

PAINTING

PAN HUITING

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Copy

of a limited edition of 100 copies

ABIogenesis

MARTIN
CONSTABLE

I first met Huiting when she was attending Singapore's school of Art Design and Media (ADM) as a student of the Digital Animation program. I did not know that she painted until long after she left school. When she first showed me her work, I was very impressed by how completely she had embraced the 'substance' of paint. Like the remains of a mad child's dinner, crimsons, lemon yellows and Prussian blues had been smeared across the canvas with abandon. I tried, like the conscientious teacher I am, to link what I was looking at with what I remembered of her student work, but they seem as opposites of each other.

As a digital animator, she was neither very gifted in matters digital, nor was she very good at animation. It was plain that this was because she was not really interested in either. However, she received good grades for the entirely left-of-field vision that she brought to the classroom. I remember her once asking in tutorial how a painting of an optical illusion was different to a photograph of one. Such a question! Its implications still bedevil me.

It is clear to me now that her need for haptic engagement was not being served by ADM's curriculum. After all, neither animation nor the digital have much of a physicality.

So... how in the hooting heck may we account for these paintings, in all their sticky glory? Where did they come from? After all, it is difficult for a painter to be a painter without first experiencing a painting: the physical can only be evidenced by itself. Now we have the new National Gallery Singapore, stuffed to the gunnels with daubery of the highest order. But this is too late to the scene to impact upon what Huiting presents us. I could suggest the obvious: that they are a re-palettting of her food-centric subject matter, that she isn't really painting but instead cooking. After all, at their best they look good enough to eat.

But I prefer to imagine that they are without genealogy, that her work spontaneously developed from base ingredients. Like some abiogenesis, it arose from the union of food, pigment and Huiting's own lyrical perversity.

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I am interested in the "paint" in painting.

The first painting in this series was born, aptly perhaps, out of a wedding banquet. I was seated with my partner at a table amongst people whom I did not know. A roasted piglet was set down in the middle of the table on the *lazy susan* in front of us. For a roast pig, it had a cute face – I had seen the grotesque, contorted death masks of its counterparts and I felt compelled to make a painting of this particular pig. All eyes were on the coveted delicacy, already dreaming of its crispy crunchy skin, the hot oleaginous juices, on their tongues. If eating is communion – *do this in remembrance of Me* – I was to have communion with these strangers over this toothsome morsel. They held back long enough for me to take a guerrilla snapshot of the cute piggy before it disappeared in a flurry of chopsticks.

One of my *modus operandi* for this series is to "screen grab" whatever catches my eye around me with my geriatric LX3 – the sunny yellow train-shaped seats at the hair salon for example. Some things, like the cute piggy, can only be captured that way. I like mundane subjects – life measured out in meals and haircuts, which constitute a clearing space for me to push paint around the canvas, serving the sort of function that *Ulysses* serves in Joyce's homonymous novel – a structure, or scaffolding around which the work is built; "exercises in style" to borrow the titular words of Queneau.

Most of the subjects that interest me are gastronomic – sculptural goopy piles of paint emerging from the plane of the canvas to sit corporeally on dishes, plates and platters, foregrounding the paint by which they are composed. Whether dragged or slathered on in an explosion of colour, in sea-rolls or congealing at the hubs of wheels, it is my hope that these paint-ings be served up as veritable feasts for the eyes.

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A REFLECTION
ON ART

Jeremy
fernando

Quite possibly one of the more enigmatic lines from a text that is always already an enigma.

Not because *L'instant de ma mort* attempts to hide anything — in fact, one could say it tells, shows, everything — but that every attempt to testify, to bear witness to, is always also haunted by what remains, by what is left behind, out, even if the remainder is within.

Where every testimony is perhaps also

le pas au-dela.

Vous lui demandez comment elle sait. Elle dit qu'elle sait. Elle dit qu'on le sait sans savoir comment on le sait ...

— Marguerite Duras

Ce n'étaient que des réflexions sur l'art, faciles à reconstituer, tandis qu'un manuscrit ne saurait l'être

— Maurice Blanchot

Where in asking a work, a painting, what (s)he is attempting to say, all one can do is attempt to listen, to respond, to her response — or, to be more precise, *its response* — which is always already a response even as it, (s)he — bringing with it all the impossibility of attributing not just a gender, but a referent to the object one is attempting to speak of, react to, respond with — might be responding in ways that remain beyond one, could well be offering a response to which one remains deaf.

For, even as one is opening oneself to the work, to the call of the work, it is never quite possible to tell, to distinguish, if one is listening to its call, to what one thinks is its call — to a sound that one thinks is calling to one, for one — or merely hearing voices in one's head.

Particularly if what is in the work itself appeals to one, always already calls out to one. And, perhaps more importantly, draws one in outside of the very frame, confines, artifice — the craft, crafting, *tekhnē* — that is a work of art, that is required to bring forth the work that is potentially art.

Doubly so if the first call to look at a work, at a series of works, at a series which might well make up a work — can one call it a primordial call, a call before the call (after all, I was ready to say yes even before hearing what the call was about, was for) — comes from a dear friend. Which is not to say that this was not already a risk; not so much for the work itself (it is not as if one can be objective, or say anything that might actually do anything to a work, unless one were deluded), but in the inherent risk that is in friendship, the risk that is friendship itself.

For, even as Plato insists — through his teacher, his friend, Socrates — that *philia* is rational, is reasoned, one must never forget that that one doesn't decide to become

friends; friendship comes upon one, quite often takes hold of one. And thus, at the moment of becoming friends, one is never quite certain, can never be sure, if it is friendship, *eros*, or even *agape*. And here, one should never forget that, to make his case, Plato has to commit the most grievous rhetorical crime against Socrates, the very one that his friend, his teacher, warns about:

prosopopoeia.

Which is not just a rhetorical crime, certainly not just a theoretical one (in the form of what is shown, staged, *thea*), but a crime against friendship — not merely because Plato had betrayed his friend's teachings, his teacher's friendship, but that he has spoken over Socrates — speaking as Socrates such that Socrates is silenced, no longer needed, no longer even there.

Where there is no longer even a Socrates.

Where perhaps the risk I am running is that in attempting to respond to her paintings, I may not only be speaking over them, but that precisely in the attempt to listen to them, the one who I efface might well be Pan Huiting herself.

Where the risk is precisely in the fact that Roland Barthes might have been right: that *the author is indeed dead*.

To have a friend, to look at him, to follow him with your eyes, to admire him in friendship, is to know in a more intense way, already injured, always insistent, and more and more unforgettable, that one of the two of you will inevitably see the other die. One of us, each says to himself, the day will come when one of the two of us will see himself no longer seeing the other ...

— Jacques Derrida, for Jean-Marie Benoist

Which does not mean that one can ever quite do away with the one who inscribes, the one who stains the canvas. For even if one does not know from whom the work comes — from whose hands these markings come through — one also knows, cannot but know, that *automatic writing* is but a pipe dream. That the work, the frame in which in the work is housed, held, is both its haunt and is always already haunted by the author; even if (s)he is quite possibly also an impossible auctor. For, the notion of origins, of the original, can never rest easy, is constantly troubled by the fact that one must draw, sketch, paint, something; that there is something which the work is derived from, even if it is from one's own mind, one's imagination. That perhaps the moment of creation, of bringing forth, is but that: a moment — a question of time itself.

Which might well be why the question of the relationship between art and time is ever-present: when one speaks of art, the echo of timelessness is never far from it; at the same time, no work can exist outside of time, outside of its time. Perhaps then, at the point where a work becomes art, at the moment when a work is recognised as art, it is both in and outside of time — or perhaps even, with its own time. Which might be why, for something to be considered a work of art it has to stand the test of time: it has to be contemporary; even if it is always from before the time it is seen, and also seen too soon, is ahead of the time in which it is seen, is ahead of its time. For, a work of art always already draws from what comes before; echoes memories of works past, works inscribed in, onto, into, it; harkens to, resounds with a line, genealogy, of works it is a part of — and, at the same time, breaks from these works, strikes out on its own; stands apart from its lineage, is unfamiliar to the ones before, is perhaps even unrecognisable, *sui generis*, a stranger, or even just strange. Thus, in the encounter between one and a work of art, what one is seeing is the time of the work itself — the time of the work being nothing other than art. Which is not to say that it is a separate time: of course not. Nor a mystical, divine, time: at least not necessarily so. But that it is the same time that is not the same.

Which also — quite possibly — means that, until one looks at a work it might well be slumbering; awakened only by one's glance. Where one's look could quite possibly be the very encounter that potentially gives rise to art itself.

That the painting itself is dormant, *est en dormir*, and is only aroused — is only seen as a painting — at the moment when one looks; at the moment when seeing turns to looking.

Bringing with it all the risks of being seen.

Vous découvrez qu'elle est bâtie de telle sorte qu'à tout moment, dirait-on, sur son seul désir, son corps pourrait cesser de vivre, se répandre autour d'elle, disparaître à vos yeux, et que c'est dans cette menace qu'elle dort, qu'elle s'expose à être vue par vous.

— Marguerite Duras

For, one should not forget that to be seen is to be witnessed — and the testimony of the one who sees is her, is his, very own: a testimony which might have naught to do with one, which might well be a test on one, a test for one, which might well always be testing one. And it is not as if one can bring in other witnesses, other testimonies to acquit oneself: for one, one's work, is not seen by you all (*vous*) but by you and you alone (*tu*). Thus, each testimony can do nothing but bear witness to itself, to its moment of seeing, to itself as testimony.

Perhaps then, when one paints, all one can say is that one paints.

Which is not to say that there is no responsibility in painting — for, what is to paint but a response. As John Banville teaches us: « trying to be a painter did teach me to look at the world in a very particular way — looking very closely at things, at colors, at how things form themselves in space — and I've always been grateful for that. You have all this space, and you have a figure: what do you do with it? And in a way that's what all art is. How do we find a place for our creatures, or inventions, in this incoherent space into which we're thrown? » Perhaps then, the responsibility that is in painting is not to another who sees, certainly not to the world, not even to the one who paints, but to painting itself, to the very act of seeing, looking, to staining a surface.

And here, we should open our receptors to the fact that Banville is one of Huiting's favourite writers, that his writing is one that she loves; keeping in mind that the register of love is never far away from a work of art; that one attempts to « find a place for our creatures, or inventions, » tends to look « very closely at things, at colors, at how things form themselves in space, » only when one cares about, cares for — has a love for — the very thing that one is responding to. For, in order to even begin to respond, one has to first open oneself to the possibility of it.

Along with all the risks this entails.

Not just to oneself, but to the fact that being in love with the very thing that one is attempting to respond to might well lead one away, astray, from the response, the ability to response, from responsibility itself.

That, as Joy Division might say: *love, love will tear us apart ...*

Only love

can break your heart

— Neil Young

Peut-être que l'amour — ou la mort — nous ferait dériver vers la mer

Perhaps then, the question of the drift (*la dérive*) is what remains with us. Alongside that of from, to, what? For, to drift implies a certain direction that one was headed from, heading to, headed for; without these indications, markers, points in relation with each other, one would just be moving. Can one know — intend — one's drift? Certainly a stunt driver would say so. But even as (s)he is starting her slide, all that (s)he can know is that she is setting the car, herself, the car with herself in it, in motion: after which, the drift itself takes over. After which, all (s)he can do is attend to it.

At the point of the drift: both (s)he and the car are drifting — here, one might not even be able to separate the movement from those involved in it. Without either of them, there would not be a drift; there is no drifting without the drifter.

Both the drifter and the drifting are in a relationality; in which, all that they can know is that they are in relation with each other.

Hence, the drift itself is a relationality.

A non-essence.

And even as we might posit that the drift we are speaking of is a relation, a movement, of love — or of death — to the sea, it is not as if one can know, at least with any certainty, what love or death are. But, it is not as if we cannot speak of it. Perhaps though: we can only speak of it *as if* we can speak of it. Always already an imaginary gesture — where what is being imagined is the relationality between the drift and the ones drifting.

Perhaps then, *what are we drifting from, to?*, is a moot question. As is, *what is drifting?* Perhaps then, all we can say is *drift?*

Where, to speak of drift is an attempt to speak of the unspeakable. Not that *what is speakable* and *what is unspeakable* are antonyms: if that were so, speaking the unspeakable would make no sense, be a contradiction. But that in every act of speaking, something unspeakable is potentially said: something that opens, ruptures, wounds even. And not just that — at the point where it punctures, speaking itself moves out of the way for the unspeakable; speaking itself disappears.

To disappear; or, to drift out of sight.

Where the words themselves slip away.
After all: « in the Beginning was the Word. It was only afterwards that Silence came. » Perhaps the wish, the hope, is that « the end itself has disappeared ... » (Baudrillard)

Remaining hidden from us.
Perhaps only glimpsed when we dream.
Secret.

*... the whole art
is to know how
to disappear
before dying, and
instead of dying.*

— Jean Baudrillard

... aye, there's the rub ...

And once the register of dreams, of dreaming, is opened, the temptation is to slide towards meaning, to attempt to know what it means. Which, in itself, may not be a problem, an issue, but if we are to attempt to flow with the drift, then perhaps it is not depth we are looking for but, instead, it is the traces on the surface that we should follow.

*Lying, the telling
of beautiful untrue
things, is the proper
aim of Art*

— Oscar Wilde

Perhaps then, *what lies behind the painting* is — the not quite wrong, but at least — a banal question. For, we should try to remember that the marks of paint, the staining by the oils on canvas, the strokes made by Huiting's hands, remain solely on the surface, lie right before our eyes.

Perhaps then, what lies does the painting tell? might be the more interesting one:

oh, such beautiful lies.

For here, we should try not to forget that what is painted does not first have to exist — unlike say with photography. Which might well be the tragedy of the photographic object, the object that is photographed: that « one is photographable, 'photogenic', and this is perhaps the catastrophe, that one can be photographable, that one can be captured and caught in time ... » (Hubertus von Amelnunxen) That in order to preserve its

writing — the writing of light — the object has to be consigned into the shadows of time. And where painting might well be a writing of writing — a staining which marks that it is marking — a darkening as it were; which then releases, frees, the very object on which it is remarking.

Where painting might well be in — as Stephanie Ye might say — a *slanty* relationship between the object and what is being depicted, being objectified even. And in that very tangential relationality, in that very swerve — *clinamen* — what is liberated, *est en vie*, is the very object itself.

In which one can only look upon the marks that are made — remark upon the marks, as it were — but where nothing can be said about the object; where it is not so much that there is no object to the painting, but that the stains have naught to do with the object.

Where all we have in front of us is the image — made by the stains.

Thus, to speak of the meaning of a painting — which would require a correspondence between what is in paint and the world — would be nothing short of absurd.

*History is not
interesting
— what is
interesting is
the anecdote.*

— Karl Lagerfeld

For, one should keep in mind that each response, each attempt at a response, is a relation — thus, always already both a connection and a standing apart; without which there would not be the space needed to connect, to make a connection, in the first place.

Which also means that the response might well have naught to do with whatever it is attempting to respond with; that there is the possibility of a non-response within, alongside, the response; that perhaps the very condition of this response is irresponsibility itself.

After all, as Jacques Derrida never lets us forget: « the testimonial act is poetic or it is not. »

*At any rate, removing
meaning brings out the
essential point: namely, that
the image is more important
than what it speaks about
— just as language is more
important than what it
signifies.*

*But it must also remain
alien to itself in some way.
Not reflect (on) itself as a
medium, not take itself for
an image. It must remain a
fiction, a fable and hence
echo the irresolvable fiction
of the event.*

— Jean Baudrillard

Thus, not only, incomparable, unaccountable, unverifiable — « it must invent its language and form itself in an incommensurable performative » (Derrida) — but, more than that, a testimony, une histoire, quite possibly only speaks to, with, itself. Trying never to forget that « the poem lacks nothing: any commentary makes it worse. Not only does it lack nothing, but it makes any other discourse look superfluous. » (Baudrillard)

Which means that — allowing the irony of alluding to meaning to resound here — the only possible response to the testimony, her testimony, the testifying marks that Huiting makes on the canvas, is a response to the stains, her stains, with a testimony, my testimony, my story.

My stains.

Colouring (*pingah*, 'reddish'; from the Sanskrit) it with my own adornments (*pesalah*, 'decorated'; from the Sanskrit), as I attempt to write (*plesiu*, 'to write'; from the Lithuanian), in response, as a response, to Huiting's painting (*peint*, 'to paint'; from the French), to the marks of her paint.

*Tell me what
you eat and
I'll tell you
who you are.*

— Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin

Thus, whatever my response is — all that I say — has nothing to do with anything, cannot be backed up by anything, is *abgrund*, is based — a baseless base — on a whim, or if you prefer, taste.

Even if I take care not to go on a spree, not to *paint the town red*, as it were.

Which does not mean that there is nothing at stake. For, it is not just that there is *une physiologie du goût*, but that every taste, every tasting, brings about, brings on, a physiological reaction, has an effect on one's body.

For, each time one paints, there is also a possibility that a cut (*primsati*, 'hews out'; from the Sanskrit) is made — just as each act of writing (*écriture*) might well bring with it a cry (*cri*); that — as Nietzsche teaches us — to write (*schreiben*) might well be an attempt to utter a scream (*schreien*).

Which might bring us back to the very beginning — to the testimony, the markings, of Blanchot. Keeping in mind that the very opening — my opening gambit — by Blanchot was him speaking through another, through the testimony of another, through Malraux (probably André, but this remains — at best — an educated guess). Perhaps then, not only committing the crime of Plato — a crime of friendship, a crime as an, in an, act of friendship to a friend — but more importantly, that the only witness to the absence of the manuscript is a reflection on art; a reflection, perhaps even my reflection, on what might well be another manuscript.

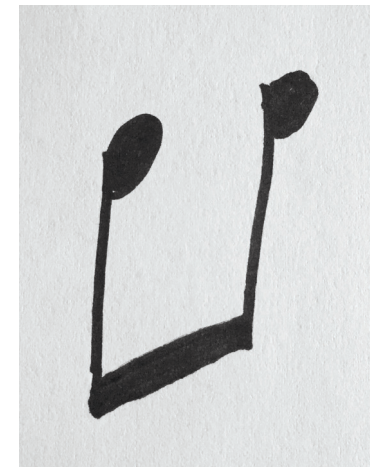
But, a manuscript in which my hand (*manus*) is never quite seen, always already absent.

Perhaps then, not quite words on the paintings of Pan Huiting, on the marks made by her hand.

But remarks.

Both as a note (*remarque*) and also as a return — a second — mark.

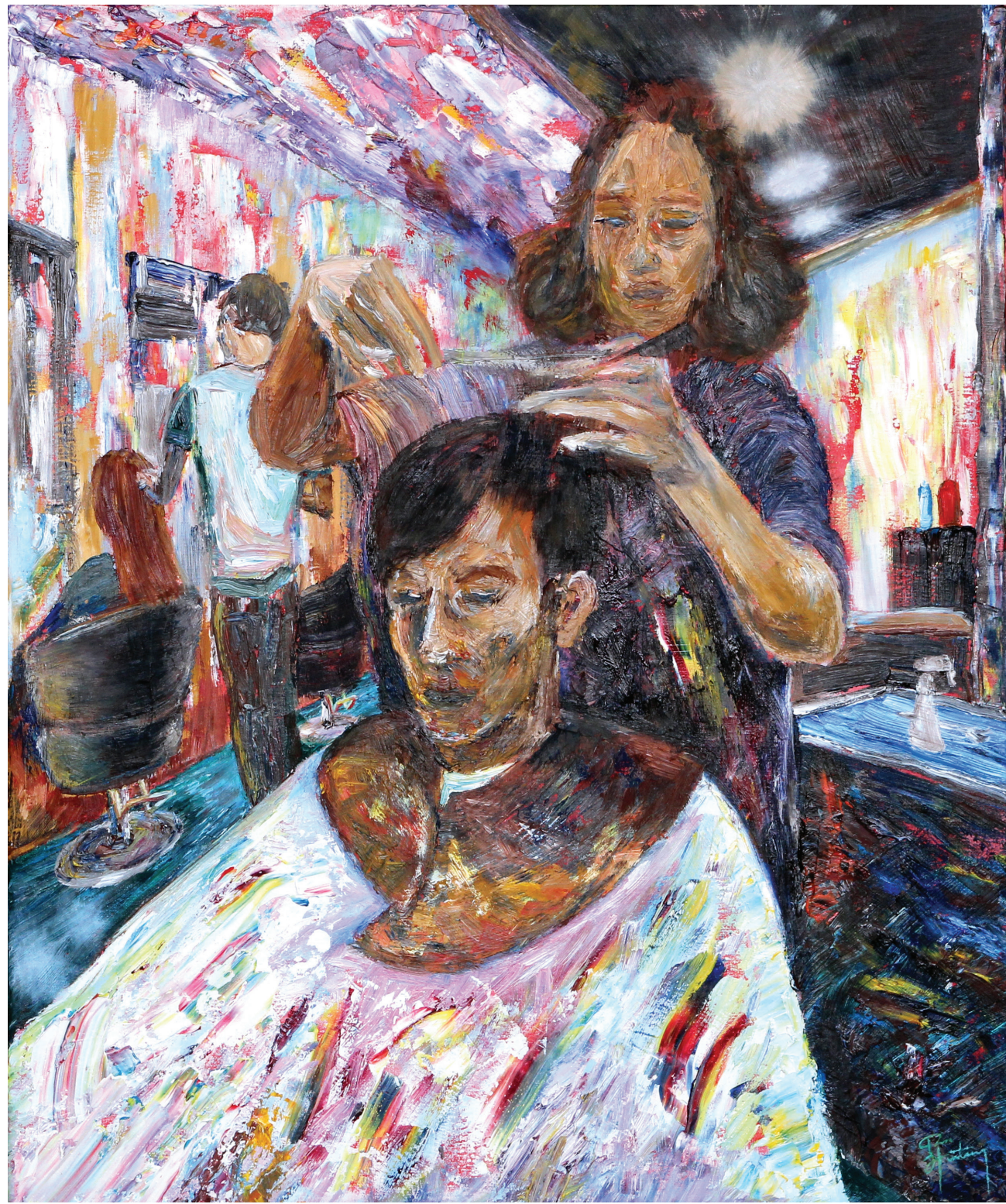
Or, quite possibly nothing more than ...





Piggy, oil on canvas, 2013, 45 x 60 cm

Hairdressing, oil on canvas, 2014, 61 x 51 cm





Pasar Bella, oil on canvas, 2014, 61 x 61 cm

Teppe, oil on canvas, 2013, 60 x 90 cm





Paella, oil on canvas, 2015, 91 x 122 cm

Kepulauan, oil on canvas, 2014, 90 x 60 cm





Choo Choo, oil on canvas, 2015, 91 x 122 cm

Lok Lok, oil on canvas, 2015, 91 x 122 cm





Korean BBQ, oil on canvas, 2015, 91 x 122 cm

Dim Sum, oil on canvas, 2015, 100 x 100 cm



Pan Huiting graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts (Hons) from the School of Art, Design & Media, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore in 2010. In 2013, she obtained a Master of Arts with her thesis entitled, "Aesthetic Transfiguration." Her painting, "Kepulauan", has appeared on the cover of a homonymous poetry collection published by Ethos Books and her writings on art have been published in catalogues and presented at conferences in Greece and Singapore. She has participated in a group exhibition "The Best of You" and "(Paint)-ing" is her first solo exhibition. Huiting is moved primarily by the creative power of art to form and shape our world. In her paintings, characterized by expressive, impasto brushstrokes, the everyday is transfigured. Her works can be found at www.panhuiting.com.

Martin Constable is an assistant professor at the School of Art, Design and Media of Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. As an artist he works as part of the Singapore-based collective Grieve Perspective. His work combines photography, painting and visual effects and addresses the theme of death, loss and sickness. He has also worked extensively with Engineers, with whom he collaborates on researching ways in which the aesthetic components of an artwork may be exactly defined. He most recently exhibited at a group show, "Dear Painter" at Sundaram Tagore gallery, curated by June Yap. His writings have been published in numerous peer reviewed journals and publications such as *Visual Studies* and *Turps Banana*.

Jeremy Fernando is the Jean Baudrillard Fellow at the European Graduate School, where he is also a Reader in Contemporary Literature & Thought. He works in the intersections of literature, philosophy, and the media; and has written thirteen books — including *Reading Blindly*, *Living with Art*, and *Writing Death*. His work has been featured in magazines and journals such as *Berfrois*, *CTheory*, *TimeOut*, and *VICE*; and he has been translated into Spanish and Slovenian. Exploring other media has led him to film, music, and art; and his work has been exhibited in Seoul, Vienna, Hong Kong, and Singapore. He is the general editor of both *Delere Press* and the thematic magazine *One Imperative*; and a Fellow of Tembusu College at the National University of Singapore.

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