

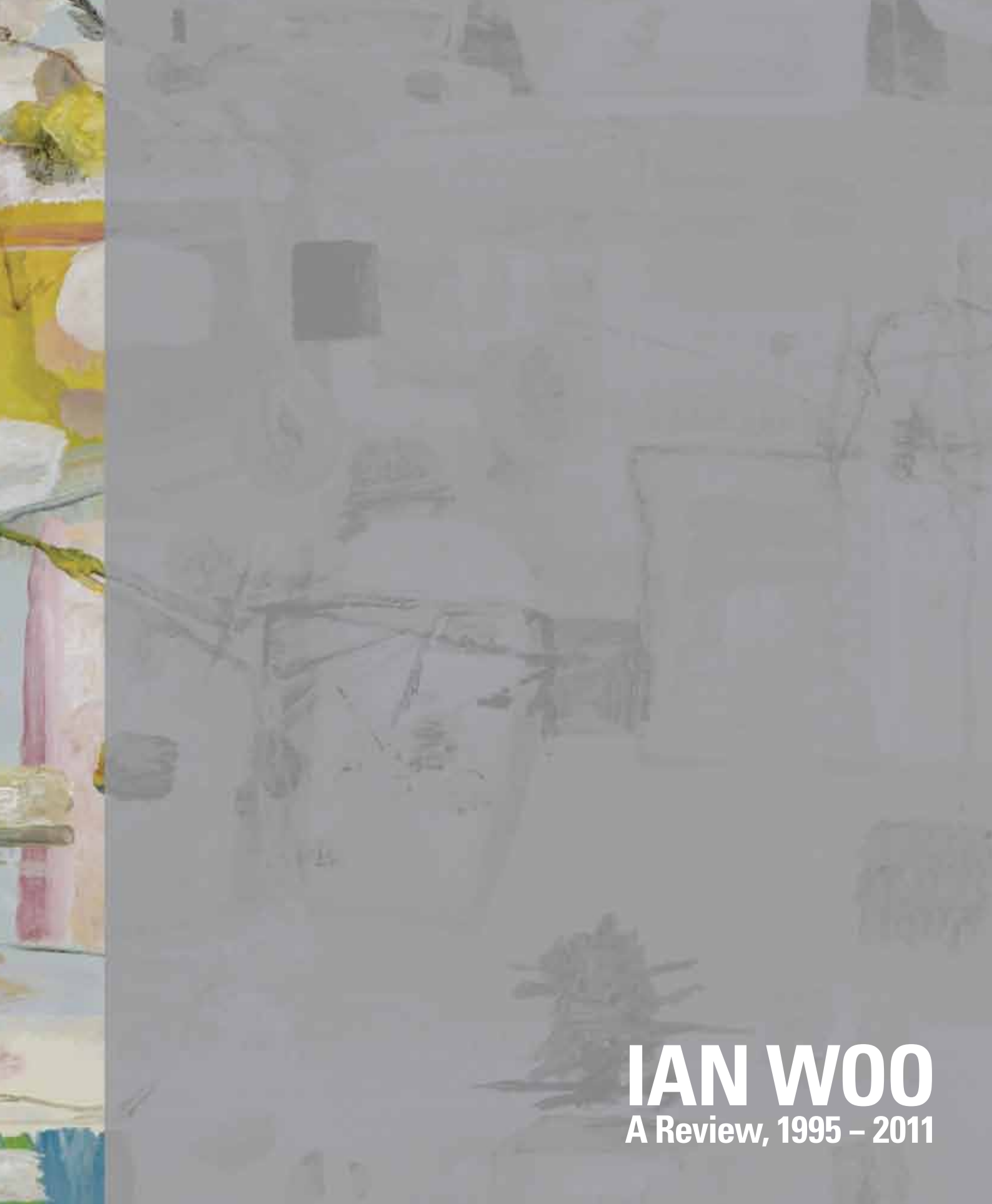
Ian Woo: A Review, 1995 – 2011

Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore, LASALLE College of the Arts

IAN WOO

A Review, 1995 – 2011





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LET'S PLAY IT BY EAR: Reflections on Improvisation Dr. Charles Merewether	4
GUO-LIANG TAN INTERVIEWS IAN WOO	13
PAINTINGS AND WORKS ON PAPER 1995 – 2011	17
CLOSER TO THE SURFACE: Questions and answers about the function of painting and that which implodes (A conversation between Ian Woo and Ian Woo)	65
BIOGRAPHY	69

LET'S PLAY IT BY EAR: Reflections on Improvisation

Dr. Charles Merewether

There is at the heart of Ian Woo's work the condition of the aleatory or chance that allows for a certain playfulness and openness of response as much as a deliberation on the composition of each painting and drawing. Even in Woo's earliest paintings, his work can be characterized by this approach.

Over time, the work of Woo has become more assured, while assuming no less a risk in the felicitous play of myriad surfaces of color, of a deliberate exposure of their *faktura* and the explicit saturation of surface. And while arguably, appearing to take on an even greater visibility, each work quietly, yet surely, retreats, withdrawing in regard to its legibility. These two movements can be seen as contradictory and yet, give way to another layer of surface and emergent form, and hence offer a beguiling detour and, ultimately, a temporal delay in the overall perception and comprehension of the work.

We may be reminded that visibility does not necessarily lead to greater clarity or comprehension. This idea is what Theodor Adorno and his colleagues so acutely defined as the legacy of the Enlightenment movement.¹ We could ask, with Woo's work as an instance, how can it be that the more we see, the less clearly can it be read. In viewing the work, we are led to a layering, a multiplicity and, at times, a bewildering incomprehension on once leaving the originating point of departure. The ground becomes not simply the space of departure or alternatively arrival but, rather, the very substance and site of elaboration to be then overlaid, or alternatively, excavated. In the following remarks, I will explore the shifting stages of Woo's work across this play and over time.

1. MONOCHROME INTERRUPTED

An understanding of Woo's early work as an art student in the early to mid-Nineties is significant in relation to what was to follow. In two paintings, *Growth* [Fig. 1] and a still-life collage *Picasso citation* [Fig. 2], both from 1990, we see early instances of his drawing that gives way to a measured degree of improvisation. In each we see a facility and ease with drawing that draws upon a form of biomorphic abstraction that informed the work of artists such as Picasso, Miró, Matta and Tanguy, to name a few during the period of European modernism between the wars. This exploration of the biomorphic was about addressing the crises in both representation and abstraction. Its influence can be seen in Woo's two works. He creates dispersal yet interconnectedness of forms across an abstract field in *Growth* and the play of planes of color structuring allusions to a still life in *Picasso citation*. Each of these works offers a glimpse of what was to come later with Woo's exploration of abstraction that tacitly rejects the representational, while paying greater attention to the possibilities and potentiality of the surface as the primary point of focus.



Fig. 1
Growth
1990
Pastel and acrylic on paper
Dimensions unknown
(Work no longer in existence)

¹ Martin Jay in his marvelous survey 'Downcast Eyes' (Berkeley, Ca.: University of California, 1993) writes of the recognition of vision has in the development of spectacle and techniques of surveillance in political and social oppression.

By the end of 1991, Woo had finished his Diploma studies at Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts in Singapore. At that time, contemporary art in Singapore was finding its way and gaining more attention, if not support. Yet, there were not so many collectors and few art institutions or art schools that embraced contemporary art practice. By the early 1990s, the National Museum had split into three component museums after the establishment of the Art Gallery at the museum in 1976. This led to the creation of the Singapore Art Museum in 1995.

There was already, nevertheless, 'The Artists Village' located at 61-B Lorong Gambas in Sembawang. Founded in 1988 by the artist Tang Da Wu, their manifesto declared that

"The Artists Village is dedicated to the promotion and encouragement of experimental and alternative arts in Singapore. It endeavors to establish an open space for artists to mature at their own pace, and to provide an environment conducive for artists to experiment, experience and exchange ideas."²

Their approach included installation practices as well and Tang organized exhibitions and symposia at the Village, as well as arranged for its collaboration with the National Museum Art Gallery and the National Arts Council's 1992 Singapore Festival of the Arts. Woo was still in college and not so engaged with what was going on around him. He remarks that

"During this period, the local artists that I liked were Tang Da Wu, Tan Teck Heng and Amanda Heng. It was also a time when The Artists Village was alive. I showed at the Hong Bee Warehouse exhibition and hung out with them for a while.

Tan Teck Heng was a very influential teacher when I was studying at the Nanyang Academy. He was very patient with me. He made us do lots of experimental drawings. Breaking up perspectives. Looking at Picasso, Miró and Klee. I started with drawing as a tool to discover what I wanted. Painting was too difficult for me at that time.

This was 1991, and until 1992 the art scene in Singapore was independent and exciting. No rules, no educational curriculum. We just did what we wanted, lots of art making and coffee talk... No arts council. In terms of galleries, I cannot comment, as I was not in touch with seeing art in that perspective. The only galleries I went to were The Substation and 5th Passage, which I believe just started. We also had the National Museum. They brought in the Joseph Beuys exhibition at that time. It's probably in connection with the Goethe Institute. I remember not being able to make anything out of it, but every work looked so serious. Even the placement of some cotton wool in a box seemed like some ritualistic trace."³

In January 1994, the National Arts Council (NAC) stopped funding unscripted performance art, following a controversial performance by Josef Ng that was regarded as obscene by many members of the public. As a consequence, the Singapore government imposed the requirement of permits to stage any such work. From that time, Tang Da Wu and other performance artists mostly practiced their art abroad, although some performances were presented in Singapore, especially dance and theatre. Young painters like Woo were not as involved in this public dimension of contemporary practice. Woo was finishing art school and, as he reflected:

"(In) the last stage of the Nanyang days I was looking at Cy Twombly a lot, but I was not painting like that at all. I just found an affinity with his ambiguity and freedom. I remember talking to Suzann Victor a lot about him, because Suzann was making paintings that had those qualities. I was making these geometric abstractions. Very primitive ones. With a ruler! It lasted for one year... Then I did these looser versions of geometric paintings. Not good at all. I hated them. I was still searching."⁴

Woo's canvases of that period, of which we have little record, are important in appreciating his point of entry and what would emerge more strongly in the following years. It is significant to note here the shift from the biomorphic abstraction of his work in 1990, to that of geometric abstraction and monochrome painting. Both these styles had had a resurgence of interest in the 1980's when painting was completely pervasive in North America and Europe. However, such an approach had no real presence in Singapore. We can point to China and Korea where, although significantly different, there was an engagement with this approach. Woo's engagement with the monochrome can be seen in a photograph [Fig. 3] taken by artist Amanda Heng at The Space at Hong Bee Warehouse in early 1992.⁵ It shows Woo's mixed media painting *Teacher* (1991) and a series of geometric abstract formations.

To look back, it is possible to misread Woo's beginnings as less than important in shaping or, at least, informing, his future development. Nevertheless, an understanding of the monochrome surface gave him an appreciation of ground as image, rather than image as ground. If we consider North America and its history of high modernism, such as that of Barnett Newman and Ad Reinhardt or that of late modernism and the Neo avant-garde, including the exponents of the monochrome such as Peter Halley; we find a range and complexity as to what constitutes both ground and surface and their conceptual significance in the structure of painting. Their respective approaches to the canvas were principally

² From website: <http://www.tav.org.sg/>.

³ In conversation with the artist, 6 April 2012.

⁴ In conversation with the artist, 6 April 2012.

⁵ Hong Bee Warehouse was situated near Robertson Quay and used by The Artists Village for the Singapore Festival of the Arts in 1990 and for other exhibitions and art events until it was demolished.

Fig. 2
Picasso citation (Still life drawing exercise)
1990
Collage and pastel on paper
Dimensions unknown
(Work no longer in existence)



about the activity of painting as a medium rather than an approach based on any deference to figuration. These approaches demanded a certain fearlessness and willingness to work with essentials and not with representation as an armature. Woo remarks:

“One year after I left Nanyang (Academy of Fine Arts), before I left for England, I found a book that had Gerhard Richter’s works. I recall Richter was making his monochromatic paintings of this girl that was murdered. Those paintings made an impact on me. I believe I was drawn to the melancholia of the works. Peter Halley was around the same time. It was Tang Da Wu that told me to look at Halley after seeing my geometric abstractions at the Nanyang graduation show.”⁶

⁶ *In conversation with the artist, 6 April 2012.*

⁷ *In conversation with the artist, 24 June 2012.*

2. OPENING HORIZONS

Woo left Singapore in the summer of 1992 to further his studies in England. He enrolled for a Bachelor’s in Fine Art at Kent Institute of Art and Design in Canterbury. He didn’t stop painting and the idea of monochrome painting was still a point of reference from which he could begin further elaboration. What was noticeable here was that he chose England to study, even though monochrome painting was less important than in North America. Yet, as Woo has remarked, he had become aware that the UK was more engaged with the idea of a Fine Art Education than North America.

During this time Woo begins to intervene on the surface of the canvas, building up areas of the picture plane, its dimensionality, introducing the curvature of line, marking and variations to the austerity of monochrome surface. Woo had become suspicious of color and later reflects that:

“I had this crazy idea that colour would relate to the real world. I just wanted to create a world that was private and as remote as that of this world.”⁷

The painting *Untitled* (1994) [Fig. 4] also shows the use of the tip of the brush as a means of exploring another technique of applying paint, registering repetition and a certain conformity of surface as distinct from individual mark-making. Such work of this time remain relatively minimal, characterized at best by a lyricism while, nonetheless, indefinable and resolutely abstract. This can be seen in *Untitled* [Fig. 5]. However, while *Untitled* [Fig. 5] as well as *The Passing* [Fig. 6] and *Map* [Fig. 7] become studies in pared-down surfaces interrupted by alternate shapes and incidental gestures, they allude to the representational figure. *The Understanding of Job* [Fig. 8] suggests a form of lunar landscape, although its title makes a Biblical reference that remains oblique, without elaboration.



Fig. 3
Installation of paintings “Teacher” and an untitled quartet of Geometric Abstractions at The Space (Works no longer in existence)
Photograph taken in 1992, courtesy of Amanda Heng

After receiving his Bachelor's degree from Canterbury in 1994, Woo enrolled for a Master's degree in European Fine Art at Winchester School of Art in Winchester, (England) and in Barcelona in Spain. He was painting and exhibiting at the time, with such work as *The Uneasy Centre of The Porcelain Cloud* (1995), *The Fantastic Painting* (1995) and *Before I Give An Answer I See A Flower* (1995). In these three paintings, an essentially monochrome surface of paint is to be found as part of a larger field of almost whimsical gestures and mark-making over the ground. The surface begins to become a ground of fluctuating layers and shifting surfaces as nothing quite adheres. This opens up to a style of painting whereby its construction seems to defy gravity and challenge the borders of the canvas itself. This is not so much by a process of turning inward but, rather, a beginning with that of the inside out, leading to a movement of expansion that seems to beckon the space beyond the frame.

Woo was viewing a lot of original work at this time, through visiting both permanent collections and temporary exhibitions in Europe. Contemporary art and painting had taken a turn by this time, following the decade of the Eighties with its dominance of painting and an aggressive art market that had come out of Germany, Italy and North America. Slowly, installation (and video practice) was coming into its own and Woo saw, shortly after his arrival in London, the exhibition 'Unbound: Possibilities of Painting' (1994) at the Hayward Gallery. Organized by Adrian Searle and Greg Hilty, the exhibition of 14 artists, included Raoul De Keyser, Peter Doig, Gary Hume, Fiona Rae, Jessica Stockholder and Luc Tuymans. As the introductory essay in the catalogue, Searle remarked of the selection,

"... instead of technique, we have techniques, and instead of absolutes and essences, discontinuities, multi-formity, differences... we wanted to show that there is no fixed viewpoint from which to look, no one way of reading the exhibition. Ironies, scepticism, and a certain doubt are highlighted here, but also a sense of the continuing desire to paint, and what such expressions may entail."⁸

During this time, we see in the paintings of Woo an exploration of the tension between representation and abstraction. He was beginning to assimilate the approach of Cy Twombly and read, at this time, the powerful evocation Roland Barthes had written on the artist.⁹ Studying in Europe gave Woo the opportunity to see not only many collections and exhibitions but also, the opportunity to experience them first-hand and hence to directly experience the scale and surface of their work. Most significantly, he saw an exhibition of Robert Ryman in Europe whose painting defied reproduction and had not been collected by museums or private collectors in Asia. As Woo remembers, other instances of importance included discovering the work of the Belgian artist Raoul De Keyser in the exhibition 'Unbound - Possibilities in Painting' at the Hayward Gallery in London and going to see 'Drawing the Line: Reappraising Drawing Past and Present' curated by Michael Craig-Martin at The Whitechapel Gallery, also in London.¹⁰ These exhibitions, and the artists included, impressed him deeply and became a crucial points of reference in his future development.

⁸ Searle, Adrian. 'Unbound: Possibilities in Painting'. Ed. Linda Schofield. London: South Bank Centre, 1994.

⁹ Barthes, Roland. 'The Responsibility of Forms'. Berkeley, Ca.: University of California, 1991.

¹⁰ In conversation with the artist, June 2012.

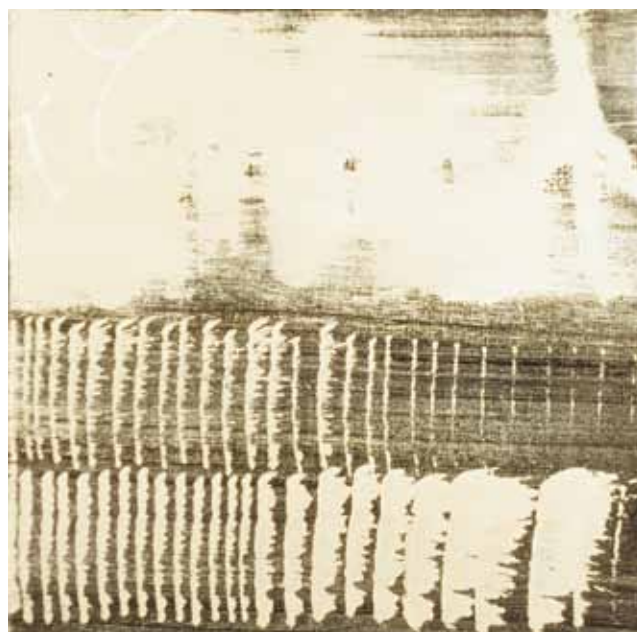


Fig. 4
Untitled
1994
Oil on canvas
30 x 30 cm
(Work no longer in existence)

3. VARIATIONS IN ABSTRACTION

In 1997, Woo returned to Singapore and over the next three years painted a series of canvases, each of which incorporated, if not dissolved, the monochrome into the field of abstraction. This augured a new elaboration of his work. In fact, we may say, in this period of development, the monochrome ground becomes another pictorial device. If we were not to know of the importance of the monochrome in his early work, we may not even give it any special mention. The clearest example of this is *Wall of Fiction* (1997), although also evident in other paintings of the time including *Frozen* (1998), *When An Angel Spreads Its Wings* (1998), *Lake in Small Study Room* (1998) and *Fluctuations* (1999).

By 1999, this initial exploration of building up the surface gains a greater ease and fluidity. As we see in *Fluctuations*, different individual forms and floating conglomerates of shapes overlap and intersect with one another as if drifting across the surface. The painting is suggestive of a form of intergalactic field forces in space, such as that of stars and planets, shooting lines of light, meteorites, spacecraft and drifting debris. We see how the painting is constructed as a series of interplaying forms begins to create an image over time as one's eye moves restlessly across the surface. And yet, here too lies the possibility of a certain stillness in the midst of the sensation of velocity that is quicker than the eye. What we see is a field force that appears stationary in its momentum, the frozen moment of a photographic image as distinct from the mobility of the cinematic.

In this regard, there seems to be two approaches that break up the monochromatic surface. One of these appears almost as a reverse approach whereby the monochrome form appears as secondary surface interacting with apparently pre-existing marks either through a partial overlaying of or discreet forms that float in a relatively confined areas of the canvas. This shift brings with it a further avenue of departure from the monochrome. This can be characterized as an intervention occurring within the monochrome form, causing a disruption in the homogeneity of its surface. A good instance of this is a slightly later painting *The Art of Painting and Moving Air* produced in 2000.

In the cluster of paintings at this time, we must also be reminded of a comment Woo makes later that is pertinent to the creative freedom of engaging with and reading his work. He writes:

"Taking painting and paint spaces in multiples from top edge of painting, followed by another point and complete painting row-by-row or column-by-column. Could be from the centre also. The point is to create a juxtaposition that has a sequence of how the eye decides to locate a space at a particular point in time. This then enables a composition that gathers itself from different locations of to form a while."¹¹

¹¹ Cited in 'Aversions', Osage Gallery, Singapore, 2009, p.124.



Fig. 5
Untitled
1993
Oil on canvas
107 x 61 cm
(Work no longer in existence)

There is another subject, a subject that painting can embody, and overwhelm the painting internally. The artist himself has remarked that we see an ongoing exploration of both incidental and spatial change. He notes of how the language of abstract painting has an “ability to express notions of a continuous presence”. We can come back time and again to discover a hitherto unseen dimension emerging out of multi-layered surfaces. In such terms, we are witness to an unremitting intensity of engagement that demands of a viewer an equal intensity of response over time.

Madness Precedence and Beauty (2001) marks itself as distinct from both before and after, because it seeks a different approach towards the ground. The painting is somewhat distinct from what has preceded insofar as it appears as a foray into an overall surface that is not monochrome. Rather, it focuses upon the ground that serves to present a form of panoply of unspecified forms. Viewing the canvas as such suggests the experience of looking at the vast expanse of a night sky filled with stars. The stars, lighting the night sky, appear scattered across the surface with neither an apparent structuring surface nor lines or forms marking out distinct areas. This recalls the paintings of the night sky by the nineteenth century artist Jean-François Millet.

4. IMPROVISATION AND DRAWING

If we look back on these first ten years, we may note the place of spontaneity and gesture in the making of work. These modalities of approach come after the laying of ground. What precedes this step is a certain structuring that, in fact, preempts any operation and functioning. Improvisation suggests something spontaneous, freely arising and making its way in a manner that is not pre-determined or strictly regulated. Nevertheless, we must add that it begins from somewhere, if only to lead somewhere else that is not already determined.

In 2002, Woo turns to drawing as the primary rather than conditioned focus of his mark-making. Music had always been a part of Woo’s life, himself a musician interested especially in that of jazz and improvisation in which performative character of its presentation, allowed for the potential of variation, riffs and ‘spaces’ of silence or emptiness. This offered him a significant correspondence, if not corollary, to his practice as a visual artist. Such interest led him to admire various composers and their approach, notably the extraordinary improvisations of Bach or Beethoven made by Franz Liszt and later Glenn Gould. Called ‘variations’, they required an assured knowledge of the original and an immense technical proficiency to enable the original work to be approached and departed from with assurance. In a distinct manner, the concept of improvisation grew in the mid Twentieth century as a spontaneous freestyle. For Woo a study of their work became important, especially that of John Cage but, equally, others, most notably the improvisational guitarist Derek Bailey as well as the jazz pianist Keith Jarrett. Both Bailey and Jarrett were able to produce complex rhythmic structures and at times melodic forms and patterns, shifting into variation or out into sudden riffs, which ebbed and flowed through the pieces.



Fig. 6
The Passing
1994
Oil on canvas
76 x 41 cm
(Work no longer in existence)



Fig. 7
Map
1994
Oil on canvas
Dimensions unknown
(Work no longer in existence)

Alongside music, it was the great Russian artist Wassily Kandinsky who, perhaps, more than any other artist, offers insight into the core of Woo's engagement with improvisation and abstraction. From 1910 – 1912 Kandinsky struggled to make a complete break with the objective world, realizing that, in the end, "the object harms (his) painting". In 1912, he published his essay 'Concerning the Spiritual in Art'. in which he wrote of an 'interior necessity' that alone could inspire true art. There was, for him, no place for the representational image. It became a seminal work for the period and an invaluable tool to appreciating the practice of Kandinsky's generation in Europe. In the essay, Kandinsky advocated 'synesthesia' whereby one sensory stimulus evokes another. He believed in the 'inner sound' of a colour and desired that painting be abstract like music. This approach was driven by a sense of spontaneity that defied the laws of perspective, by an orderly construction or geometry of design or a material ground that was informed by a certain rigour. Rather, there was a sense of dynamism that was, for Kandinsky, animated by colour, line and movement. Colour had no associative connection to nature or the order of things. Hence, colour bleeds, suggesting a slippage beyond any boundaries that would attempt to contain it. The spirit for Kandinsky ruled over matter, and thus he turned away from material reality. Space was boundless and the surface plane was conceived as energy or an unbounded field. In other words, Kandinsky sought a metaphysical art that transcended the material, objective world. Abstraction opened up the possibility to address the spiritual sphere of life.

I would suggest that the work of Kandinsky, if not philosophy as embodied in his paintings, has always been present in Woo's mind. This is to say Kandinsky has been an influence without necessarily being an immediate source of reference. By 2010 this influence deepens, as a greater confidence in the approach Woo takes to his practice is made manifest. It is then that Kandinsky's extraordinary ability to allow spontaneity to guide, and almost govern his work, becomes an important precedent and measure of Woo's painting.

5. TEXT AND IMAGE

From 2002 through to 2005, Woo begins an occasional series of works on paper, in which he introduced the painted written word onto the surface. These works on paper are lighter in the incidence of word or image and, as such, more playful through the superimposition and layering of images by virtue of the use of transparent watercolour washes. In this regard, it gives rise to the aesthetic potential of multiple surfaces that will later come to feature in Woo's painting.

By 2005, Woo was in the middle of writing his doctorate thesis entitled 'Momentary Word Paintings: Analyses of momentary structures as continuous presence between contemporary music, words and painting'. The title itself is revealing not only in regard to its substantive content but, equally, its coincidence with his practice at that time. In Woo's



Fig. 8
The Understanding of Job
1994
Oil on canvas
Dimensions unknown
(Work no longer in existence)

thesis, he writes of sensory experience occurring in all fields of daily life including that of material practices such as art, music and poetry. This is achieved through echo and repetition, juxtaposition and multiplicity, and an interweaving and orchestration of these structures.¹² In this context, one gains a sense of a phenomenological relation to the world, perhaps made more acute by the time Woo spent looking at art whilst based in Europe. More specifically, this exploration is informed by Woo's engagement with concepts of duration and by its association with the notions of event, memory and becoming in the experience of the work as well as that of capturing the multiplicity and layering of a work simultaneously. For Woo, such an approach is informed by the reading of French philosophy, especially the work of Henri Bergson, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Gilles Deleuze.

In this context, Woo considers his own work in which words are used as a direct counterpoint to the image. This is captured by both paintings *Across The Lake There Is Fire* (2005) and *Shopping For Bargains As We Watch The Sunset* (2005) In each the painted and glazed ground is largely covered by a web of white lines, laced together to create intricate arbitrary patterns, and dispersed lines of white painted words not always clear in their legibility. The intricacy of each of these elements suggests their slow application, irrespective of the singular or overall sense of the work. These paintings break up the canvas into a myriad of lines and the occasional words. It is as if each work emerges out of the intricacy of weaving these parts together while, nevertheless, maintaining a sense of an almost arbitrary or random interplay of line and word. Woo discusses the works in terms of optical points of attraction and of fracture and flux amidst an overall field. He likens the operation of the work to the act of 'becoming' and the painting of Twombly.¹³

In the following year, Woo paints the powerful work *The Moving Finger* (2006) that again marks a shift, not so much in his style but in the construction of the work. Woo remarks that the painting "takes its reference to Rembrandt's 'Belshazzar's Feast' (The National Gallery Collection, London)". Rembrandt takes the biblical narration of the divine with its mysterious hand that appears and writes in mid-air in the form of an encoded language, the story in which King Belshazzar's time is declared over.¹⁴ Line, as a distinct form, rarely appears but the painting functions more through the restless body of an agitated paint surface. Reminiscent of Italian Futurist painting, Woo's painting is built up slowly, not by sheer surfaces of color but, incrementally. He lays down small passages and slivers of modulated paint and colour, layered on by distinct brush strokes across the surface. These are then distinguished by the introduction of other colors or momentarily form. The result is a powerful surface of paint that virtually shimmers out of a graduated movement across the surface.

By 2008, Woo had broken down his approach to become more formalised, more singular in regards to the viewer's point of focus, more controlled. In a series of works, *Hypothetical Draft With Flowers*, *Total Recall*, *Lake Fluorescent Cake Surprise* and *Blood Epic*, Woo's approach is tempered. The energy of the work becomes more contained, folding into and centering on a single image forming a still-life of flowers. Their layered surface and warmth of colour are reminiscent of the lacquered canvases of the Eighteenth century artist Jean Baptiste Siméon Chardin. The painterly quality of these works give way to a chromatic harmony and level of ornamentation that pushes back to subsume the earlier attention to both *faktura* and gesture.

Each painting by Woo was made during 2008 and belong to a extended movement that then lead to canvases, in the following year, such as *We Have Crossed The Lake* (2009) and *The Negotiated Turn Of The Century* (2009). Each of these two works becomes virtual landscapes of thickets that open onto empty pockets of space. These open spaces are loosely knitted together with long tenuous lines as if like vines winding through and across the empty caverns, stringing together and separating off into strands of loose flowing lines, as if buffeted by the wind.

At the same time, Woo returns again to drawing. *Lot sees salt* is a suite of four graphite drawings made in 2009. These drawings are executed through an initial freedom of line that builds a certain density of form through repetition and layering. Limiting the use of the surface of large sheets of white paper, Woo creates the effect of a loosely knit structure that appear almost incidental to the surface on which they have been drawn. These drawings parallel the paintings from the year 2008, such as *The Negotiated Turn Of The Century*. However, they are more singular as an image in their overall structure, as if like a kernel of a shell opened up.

6. TOWARDS AN EXPANDED DENSITY

The graphite drawings of 2009 allows Woo to return to painting in a new series of densely layered surfaces that are both distinguished by their forms of richly textured planes of modulated color and by an expansive interplay of overlapping surfaces. *The Antidote Number Two* and *The Antidote Number Three* (2010) are key examples of this approach. The density of line seen in the graphite drawings has melded into a dynamic field of forms that are slowly wrought through a variety of means of mark-making. The aleatory, referred to earlier in this essay, returns. However, this time it is guided by a more subdued and subtle wit of play between the merging layers and mobile movement of marks and lines. Different spaces, lines and forms present themselves. We are invited to choose a point of entering and beginning, a pathway expansive or narrow, moving here or there that may lead in one direction or another, trails off or withers away, disap-

¹² see PhD thesis, 'Momentary Word Paintings: Analyses of momentary structures as continuous presence between contemporary music, words and painting'. (RMIT, Melbourne, Australia, 2006) Part Three: 'The Ambience of Sound and Patterning - Composition of the Natural World.' pp. 36-45.

¹³ *ibid.*, p.57

¹⁴ Ian Woo, see interview with Guo-Liang Tan, pp 14

pears or opens up to emergent narrow alleyway, a path or field of momentary respite. There is no singularity of approach to picture-making but, rather, a range of techniques now applied with confidence using brush, palette knife, sponge and through techniques of application, brushing with broad, strong, long, short, straight, curving, smooth strokes or by marking, dripping, bleeding, spotting and drawing, and by a sharp distinctions between, or subtle transformation and overlapping, of forms. While these may be viewed as techniques, Woo has noted:

"I like to believe that there are two to three pictures being unfolded in each one of my paintings. I like to think that each painting has the ability to suspend its presence to enunciate the appearance of change."¹⁵

The idea of 'suspending the presence' is not unimportant to take note of, precisely because he registers not only the way of creating temporal delay but, equally, of deconstructing the idea of presence as anything more than a momentary effect. Equally, his note reminds us that ambiguity is suggested here through the possibility of different entry points. There is no fixed or singular point of entry but rather a multiplicity or many simultaneously.

Since 2011, Woo has embarked on a new body of work, large-scale paintings. In many respects, Woo has been a keen observer of his own work. *The Moving Finger* (2006) is dissembled in his more recent work from 2011. No longer do we see the movement of an agitated yet tightly-woven forms but, rather, an openness giving the canvas space the possibility to breathe expansively and move freely. *Bird See Bird Sing* (2011) appears to build a structure that is unhindered by the clamor of intersecting forms. The passages of paint seem rather to gather and build towards a centrifugal force that opens up more deeply into a virtual passage or vortex of revolving forms, restlessly moving in and out as if caught by the mounting energy gained through its own movement.

Similarly, the painting *Hobby Craft Romance* (2011) opens up spaces that unfold like clouds in the sky, recalling the painted visions of the world that El Greco, Tintoretto and Veronese would offer their audiences. In the work by Woo, the scale has significantly increased to that measuring a standing figure. Colour has lightened and the image becomes more ethereal to a point where everything appears to hover momentarily and then float unanchored, lifting off from any pull that gravity may have exercised. And yet, the layering of planes also serve to mutually stabilize the structure in a manner that recalls that of Kandinsky and the Russian constructivist paintings of Lyubov Popova and early Aleksandr Rodchenko.

I opened this essay with the suggestion that at the heart of Woo's work is the condition of chance or the aleatory that plays between deliberation and openness of form. Over the past twenty odd years, this approach has defined the core of Woo's practice as an artist and for this reason improvisation remains of an essence to its appreciation. The sense of play at once invites a viewer to engage and take pleasure in seeing the work while, offering an enticing opportunity to explore the felicitous layering and variation of surface and gesture. It would be, perhaps, the equivalent to getting lost in a city. One may begin with a sense of direction but, take a detour from the known route or direction with which the journey began. Not all are main roads, some are small, dead-ends, others man roads, each inviting for different reasons, independent of its destination. This journey then becomes not simply bounded by a planned geometry of space or map shaped by the knowledge of an end-point. Rather, to view the work of Woo is to enter a process defined by a sense of recognition and unknowingness over time. Let's play it by ear.

¹⁵ Artist statement issued for the exhibition 'Remaking Art in the Everyday' curated by Eugene Tan for Art Stage Singapore 2011

Dr. Charles Merewether is an art historian, writer and curator who has worked in Australia, Europe, Asia, the Americas and Middle East. He was Collections Curator at the Getty Center in Los Angeles from 1994 – 2004. Between 2004 – 2006, he was Artistic Director & Curator of the 2006 Biennale of Sydney and Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for Cross Cultural Research, Australian National University. In October 2007, he has been appointed Deputy Director, Cultural District for the Tourist Development and Investment Company, Abu Dhabi. He has taught at the University of Sydney, Universitat Autònoma in Barcelona, the Ibero-Americana in Mexico City and the University of Southern California, and has lectured at the Beijing Academy of Art, Lingnan University in Hong Kong and the Asia Research Center at the National University of Singapore. Merewether has published and been translated extensively while also curating over 20 major shows in Europe, USA, Latin America and Australia, as well as serving on the advisory boards of a number of biennales including Johannesburg, Istanbul and São Paulo. He is the Director of the Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore at LASALLE College of the Arts.

Guo-Liang Tan Interviews Ian Woo



GL: Your exhibition begins with a pairing of two paintings - 'Before I Give An Answer I see A Flower' (1995) and 'Two Flags' (2011). I thought the juxtaposition showed a real consistency in your visual language and pictorial concerns despite the years in-between. Did that surprise you?

IW: *I am not surprised especially if you look in terms of my interest in painting as a pluralistic device to give a sense of spatial and structural momentum. However, there are inherent differences in the way the painting has begun to reassemble itself, in search of possible space, of resemblance.*

This search for resemblance begins with my feelings that the classic notions of Abstract gestural painting as a composition device can often be seen as a historical cliché. However, I am somehow attracted to these references as starting points of enquiry towards an enigmatic gravity. The search for this enigmatic resemblance could be exemplified in the way in which hybrids of an emotive painterly mark can be juxtaposed with ones that are strategically unresponsive or even hesitant.

To further illustrate my point, I tend to find ways to arrange painting idioms so as to provoke our sense of perspectives. The earlier work ('...Flower'), which I see as an early archetype, functions like an unfolding page from some picture book, coming to life in three parts. While the latter painting ('Two Flags') has a perspective that suggests a single space, a kind of horizontal plane, where elements are found to be in various stages of change and formation.

So even if these works contain similar forms of painting devices, the final interplay between the modulation of space and perspective between the two paintings pose two different forms of representational questions.

GL: Yes, it is as if you have knowingly adopted this all too familiar gestural language in painting and transformed it into something entirely your own. I see your painting process as a kind of intuitive dialogue between different types of mark making which subsequently unfolds into spaces, things and even landscapes. In paintings like 'The Clearest Symbol' (1997), the marks appear to cluster and hover, shifting between objects and signs. How does language come into play in your work, or to borrow Barthes: Is painting a language?

IW: *You know that Spielberg movie 'Close Encounters of the Third Kind'? When they play that five note tune to communicate to the alien like a Morse code? I think my painting is a bit like that in that there is a return to the foundations of language, which in this case is this mark, one that takes off to become form, perhaps to communicate with the alien in us. It's a language that starts from the back of my head rather than the front; it's a way to reach for the unfamiliar in me and eventually to the audience. At the core of this, I really do make work for the people, but its not that kind of communication that gives the people what they want, rather what we did not know we could have.*

In relation to 'The Clearest Symbol', I was into Wittgenstein at this point; his writings about the limitations of language in relation to the things of this world. I understood them as little anecdotes that inverted the construction of sentences. So I was trying to do the same thing to this painting, to paint like the syntax of language, making objects appear and disappear from the tweaking of paint on the surface of the canvas, revealing forms that have reflexive characteristics.

GL: Painting is a language in the (un)making then? The Abstract gestural cliché often situates the mark as being authentic and deliberate but your process of mark making appears estranged and at times, doubtful. The paintings may acknowledge painterly syntax but they also point beyond language. This makes it impossible to read them in a purely expressionistic or symbolic way. Is it in anyway a conscious effort to challenge these binaries and perhaps to discomfort the viewer's expectation?

IW: *I feel like I am always starting from the beginning of language. Painting or drawing as if the act or the materials were discovered for the first time, a bit like uttering one's first sounds. It's a bit of a Beckett thing, where instead of moving ahead, we constantly find ourselves starting all over again, and again, each time yielding different results. You mentioned painting as expressionistic or symbolic, two words which I tend to relate to ideas about representation; its connection to knowledge compared to pre-knowledge, the primal, which in my position falls under the issue of non-representation. These shifts between the known and unknown pretty much sustains my interest, switching between modes. Working between absolute abstraction and its potential towards subjective forms of representation, resulting in various subversions from flatness to spatial suggestions. These attempts turn into pictorial puzzles that are waiting to be unfolded as the painting process progresses. Note that I have diverted the meaning of these words expressionistic and symbolic, which is commonly associated with abstraction to something that is representative. I think I just confused myself!*

GL: There are definitely instances in your paintings where you build up these opposing modes of representation almost to the point of collapse. Perhaps none of your earlier paintings come closer to this threshold than 'The Moving Finger' (2006). The overlapping of marks appears to be cancelling each other out, blurring the foreground and background. Spatially, it's very schizophrenic.

IW: *The 'Moving Finger' takes its reference to Rembrandt's 'Belshazzar's Feast' at The National Gallery, London. It takes its narration of a divine hand that mysteriously appears and writes in mid air, consequently telling in the form of an encoded language that King Belshazzar's time is up. I really liked the idea of an image of a metaphysical finger giving a sign, a warning. So it was mid way through making my painting that I felt that there was a collapse right in the middle of the composition which somehow had triggered this relation in shape and form to this moment in historical painting. I believe there was something about the background mood and colour in particular that reminded me about the religious paintings of the past. Again, it's the painting that informed me of this influence not the other way round. It is in no way an abstract citation of any sort, which could be hilarious.*

GL: John Berger once wrote about how in Rembrandt's paintings, there is often a serious dislocation in his representation of the physical world. He argues that Rembrandt is in fact much more interested in the subjective corporeal space than 'real' space. When I stand before a painting like 'The Moving Finger', I am drawn into and pushed out of the pictorial plane intermittently and my body becomes highly aware of this affective space.

IW: *An embodied experience. A painting after all comes as mark and trace from our state of being. So its mind, body and spirit or dare I say 'culture'? It's an acute awareness of the body's ability to translate substance into air and space within a two dimensional space. I also do think of the body's relationship to the act of looking at paintings a lot. I once mentioned that given a choice, I would rather not talk about my paintings but instead stand/sit and make bodily movements or some even guttural sounds to an audience. Of course with some of my work, I would need more than one set of heads and eyes. I really believed that that would be a better kind of communication.*

GL: Do you think this more visceral form of communication has something to do with your interest in sonic improvisation? It's not very fashionable these days to relate painting to music but Kandinsky, for example, was very influenced by Wagner and approached every point, line and plane with a kind lyricism.

IW: *Two of my favorite books are 'Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music' by Derek Bailey and another publication of writings by the composer Morton Feldman 'Give my regards to Eighth Street'. Feldman takes many references from the history of modern music and painting to make comparisons towards notions of aesthetics. These two musicians think of music more in the vein of Fine Art than your usual stuff out there. These two works were highly influential to the way I built my painting structures, especially Feldman's slow modulation of sounds being stretched across infinite time. Feldman was notorious for writing music that were highly impractical to perform, like his 'String Quartet No.2' which lasts for 6 hours!*

I have too much reverence for music's form and function to try to make any demands in putting them together. These days, when I work in the studio, I make sure that there is no music but just the sound of natural ambience. Perhaps I am suspicious of the representational relation between the aural and the visual. However, historically, I could cite various examples of visual artists using music as an accompaniment to working like Gerhard Richter listening to Glenn Gould's Goldberg Variations. But perhaps this situation could be kept a secret or private one, because of its subjective nature. The sonic is the sound of memory; a memory of place. Sound can trigger us to make up an image or sense of place. In a similar manner, an image of a certain place can inspire a certain assemblage of sounds to accompany it, an example would be incidental music used for films.

GL: Was that your approach in works like 'House' and 'Terrace' (2007)? There is a visible shift in the series of paintings from this period. For one, they operate on a much smaller scale compared to the paintings before and although you are still working within your usual painterly lexicon, the point of departure here appears to be a sense of place – or should I say the memory of a place?

IW: *I would think that the process of making the smaller works seem to involve more of a mental capacity than that of the physical. But it's really important for me to understand that the processes of working from large to domestic sizes do require different attitudes and mentalities. The way one holds a brush changes and the cognitive suddenly has a limited field of vision and foresight to play with. These pieces you are referring to are like miniature worlds that only the mind can dictate its presence. The body is too clumsy to deal with it. So perhaps you are right that memory plays a bigger part, memory of place. Place as an abstract entity. I would say that the only thing that is a constant between the larger and smaller works is this idea that painting itself is imploding beyond the edges of the picture frame.*

GL: In the larger paintings, the marks are brought very close to the surface and the experience is more physical and immersive whereas for the smaller works, the marks appear to sink further back into the pictorial space and the idea of picture making becomes more explicit. It's something that cannot be experienced through reproductions, like the ones printed here in this catalogue. A lot of artists today work with the projected image where scale is only considered after the image is constructed. For painting, this decision has to come before the making because the size of the canvas has such a direct effect on one's relationship to the image itself.

IW: *One important aspect of looking at the paintings is the importance of distance. There is a cutoff point where my paintings begin to imply spatial shifts. However, when one moves closer, the materiality takes over and you realize it is just coloured debris. With the smaller pieces, you do not need to adjust as much and one can get an overall feeling of the physics of each picture. What I mean is the variance between pictorial space and materiality has a level playing field in the smaller works compared with the larger ones.*

GL: I do see some relevance of this slight 'detour' to your more recent works, like 'The Garden' (2011). It almost reminds me of Giorgione's 'The Tempest'. While the earlier works might appear almost formalistic, the unfolding of space through mark making here seems to give way to a renewed sense of the historical by giving a nod to the 'picturesque'. I know you do not usually work from visual references but was there anything you were consciously looking at?

IW: *It's a painting where the diagonal divider was a conscious device to disorientate one's longing for the sublime in landscape. In terms of the Classical influence, it's actually more like my take on 'Indian miniatures' but it went off at some point, but what I want to emphasize is that it is important for me mentally to have this focus as a starting point when making art. It's an imaginary sense of direction, which in this case is that of a place. I wanted to paint a place I would have encountered for the first time. It's always like the first time for every painting; the first garden at the moment I was painting, like the beginning of language. So it is possible for abstraction to have a narrative quality.*

It's also not surprising that you see a reference to history painting in this work as I feel that I am using not just a pluralistic mark making device but perhaps shades of colour, form and space that proposes different historical homages. I do think about Hieronymus Bosch at the sides and maybe some of Utagawa Hiroshige's waves at the bottom half. A bit like how a deejay would sample to arrange different sounds, have you seen someone like Christian Marclay work? He prepares records in a way that changes the production of their sound ever so slightly or drastically and weaves this amazing array of improvised sound collage. I also believe that the idea of multiplied time being represented by compartments in the earlier work has evolved to become that of this palette of histories, which morph in and out of spaces. Dare I say no colour and form is innocent?

GL: On one hand, your work plays with this palette of painterly history; on the other, there is this deep fascination with a return to the beginning of language, of image making and ultimately of painting itself. As such, you appear to be working yourself into/out of history at the same time. I can't help but be reminded of a quote by John Cage:

'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.'

IW: *Yes, Cage was obviously interested in removing the personal in any work of art and he did using very extreme gestures like the 'silence' 4'33" piece. It's a wonderful quote, a parable within its time, but I believe in practice, one needs to play games in order to form distance from the private. The private is tricky business; it gets complicated with fleeting emotions, emotions are like temporary concepts. Any concept from reality needs to be suspected if taken as an immediate transfer to a work of art. Otherwise you are looking at a private journal. That is all together another story. Literally. So I like the idea of the practice of art as an equivalent to a removal of private associations of history layer by layer and I believe that the end where Cage talks about having nothing left but the work of art deals with his interest in indeterminacy.*

I see painting and drawing as the element that is a carrier of history. My role is a viewer and negotiator, which is why I tend to use the term 'beginning of language' because I am constantly waiting for painting to reveal itself as a starting point towards the reframing of our cognitive desires. These are developments within contemporary painting that have been taking shape the last 20 years especially if one were to take Richter's distortion of photo imagery as a presentation of confusion, using methods of disorientation as a starting point to deal with the crisis of representation. I believe these

kinds of awareness provides a kind of affirmation that skepticism in painting as a reflexive language would be an ongoing process to do with the renewal of looking at ideas of representation and memory in painting, resulting in different ways in which the culture of recognizing and forgetting becomes a key criteria in the reading the phenomena of any sort of constructed image.

GL: I might be wrong to say this but this crisis of representation you are talking about, particularly in the context of painting, could be said to be a very Eurocentric one? It would appear to me that for many, it is still possible to paint in this part of the world without acknowledging the problematics of representation, or without a kind of postmodern skepticism. Historically, painters from the region are more concerned with developing a pictorial language that has much more to do with visual style than in being self-reflexive. In some ways, the ambiguity in your paintings isn't simply pictorial but also cultural.

IW: Perhaps I will start responding to this question by referring to Malaya and Singapore's early modernist painters like the Nanyang artists. Here we have early examples of artists that had opportunities to travel to Europe and were using the vocabulary of western painting to express regional matters. A good example would be the artist Yeh Chi Wei who was a very good realist painter in his early years but as soon as he could travel, he suddenly became curious beyond matters concerning representation. He later returns to Singapore making paintings that had a strange mix of cubist and symbolic content. But more importantly, the painting became more about paint, texture and visual poetry. The issue of representation became less of a burden; instead what we have is a kind of pictorial play that suggested the concept of a visual question rather than providing the viewers with simply an answer. Like how he would paint figures and objects using their forms to intermingle and suggest ambiguous relationships between the subjective and objective. So in a sense to move out of the country was a critical thing that challenges what one believes in. Knowledge and experience makes you reassess your responsibilities and awareness to your art. The idea of education and archiving that I know of is a Western model and I cannot refuse it once the apple is partaken. Perhaps that is where much of its skepticism comes from. But I do not see these qualities as associated to skepticism when I make work, but rather a quest of pictorial language between the primal and the contemporary status of being and time. I also feel that the idea of information being available electronically these days are changing the way we are influenced, one could access a range of artistic information, examples and I guess when you mention post modernism, this is what I am thinking about – the speed in which we can see and understand information within compressed time frames. So as long as one is an artist that uses the net as a source, you cannot avoid being naive about what has happened before and around the world. I also feel that if one is interested in contemporary art practice, then one needs to be familiar with some stop points as references. This may not simply be about looking at current art works, but it could be films, music, philosophy, fiction, the newspapers, your bedroom, backyard, etc. Of course, to be unaware is not a bad thing and it would be unfair to say a Sunday painter is not aware of contemporary art, the question is whether they feel it is important to their lives and if they would like to risk spending time, asking these questions about their art. By the way, isn't painting a still life a reflexive thing? It's quoting history again and again. There is a term 'semi abstract' that actually refers to what you stated as problems of representation, it's a term used loosely without really going into intellectual territory. Many leisure painters use this term, perhaps in reference to being semi-conscious! So, we are familiar with the situation but perhaps are not interested in pondering or articulating its relevance to the way we see images. We simply have no time for such things! Friends tell me that when you have too much time on your hands, you start to make this thing called contemporary art! I don't know, perhaps if I was not involved in art education, I might not be thinking about such matters.

GL: I think we should all spend more time going beyond the 'semi-abstract'! Perhaps it is unfair to pose the question of geography to painting alone since many contemporary modes of production in the region often mirror those in the West. It's not about dealing with this burden of history and culture superficially on a representational level but going right down to the fundamental level of making. In painting, you can't escape this burden. It's there even before you paint and yet, the work demands that you work through it, with a careful measure of remembrance and ignorance.

IW: 'Careful measure' to forget – I am thinking of your earlier Cage quote, I think when I start a piece of work – the blank canvas, I would rather like to have a mindset of; 'the sooner I forget (history), the better'. But once I start work, it slowly comes back haunting me. Then it's really a matter of setting up the right mousetraps in the right places.

Guo-Liang Tan is a visual artist whose practice revolves around the problematics of painting and issues of representation. Alongside his own work, he also collaborates regularly with other artists and art spaces on publications and exhibitions including 'Aversions' (2009) published by Usage Gallery and 'We Who Saw Signs' (2011) at Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore.



PAINTINGS AND WORKS ON PAPER
1995 – 2011



The Fantastic Painting
1995
Oil on canvas
196 x 150 cm
Private collection



Before I Give An Answer I See A Flower
1995
Oil on canvas
200 x 180 cm
Private collection



Sleep
1995
Pencil on paper
33 x 27 cm
Private collection



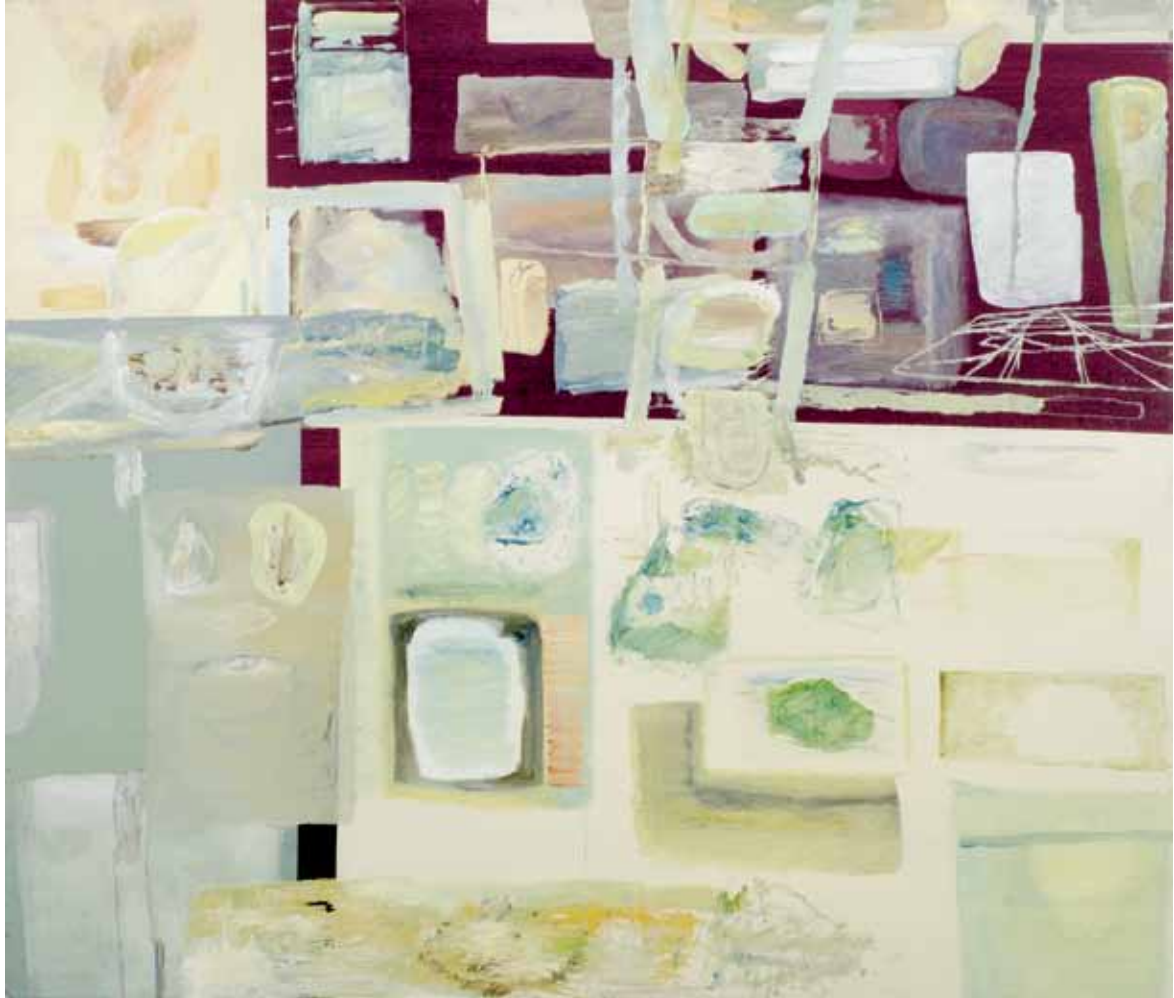
The Uneasy Centre of The Porcelain Cloud
1995
Oil on canvas
Diptych, 50 x 100 cm each
Private collection



The Clearest Symbol
1997
Oil on canvas
90 x 110 cm
Private collection



Wall of Fiction
1997
Oil on canvas
92 x 61 cm
Private collection



When An Angel Spreads Its Wings
1998
Oil on canvas
150 x 176 cm
Singapore Management University collection



Fluctuations
1999
Acrylic on canvas
120 x 120 cm
Private collection



Lake in Small Study Room
1998
Acrylic on canvas
61 x 51 cm
Private collection



Frozen
1998
Acrylic on canvas
61 x 51 cm
Private collection



The Great Interiors
2000
Acrylic on linen
160 x 170 cm
Singapore Management University collection



The Art of Painting and Moving Air
2000
Acrylic on linen
Diptych, 116 x 87 cm each
Public collection, Private collection



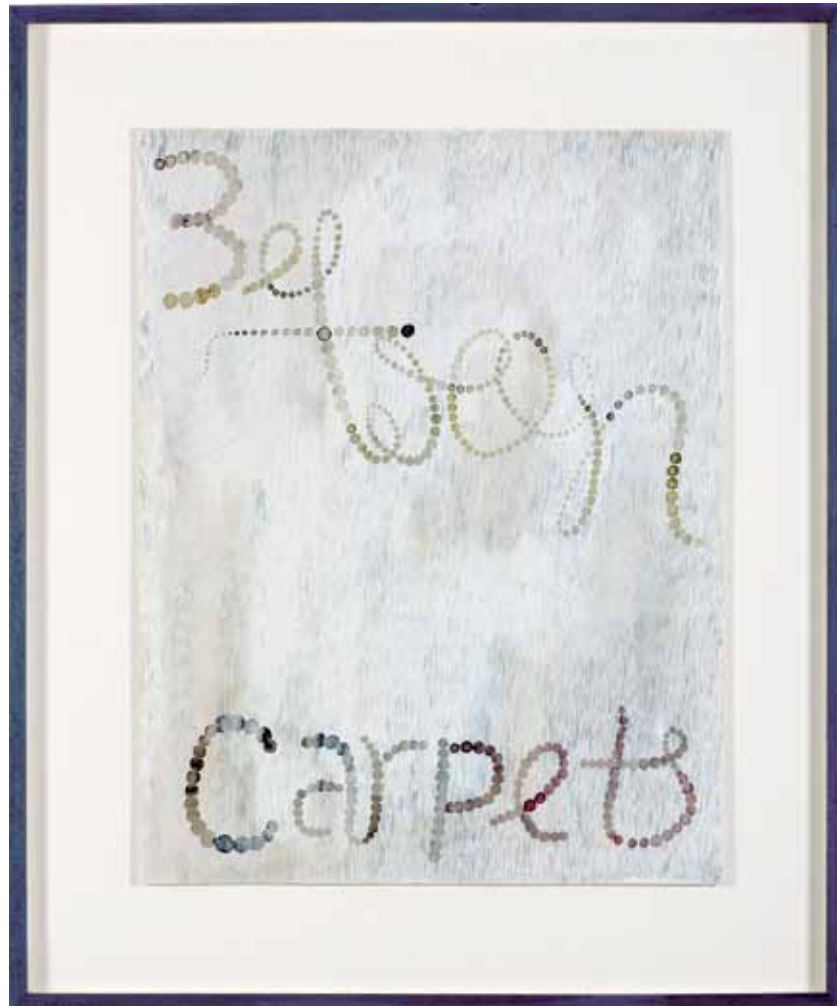
Mental, Health and Being
2001
Oil on canvas
156 x 101 cm
Private collection



Madness Precedence and Beauty
2001
Oil on canvas
120 x 120 cm
Private collection



Lizard Surprise
2002
Watercolour and gouache on paper
66 x 51 cm
Private collection



Between Carpets
2002
Watercolour and gouache on paper
66 x 51 cm
Private collection



Ego
2003
Watercolour and gouache on paper
66 x 51 cm
Private collection



The Infinite Landscape
2003
Watercolour and gouache on paper
66 x 51 cm
Private collection



Across The Lake There Is Fire
2005
Oil on canvas
160 x 170 cm
Singapore Art Museum collection



Shopping For Bargains As We Watch The Sunset
2005
Oil on canvas
160 x 170 cm
Singapore Management University collection



Forest Noise
2004
Acrylic on paper
19 x 31.3 cm
Private collection



The Moving Finger
2006
Oil on canvas
154 x 122 cm
Private collection



House
2007
Acrylic on canvas
21 x 32 cm
Private collection



Terrace
2007
Acrylic on canvas
23 x 36 cm
Private collection



Blood Epic
2008
Acrylic on canvas
25.5 x 43 cm
Private collection



Prog Rock Number One
2008
Acrylic on canvas
30 x 57 cm
Private collection



Lake Fluorescent Cake Surprise
2008
Acrylic on canvas
71 x 69 cm
Private collection



Total Recall
2008
Acrylic on canvas
46 x 61 cm
Private collection



Hypothetical Draft With Flowers
2008
Acrylic on canvas
91 x 122 cm
Private collection



Harvest
2008
Acrylic on canvas
76 x 76 cm
Private collection



Warp
2009
Acrylic on canvas
150 x 176 cm
Private collection



The Negotiated Turn Of The Century
2009
Acrylic on canvas
160 x 170 cm
Private collection



We Have Crossed The Lake
2009
Acrylic on linen
194 x 244 cm
Private collection



Jazz Rock Special
2008
Pencil and watercolour on paper
20.5 x 13.3 cm, with torn left side
Private collection



Lot sees salt (Neck)
2009
Series
Graphite on paper
Cropped variable height
approximately 190 till 210 cm x 150 cm width
Singapore Art Museum collection



Lot sees salt (First Heart)
2009
Series
Graphite on paper
Cropped variable height
approximately 190 till 210 cm x 150 cm width
Singapore Art Museum collection



Lot sees salt (Wing)
2009
Series
Graphite on paper
Cropped variable height
approximately 190 till 210 cm x 150 cm width
Singapore Art Museum collection



Lot sees salt (Head)
2009
Series
Graphite on paper
Cropped variable height
approximately 190 till 210 cm x 150 cm width
Singapore Art Museum collection



The Antidote Number One
2010
Acrylic on linen
60 x 50 cm
Private collection



The Antidote Number Three
2010
Acrylic on linen
122 x 91 cm
Private collection



The Antidote Number Two
2010
Acrylic on linen
110 x 76.2 cm
Private collection



Digital Acid
2010
Acrylic on linen
122 x 91 cm
Private collection



The Garden
2011
Acrylic on canvas
60 x 46 cm
Private collection



Two Flags
2011
Acrylic on linen
200 x 180 cm
Private collection



Fire At Gigabyte Mountain
2011
Acrylic on linen
250 x 200 cm
Public collection



Hobby Craft Romance
2011
Acrylic on linen
250 x 200 cm
Private collection



Bird See Bird Sing
2011
Acrylic on linen
250 x 200 cm
Private collection

CLOSER TO THE SURFACE: Questions and answers about the function of painting and that which implodes

(A conversation between Ian Woo and Ian Woo)

The assemblage of questions and views discussed in this interview were based on actual questions and responses that have, at some point of time, been posed to the artist by various individuals ranging from curators, collectors, dealers, journalists to audiences in the last sixteen years.



Part 1

I.W: What is the function of image in your paintings?

Ian Woo: *Static memory.*

I.W: What does it represent?

Ian Woo: *The image represents the memory of embodiment; imploding and suspended.*

I.W: But there is no body in your painting.

Ian Woo: *Yes, metaphorically there is, traces of it. Remember, it is a painting; it cannot be a body again. You are the body looking at it. Maybe the painting functions as a mirror when I am painting it. But, hang on, if it is a carrier of memories and trace, then maybe it is also a body? An alien body, a machine perhaps, one with its own time and space.*

Part 2

I.W: Is your work chaotic? It seems like there is an impression of abstract objects and spaces but it just goes off tangent within the picture. There are parts in the painting where the logic of illusory space collides and surprises, there is also a sense that there are many levels of the reading where changes in the development of spatial logic are challenged and complex.

Ian Woo: *It seems to be chaotic, but the process of making them is not. I paint close-up, consciously negotiating placement of substances. I believe that I am packing and unpacking things. Sometimes these things carry weight, they are at times light and may dissolve while unpacking. But more importantly, they reflect light against each other. I think when you suggest that it is chaotic, you are referring to the whole of the painting. It is perhaps formless; it questions the viewer in us. Inviting you to be a part of it, to fulfill its formlessness, to enter a relationship with it.*

I.W: So in the process of picture composition, you are not conscious of how it looks as a whole? That seems impossible, it is as if you negate any sense of proximity or visual judgment.

Ian Woo: *It's a game of indeterminacy. I would say I have a subconscious reliance on the memory of the overall painting structure when I am painting up close or zoning in on certain parts. I only become conscious of the whole when I step back, when the details start to lose their criticality. Distance and awareness are momentary. I use this to-and-fro mapping device to find new gravitational structure between matter and space. This happens most with the medium- to larger-scale works and with the smaller works when this separation starts to merge. I once heard that the painter Monet painted very close to his canvas nearing the end of his life. At a certain point, he would step back and the painting would be completed, which suggests that he never stepped back to check his composition. I do not know how true this is, perhaps it is fiction, but I love it. I would like to believe it is true.*

I.W: It takes you to the other side?

Ian Woo: Yes.

I.W: What is the function of painting?

Ian Woo: *I would like to think its initial function would be as an phenomenological mirror that is placed on the walls suggesting a framing of our visual aspirations for private domestic spaces, then perhaps the institutions, like the church and the temple. I then think about the early cave paintings, which in a sense makes me think of the frame as the physical presence of the cave itself. It is found that the denser and more populated the cave paintings were, the more resonant the sound and echo in the cave where the paintings were found. This was a suggestion that the people who painted them were singing or making some kind of body sounds. So there is a correlation and impact of sound and space, which triggers how the body desires to draw or make semblance of the things of the world. But if we are to say that painting came before the camera, then, painting is to capture time and space. Of course, history has revealed that the idea of a painting as picture has become really fluid, curving outwards and concaving between the illusory semblance of a portal to that of an absolute plane and finally returning as an object itself. In the last 15 years, we see this in the form of the above hybrids, restaging the various historical characteristics of painting as a conceptual framing device.*

I.W: So is your painting a hybrid of these characteristics?

Ian Woo: *I like to think that it is about picture-making, one, which draws upon the influence of boundaries that govern the way, we look at modern paintings. The flat plane acting as a page-turner, as static motion, a portion of still-life, of a place and perhaps makes its way back to the realization of painting as an object.*

I.W: Don't you think this is demanding of the viewer?

Ian Woo: *No, I do not think it is essential that the audience sees and understands these ideas to appreciate the work. In fact, these ideas are my problems, the audience does not need to know my problems to appreciate the work. They are separate responsibilities. These are simply ideas that keep me focused on the process of painting; they are like routes that one takes as a kind of meditation, routes that constantly change their course.*

I.W: Change as in modulation?

Ian Woo: *Change as in modulation of colour, tweaking its tonality, seeing how it affects the overall scheme of the picture. It relates to what Cézanne did early on with his still-life painting where he was searching for a fictitious light, not representing what was light which lasted for a couple of hours. Instead he kept changing the painting's appearance, which had nothing to do with illustrating reality. The painting had its own inner logic, a life of its own. It was also a search for non-colour, subtle shifts in colour combinations that resulted in various greys, almost like colour was only hinted and dissolving back into the picture space. Change in my painting is sudden, slow and at times hovering, suspended. Taking me on a trip.*

I.W: It strikes me that your painting seems to resemble a machine that takes the viewer on a journey, which uses the fragmentation of memory as a signaling device that at some point resembles parts of reality and then disappears.

Ian Woo: *Signaling device? I used to be a signaler in the army, but at this moment I am thinking that it is a bit like swim-*

ming in unknown waters and then getting up to the surface and realising where you are. Or you think you know where, so there is this constant adjustment due to momentary disorientation.

I.W: It is interesting you mentioned about water. Your interest in the body also relates to the beginning of the memory of the body as a form in the womb, which is an environment associated with water. Do you feel that this has anything to do with your obsession for a constant return to the beginning of language whenever you make art?

Ian Woo: *It is a nice idea and one that situates memory in its most abstract sensuous form. I see the womb similar to a cave; it has its own sounds. But this is still a mystery, a good thing though. Perhaps we should stop here before we get too close to the surface?*

I.W: Not yet. Why is upholding an element of mystery a good thing?

Ian Woo: *Perhaps, it is mysterious only in relation to the language we understand. If I could use other faculties of the body to communicate the work I would probably do so.*

I.W: Perhaps you should.

Ian Woo: *But I think the faculties of my body are limited. It would conjure other sets of language problems. There would be a misunderstanding that the painting or drawing represents my body. Which it really doesn't.*

I.W: But your work deals with abstraction and re-combinations of representations, perhaps you cannot avoid misunderstandings or misinterpretations. The work does veer towards strangeness.

Ian Woo: *I like misunderstandings. I think the world is one big misunderstanding. Remember we talked about the experience of being under unknown waters and then emerging to a different reality? I think the two realities are actually similar in that they are both strange, and the difference is that we are used to one more than the other.*

Part 3

I.W: Lets talk about the works on paper. They contain parallel ideas in terms of the mark-making and shifting between forms and the formless, but the medium does make them have a fragile quality, which is emphasized in opposition to the paintings.

Ian Woo: *I think paper is a problematic material. It just has a shorter life span and it buckles and has its own life in terms of dealing with this weather, so I just went with the way it is; just work and present it in all its inconsistencies. The mark or drawing on paper really extends beyond the pictorial, you see where the marking leaves and affects the paper curvature, especially with water. In the graphite work, no erasure is used, no corrections. So there is a kind of adding on focus to how the structure is coming together. There isn't much of a surprise at the end. While the paintings have a kind of shift and morphing towards the point of resolution. The works on paper are immediate and kind of stay that way until embellishments make them look right.*

I.W: But they are also monochromatic, like they are from another time. Are they fossils of the paintings?

Ian Woo: *The larger drawings are monochromatic because colour just did not work. I tried several versions and then the greys just worked with the paper. It's the memory of this hypothetical draft or schematic I am making in reference to the painting structures. But you realize that they are only one structure smack in the middle, not multiplied, like they are samples or may be like you said fossils of specimens.*

I.W: The works on paper contain specimens from another time, making the paintings have a presence, a currency.

Ian Woo: *Mummified structures.*

I.W: But the coloured water colour and gouache pieces do contain some erasure.

Ian Woo: *Yes, they function more like the paintings, but lighter. Dreams. Domestic convergences and disruptions, I was reading Murakami's "The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle" as well as listening to the composer Toru Takemitsu during the period between 2002 and 2003. I was also thinking about design in an organic way, like typography done by hand. I like the idea of the handmade. Believing that I was making posters for some unrealized movies, with an unrealized score.*

I.W: Interesting relationship between a Japanese composer and a writer both influenced respectively by early Modernist European music and American writing. Takemitsu went against the grain of the Nationalistic and had a hard time with the Japanese artists, especially those younger than him. But the Japanese are so extreme; they can assimilate anything and yet still find themselves in it!

Ian Woo: *Yes, speaking of which, I am still a sucker for Edo period paintings and all that decorative idealisms. I think you experience an extreme take on the function of art with them. Always extreme. I remember my first trip to Tokyo, where we (my family) landed in the night and proceeded to travel in a car, where I looked out at the city and saw all these strange signs and black grey buildings. It was a mixture of bewilderment and fear. I felt I did not have to travel out of planet earth to find alien culture, that was it!*

But I think your question has to do with identity and influence. So how does one keep getting interested in so much art? I mean you need to find your own style?

I will say, stop lying to yourself that you are original. I think it's just a shifting of frames. If I did a copy of the Japanese Edo painting, even if it is an extreme copy, there must be something that is different. It is like those Asian bar bands that play copy versions of popular tribute bands from the West. It is always at some point a bit perverse. The closer it is, the more perverse it becomes.

But no, I do not intend to do a copy of Edo period paintings, at least not now.

I.W: Is your work perverse?

Ian Woo: *No, it is not my intention. But if it were, it would be an after-thought rather than intention. However, if one were to think about the idea of abstraction as a borrowed idea and taken away from its context of absolutism, perhaps then my work is perverse in that I have made them to be representational of things; things of strange realities.*

I.W: I think that would be my last question. Thank you for taking the time to do this.

Ian Woo: *No. Thank you for spending the time to do this.*

Ian Woo was born in 1967 in Singapore where he currently works and lives. He began his studies at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts in 1988. Between 1993 and 1995, he went on to complete his Bachelors of Art at the Kent Institute of Art and Design followed by his Masters in European Fine Art at the Winchester School of Art. His first individual exhibition in Singapore was in the year 2000 and since then he has exhibited both internationally and regionally, with acquisitions of his works by major institutions like ABN AMRO, Singapore Art Museum, Singapore Management University, Istana Singapore, UBS, United Overseas Bank, and the Mint Museum of Craft & Design. Woo was recipient of the UOB Painting of The Year award in the Abstract category in 1999. Subsequently, he was the Juror's Choice for two consecutive years in South East Asia's Philip Morris Art Award in 1999 and 2000. His Doctorate research from the RMIT University focuses in the language of abstract painting to possess the ability to express notions of a continuous presence. Ideas pertaining to the incidental and that of spatial change remain pivotal influences to his work.



BIOGRAPHY



Ian Woo

Born 1967 in Singapore
Lives in Singapore

Education

2006 Doctor in Fine Art, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, Melbourne, Australia
1995 Masters in European Fine Art, Painting, Winchester School of Art, Winchester, England/Barcelona, Spain
1994 Bachelors in Fine Art, Honours, Painting, Kent Institute of Art and Design, Canterbury, England
1991 Diploma in Fine Art, Painting, Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, Singapore

Selected Individual Exhibitions

2011 *Ian Woo, A Review 1995-2011*, Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore, Singapore
2009 *Flux Technicolour*, Watergate Gallery, Seoul
Flux Technicolour, HT Contemporary Space, Singapore
2008 *The Thing It Saw*, Plastique Kinetic Worms, Singapore
2006 *Everything That Went Before This*, The Substation Gallery, Singapore

Selected Group Exhibitions

2012 *Encounter: The Royal Academy of Asia*, Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore, Singapore
Panorama: Recent Art From Contemporary Asia, Singapore Art Museum, Singapore
2011 *Nine*, Institute of Contemporary Art Singapore, Singapore
Remaking Art In The Everyday, Art Stage Singapore, Marina Bay Sands, Singapore
Sovereign Asian Art Prize Exhibition, The Rotunda, Exchange Square, Hong Kong
2009 *Found And Lost*, Osage Gallery, Singapore
Space For Perspective, Changart Gallery, Beijing
From Left To Right And Right To East, T1 Project Space, University of Huddersfield, The Huddersfield Art Gallery, Huddersfield
2008 *Showcase Singapore*, City Hall, Singapore
Always Here But Not Always Present: Art In A Senseless World, Singapore Management University, Singapore
2007 *The Extraordinary Tales Of Skylarking*, Jendela, Singapore
Black Is Not The Darkest Colour, La Liberia, Singapore
2006 *Zhong Biao. Ian Woo, ARCO*, Feria Internacional de Arte Contemporaneo, Parque Ferial Juan Carlos I, Madrid
2005 *The Art Of Collaboration: Masterpieces Of Modern Tapestry From The Tapestry Workshop*, Singapore Tyler Print Institute, Singapore

Exhibition Catalogues

Flux Technicolour. Text by Howard Rutkowski. Interview with the artist by Mary Dinaburg. Fortune Cookie Projects 2009
From Left To Right, Right To East. Text by Steve Swindells. University of Huddersfield 2009
The Thing It Saw. Interview with the artist by Lawrence Chin. Text by Lawrence Chin and Lim Kok Boon. Plastique Kinetic Worms 2008
Everything That Went Before This. Interview with the artist by Beth Harland. The Substation Gallery 2006

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Awards

2010 Sovereign Asian Art Prize Finalist
2000 Juror's Choice, Philip Morris Group of Companies ASEAN Art Awards
1999 Juror's Choice, Philip Morris Group of Companies Singapore Art Awards
1999 Category Winner of the Abstract Medium, The 18th UOB Painting of the Year Art Competition

Public Collections

ABN AMRO Singapore
The Istana Singapore
National Library Board, Singapore
National University Singapore Business School, Singapore
The Mint Museum of Craft and Design, North Carolina, USA
Prudential Portfolio Managers Asia, Singapore
Singapore Art Museum
Singapore Management University
Swissotel The Stamford Hotel, Singapore
UBS Singapore
United Overseas Bank Singapore



Installation shot, ICA Gallery 1



