# FAUX
## IVAN LAM

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# IVAN LAM - FAUX

"We live in a world where there is more and more information, and less and less meaning."

Jean Baudrillard, *The Precession of Simulacra*

Ivan Lam's latest body of work is part of an on-going exploration into themes around authorship, the role of the artist, chance, and authenticity, which has pre-occupied the artist in his trajectory since his departure from painting with the *Vanity Project X* series. In this new series, *FAUX*, he challenges us to look beyond the image, beyond the superficial immediacy of what our preconceptions dictate. What is real? What is artificial? What is the symbolic meaning we attribute to icons and objects?

The starting point for this series is the copy itself: the photo of a Sunday flower arrangement for church taken over a sequence of weeks. The creator or author of the flower arrangement is the artist's mother; the documenter of the floral arrangement via a photo, his sister, to share in a family WhatsApp group; the documenter of the document (the photo), the artist. Never having viewed the original flower arrangement, and guided only by the photograph, Ivan set about creating his own reproduction of the image through painting – thus marking a

return to the medium, although, crucially, via oil paints: a material which the artist has not touched in 20 years. Each painting is elevated into a diptych, through juxtaposing it against an astoundingly realistic copy of different types of marble stone. The juxtaposition of two images in one work, and the use of resin to homogenize the work with its sumptuous sheen, are two hallmarks of Ivan's practice which have endured, and which, in this latest series, take on a further complexity and significance.

The idea behind the process of the series calls into question the authorship of the works – whose work is the 'real' work. The original work – the arrangement of alter flowers, alms bag and two chalices – are an offering to worship. The flowers are symbolic of our ephemeral nature and of the new life of Christ; the chalices represent the Eucharist, and the alms bag a reminder of charity. The photograph serves as a record of the weekly flower arrangement, whilst the painting evokes the genre of still life, which rose to prominence in the 16th century, particularly amongst the Dutch and Flemish masters. The genesis of Renaissance still life was to convey religious or spiritual meaning through inanimate signs or icons. In a canny gesture, Ivan has deliberately chosen the medium most associated with still life – oil painting – to paint the photograph. He has also employed techniques from this time.

The very act of painting an unfamiliar genre in an unfamiliar and complex medium is characteristic of Ivan in his predilection to undertake a challenge where other artists would shy away. The first few paintings in the series – e.g. *Just for You* and *Always Waiting* were based on simpler flower arrangements. Ivan has applied the paint in seemingly more singular gestures; colours appear more solid, almost hyper-real, personal style is effaced, and authorship is subverted in the name of technical reproduction. Other paintings such as *Inspirations* depict more complex flower arrangements, and are more painterly in style, teeming with texture and depth, and allude to the earlier works of the Impressionist Paul Cezanne. It is ironic, however, that these painterly elements were applied in relation to recreating the effects of the technical reproduction of the photograph. When the original image (intended only for viewing through a mobile phone screen) was magnified to serve as a reference during the painting process, the low resolution caused pixilation and blurred/patchy effect. In order to recreate this, Ivan deliberately made the application of paint corresponding to this pixilated part more diffuse and almost abstract through a more painterly style. In doing so, the hand of authorship appears to be creeping in.

Chance also interplays in the work. The reaction of resin when applied against the as-yet-undried oil paint creates a tempest-like halo effect around the flowers in *Tempus Fugit*, evoking chiaroscuro (the bold contrast between light

and dark), an oil painting technique dating to the Renaissance. The profusion of colour, formal arrangement and the contrasting marble colouration also imbues a variation in the mood of the painting: some like Inspirations are joyful; some like Just for You are more austere and allude more strongly to the piety of worship.

In his seminal work *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Walter Benjamin describes the history of changes in art over the modern age. Examining the notions of copy and authorship raised by Ivan in his work, through the lens of Benjamin's ideas make for an interesting comparison.

Benjamin's premise is that the work of art has a "unique existence in the place where it is at that moment," and thus an authenticity, which he dubbed as the aura of the work. Photographic reproduction removes a work's aura, as the object it is no longer unique. In doing so, the work's authenticity, and, by consequence singular authority, is also effaced.

For Benjamin, perception of the original work of art is mainly one of contemplation and involves domination by the author, whereby the work of art absorbs the audience. When the original work is perceived through the camera lens and not the human eye, our perception is guided towards specific points,

whilst leaving out others. Through the reproduced image, contemplation is turned into distraction – the audience absorbs the work of art, and their thoughts are displaced by moving images, stopping them from thinking.

In Ivan's series, the original arrangement of flowers and other religious icons authored by the artist's mother can be considered as the original work. This work is essentially an act of worship, and the contemplation that it invites is a religious one. However, when the authentic flower arrangement becomes a WhatsApp image disseminated to many, it loses its aura, its authenticity and authority is essentially reduced – it becomes a bunch of flowers in a church. The perception it invites is one of distraction. As Benjamin writes "the public is an examiner, but an absent-minded one." This statement is particularly pertinent when applied to the mode of WhatsApp (or any other social media) where we are constantly on, but never fully engaged.

By creating a painting of a photograph, Ivan is inverting the reproduction process, transforming the copy, with its reduced authenticity and authority, back into a unique work of art. However, the work is further altered through incorporation of the additional elements, such as the marble diptych, rendering the work its own unique aura, with a different set of enquiries.

Meaning and the displacement of it via the proliferation of copies is also explored in Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulacra. Baudrillard defined three orders of simulacra: 1) where the image is recognized as a place maker for the real, which he associated with pre-modern time e.g. Renaissance painting. 2) where distinctions between the image and representation began to blur, where imitation masks the underlying reality so well, it threatens to displace it, thanks to mass production and the proliferation of copies i.e. photography and 3) the third where we are "confronted with a *precession* of simulacra; that is, the representation *precedes* and *determines* the real. There is no longer any distinction between reality and its representation; there is only the simulacrum." As Baudrillard writes: "it is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real."

In Ivan's series, the reality of the floral arrangement is deliberately substituted for the pixelated reality, of the mass-produced, unreal image of commoditized aesthetic production. The work is no longer an offering of worship, it is a copy of a copy. It is no longer an arrangement of religious icons, loaded with biblical association and significance, it is an artwork. Baudrillard argues that in the post-modern world, we have lost the ability to make the distinction between nature and artifice, between reality and representation. Similarly, Ivan's paintings force us to confront what is real and what is artificial.

The beautiful arrangement of hues and grains of the marble abstractions appear man made; yet it is a mineral rock. Its depiction is so lifelike the viewer might be forgiven for thinking the work to be incredibly heavy; yet it is artifice, created through an arduous process of superimposing a photographic film of an image of marble onto the canvas. Marble also provides aesthetic, formal and art historical counterpoints to the painting. Aesthetic, through highlighting colour and shape in the painting; art historical, as marble was the medium of many Renaissance sculptors, and has a long tradition in religious iconography; and finally, formal, as marble's longevity and density contrasts directly with the ephemeral nature of flowers, its lightness, its life. Ivan is artful in his use of marble; he elevates it from artistic medium to the artwork itself and the grains appear like beautiful abstract paintings evoking artists such as Clifford Still. These dichotomous counterpoints unify the two halves of the work into a coherent whole.

The dichotomous nature of Ivan's work is also evinced in the artist's trademark use of resin. The material, originally intended to provide a protective glaze to the surface, is extremely fragile. Its glossy sheen both beguiles and resists; our gaze is irresistibly drawn to it, yet it is literally reflected, avoiding scrutiny. In this series, resin dramatizes the 'realness' of marble thus plays a part in the subterfuge of reality through artifice. The deployment of resin, the very last part

of a long and complex process in creating the work, so supremely completes its transformation, demolishing any bearing to almost any type of tradition the work invokes – religiosity, the cultic or auratic qualities of art, and still life amongst others. Its glossy immutability is a mask, or a portal to another deeper perception, invoking an aphorism of Aldous Huxley: "There are things known and there are things unknown, and in between are the doors of perception."
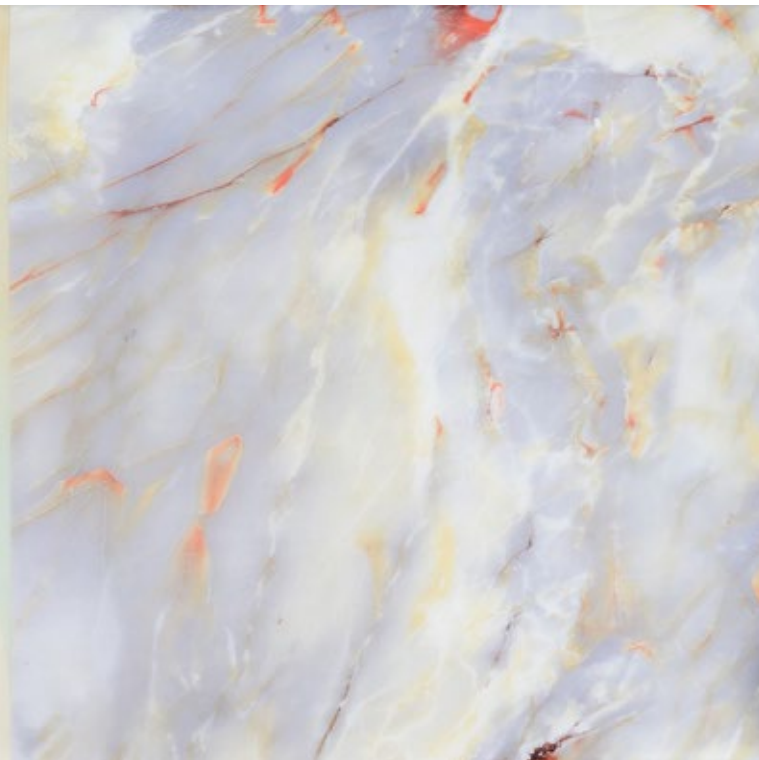

Gowri Balasegaram
February 2019

**Always Waiting** (2018) | Oil on canvas and Bianco Sivec marble; 75 x 150 x 8cm

**At Your Good Service** (2018) | Oil on canvas and Pentelic marble; 75 x 150 x 8cm

**Be Thankful** (2018) | Oil on canvas and Sylacauga marble; 75 x 150 x 8cm

**Dedication** (2018) | Oil on canvas and Athena red marble; 75 x 150 x 8cm

**Depending On You** (2018) | Oil on canvas and Ruskeala marble; 75 x 150 x 8cm

**Inspirations** (2018) | Oil on canvas and Giallo Cleopatra marble; 75 x 150 x 8cm

**Just For You** (2018) | Oil on canvas and Vermont marble; 75 x 150 x 8cm

**Looking Up to You** (2018) | Oil on canvas and Onice Verde marble; 75 x 150 x 8cm

**Tempus Fugit** (2018) | Oil on canvas and Aurelio Yellow marble; 75 x 150 x 8cm
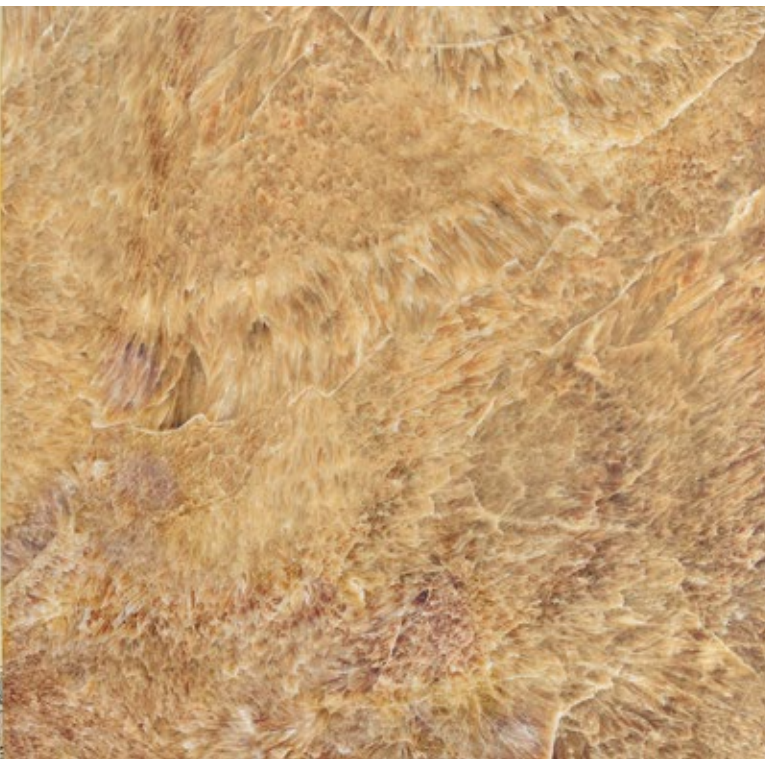
*To my loving mother; without whom
none of these pieces would have been made.*