

After All These Years, 2007

IVAN LAM – Getting Past Pushing Paint Around the Canvas

Ivan Lam on Painting... So Far

Ivan Lam's paintings are a sure form of figurative abstraction, a repetitive method of trial and error and the reliance on precise method that furnishes the viewer with a visual paradigm of subtly balanced areas of colors and geometric formulations.

To describe Ivan's body of work as contained, predetermined formulas, albeit remarkably successful ones, and always obviously labored, is apt to do them injustice...

In spite a very constant view of Design and new technologies – Ivan is acutely aware of art histories and traditions which, combined with his fascination with editing the icons of today, as well as an inventive use of color, brings to all his work a warm connection which seems at odds with their very considered execution.

From the earliest light boxes which relied on silkscreen transfers in positives and negatives of black and white and grey from over a decade ago to the painterly colorscales of this current exhibition.

Yet Ivan Lam's works possess an enormous sense of pictorial means and emotive strength in spite of a palette and bravura that refuses to rest on any sort of expressionist skill.

His calling has always been toward an innovative and mechanized combination of painstaking understanding and innovation of new technologies within the contexts of older mediums, popular iconography and a constant calling toward a painting style that might be referred to as organic forms against hard edged backdrops.

At a period within our Malaysian art movement where the dominance of painting due to art historical factors and contemporary realities such as the art market is demanding its supply, Ivan Lam refuses to be a picture-maker who is content to push paint around the canvas.

His intent – flagrantly entwined in the contemporary narrative - is to say new things by reinventing the painting medium in striving for a visual language that is distinctly his own.

As a consequence, Ivan Lam is giving Malaysian art - audiences and practitioners, a style of work and process unlike any other which is immediately familiar to Kuala Lumpur.

While there certainly is a preference with many Malaysian contemporary painters at this moment to explore the relationship between text and icon; Ivan's versions have mostly resisted the expressionist drama of drip and splatter for their drama.

A consummate explorer of style and effect, paintings like *Eye* (1996) and *Gray Target* (1996) may have, very briefly, pondered on gesture and drip as background device, Ivan quickly finds his forte in the cool and calculated sense of compositional patterning in mixed media works like *Breakfast* (1997) or *Corner* (1997) to convey meanings through the artifacts and icons and signage in his bold color paintings.

In these paintings, the editing of the image and their arrangement are secondary to the design and formal considerations of color. The viewer brings to their interpretation whatever each symbol or signifier means to them.

Works that follow like *Cross-Eyed* (1998) are broken down further, simply reveling in the act of choosing images for the silkscreen and putting them together in random play of symbology and very personal autobiography. It is almost as if the story the artist is interested in is more tied into how the work is made.

Furthermore because the final image of most of Ivan's series of works have become so simplified, so lean, so distilled and markedly minimal in character, one is less aware of the painstaking method of layers and drawing that go into all his works even those which rely on the silk screen which has set him up as one of the more unsung, innovative modern Malaysian printmakers.

But Ivan is certainly not a minimalist.

His ability to convey abstraction in spite of using recognizable forms, symbols and motifs for their geometrics have always been meant to communicate.

The added dimension of pushing the limits of the silk-screen not only from the point of view of scale and technique but also innovative applications on new surfaces like Perspex and their use of artificial light in very sentimental works like *Estranged* (1999) places this Malaysian artist outside the ambit of painting for the sake of a painting.

Ivan's temperament seems attuned to the solitude of Japanese mysticism and the excitement of Japanese *Manga*, distilled from a keen interest and knowledge of Far Eastern painting and philosophy set against the *grunge* vitality of the Now.

The artist's unapologetic appropriation of the contemporary through popular cultural iconographies and current events – the signature quip from Don Maclean's *American Pie* as an abstract foreground to the burning flag in a work like *911* (2001) continue to reinforce the artist's insistence that even with regard to seminal turning points in world history, he is willing to forego their currency of content for the supremacy of the aesthetic experience.

Text is explored purely as a visual device if you are not interested in their meaning – it is left up to the viewer – if you don't want it to their meaning can be simply relegated to *background noise*.

In works from this same series, *Emptiness* (2001), Ivan extends his reverence for the elegance, restraint and asymmetry of an Oriental aesthetic in a successful meeting of the pragmatic Western abstractionist and the Eastern landscapist.

But Ivan is also acutely aware of the pitfalls and potential clichés involved in playing on signs of duality and opposites when merging styles and tradition preferring in using color theory and drawing and the composition of found images to express his interest in the juxtaposing of the Here and Then rather than dwell on the East and West.

Even in works like *Tamara*(2003) which is his ode to the famed Japanese printmaker the intention is less tied in to the imagery rather than exploring the means by which their replication can be replicated in a scale that contemporary technologies enable.

Following these initiatives would be the continuing contemplation of current technologies and mechanization as tools for the contemporary painter and how it affects the making of the objects as well as its presentation from a point of view of effect and style.

Seeing the need for artists to be recorders of their time – not purely because of their topic – Ivan embarked on **CMYK** – a sadly underrated series of paintings that intended to replicate the printing process - by hand, dot after obsessive dots in 4-colour perfectly aligned systems of marks. The CMYK works provided for Ivan the scientific exploration of how the eye reacts to how and what colors are placed next to each other.

This relationship would prove crucial to the making of the works in this current exhibition, **Ivan Lam: *After All These Years...***

With works like *Beautiful Mistake*(2005) as well as the **Masters Series** which reflect his acute awareness of artistic parentage and art histories, the intention was also to attain an effect of the mechanical and purposely erase the signature of the artist to a point where as far as the viewer is concerned the object was machine made. Therein lay their success.

Ivan's deconstruction process – from his earliest discovery of the print process as a student while working in a T-shirt shop in distant Maine to the exploration of the printmaking medium in Fine Art and industrial printing techniques as well as the new industrial paint technologies he mastered on the way has definitely resulted in a distinct new way of making paintings.

The exhibition **PLOSIVE** in 2003, a beautiful wandering showing of disparate range of styles, techniques and subjects – from the precise automobile profiles like *Mini* (2003) to the rich realism of *Black Maria* (2003) and the graphic resonance of *Ripple* (2003) - marked the purging that Ivan had planned from the beginning.

As with all his varied and individual series where Ivan is concerned there is always much to learn – for him as an artist making his work and for us as viewers receiving his images

Not only is his body of work an important part of the history of art in Malaysia but it presents a great session in the practice of painting as a serious science and methodology which places it as new and contemporary medium.

Ivan Lam: *After All These Years...*

Over a decade ago, Ivan Lam began painting and *printing* in his now signature photo-realist style of silhouettes and blocks of color.

His new works in *After All These Years...* continue to feature croppings, close-ups, reflective surfaces and striking light contrasts that allude to photographic sources with the added dimension of tremendous and dynamic scale.

The exhibition sees Ivan resplendent with the knowledge of the effects which the technological tools he has mastered, but returning to a process where all he will rely on is painting in its most traditional application.

This was what the process of the **CMYK** works meant to the artist.

His subject-matter has remained constant – a very clever coming together of contemporary facades, popular icons, current affairs and autobiographical references resulting in images and meanings which for Ivan refine a contemporary vision of Malaysia and the world.

12 major works and two years later, Ivan tells us the story of star-crossed lovers who break up and moved on. They get back together and she dies in childbirth... holidays, eating out, foreign holidays - snatches of the tender memories of any relationship peppered liberally with autobiographical detail and sweet nostalgia.

Every frame that is frozen is a part of the artist's experience through entry points into it have been careful to avoid any specific beginning, middle or end.

While the inclusion of text, quotes and captions that Ivan has eloquently used in the past - revealing his very obvious interest in contemporary culture and concern for current affairs – they are absent in these works. Ivan nevertheless successfully maintains a level of the poetic that is so indicative of his entire body of work through the imagery or even simply in the titles of paintings like *Flower, You Never Forget My Birthday* (2005).

More than the story itself, Ivan seems interested in the devices needed to tell it.

This exhibition, Ivan's first in 3 years demonstrates his on-going independence from the production of painting in its conventional and traditional sense. Although his style is still precisionism, he has persisted in his exploration of graphic, abstract and design concerns.

His work maintains the connection with Photo-Realism; however, his process has changed as far as the reliance to the silk-screen is concerned.

In works like *LCCT (Never Wave Goodbye)* (2006) he uses the photograph as a starting point for his work, but his paintings develop slowly from meticulous pencil drawings where compositions and formal relationships are worked out.

The works in this show, as with past series - in varying degrees - present a kind of narrowing of his range of media, relying less on his famous mastery of the formal science of printmaking. Through his painstaking and calculated act of painting - the definitely obsessive act of layers and strategic placement of pigment – Ivan has always modified color, strengthening contrasts and setting moods.

His colors relate to each other in single chromatic additives – red, greens and yellows held together by whites and blacks... colors invented by the artist himself through the use of new industrial technologies and carefully tagged and referenced like religious objects.

While it has its sources in very Japanese design, Ivan strives to achieve color – especially in the context of these works – *Russian March (Promise me You will Hold My Hand)* (2006) - as a means for defining and regulating forms in a way that defines their relative importance within the narrative as well as their aesthetic.

In his painfully somber *Mum & Child (The Pain is Unbearable but I Must Go On)* (2006) in spite of the stillness of the setting as well as their precise readings of form and color values, there is an improbable expressiveness, the creeping in of hue against flat blocks of color that conveys an improbable sensuality and warmth which is at odds with the precise nature of the execution. It is a quality that runs through the body of work as it successfully does in most of Ivan's paintings.

The compositions employed in these new paintings like *Surgery (Sorry Sir but We Did Our Best)* (2006) and *Sushi Bar – The Place Where We First Met* (2005) boast a new accessibility. Like windows into grand vistas, the scale is life size. The paintings in this series draw the viewer into the picture space. The strong horizontals and verticals, in a semi-grid, make the image legible and immediate.

The paintings become signs themselves.

Ivan hasn't always used angles to accentuate and add excitement to images; past works have often reveled in a purposeful flatness in the handling of depth and space. The paintings in this broad narrative for which any painting can be an entry-point, feature dramatically receding walls or structures of enormous and wide proportions immediately becoming closer to human perception.

He definitely continues to explore camera-vision possibilities in his appropriation of subject for reference, but his vision has always been a selective one: the interiors, the march, the buildings appear revitalized, cleaned up and in sparkling repair.

If they aren't in perfect condition, Ivan gives them the treatment and finish and often strengthens them by using them as formal devices around which the compositions are organized.

Ivan Lam: after all these years... is a wonderful culmination to a decade long search by the artist which few practitioners are willing to invest in these days. The artist does not see himself as an archivist holding images for posterity as so many figurative painters rely on as a romantic hook for their viewer.

His relevance is rooted in contemporaneity, conveying a very particular feeling for contemporary Malaysia, capturing elements of bravado and dazzle, of the banality of the urbane as well as the drudgery and predictability of everyday life in the face of a larger world filled with conflict and difference.

These qualities are most strongly suggested when all the pictorial elements come together, often a summation of composition and color coordinated form, coalescing motifs or entire pictures of personal significance to Ivan that also strikes a universal chord.

Ivan Lam is a painter who will continue to innovate and push accepted boundaries within his practice as well as the larger Malaysian and regional art movements.

As art lovers, we will continue to watch, connect with and enjoy his work immensely, I know, for a long time to come.

Anurendra Jegadeva
August 2007



Ivan Lam, *Heaven (Heaven Can't Wait)*, 2007, house polymer synthetic paint on canvas, 120 x 300 cm. All images: Courtesy of Wei-Ling Gallery and the Artist.

Twelve Degrees Of Separation

Evolving from a career as a printmaker, Ivan Lam's recent move into painting transposes the layering of color from the silk-screen to the canvas. While his paintings appear to be based upon narrative, Lam is foremost a painter of technique. His strongly graphic images describe an evolution where each painting informs the next, pushed forward in a chain of new marks, like degrees of separation connected but new.

By Gina Fairley

Known as one of Malaysia's leading contemporary printmakers, Ivan Lam (b. 1975) took to the canvas in 2005 armed with house paints and an understanding of color theory. Producing a suite of 12 paintings over a three-year period enabled Lam to push the parameters of *how* he constructed an image. It also allowed him to mine a more personal expression beyond his graphically astute signature prints. Audiences witnessed this trajectory as a kind of hop-scotch progression in his exhibition *After all these years* (2007), held at Kuala Lumpur's Wei-Ling Gallery, moving from a cool, razor-sharp definition in the work *Flowers (You never forget my birthdays)* (2005) to an intuitive painterly style in *Heaven (Heaven can't wait)* (2007), its free lines arriving at a

new vitality in Lam's *oeuvre*. *After all these years*, as the title infers, goes beyond its three-year gestation and is the culmination of a decade of honing techniques with near manic obsession.

What is interesting in Lam's shift to painting is the metered consideration with which he approaches the medium; each canvas offers an end point and a new beginning. While the narrative is peppered with autobiographical detail, more central than the story is Lam's interest in how that narrative is relayed.

To understand this technical journey fully, one has to step back to where it started. As an apprentice in a professional print shop in Portland (USA) in the early 1990s, Lam developed a foundation for his studio practice that continues to resonate in the work today: the clarity of graphic reduc-

tion and balance, the systematic layering of screens, and an obsession for perfection.

Returning to Malaysia in 1998 his prints were quickly noticed, winning the Grand Prize for the 2003 Philip Morris Award and in 2006 he was a finalist for the prestigious Sovereign Art Prize with the mixed-media work *Integral* (2001). It was a prolific period where Lam defined his own style that fused photographic cropping and studio lighting with his printmaking expertise and a desire to experiment with materials. Drawing upon popular culture, art history, and traditions of text, Lam garnered a reputation for creating dynamic works out of the static print mold and neatly slotted into a developing Malaysian contemporary art alongside artists such as Redza Piyadasa, Ahmad Shukri Mohamed, Chai Chang Hwang, and Jalaini Abu Hassan.

Working in a kind of ode to Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg—who consequently visited Malaysia in 1990 with his evolving touring exhibition *Rauschenberg Overseas Cultural Interchange*—it was a Malaysian style that drew heavily on their overlaying of pattern, text, and schematics alongside Malaysia's drive for development and internationalism. Lam's 911 series (2001) proved to be a pivotal point that wrapped up his 1990s American-based work and turned to this local scene energized by its own creation.

Standout works from the series were *Integral* and the more political works, 911 (2001), and *Stargazer* (2001), the American and Israeli flags respectively surrounded by news bites of media propaganda—"destroy them" and "good and evil"—emerge from a compressed sea of text distilled to a graphic function. Malaysian curator Anurendra Jegadeva described this early work as an "unapologetic appropriation of the contemporary through popular cultural iconographies and current events... [where Lam] is willing to forego their currency of content for the supremacy of the aesthetic experience...the editing of the image and their arrangement are secondary to the design and formal considerations of color."¹

From this series Lam's technical

preoccupation can be easily traced forward to the color coding of his *CMYK* series and more structured pixilation of his *Seasons* and *Masters* series (2005) that, while appearing disparate, are the foundations for the paintings exhibited in *After all these years*.

In 2005, Lam produced a suite of four landscapes, banal scenes evoking the seasons and cropped in tight horizontal zips. Black trees replaced the black pop outlines of the earlier works and performed a new function in stacking space using a scroll-like perspective. The primaries of red, yellow, green, and blue were used as a formal device not to talk about a place or time but as a code for replication. Lam further divided color internally by introducing the use of pixilation as a technique for sectioning and controlling color. This was to become a vital key to the future paintings. Lam had pragmatically updated the age-old tradition of landscape with digital technology and in the process sutured Eastern perspective with Western abstraction.

Lam ratcheted this digital color code to new levels in his *Masters* series. He appropriated masterpieces by Michelangelo, David, Degas, and Vermeer using the four-color separation printing process, articulating the image dot-by-dot. It was about constructing a system of marks that appeared machine-made and, like DNA or the formula for a Sol LeWitt wall drawing,

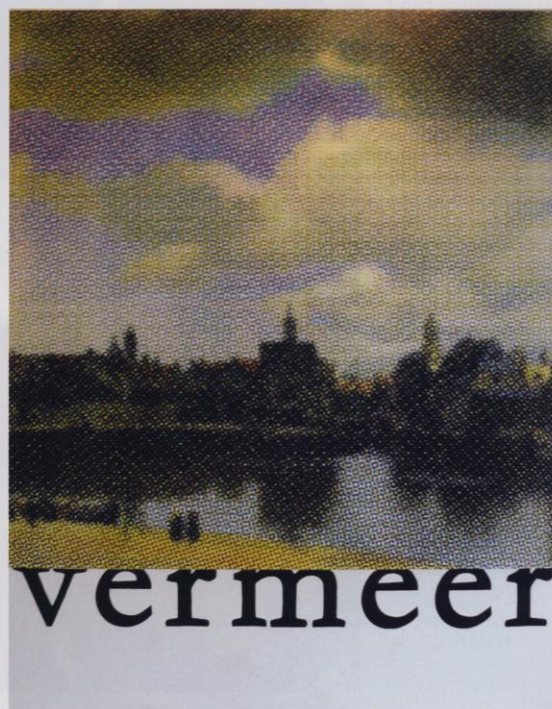
Lam deconstructed the image into code. By using familiar images from art history the narrative was prescribed and hence contained, allowing him to turn his attention fully to technique. They were deceptively simple and highly intelligent works.

Susbi Bar (*The place where we first met*) (2005) was the first painting by Lam and it provided a technical anchor to his current work. It was here that he introduced a different approach to his now established system of 'color coding' and one that dominated the work for the next three years. His choice of commercial house paints with their charted hues was the obvious medium for Lam and provided the kind of 'painting-by-numbers' methodology required to manage a palette of up to 100 colors. While remaining contrived, the formula became expressive and for the first time a sense of hand entered the Malaysian work.

Overall this painting was an exercise in tone: How many yellows or reds could Lam define in a single hue? Standing in front of Lam's paintings, which average at an expansive one by three meters, the viewer's vantage point is clearly defined by the conventions of perspective. Warm tones pull the viewer through the painting to a cool background, spatially locating them within the scene. But there is also a sensory compression at play here, the viewer



Ivan Lam, *Integral*, 2001, mixed media on canvas, 120 x 90 cm.



Ivan Lam, *Vermeer*, 2005, mixed media on canvas, 97 x 76 cm.

is equally drawn in by the brushwork's tangibility—one can *feel* the painting process. It is quite a different psyche than the *faux*-manufactured pixilation of the previous *Masters*.

Lam's casual, painted mark, however, is a guise. Rather than constructing these marks with erudite speed his images are painstakingly built up from subtly different colors ordered with a kind of Cubist tiling. It is an academic action that evokes an emotive response. Such confident handling of pictorial space comes from a deep understanding of the graphic performance of color.

The rough color chips of *Sushi Bar* were the point of exit that Lam carried to his second painting, *Flowers (You never forget my birthdays)*, a study in neutrality and the start of a curious chain of connectivity, or evolution, over the ensuing period. Broken down, *After all these years* could be described as lessons in 'painting 101,' from color theory to perspective to spatial tension and, finally, liberating the mark. While the exhibition arrives at a kind of cathartic epiphany, the journey is not chronological and connections weave randomly across this suite of paintings.

What remained central was Lam's technical intelligence rather than a seduction into narrative, favored in Malaysia.

Sitting in contrast to *Sushi Bar* with its brushy modulations, flatness defined Lam's *Flowers*. It is the most abstract of Lam's paintings and barely recognizable as a still life. He reverts to the familiar territory of the graphic devices of cropping to sharpen his study. The 'scene' is merely a delivery device for technical inquiry. While Lam cites American photo-realist Richard Esters as an influence for his meticulous detail, one wonders the role Cubism has played as a subconscious foundation and, more specifically, its local derivatives through the work of artists such as Malaysian master Latiff Mohidin (b.1938) with his seminal abstract



Ivan Lam, *Sushi Bar (The place where we first met)*, 2005, house polymer synthetic paint on canvas, 150 x 165 cm.



Ivan Lam, *Flower (You never forget my birthdays)*, 2005, house polymer synthetic paint on canvas, 165 x 150 cm.

botanical series, *Pago Pago*. Lam's canvases are clearly a composite of not only his personal journey to paint, but also a subconscious collecting of visual references *en route*.

Stripped of all perceived color, *Russian March (Promise me you will hold my hands)* (2006) called on Lam's rigor for the industrial standards of multi-screen prints to manage nearly 80 different blacks and whites. While this painting introduced figuration to the series, narrative continued to remain incidental. What was the rally about, we do not know? The painting's monochrome is a curious punctuation in Lam's decade-long preoccupation with color, especially given that his images are never random. This writer suggests that Lam has bleached the



Ivan Lam, *Russian March (Promise me you will hold my hands)*, 2006, house polymer synthetic paint on canvas, 90 x 240 cm.

painting to avoid distraction and convey lesson two to the viewer: perspective.

In *Russian March* Lam manipulates pictorial space solely for visual effect. He juxtaposed a crowd's density with negative space, carving a void through the left side of the canvas to arrive at an open sky. Ushered by the broken line of street markings, the viewer is again pulled through the scene. It has the raking quality of Giorgio de Chirico's *Mystery and Melancholy of a Street* (1914), Lam replacing architecture with the mass of a crowd to define the same triangular perspective. Lam again calls on art history and painting's formalities to speak of contemporary society.

Similarly, *Chinese Man (Always be by my side)* (2006) is an exercise in spatial division. Lam visually sliced the canvas vertically, giving each side its own protagonist. Where *Russian March* called on the principles of perspective, here Lam has used this split to dramatize the effect of

light, a contemporary chiaroscuro playing dark against light. A white sky punctures the image with blazing intensity and casts light across the scene with the intermittent energy a neon. In contrast, a dense black mass of clustered motorcyclists, stopped at the traffic lights, lose all definition and identity. Gone is the crisp detail of the silk-screen, yet the mechanics of image making are maintained.

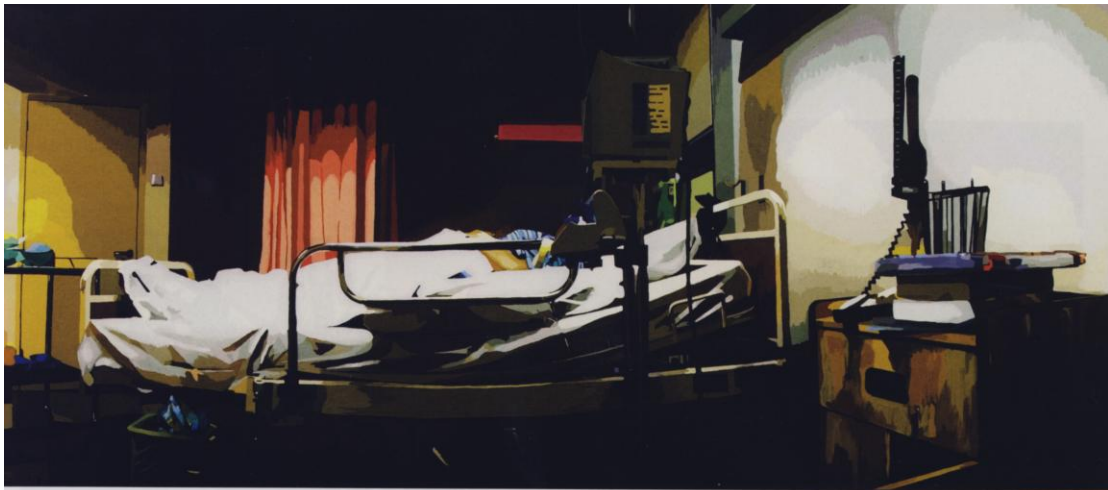
Interestingly, Lam emphasizes the division of space not only left to right but through the degree of detail from foreground to background. For the first time the foreground has been activated by employing a web of brushy lines. One ponders whether these devices aim to create an internal tension or a considered yin/yang balance? Perhaps they speak on a metaphorical level to Malaysia's own social division. Regardless, the tensions and ambiguities in Lam's paintings are not construed as emotive. They are cerebral paintings that probe our visual engagement with the world, now.

The paintings that followed *China Man* returned to a poignant absence that honed Lam's painterly technique. *Mum & Child (The pain is unbearable but I must go on)* (2006) conveys an emotive story yet its protagonist remains anonymous, veiled by the accoutrements of an intensive care ward in a hospital. Of greater focus for Lam was the introduction of a descriptor for flat space—the walls and furnishings of the room became the active characters.

Mum & Child is the most spatially contrived of Lam's 12 paintings. The hospital bed is placed central to this vast horizontal work, beaming crisp white in a sea of puce institutional color. It presents a turning point for Lam, connecting spatially with his earlier season compositions, such as the triangular perspective of *Winter, Your smile is 'like' a warm ray gun in the cold* (2005), with its white empty center, as well as the need to fill flat space with the hip graphic marks of his American heroes, such as *Gray Target* (1997) and *Divider* (1997) that patch painterly gesture over



Ivan Lam, *Chinese Man (Always be by my side)*, 2006, house polymer synthetic paint on canvas, 80 x 255 cm.



Ivan Lam, *Mum & Child (The pain is unbearable but I must go on)*, 2006, house polymer synthetic paint on canvas, 110 x 275 cm.

popular images to add texture, volume, and erase the mechanics of the print. This texturing found a new expression in *Mum & Child* and is most developed in a hospital side table that verges on a study in camouflage, its semiotics of negation rippling through the image.

Lam repeatedly picks up on a painting's strength and carries it to the next, pushing it as far as possible. In the case of *Surgery (Sorry sir but we did our best)* (2007) it is this surface patterning that Lam explored. The rough, abstracted shapes that have moved through the series from *Sushi Bar's* color swatches to *Mum & Child* walls as color-bleeds become a repetition of eloquent lines in *Surgery*. They dominated the last works and provide the exit point of the series.

Surgery is an impressive painting for its level of detail. Lam calls again on the influence of Richard Esters; however, he is no longer dependant on the silkscreen to deliver that precision. We see echoes of Esters's *Telephone booths* (1968) played out in the shiny metallic reflections and light bouncing off hard surfaces with clinical precision. Emotion is controlled and assured through a palette of institutional greens and flat clarity, yet in the floor's surface Lam permits anarchy; the rawness of the lines break from the scene's control and draws attention to a spot of blood. For a fleeting moment we are permitted to move beyond Lam's technical enquiry.

In a dramatic crescendo, Lam's paintings take a

jump, which almost catapult development from calm hospital clarity to two landscapes that cap this series and three years of work. *Home (We are finally home)* and *Heaven (Heaven can't wait)* (2007) are remarkably free paintings.

While seemingly vibrating with a new freedom of mark making, Lam remains regimented in his construction of the picture. Every stroke here is a different color—applied and allowed to dry before applying another. It is a laborious task masked by its brushy sense of speed and one that sits quite counter to the slashed energy of abstract expressionism.



Ivan Lam, *Surgery (Sorry sir but we did our best)*, 2007, house polymer synthetic paint on canvas, 205 x 165 cm.

The foundation of drama lingers in Lam's work. In *Heaven* he unconsciously employs it as a staging device upon the viewer, dramatically playing off a dawn sky against black silhouettes of power lines and a construction site with a sensation of epiphany. Is it this enlightenment, the painting's title, or that it is the end point of three-years of discovering painting that allows the viewer to share in Lam's celebration?

There is more space between the marks in this painting and, as such, it has moved as far as possible away from the confinement of photographic/print reproduction of the earlier work, from digital

blip to painterly mark oscillating between abstraction and representation. We just have to recall the regimentation of dot-on-dot of the *Masters* series. For Lam his painted evolution from the past can be traced like history and therefore validates its current manifestation.

After all these years concludes more than three years in the studio. It is the diary of an innovator, a fearless explorer and an obsessive technician. Lam maps new territory in contemporary Malaysian art with the maturity of a master printmaker and the vitality of someone fresh to the canvas. Δ

Note:

1. Anurendra Jegadeva, "Getting past pushing paint around a canvas", catalogue essay for *After all these years*, published by Wei-Ling Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 2007.

Australian arts writer Gina Fairley is a roving contributing editor for Asian Art News and World Sculpture News.

Panorama, 2009

IVAN LAM – Panoramas' of the Gloriously Mundane

By Anurendra Jegadeva

I met Ivan Lam more than a decade ago when he first returned from America.

He was only slightly younger then but already he had an intense realization that he would only ever be able to find himself through his art. He possessed a sharp awareness of tradition and a love for innovation, of popular culture and its iconographies as well as a deep need to communicate with his contemporary audience in real and meaningful terms.

A kind of Ying and Yang – the Alpha-Omega if you like.

This commitment to the struggle to make meaningful work has stood him well through the years.

From early painted print works and the ground-breaking Perspex light boxes of the 90s to the prize-winning Integral (2001) and Symphony of our Children (2003); from the celebration of popular objects as monuments in works like Evo 7(2003) and acidic post colonial references to the confluence of traditional symbols, fleeting trends and contemporary values in sexy, sexy works like the Ripple Series (2003) and Utamaro (2003)– Lam has been on a quest for a style and technique that consciously pushed the boundaries of painting as he searched for reason through observations of contemporary life.

His ability to continuously push the boundaries of Painting has also meant that he has remained relevant within a creative mainstream more and more dominated by new and mixed media, and where painters have felt the acute need to reinvent the medium itself for it – and them - to remain innovative and significant.

His treatment of his subject matter also pushes the boundaries of the narrative. With a refreshing irreverence, Lam strips down the narrative in his work to single moments – always from a distant standoff tinged with personal experience and unwilling to dictate any kind of definite meaning to his audience.

The common experience he wants to convey is almost abstract in how it is presented. It doesn't translate into a specific Malaysian or Asian one but finds a larger resonance that is more interested in the artist and his audience as witnesses to a world afflicted by media and consumerism, confusion and displacement – and always - the universal loneliness of that contemporary citizen within a world of webs crowded with noise and opinion.

These distinct narrative devices and painting formats came to fruition two years ago when Lam gave us AFTER ALL THESE YEARS.... autobiographical paintings hung like a wayang in 9 scenes, stories of love and family, of birth and change. Of memory and reality - always tinged with a sense of loss.

A painter at heart, PANORAMA, sees Lam at the peak of his contemporary relevance. A culmination of sorts – the exhibition attests to a mastery and

reinterpretation of contemporary realism through a definite and highly defined technique, style and expressions that have been perfected over the last decade.

As he himself very humbly puts it - 'I had spent the last ten years honing my skill - I know the 'kungfu' - now I wanted to tell the story.'

There is a strong narrative quality that continues from AFTER ALL THESE YEARS but it is not a 'continuing narrative'. PANORAMA's stories are broader and more inclusive and unapologetic that these pictures have a story.

Still, to see this exhibition as a sequel to AFTER ALL THESE YEARS... (2007) is convenient and enjoyable even if unnecessary. Every stage of an artist's development refers to its own past, especially its immediate one.

PANORAMA's seamlessly execution may find its beginnings in its predecessor but this is an undeniably fresh and powerfully heartfelt body of work. As contemporary painting, PANORAMA, the most recent genre paintings by Ivan Lam, with their meticulously observed realism are his most beautifully pedestrian and resolved to date.

His atmospheric yet detached interiors of restaurants and cars; exteriors which are deliberately contained ... traffic jams; desolate construction sites, crowded airports or the KL Eye carnival - all compulsory parts to a Kuala Lumpur state of mind are the focus of the artist's increasingly psychological examinations of isolation and displacement as he tries to make sense of the immediate world around him.

Through his paintings Lam has always strived to develop seductive visual elements through the appropriation and reinvention of technologies and industrial processes to portray feelings of alienation associated with contemporary life - and always, in a contemporary visual language.

And while some of the previous works, Shushi Bar (2006) and Surgery (2007) already saw the beginnings of human places devoid of human beings but packed with their trappings, PANORAMA finds all the new works whole-heartedly located in quiet settings that are baroque environments.

These recent paintings are filled with the detail of everyday life - but in their absence of human beings they blister with a methodical silence dictated by their very formatted, almost cubist compositions.

Even in a work like Waiting for a Better Future, Hoping for a Greater Lie (2008) which is filled with people waiting at the LCCT departure lounge, the human actors in the painting are given the same treatment and importance as the corrugated walls or the arrivals/departures information board, the stainless steel railings, the plastic tandem chairs.

Later you realize, that the artist has also created a space from which the viewer, like the artist himself views the vista and becomes a part of the painting. However the artist immediately sets a boundary - a distance from the panorama that denies any kind of real interaction with the space or its sitters.

The viewer remains separate and alone within the setting.

And as if the artist is conscious of what he senses at the corners of his eyes but can never quite see – Lam brings to his paintings his signature panoramic views – he takes the 120 degree, standard view of our perception of the world and gives us a wide angle 170 degree, view of the world... as if to suggest that if we could see more, we would also understand our world better.

Lam enjoys the physicality of these familiar objects yet presents all of them equally, as forthright statements of visual fact. No one object is more important than another. As he distills his visual information, his concern is with the surface of things – corrugated walls, plastic chairs, the various components of the monumental piling crane, the complex play of interiors meeting exteriors; of the horizontal assembly line of red table cloths against vertical lines of door frames and glass fronts.

Amidst all this paraphernalia of everyday life, the artist commits to a unity of the picture plane – a flatness of the surface where the in and out movement is less important than how all the colors and forms come together in delightful oneness and perfect harmony.

With tantalizing invitation, each very literal vignette is designed to appeal to the senses.

...

And Lam does not paint movement but rather stillness.

In a work like *The Beginning is the End The End is the Beginning* (2009), the frantic pace of city life is a given – he leaves it to the audience to fill that in - but at the same time, the stillness of the scene seems to be at odds with the frustrations of the grunge of daily urban existence. The soft glow of the tactile white clouds on their bed of deep, tranquil blue ping like a Turner-esque mantra of the acceptance of life as it is.

While the narrative moves through places that are unavoidably entwined in our everyday suburban lives - transport, traffic, development, sustenance, entertainment – the path provided by the artist lead you through these paintings only pausing at moments of possible dramatic action.

The Machine That Walks The Earth (2008) is a depiction of part of a piling crane in a housing development near where the artist lives. It has become part of his daily trek to and from home.

From morning to night, the monolith pounds the earth – testimony to the unstoppable march of development. – captured in the traditional stark light and shadow contrasts that remember Dutch painting.

There is a weight to this piece that *The Beginning is the End The End is the Beginning*, with its opening skies avoid. In this painting of the machine that walks, the object is anchored within the center and beyond the picture frame. Its

monumentality is threatening – its place within the modern landscape non-negotiable.

These scenarios that seem mundane but are so salient because of that very ordinariness are executed with obsessive deliberation. Lam's panoramas are deliberately frank paintings with no startling revelations, an art of technical prowess, intricate composition, brilliantly tactile surfaces and an undercurrent of social comment.

In *You Won' Die Today, Maybe Tomorrow* (2009), Lam captures a broad vista of the KL Eye fronted by a fair, carousel and the promise of fun and frolic. Painted around the time of the Israeli invasion of Gaza, the park is devoid of laughter or the babble of children. Even without that direct reference the stillness suggests a dire narrative. It is these undercurrents of emotion that make these works so engaging.

While Lam remains involved in what some might consider the questionable enterprise of painting photographically accurate likenesses, he also reveals a state of mind. The artist's capacity for minute description disguises a more private vision. Neither romantic nor glamorous, Lam's closely observed naturalism – served cold - has the capacity to arrest our attention and persuades us to immediately relate to the subject as well as their latent content. His images are so rich in detail and design and immediacy that the inclination is to ignore his more formal accomplishments.

For Ivan Lam is an extremely gifted painter.

Lam understands his medium completely and it is obvious in paintings like *The Urgency of Inside Looking Out* (2009) where the contemplation of the panorama of the Chinese red-table-cloth restaurant is more important than the emotionality of the place at its busiest times of business. The purposeful flatness of the decorative forms and cool paint surface seem to drive home the point that even if it were full of people – as with the LCCT painting - the viewer, like the artist would find himself alone.

Lam also understands the tools he has at his disposal and is conscious of that which photography has made redundant in modern painting.

In a work like *The Urgency of Inside Looking Out* or in *Waiting for a Better Future*, the camera has made images like this one useless unless the artist can draw us into the mysteries of representation and develop a statement about the human condition. In spite of the objectivity and the methodically precise arrangement of the setting, the artist's concentrated view of what appears to be an everyday event aspires to do more than record people and places.

As an artist, Lam finds in each of these paintings, a moment when the factual storytelling ends and form, atmosphere and social context become central issues. Lam's realism does not debate the nature of reality, but simply confines itself to panoramic, highly selective views of the social environment we share.

The content of these paintings, more than ever, present not only the reality of objects, but a measure of the artist's perception of the distances we place between ourselves in contemporary relationships.

And through these paintings, he has the ability to make us feel it.

Therein lies their power.

Like backdrops to our lives, the artist presents scenarios in which we are – unavoidably – the protagonists – not outside the picture but within its foreground – but only as observers not participants.

And so we are inevitably alone.

But if these new paintings are anything to go by, it is a bleak world we live in but it is nevertheless, still extremely beautiful ... at least according to Ivan.

Together Alone, 2011

Together Alone – a title, a framing device, a description, and a state of being. Paradox, duality, difference, interdependence. The phrase and idea of *Together Alone* is poetic and quite apt to what is at stake in Ivan Lam's new body of work and his reinterpretation of the diptych. He plays with the distance between images and their discourses, and the ambiguity of meaning as images travel globally but not necessarily globally understood in the same way. This involves but is not determined by the artist-subject who cites, recycles, appropriates and re-appropriates images from the archive and the seamless and timeless space of the digitally mass-produced for an elitist form of cultural work.

Together Alone, Lam's 2011 solo show at Wei-Ling gallery, is the artist's deliberate and determined effort to move away from some of the concerns he explored in his 2009 *Panorama* series. Writing on the works in *Panorama*, Gina Fairley succinctly situates the work and its vision "that sits outside definitions of physical and psychological space. Just as panorama traditionally transmutes visual reality with its unrealistic optical expanse and warp, [these] paintings are able to transport the viewer to a different dimension using triggers that are recognizable – 'photo-real' – and yet in them, reality is slowly unraveled, undermined by the artist's decisions." (1). Ivan Lam uses similar recognizable 'triggers' in his new body of work, but moves from the broad scene to the universally familiar icons.

The artist has also shifted in his approach to subject matter beyond the pictorial field, while still holding a fascination for the structures of representation that convey it.

Lam has been consistent in his emphasis on "technical intelligence", over and against "a seduction into narrative favored by Malaysia." (2) Similarly, Anurendra Jegadeva suggests that in Lam's 2007 *After all these Years* "the editing of the image and their (sic) arrangement are secondary to the design and formal considerations of color." He adds that "more than the story itself, Ivan seems interested in the devices needed to tell it." This includes the artist's continued "obsessive act of layers and strategic

placement of pigment.” (3) The same tendencies and mode of working persist in *Together Alone*. However, he seems more relaxed in his painter’s skin - “I am no longer trying to prove I am a colorist.” But these works certainly show that he is and to great effect.

Lam recently introduced industrial resin to his already densely packed bag of pictorial tricks. After weeks of experimenting, he found that the layers of color below the surface of the resin appeared more vivid, clear and precise: “it’s like high definition LCD TV.” Hence, the resin, as a supplemental surface, extended and changed the possibilities of Lam’s already massive archive of colors. Additionally, resin, or rather its characteristics and properties, has become another kind of artwork for him. Here he plays with resin’s strength and fragility. That resin shatters like glass once the surface has been damaged makes these monumental works even more ‘precious’ for their very fragility. Lam relishes in such a string of what he calls dualities.

The works in *Together Alone* consist of five paired paintings. They are monumental in size. On a certain level, their sheer size is designed to envelop vision, making us blind to or forget our external surroundings. This relation of distance and experience has implications for the works’ intelligibility and legibility at every level and layer of the work. In order to enact the work as a whole, it must be seen in total, both sides fully available to the eye at the same time. To do this requires us to step back, far back. A different set of relations are set in motion when the works are seen from a “closer distance.” If seen from up close, close enough for vision to be engulfed in the work’s gravity, the building blocks of the work are revealed and one might be caught in the web of the artist’s obsessive universe and architectural structures. What at a distance looks composed, at a close remove reveals an intent to rein in an energy that threatens to get away from the artist. Even silk-screened symbols, so clear-cut and flat, are layered in such a way as to absorb the viewer in an endless game of penetrating the manifold layers below. *Submarine – I will sink to the bottom with You* epitomizes this momentum.

There is an assumed intimacy and a promise, as well as foreboding bordering on melancholy in *Submarine*, which is bolstered by the sentimental title that is at once autobiographical and pop culture cliché. It also perhaps articulates the artists desire to share and a holding back from direct disclosure. One panel consists of numerous shades of the deepest black and variations thereof, giving a sense of endless depth and a gravity so massive that no light could possibly escape. The presence of submarine is only implied. We complete the picture, imagining a submarine doing what it is designed to do, remain hidden. Its mirror half carries a brighter spectrum of color. A fantastic array of particles invades our space. Here, the symbol of submarine in outline is nearly hidden beneath the weight of the static or white noise of Lam’s brush. What I call the white noise of the brush seems like part of a contemplative exercise in self-control, release, and letting go – a meditation of sorts.

The white noise coalesces into a figure of concentric and overlapping circles; a figure that Lam frequently employed in his work of the late 1990s and up to *After all these Years*. At times, as in *Submarine*, it becomes a kind of archetypical form. As ground for his paintings in this series, these circular figures resemble a kind of aura radiating outward in ever expanding ripples. Visual vibrancy and depth is built up through a sequence of colors layered in cross-hatch patterns, often beginning with an all over

surface of red-orange or burnt orange-yellow. In some works, the brushstroke is short and staccato, in others elongated, rushed and dripping with excess materially and metaphorically.

The current series is a continuation of the artist's engagement with historical genres and structures of representation from art history (read large, plural, multiple). He makes a conscious move away from his previous work with panoramic pictorial space to explore formal and rhetorical possibilities of the diptych. But he is not intent on a critical reappraisal of it. Put simply, a diptych is a visual work made of two panels, each side is supposed to be read simultaneously to form a third figure.

Such is the case in *Target and Deer --- You are being Missed Deer*. The conceptual nature of the piece lies in the vacillation between two images that metaphorically refer to the same thing. The title obscures such a direct reading in that it shifts the location of target. Read in tandem with text, the deer becomes the primary target, and is also "beside itself."

Considering the usefulness of the forces of contradiction he imports into the structure of his diptychs, Lam states: "the dichotomy between the two paintings creates visual tension and division... I constantly try to negotiate the boundaries of what is what is not. When you think you have it, you lose it. When you have presence it's actually the absence of it. It is in this dichotomy that my art thrives - in the contrast, the comparison, in opposites, the straddling between both, the graphic and the fine art, and the known and the unknown." (4)

Each 'half' of was completed separately and months apart, and the artist did not produce them with a linear progression in mind. The first of the pair was completed without thought to its companion, or opposite Other. The overarching concept therefore derives after the fact, after the two works have been placed together. Yet in some of his juxtapositions, he attenuates the distance between images and their general meanings to such an extent that the relationships between the two images seem to edge toward the random. The conceptual and spatio-temporal distance between the two images in *Buddha and Communications Tower - I Tried to reach you but you were engaged* and *Bird and Kimono - for a lark I will eat a crow*, for instance, seem difficult to bridge. And this is partly what the artist is counting on.

It can be argued that Lam appropriates and empties images in such a way that his work can read as knowingly bypassing or going beyond certain thorny positions and (dominant) discourses. They belong to everyone and no one. For some this might seem obvious. Along their varied journeys, images may lose some or all of their reflective capacity or may become blurred. Lam's juxtapositions will be read differently across locations, and hence have something unique to say in them. But I underscore the artistic use of the homeless symbol shed of its dominant meaning here because this aspect in his work might have particular critical resonance regarding the dissemination of the culturally significant (marked) image in contexts in Malaysia.

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(1) Gina Fairley, "Unleashed Reality," in *Panorama* exh. catalog. Wei-Ling Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, 2009: 14..

(2) Gina Fairley, "Twelve Degrees of Separation," *Asian Art News* (March/April, 2008): 62. Reproduced in *Panorama* exh. catalog. Wei-Ling Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, 2009.

(3) Anurendra Jegadeva, "Getting Past Pushing Paint around on the Canvas," in *After all these Years*, exh. catalog, Wei-Ling Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, 2007: 13.

(4) Ibid.

Machines, 2012

MACHINES

"Machines" is Ivan Lam's latest body of work to be shown at Wei-Ling Gallery. Three large glassy smooth paintings undulate with the thick layers of epoxy resin that is common to many of Ivan's recent works. The upper section of each Machine painting is a beautifully rendered image of a construction machine against a backdrop of architecture and blue sky. There are no humans in the scene, no operators, no laborers. They are conspicuous by their absence, as if the machines are dormant animals, awaiting the return of their masters. The machines lay waiting in an architectural scene, rendered exactly, beautifully, with tenderness. The colors of the scene glow with the blistering hue of high midday sunlight that bleaches out all green, casts no shadows, gives no reprieve from the heat. The machines sweat their labors, breathing deeply, catching rest before they are called to duty once more.

Beneath the effervescent glow of the rendered scene is a panel of graphic text. The word 'machine' and a number. Letters are jumbled, upside down, reflected. I have a dyslexic moment, misread it and think it says 'man', 'He', 'I am' 'machine'. I'm sure this is intentional. I think Ivan is telling me that he's a machine, making his paintings, building his creations, making his life. I need to ask him. I read the press release for the show, it says they 'represent the Holy Trinity depicted in Biblical doctrines' and the intertwining of the three main races of Malaysia. This isn't what I want to know. I need Ivan to tell me about the Machines. I think about Ivan's pop art references, about the billboard painter turned artist, James Rosenquist, about Rauschenberg's use of text and image, but most of all I think about Andy Warhol's 1963 Time Magazine Interview where Andy Warhol reflected, "Paintings are too hard. The things I want to show are mechanical. Machines have less problems. I'd like to be a machine, wouldn't you?"

Ivan and I are old friends, so I texted him on my iPhone-machine and we started an SMS interview, it lasted several days, and ignored our different time zones. What follows is part of that conversation.

Hedley Roberts: "The new works seem to tell a story of the fragile ambitions of masculinity. Machines the future potential of a city attempting to secure its own future. Is this a personal metaphor?"

Ivan Lam: "I guess when I commit paint to canvas it's already a personal act, a solipsism, a reflection of myself and the environment that I'm in. The lone machine as me, a male trying to make its way in securing or shoring up the future, but at what expense?"

Hedley Roberts: "Warhol said 'Machines have less problems, I'd like to be a machine, wouldn't you?' Are you the machines in this work, or a machine making the work?"

Ivan Lam: "Both. At times I feel like a machine making the work. Methodically planning, plotting and painting. At times it seems as if the artist has taken a back seat. At times I'm painting the machine in me."

Hedley Roberts: "Your methodology is very structured. The work is planned and executed. You're the architect designing, imagining the work produced, but you're also the constructor, the producer. You labour to create precisely finished works, yet, regardless of whether you're painting the works with commercial paints into perfectly planned colours structures or screen printing multiple colour or separations, there are mistakes that reveal the human hand. The paint is never perfectly flat, the print never perfectly registered, the epoxy resin never quite becomes perfectly glassy. What is this tension between machine and man, process and craft, automatic and autographic?"

Ivan Lam: "I think I still want to reveal the artist hand. The illusion of the painted mistakes only makes the work more human. I guess the more mechanical it gets the more human it tends to become. It's this tension that creates the balance; it's constantly in a state of flux, constantly in motion, negotiating shifting boundaries. I never consciously try to hide the artist hand, but rather to sharpen my craft, my skill in the process of making the work"

Hedley Roberts: "I think I'm driving at the idea of the 'grand ambition' and the inevitability of human failure. The machines themselves speak of the architect, aspiring to produce some sublime vision. Yet the machines themselves, as tools, reveal the fragility of the human form – our need for machines to realise our ambitions. The machines themselves have traces of this humanity in the absence of operators, the stencilled letters on the side of the cab. I'm wondering about your personal dialogue with the grand statement and the vulnerability of the human condition....?"

Ivan Lam: "Machines are the shortcomings of men. If we were perfect, they would never have been invented. Machines stand as a symbol of our failures, but presented as our pride and joy.

Hedley Roberts: "Tell me a bit about the germination of these works. The process that led to the actualisation. Formally, how did they come to exist?"

Ivan Lam: "I've been photographing these machines laying by the side of the road for about two years. They come in all shapes and sizes. I was thinking about form and function. They build for us, but what are we building with them. We need them, but we don't really."

Hedley Roberts: "The scale of these works and the subject acknowledge the commercial art references that you often quote in your work. How does this work, in particular relate to artists like the billboard painter turned pop artist James Rosenquist?"

Ivan Lam: "Rauschenberg spoke of 'bridging the gap' between commercial art and fine art with his 'combine' paintings. These works make reference to both Analytical Cubism and Dada in their use of collaged text and image. I'm continuing a tradition that predates 'pop art'."

Hedley Roberts: "What's your relationship to the commercial tools that you use to make your work, the paint, brushes, masking tape, solvents etc? Metaphorically speaking, these are also machines that enhance the faculties of the artist, enabling you to create a vision. The machine needs an operator, designer, contractor. Without agency, the machine is dormant, dumb, without purpose or intelligence.

Ivan Lam: "I'm the puppeteer, these are my machines."

Hedley Roberts: "But what about the Holy Trinity?"

Ivan Lam: "It's the triumvirate that builds my country. The colors of my country's flag. These are machines that build this nation, the men and women that use the machines."

This is 2012, I live in London, a city that is building and changing to accommodate the Olympics. There are machines and construction everywhere. I watch them build a stadium where nations and individuals will compete and dream of everlasting reputation. Ivan is an artist approaching peak fitness. He wakes at 5am to run most days. He lives in Kuala Lumpur, a city that is ever changing, growing, building an international future. I am standing contemplating the three most recent works of a painter that I've followed for over six years. "Machines" is an exhibition of works of an artist who is getting into his stride.

Dr. Hedley Roberts
July 2012

Dr. Hedley Roberts BA(Hons) MA(RCA) DFA FHEA
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COMA, 2012

IVAN LAM - VENDING COMA

Almost 10 years since its inception and 8 months in the making, Ivan Lam's art vending project Coma: 38/500 puts a spin on notions of authorship, value, and consumer immediacy, when sited within the hotbed of Asia's contemporary art market. Lam's on the money when he says, "The art fair itself is a larger-than-life vending machine". Usurping his own spotlight as a featured artist for Art Basel Hong Kong, Lam has stocked his vending machine with a collection of original artworks by Malaysian artists, sharing the stage in a rather philanthropic gesture.

This project, however, is far more than a charitable act or clever marketing gimmick. Rigorously conceptual in its foundation, it sits within a lineage of projects by Lam that explore social/spatial relationships, often using the intersection of high design and the everyday. Speaking with the artist on the eve of the fair, I pushed him on these ideas. It was a surprising conversation that challenged both our prescribed ideas about representation and the art fair forum, and indeed was at a timely chapter as fairs reinvent, reposition and refine themselves within an ever-expanding competitive field, especially within Asia.

CONVERSATION BETWEEN GINA FAIRLEY AND IVAN LAM

Gina Fairley : Ivan you say it is an "artist's responsibility" to help nurture and spread Malaysian art to a broader understanding / visual recognition within an international arena, and that it is "your gift back to an art scene that has been good to you". Your work has long had a strong conceptual underpinning and from that perspective I see Coma sitting extremely well within your broader oeuvre. Where you stump me is the compulsive charity line. The commercial art world is far from charitable. Why frame the work in this way?

Ivan Lam : Firstly, there are many layers to this project. One of them has this purported selfless and altruistic leaning. It's such a long shot to be accepted to exhibit in a privileged art fair that to smuggle 500 more Malaysian artist into it is a subversive thrill that I couldn't pass on. Does it undermine the fair's tight screening process that all galleries are subjugated? Perhaps, but the more pertinent question lies in this 'screening' process. This is the revelation of Coma.

GF : Spruiking artists through an application process, do you not employ a similar selection process? I am interested in how you conceptually manage that role as author of this project, that is, your projection of Malaysian art?

IL : The self is negated by the plurality of solutions for representation. The choice to make this project all-inclusive stemmed from the reasoning that all artists are deemed equal with the same stature, creed, age and reason. All are equally invited, produce work of the same size, and those represented are paid the same amount of money for their work. This non-hierarchical approach rocks the fundamental status quo that art only exists within the closed loop of elitism.

GF : That would have to be the jarring conundrum of an art fair wouldn't it, touting its wares to the masses, and yet this platform of choice is rigidly siphoned through networks, economic advantage, geography, and as you remind us, selection?

IL : I am playing to 'the gallery' (pun intended) that the art world doesn't have to be cold and calculated. An artist's calling / vision should sit above commercial gains. I had many inputs how to put forward a selection process that would somehow fit all artists, only to find that no matter how much you tweak or adjust the criteria, you are bound to find strong opposition. I didn't want to lose my sight and integrity by bending backwards to get the "numbers".

GF : It raises an interesting point, that of authorship. On one level it's a conceptual work of yours and yet it is filled with the art of others.

IL : Yes it's my work, but my work consists of many other artist's works. I am akin to a conductor in an orchestra and they are my musicians. I am only negotiating the boundaries between them. When you make a non-art object an art object, and then flip it back to non-art object, so on and so forth, you blur or create new context. You take yourself as an artist out of that context to be part of the creation and you surrender that control together with the rest of them. However, at the end of the day it's still MY machine. All the artists' works inside the machine have become my work.

GF : In regard to the format of these original artworks, how heavily have you relied on the vernacular of the business card and that notion of transaction and transportability?

IL : Simply, the size is determined by the vending machine. In order for it to vend, it needs to be precisely that size, custom-framed by a Perspex casing slotted into the machine's display units. Many artists have found this a hindrance or objection to their practice. I wanted something that they were tasked to make, something that represented who they are - like a business art that you pass out to clients - a quick one two punch that says who you are succinctly. Yes, the play on the business card is deliberate. The need to network is heavily ingrained in our culture. It is a curious pun between replication and originality - all artworks in the vending machine are one of a kind. Not replicated, but cultivated.

GF : Have you faced challenges in getting content for Coma, and what has that reticence been ? Do you think there is an inherent apathy in the Malaysian art scene or do your colleagues just not get it? Is it the case that they see Coma as all glory for you through 'using' them? How did you negotiate those hurdles?

IL : I was like a doe-eyed, naïve schoolboy innocently thinking that all artists will connect with my vision for this project. Oh boy was I in for a rude surprise. Everyone had a say, an opinion. Everyone wanted to be the defender/vanguard of the Malaysian art - the glory seekers. It was disorientating to say the least. As much as I wanted this project to unite Malaysians, regardless of age, creed, race, status, representation, these are the exact things that worked against the project, reiterating camp-like divides. What was I thinking getting out of my comfort cocoon and get brickbats!

Preparing the work for shipping to Hong Kong, I had 38 pieces submitted out of about 2,000 invited artists. They are artists I didn't know before, names that became friends, artists that rallied other artists to join. They were precisely the reason why I embarked on this arduous project - to reward the present. It is a curious roll call that I have highlighted in the vending machine's title Coma : 38/500, leaving the viewer to question the absence of the other 462 pieces.

GF : The idea of volume is key then. I think one of the things that defines a vending machine is its excess of choice, groaning with temptation. Unless it is choked full –

intentional or not - you are creating a satire about preciousness. Perhaps the thin veneer adds another level to this project?

IL : I have come to realise that dealing with the human psyche is one thing, but dealing with the artist's psyche is a whole other level all together.

GF : Colloquially, we associate the word coma with sustained unconsciousness, minimised brain activity. As a title it might suggest an unfeeling or localised ailment of spirit, as you suggest, but it could also pose a metaphor for the broader market's lack of knowledge of Malaysian art?

IL : While critical, I think it an apt title to show the current state of Malaysian art. It's alive but brain dead. It needs that shot of adrenaline. That type of derisive thinking, of being sidelined, slowly seeps into the psyche of an art scene. I want to be proactive and reactive about it, rather than be dead and accept fate. If you can't bring the world to Malaysian art, bring Malaysian art to the world.

GF : I want to return to the foundation of this piece - it is a vending machine in an art fair. Clearly you are tapping into notions of merchandising, price point, packaging, speed, transportability - you have even referred to the individual artworks as 'products'.

IL : The eco system of the art world is organic and is constantly evolving. Why would art remain the same? The 'proposition' of this artwork speaks as much about the nature of collecting as it does art production. Sealed in Perspex boxes, each artwork carefully placed in a working vending machine, this shifts the boundary of art to commodity. The vending machine inherently vends products for consumption. Now it vends art. At the same time by its very nature it bypasses the need for the salesman. And, when you place the vending machine in the art fair it becomes a covert object. It speaks of a different future. The boundaries of what it is are constantly being negotiated.

GF : I am particularly interested in the notion of how we construct value, not so much in economic terms but in terms of the rarified object, the 'original' as a selling point. Do you think "value" is a slippery or malleable concept when it comes to contemporary art?

IL : Yes I think so. You cannot talk or have a discourse on contemporary art without the mention of money. It's that prevalent. This project mimicks or makes a mockery of the very institution that it represents. It reminds us what the value of art is, and is valued for. This project divides as much as it wants to unite. It is all-inclusive yet exclusive. As much as it tells us about what we are, it also subliminally tells us what we are not. Simply, this project is a reflection of the times that we live in.

GF : I agree, the art world and art fairs are about negotiations, sales pitches, and horse-trading. From that point of view the negotiation of this artwork enters the realm of performance.

IL : Roles are reversable, artworks become products, everything changes but yet everything stays the same. It's in a perpetual state of flux. I suppose from that point of view there is an inherent movement, theatricality, in this piece – literally and metaphorically –that could be akin to performance. However, its premise remains a showcase of painting. I think that also speaks to the dominance of painting within this contemporary Asian art market.

GF : I understand Coma is interactive in that you rotate the artworks daily so that this landscape of Malaysian art is ever changing – fresh – a bit like turning the pages of a catalogue. In your view Ivan, does it owe any debt to the lineage of durational performance art and interventions?

IL : This is a departure from a fixed vantage point of looking at art, and as you suggest could be described as a performative installation, but its core remains traditional painting. I get to be someone else, momentarily, moved beyond the pigeon-hole of a painter. There is definitely a physicality to the object, and the duration has certainly been arduous in realising this project, however, I clearly see Coma separate to that history you refer.

GF : A deceptively complex artwork, Coma 38/500 certainly challenges in the art fair context. It almost derails the kind of psychomotor action of perception driven sales, not unlike the hypnotic effect of the robotic arm in a vending machine. Got ya!

IL : Put in the money, select the number, and ‘tada’ an artwork is yours. It takes out the middlemen in this transaction. It’s quite a direct approach. Ironically, though, it’s placed in an art fair where there are layers and layers of middlemen. I want to challenge that notion as to what are you buying, and really whom are you buying from. As Ingrid Rogoff stated, “criticality is key to moving beyond existing frames of knowledge’s and allegiances.” (2003)

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