo also uses the notion of “portals” in his paintings as another way to describe processes of improvisation in his work. Initial marks and lines suggesting a framing device, such as repeated angular grey strokes found in *The Brain is a Scroll*, act as an invitation for forms to occur. They may be retained or dispersed, leaving a final result without a direct link to its origins.

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FOST Private Limited
1 Lock Road
#01-02, Gillman Barracks
Singapore 108932
Telephone 65 6694 3080
E-mail info@fostgallery.com
Website www.fostgallery.com

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In the exhibition, this 2015 work is situated alongside a set of 17 new works from an ongoing series *Streaming the Mental*, which like its title suggest, seek to channel moments when the artist's thinking connects with the act of painting. In part a comparative display to draw out signature gestures in Woo's paintings – portals, fractals, layered blocks, transpose shapes and objects suspended in virtual motion - that have become characteristic of his paintings they also reveal what may be the impulses in his process underlying the more formal appearance of their final outcome.

Unlike his larger works that undergo a longer period of germination, the smaller pieces in *Streaming the Mental* capture instances when ideation becomes form. The result is a certain unpredictability with a sensation of lightness and liberty. We begin to see this when we sense in these works, how elements on his painting seem to bounce of each other, when solid forms become non-solid, or when the transparent becomes opaque. Collectively, each piece can also be seen as a variation in painting that mediates between motion, space and time, generating a sense of rhythm in relation to representation.

If returning traces from processes of painting can be described as reverberations, Wyn-Lyn Tan's series of sculptures bring attention to the notion of "echoes" of painting which she transforms into tangible form. Tan's paintings come from a continuous process of addition and subtraction of paint, when she uses paper to absorb excess paint, or parts of her work she would like to retain translucency. The absence of this material which may not be part of the final painting remain a important part to the artist, and she preserves this presence in series of paper and resin sculptures *Traces*, which are part of her paintings in the exhibition.

Much of what has been noted of Tan's practice stem from her training in both Chinese ink and Western painting that has culminated into a recognisable aesthetic of abstract landscape. Because Tan tends to retain a palette of pastels through the course of different series in her work, the shifts in her practice that privilege mark-making as a form representation may not be as immediate. In her work, Tan mostly paints with her canvases on the floor. As such, movement and momentum are pivotal moments in her painting, and where the duration of pauses between her wet and dry brushstrokes would play a determining factor in the form of her work. Tan describes how she maneuvers with the effects of paint like "taking one step forth and two backwards", and vice versa. The works *Undercurrents*, *Remnant Figments* and *Shades of Cadence* are centred on the instinct for action and rhythm. Another two works *Etched in Chartreuse* and *Between Crimson and Flaxen* mark a new foray into bolder colours with more liberated brushworks that express different pulses at work in her painting.

Known for his work based on the mapping of geographies, territories and their subjective boundaries, Ng Joon Kiat's paintings are driven by perspectives of the macro which he creates with materially-led effects. This interest in the dimensions of the universal has led to a small series of work since 2014 exploring white noise, and the notion of invisible frequencies that surround us. While they depart from his painting of multi-layered topographies, the connection is apparent, particularly in his work *Whispers From Ancient Times*, a new work that is based on his interest in cosmic microwave background (CMB). Established by scientists as the continuous existence of electromagnetic radiation from the Big Bang also known as "relic radiation", seen in the work are hints of natural terrains that have been obliterated by a layer of resplendent white and graphite flakes to suggest an invisible presence from a time immemorable.

Ng's work are recognised for his treatments of material and their complexities unpinned by deeper ideological leanings. In a 2007 artist statement, he had opined of his works that "a literal description of the painting process does not bring out their meaning. Rather these paintings are about working out the conceptual idea of location." And so it is with his new body of works in this exhibition, where the visible layeredness in his paintings concurrently serve to present an atmosphere of obscurity. Says the artist, "White noise has a lot of information embedded inside. Its data that may or may not have meaning, but it is the embedment that drives the process." Describing his works *Gateway Series* as a way of connecting physical material traces to invisible elements like environmental frequencies, at the heart of his process is the question of how artists can depict the things that exist but not within the range of human perception.

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Zul Mahmod's work develop from his site-specific sound installations which have been installed with solenoids and programmed to effect sound at intervals. Each solenoid represents a note from a MIDI system (Musical Instrument Digital interface) of generated signals, most commonly heard in electronic keyboards, translating them into standard musical notation equivalents. *Resonances in Frames* was composed with a range of 6 to 12 notes to play a different tempo at intervals. Each piece has been composed with a different rhythm to collectively become a larger soundscape as a set. The layering of sound results in modulated intensities of beat, reflecting the artist's ongoing interest in the inflections of urban environment noise and the variation of their textures that exist as part of the everyday.

Amidst the grids of intersecting layered copper pipes and the overlap of sound and vision, a certain sense of ambiguity prevails. One's attention vacillates between the aural and the visual as instinctive senses attempt to locate the source of the generated rhythms while being reliant on sight. This disruption of a conditioned field of perception gradually shifts into an awareness of the interplay of unity and dissonance in Mahmod's work, intentionally designed by the artist to reveal this tension.

From a materially-led perspective of art-making, the sonic and visual arts remain distinctive fields. The former provides a mode of expression that is based on hearing, and the latter, on seeing. One cannot hear a painting or see music. A sound is not a picture. In modes of contemporary art-making directed towards the non-representational, such a comparative perspective of the two domains within this exhibition may yet provide a way of articulating their reception, with a heightened sensitivity more cognisant of the temporalities of space and time taking place within the work of art.

About the writer

Michelle Ho is Gallery Director of the ADM Gallery at the School of Art, Design and Media, Nanyang Technological University. She has over 10 years' experience in curating Singapore, Southeast Asian and international contemporary art. These include shows like *In Praise of Shadows*, *The Art of Conflict: Video Works from the Asia Society Museum Collection* (2017) and *Time of Others* (2015 – 2016), a collaborative exhibition with Queensland Art Gallery (QAGOMA), Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo (MOT) and National Museum of Art, Osaka (NMAO), to name a few. Formerly a curator at the Singapore Art Museum, she led the acquisition strategies of the museum's contemporary art collection from 2014 – 2015, and was also co-curator of the Singapore Biennale 2013. Ho is also the curator for the Singapore Pavilion, Venice Biennale 2019.

¹ Karin V. Maur, *The Sound of Painting: Music in Modern Art*, Prestel, London, 1999, p 33 – 35

² Theodore W. Adorno and Susan Gillespie, "On Some Relations between Music and Painting" in *The Music Quarterly*, Vol. 79, No. 1 (Spring, 1995), Oxford University Press, p 71 - 72

³ Ibid.

⁴ In an interview with Guo-Liang Tan, Woo spoke of texts that were influential in his practice in their comparative references to the history of modern music and painting in relation to aesthetics. Charles Merewether, *Ian Woo: A Review, 1995 – 2011*, Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore, Singapore, 2012, p9, p14

⁵ Conversation with artist on 12 Oct, 2018.

⁶ Conversation with artist on 6 Nov, 2018.

⁷ Artist Statement in *Imagining a Geographical Presence: A Study of Horizon in Contemporary Painting*, Singapore, 2007

⁸ Conversation with artist on 2 October, 2018.

⁹ Artist Statement in *Imagining a Geographical Presence: A Study of Horizon in Contemporary Painting*, Singapore, 2007

¹⁰ Conversation with artist on 2 October, 2018.