

SEAN LEAN
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A stew of colours and cognitive juices have been brewing in Sean Lean's studio, where monochrome and formalism used to rule. In his previous body of work, which featured in an ambitious first solo exhibition titled *Flesh*, paintings of animals were at fore and the works were an exercise in artistic expression – something that was “enjoyable and a relief” for Sean to produce.

These days, it's China, a sprawling land that dominates much of Asia and international headlines, which has been the artist's muse. However, more than the nation of over 1.3 billion inhabitants, it has been the artist's parents who have played the strongest influence. “*Motherland* is my parents' China, the affinity they feel about the country where their fathers are from,” says the artist. Spurred by a curiosity for his parents' fascination with this land, *Motherland* encapsulates these personal reflections and the 18 works in the show come together as an investigation into “Chinese-ness and what it means to be a Chinese person now”.

My Family, They Make Me

Work on *Motherland* began two-and-a-half years ago, shortly after Sean's debut showing. The germination of the series' material, though, began somewhat unconsciously and as early as his childhood. “My family is somewhat traditional. My parents speak little English, if any, I went to Chinese schools, and my family were very into Taoism, and still are. We'd have worship ceremonies on the 15th of every lunar month and both of my parents are still vegetarian for Taoist reasons. I was one, too, for about 8 to 10 years,” explains the artist.

Exposure to different cultures fed into Sean's boyhood, and Western influences – from learning the English language through computer games and fantasy novels or comic books – soon injected doses of difference to his personal identity. Around him, though, others bore little affinity for the same things. “In a way, I think I felt a little lonely then. My dad used to read me ‘Romance of 3 Kingdoms’ as bedtime stories, and I would be reading ‘The Hobbit’ on my own. When I got a little older, I would be reading ‘Lord of

the Rings’ and ‘Jinyong’ kungfu novels. It's surreal thinking back (on this contrast) now; I'd watch ‘Cheers’, ‘Who's The Boss’, and ‘Full House’ by myself, and watch Hong Kong TVB dramas with the family; I'd read manga and ‘Batman’, or listen to Alan Tam and Nirvana... You get the idea.”

The artist's college years saw the presence of more kindred spirits and opportunities to discuss shared cultural fascinations, but still, his identity seemed to be in flux. “There were moments which jolted me into feeling like an imposter, and that feeling persists even now, although not as much. I feel like I am always teetering on the edge of two distinct cultural groups, like I am in a cultural no-man's land,” argues the artist.

If these concerns need some visual representation, you'll find it in *Dear God*, a 2009 work that encapsulates the dichotomy of Sean's traditional Chinese upbringing and the influx of foreign cultures into his life. In the work, a traditional Chinese altar takes centre stage and the background sees a mural of iconic superheroes taking flight. This work serves as the unofficial predecessor to *Motherland*, and the work's contrasts speak of Sean and the inevitable identity mishmash that individuals of his generation face: which gods do I worship – my parents' or the ones of my choosing?

A question of being Chinese, today

Within the grand scheme of things, this generational divide isn't foreign matter when considering the history of migrants in Malaysia and the natural evolution of disparate cultures in what was then, a fairly uncharted land. When Sean's grandfathers – both migrants from China – descended upon Malaya, it's likely that they held their original values and cultures tightly. Two generations down the line, those same values would have seen a natural dilution and adaptation to times and other influences.

Yet, what's within never really leaves. It merely changes, and in *Motherland*, this plays out in the potent use of Chinese iconography and how it is represented by the artist. “What I try to do in this series is to take iconic traditional Chinese imagery, and see how much I can take away elements of what makes it traditional while retaining parts that still make it Chinese,” Sean explains. Icons like the dragon and phoenix in *Pantone Men* and *Pantone Women* or the Chinese warrior and lord in *Green Door* and *Tiffany Blue* (a work that also features the visage of the artist's mother) are evergreen symbols for Chinese culture and romanticized earmarks of the past, but Sean has reimagined them all by adding twists in the iconography like the crackled effect on the paintings' surfaces

that serve as interruptions to the representation of history, and which can also be read as marks of Chinese identity in flux and the ruptures in Sean's own.

This plays out further in works like the trio of classic Chinese New Year symbols of *Fu, Lu, Shou* (Happiness, Wealth, and Longevity), where a smattering of tongue-in-cheek interpretation is added through the paintings' backgrounds of Roman goddesses instead of the usual pairing of the three male Chinese deities. This parody can also be seen in *Motherland's* two Buddha paintings, where the figures are juxtaposed with graffiti-style text that commands viewers to, simply, 'Believe'.

My history, I write my own

Whilst *Motherland* points to the artist's roots and the iconography of Chinese culture, it is also Sean's imprint for his personal journey and an examination of his identity today. The paintings of Chinese dragons and their iconic counterparts, may herald a modern-day romanticization of the past, but the body of work is more blatantly, a coming of age as a man and a coming of age as an artist. Sean's *Motherland*, is thus both uniquely his own and also, a stunning visual documentation of where his roots fundamentally lie. China, wherever that might be, mightn't be very far away at all.

Rachel Jenagaratnam
Singapore
August, 2015



Dear God(s)
Oil on canvas
122cm x 183cm
2009



Multicolor Dragons, Small, Black.
Alkyd Enamel on canvas
177cm x 177cm
2015



Multicolor Dragon, Medium, Purple.
Alkyd Enamel on canvas
177cm x 177cm
2015

Multicolor Dragon, Large, Yellow.
Alkyd Enamel on canvas
177cm x 177cm
2015





Fortuna
Alkyd Enamel on canvas
273cm x 273cm
2015



Felicitas
Alkyd Enamel on canvas
273cm x 273cm
2015



Meditrina
Alkyd Enamel on canvas
273cm x 273cm
2015



Tiffany Blue
Alkyd Enamel on canvas
231cm x 146cm
2015



Excelsior Fresco-Stencils no.1676
Alkyd Enamel on canvas
80cm x 80cm
2015



Excelsior Fresco-Stencils no.1773
Alkyd Enamel on canvas
80cm x 80cm
2015



Excelsior Fresco-Stencils no.1677
Alkyd Enamel on canvas
80cm x 80cm
2015



believe (Thousand-Hand Goddess of Mercy)

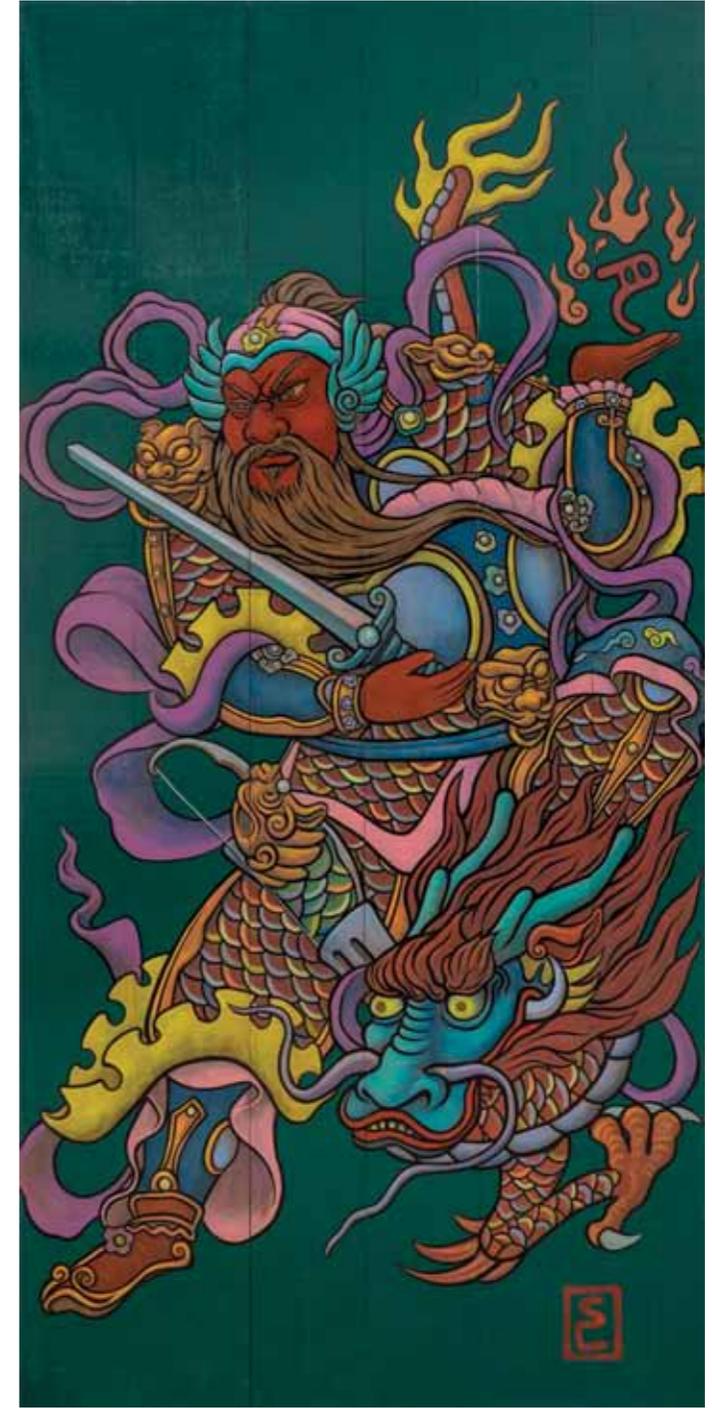
Alkyd Enamel on canvas

196cm x 229cm

2015



Red Door (Guardian)
Alkyd Enamel on panels
230cm x 113cm
2015



Green Door (Guardian)
Alkyd Enamel on panels
230cm x 113cm
2015

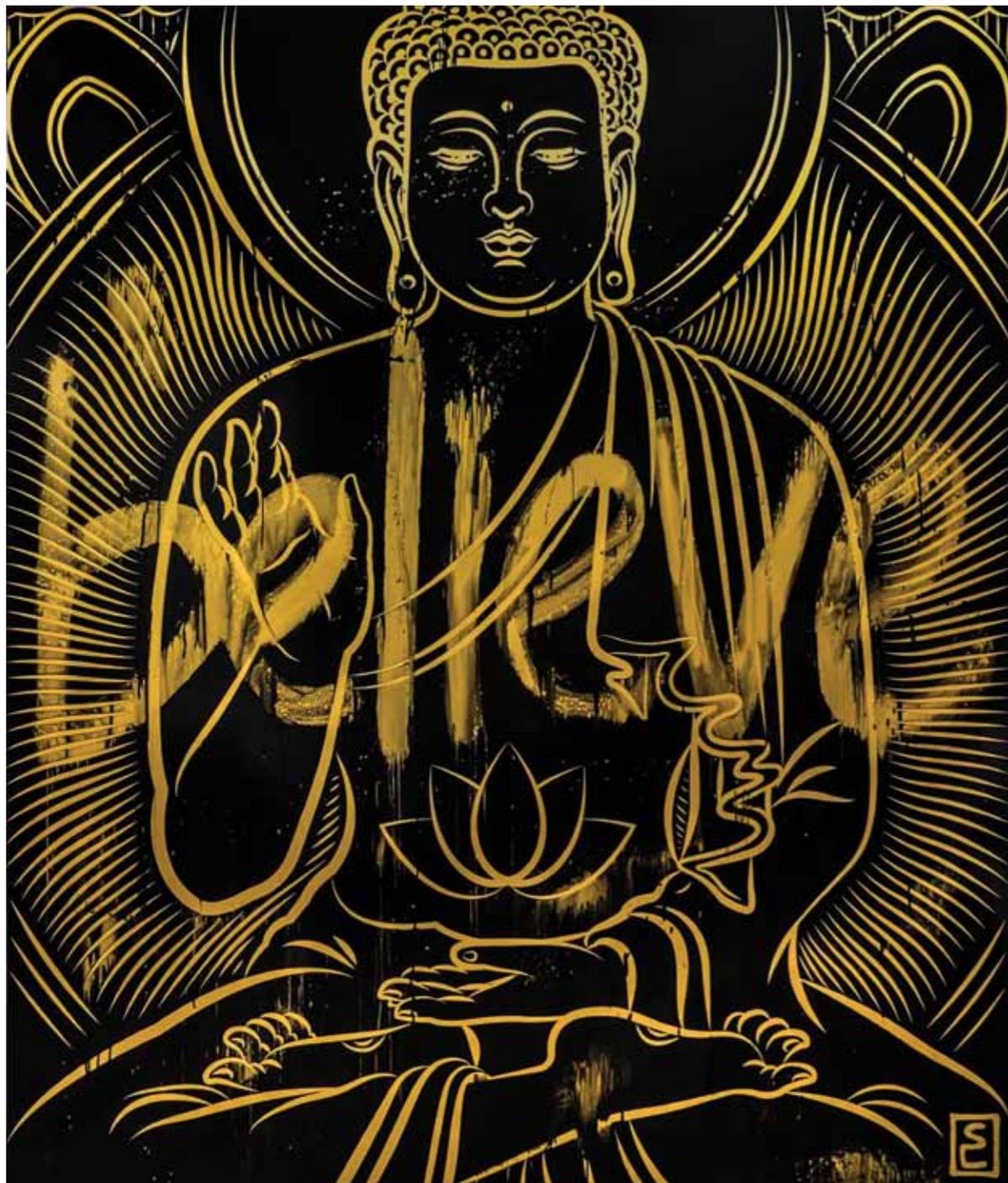
Cotton Candy Pink
Mixed media on canvas
229cm x 196cm
2015





Pantone Spring 2014 (Women)
Alkyd Enamel on canvas
229cm x 196cm
2014

Pantone Spring 2014 (Men)
Alkyd Enamel on canvas
229cm x 196cm
2014



believe (Golden Protection Buddha)

Mixed media on canvas

229cm x 196cm

2015

Sean Lean b. 1981

EDUCATION

2000 Diploma in Visual & Digital Arts, Limkokwing University College of Creative Technology

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2015 MOTHERLAND, Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

2013 FLESH: BLACKS & WHITES, Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2015 THE SPACE BETWEEN, curated by Anurendra Jegadeva & Rahel Joseph, Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

2014 Bologna Fiere SH Contemporary 2014, Shanghai Exhibition Centre, China

2013 18@8 Mirror, Mirror on the wall, Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

MEASURING LOVE, Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

2012 BRIGHT YOUNG THINGS, Wei-Ling Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

2002 URBANSCAPES, organized by Klue Magazine, Grappa, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

2002 VDA GRADUATION SHOW, Loke Mansion ADKL, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

2001 MANUSIA, NN Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

2001 DOORS, Loke Mansion ADKL, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

2000 EYES WIDE OPEN, LUCT, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

AWARDS

2002 PRESIDENTIAL SCHOLAR AWARD, Limkokwing University College of Creative Technology

2002 YOUNG ACHIEVERS AWARD, Limkokwing University College of Creative Technology

2001 BEST STUDENT AWARD in Visual & Digital Arts, Limkokwing University of Creative Technology

1999 NST SCHOLARSHIP AWARD, Limkokwing University College of Creative Technology



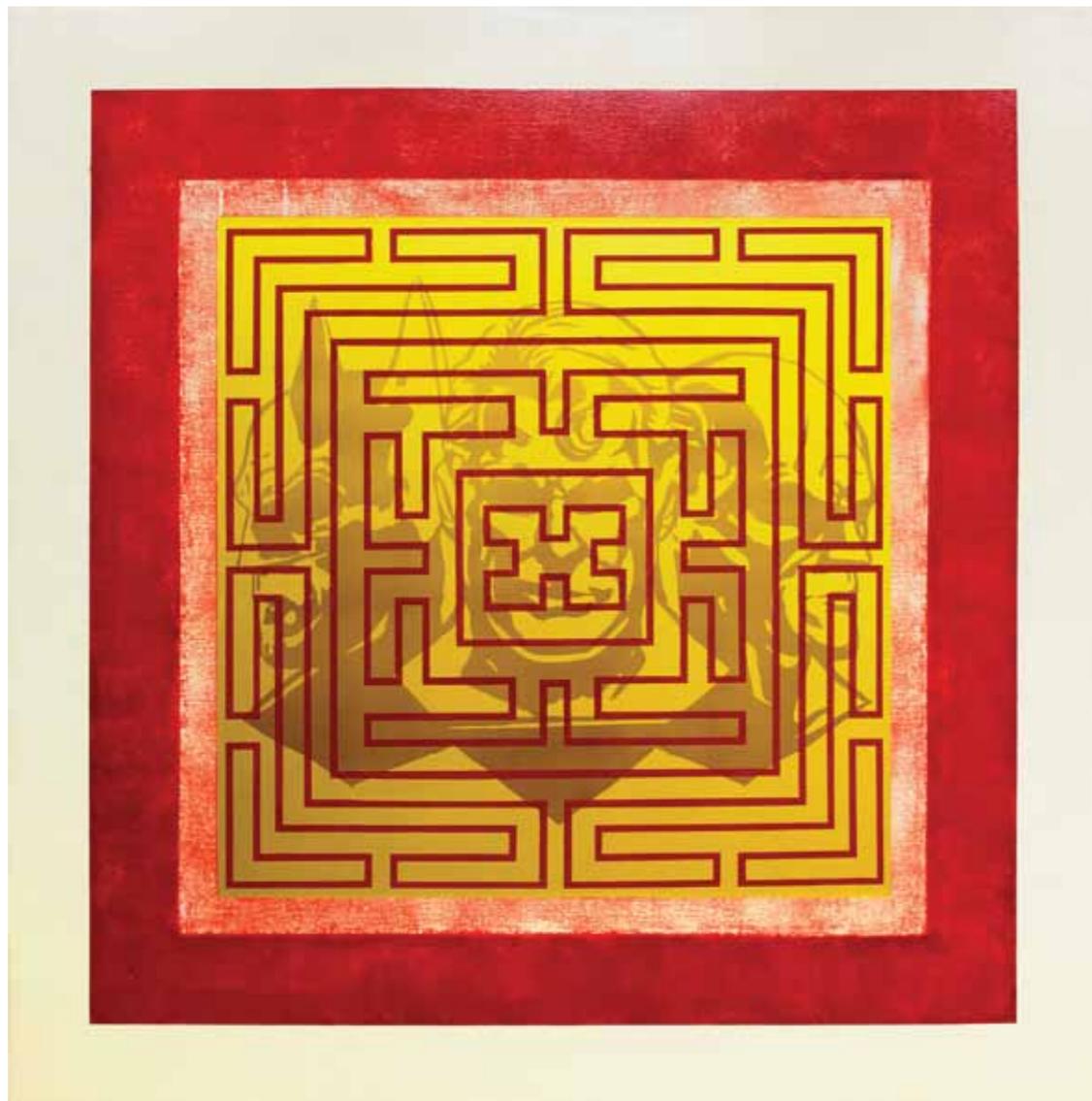


I would like to thank Wei-Ling for the continuous trust in giving me this opportunity and the team at Wei-Ling Gallery for their tremendous support in making this show a reality.

Thank you John and Ryan Lean, brothers/mentors/role models/studio assistants/financiers/all-round providers, for doing what they do, so i can make art.

And my parents, for showing me how to be human, Chinese or otherwise.

Thank you.
-SL



Dear God(s) II
Mixed media on canvas
178cm x 178cm
2014



Produced by **Wei-Ling Gallery**

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Wei-Ling Contemporary

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Cover image: *Red Door (Guardian)*, Alkyd Enamel on panels, 230cm x 113cm, 2015

