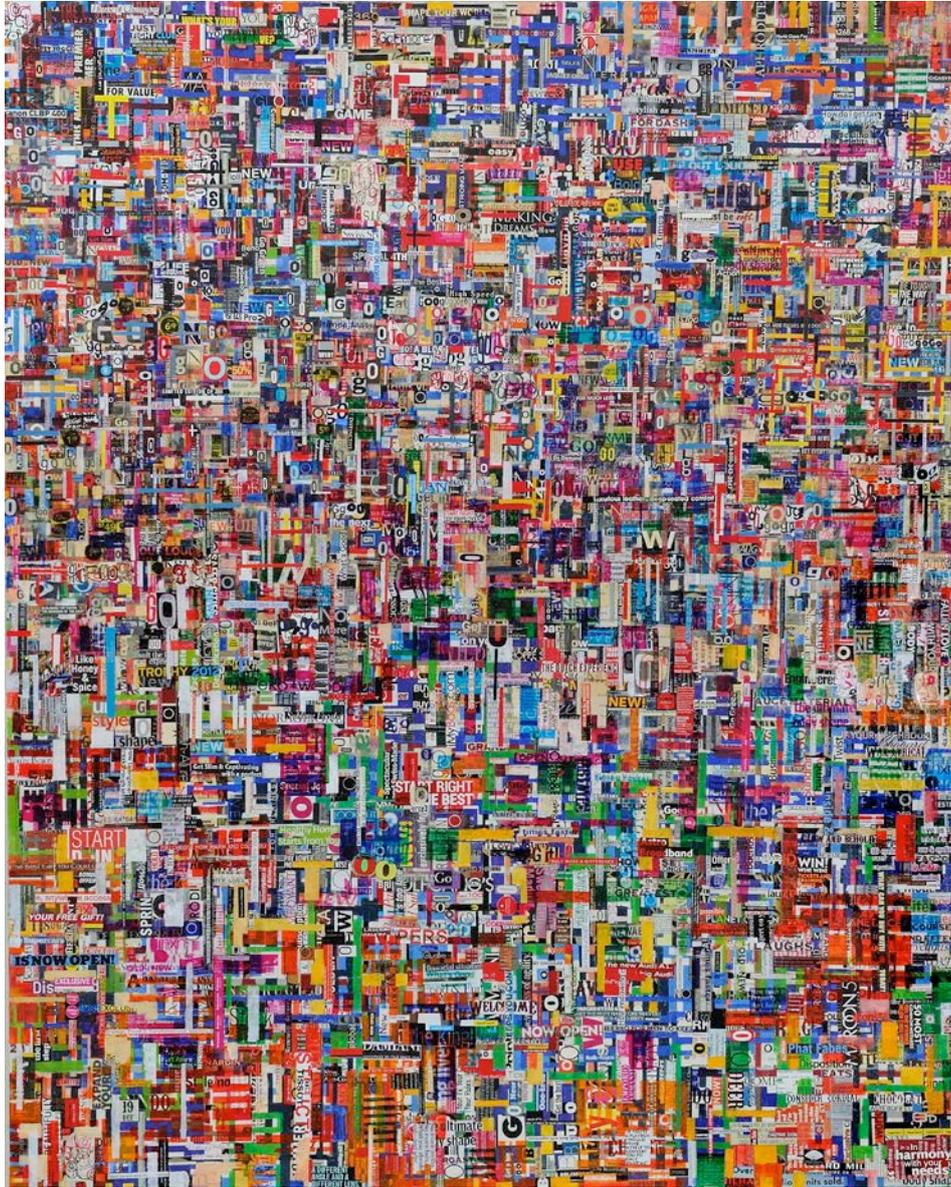


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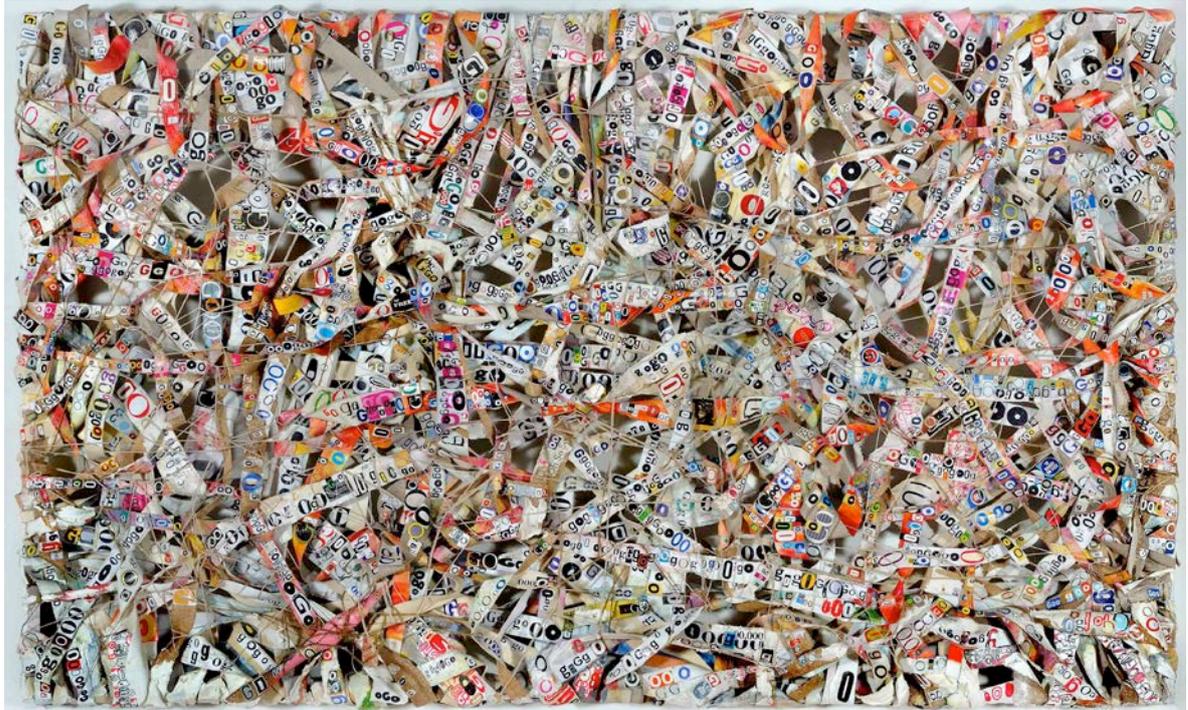
2014

ART BASEL HONG KONG 2014

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Choy Chun Wei  
Future Store  
Mixed Media on Canvas  
172cm x137cm, 2014



Choy Chun Wei  
WEB-GO  
Mixed media on canvas  
83cm x 151cm, 2014



Choy Chun Wei  
Reaching New Heights With New Look  
Mixed media on canvas  
141cm X 402cm (Diptych), 2014

Choy Chun Wei is an artist whose predilections and ideals of art are based predominantly on design language. His immersion in Graphic Design studies at the tertiary level has provided design oriented conceptual reading and contextual imagination into his chosen practice in the fine arts. This confluence of design and fine art is germane to an exciting development of his art, clearly distinguishing Chun Wei from his contemporaries. An articulate and demanding artist, Chun Wei is never one to rest on his laurels constantly seeking to develop and improve himself as an artist. Already an established artist in the Malaysian art scene, Choy Chun Wei is much sought after by Malaysian public collections, as well as, international collectors.

### **Choy Chun Wei in Conversation with Kelvin Chuah**

#### **Could you describe your art practice and how you have evolved over the past 10 years as an art practitioner?**

My early works consisted of vertical cut up photos of urban homes. The small works focused on selected living spaces that were interspersed with hand drawn grey graphite strips. These were very much worked upon and lacked tactility as compared to the feel of actual materials incorporated in later works. I am happy to note that I have since evolved from aesthetically driven works and have shifted my energies to transcribing the process of design as my intent. It has become more of a reflection of my thoughts and my approaches to mapping my own design language. Instead of being interpretation reliant on a particular subject matter, I am now reevaluating interpretations I have done by conducting an art as research practice. My art pieces have occasionally been misconstrued as being located within the premise of abstraction. It was not my intent to produce abstract images but to invite the viewer(s) to partake in my pictorial dialogues. Plausibly, the resultant compactness and tensions created from the placement of different mediums on a canvas generated non-focal images that emit abstract suppositions from the audience.

#### **You are also an art educator, delving into youthful and developing minds.**

I was lecturing at a private college for a period of time when I came back to Malaysia before I became a full time artist. I am still an art educator today as teaching allows me to reinvigorate myself and to instruct local students with design principles that I was formally taught. I vividly remember my own artistic training relevant to my practice until today, gaining stimulation from Jean Dubuffet's Styrofoam works. His deviation from common aesthetics, handling of materials, processes, attitude towards art and daringness to deviate from art practices from his contemporaries in France served as inspiration to me. So instead of working with conventional art mediums and materials, which have a place in art training, I advocate for more experimentation and development. A more 'hands-on' approach to understanding the values of natural and fabricated products we have around us. In other words, it is my attempt to cultivate an attitude and aptitude towards organic and elastic forms and to draw influence from such sources. Ideas are not from text alone, but are gained from thinking, doing, making and connecting. I always believe that we teach to educate but we learn more as educators.

#### **How has your work in fine art been integrated with your training in design from Central St. Martins?**

The training I received from Central St. Martins was essentially to prepare oneself to conduct investigations on their own. They trained us to be critically inclined, to express our opinions with a comprehensive understanding of facts and historical developments in relation to art and design. It goes beyond the surface of advertising and editorials, as we are inoculated with the importance for deeper inquiry through reading and discourse with others. In Central St. Martins they imbibed in us a mentality of not being overwhelmed by industries but to become units that make the industries. Units function as an important component of my work today.

I still observe principles of design from my undergraduate training, which is very much reflected in the outcomes of my work today. Design language is deeply ingrained within my work process and I have sought to push the limits of my understanding of design and exert to

integrate it with the fine arts. In my opinion, graphic language is essentially a composite appropriately applied for industrial and commercial functions. Yet, its application may yield artistic elements that may be worked and refined from mundane to more complex forms.

**You are working on your Master's program. Can you elaborate on it?**

I embarked on a postgraduate program to open myself to art studies with foci on subjects and thematic distinctive from my undergraduate training in design studies. I am exposed to different approaches and engagement with art, delving into fine art, theoretical discourses and a general understanding of Southeast Asian Art. I felt that it is essential to have an understanding of regional art developments as I am practicing within the region itself.

As I learnt more about art methodology and history of art, questions arose from within myself, triangulating enquiries towards my own art practice. I developed an innate interest to conduct personal research relevant to my own practice. You can say that it's my attempt to reassess and reevaluate my own art productions and practice for the past decade in order to move forward. The reconsiderations are proving insightful in this attempt to displace and position myself on a critical platform to revisit artistic choices that have determined my direction for ten years. It is invigorating to appraise artistic choices made and to cogitate on subject and matter with current perspectives. This is a dislocating exercise and an entirely new experience in my growth as an artist. I searched for models of reference in Malaysian art practice but was unable to locate documented evidence invested within practice-based research. Perhaps it is not unexpected, as visual artists tend to focus on the making and of contextual readings of their pictorial imageries.

**What is the research topic of your postgraduate thesis?**

I am working on Art Practice as Research, reading and researching into my practice with equal weightage between contextual analysis and material transformation. I believe this is somewhat new for contemporary artists in Malaysia to be more reflective and less reflexive of one's practice. As you know, my art making involves meticulous and patient execution, drawing inspiration from the natural environment. Working with mixed media necessitates an innate sensitivity to the materials being selected, as well as, apposite handling. In the process of my investigations, I am continuously catechized on every facet; from choice of materials, composition, art influences, materiality to my objectives in art making. These are some of the issues raised in confabulation. The consistent probing and 'un-layering' years of self-constructed notions provided clarity in the search for fundamental interests and wellspring of my intentions.

**For your art making, what are the types of objects that draw your attention?**

I deal and have dealt with various materials ranging from what others may consider as garbage, newspaper cutouts to recycled objects. I look at the environment, searching for existing materials that is part of our proximity. I believe this leads to criticality of our surrounding. From selected objects, I construct my own forms. All of these are derivative from design principles and elements. It is a formulation of my own open-ended design language. In my work, there are no ready-made objects ala Duchamp. I am determined to formulate my own direction and signature by drawing upon my background, training and philosophy of life.

**Can you articulate on your working process and development?**

My previous works were very much based on developing found objects, constructed compositions, which are melded to form my own dialogue with the natural surrounding. Indeed, the natural environment and space are imperative elements in my dialogue with art. It is only recently, when I revisited my working processes and methodology that I reconfigured my thinking process and determined my intentions relevant to the making.

**What are your current thoughts? Are you working with any particular paradigm at the moment?**

A recent dialogue revolved around my handling of found objects and my connection to those articles. It is perhaps a less examined trajectory of my work dealing with the materiality of objects; altering and molding, exploring its malleable and organic properties to create possibilities for my designs. Material and material culture are still important considerations in my works. Instead of focusing merely on how I have manipulated existing objects in the past, I would like to highlight the influence of 'seeing' as the crucial element in the aforementioned exercises. No doubt I have been influenced by John Berger's "Ways of Seeing", but my views (of seeing) and resultant selection of items were very much determined by observations of my immediate surroundings. The significance of objects is thus related to a Malaysian material culture as I am based in Kuala Lumpur. I would say that I am interested to explore the process of seeing and to a further extent how seeing leads to the selection and handling of materials.

Also, I would like to invite the audience to explore my works by observing different angles for enhanced viewership. Due to the different properties of layered objects and its transformations, most people tend to view only the frontal surface. The dialogue runs around the entire canvas generating visual stimulations at different trajectories. Each piece is carefully formulated to reflect much-layered surfaces mapped in an intricate manner. Hence the textures, correlation and intertwined composition provide fresh openings to discuss about the mediums and their interlocked connotations. Though visually similar in some ways every piece displays its own characteristic.

**Can you elaborate on the correlation between text and words in your more recent endeavors? How did this start and which direction is this leading?**

Fonts, texts and its inherent meanings have always captivated me. Simple words like 'go' and 'new' are indications or markers if you will, for me to create narrative(s) within a painting. There are also other words that are very important to my construction of a dialogue within a work of art. I do not simply take a word and work with it. Rather, the text/word is significant for me to conceptualize and develop it as an entry point to fashion a dialogue as a manner of conveying my message. There have been misconceptions that I take random words and develop incorrigible messages in the works. In actuality, the words and texts form a personal dialogue of my concerns interrelated with my life and work. The textual entries avow conceptual ideas, meanings and concerns shaped by the words. From the words, the tactile assertions are stretched, contested and negated. While the formation of visual imagery and aesthetic considerations derived from textual organization have deconstructed initial meanings and intentions, the process also created new meanings and intentions. Even the spaces divided by spatial considerations provides an interlude for more intimate reflections, which have led to other developments on the surface of the art works. The medium is now the message.

The strategies initiated from textual concerns have transgressed to the linear structures of grid. I was deliberating on the purpose of text and its functions as a tool. Constant observation and contemplation on the words have thawed the line works (that formed the text), bending the lines to striation, grid like lines that define spaces and boundaries. The grid lines are becoming carousels, organic and malleable space I can arrange and control within the canvas.

**What is grid to you? Why is it important for you to map space within grids?**

I grew up in Sungai Petani, Kedah, Malaysia. My parents relocated to Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia during my schooling years. I was used to tranquil, open spaces. The shift to the urban city life created a major shift that affected my perception of living in a tranquil, nourishing and natural setting. I began to see space, little pockets of green becoming big structures with artificial lights. I witnessed an intrusion of space publicly and privately. This 'intrusion' meant other sources have control over space that affects us due to reasons of profiteering. We are inevitably encroached, controlled and encapsulated by the lessening of

space in our surroundings. It is in a way acts of power and control by certain quarters that demand for our compliance. I refer to these as 'logos' and they are everywhere.

### **Sorry to interrupt but what is your definition of logos?**

Logos are my way of signifying innumerable influences ranging from corporate bodies and billboards to screen advertising. The aforementioned are inoculated into my perceived ecosystem of space and environment for future developments. I have always mind-mapped subject and matter as logos since my undergraduate days.

In my art, I now have a chance to draw upon logos as a reservoir of inspiration. These thoughts are reflected in my layering and mapping of grid spaces in a metaphorical manner over actual spaces and boundaries. Grid is part of our lives and grid from Marshall McLuhan's 'Medium is the Message' is a manifestation of the medium, how we extend ourselves. Art is an extension of us (physically) and on the physical. What is the medium in my work? The words, the found materials and my natural surrounding - the environment. Grids controls and compartmentalize different areas, demarcating how and what I perceive them to be. Therefore, I see the entire mapping and its contents in units, which are more defined in segregation. I find this schema more distinctive as compared to the classical way of looking at shapes. Also, grids coated with images and wording creates more complex readings of the imagined over the real.

Within grids I would like to emphasize again what I would categorize as 'units' that formed the basis of my compositions. By working from within this singular element, units developed a chained progress that formed the story in its entirety. The units and all the other elements hence elicit triggers evoking imaginings and coalescing all the elements together.

Allow me to add that looking at elements in compartments and relating to them made the images more wholesome. The relation of the parts made better sense. Dismantling things allowed for insertion of newer articles. I now have better control as personalization of space within grids and units takes place. The grids in its currency created and refracted tensions, relations and dialogues of imagined space derived from words, treated objects and logos founded on my storyboard (the canvas). It is a process at this point of time. Again, the grids are not constructed borders but a composition of space utilizing design knowledge and language.

### **Is this development your conception of pictorial imagery and integration of how art imitates life?**

Yes, very much so. Perchance it may be seen as my manipulation of pictorial images through subtle transformations. Much of my work for the past decade has revolved around the handling and hybridization of materials, space and text. I was attempting to expand the possibilities in my image making. Having invested a significant amount of time to study, interact and to integrate the individual units together, it came to a stage where I felt really comfortable with the singular units as mediums channeling my messages. I have deliberately disengaged from this comfort zone, shifting my focus to highlight contextual concerns instead of fitting logos to attractive aesthetics. As you can see, my current efforts seek to accentuate the artistic process. I am using grids as my design language to formulate a new visualization. Hence you see a lot of 'bleeding' beyond the borders of the frame. There seems to be more fluidity as subject matter mesh together in a more intricate manner. Basically, I do not wish to initiate quick pictorial changes but to induce subtle progressions via manipulation of imagery. I am interested in investigating the attitude of making and to cogitate on the mark(s) I make to be more self critical towards the ideas of existence and humanity. The completed work you see is not accurately viewed as complete but it is sufficient for the time being.

Kelvin Chuah is an artist and art writer. He is currently pursuing his doctorate at Universiti Sains Malaysia, focusing on the modern condition in Malaya and Singapore.



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2012

18@8 KUL-SIN

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Choy Chun Wei  
Brave New Malaysia  
60cm x 180cm  
Mixed media on wooden panel  
2012

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2012

TIMELESS

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Choy Chun Wei  
City, Machine and Industry  
172 cm x137 cm (3 Panels)  
Mixed Media on Canvas  
2012

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2012

PRECIOUS LITTLE PIECES

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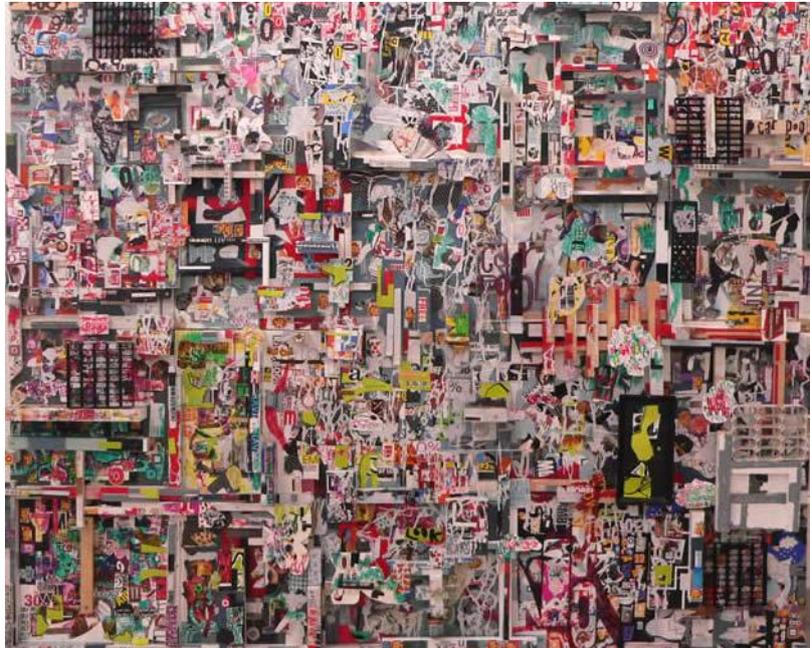
Study I (Working Drawing)  
Variable size  
Mixed media  
2012

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2011

18@8 SAVE THE PLANET

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Architecture of nourishment

Mixed media

120.5cm x 146cm

2011



'O-Messenger'

Printed paper, acrylic gel, acid free pigment ink

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2011

HERE AND NOW

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Runaway Slaves - City of Objects  
Mixed media on canvas  
150cm x 300cm (2 panels)  
2011



Absolutely New  
Mixed media on canvas  
214cm x 214cm  
2010/2011



Master Plan - Right Here Right Now  
Mixed media on canvas  
213cm x 366cm (2 panels)  
2011



Instant City  
Mixed media on canvas  
123cm x 324cm (3 panels)  
2011



Web Goal

Mixed media on canvas and collage on shredded canvas and wood

122cm x 122cm

2010



Architecture of Desire

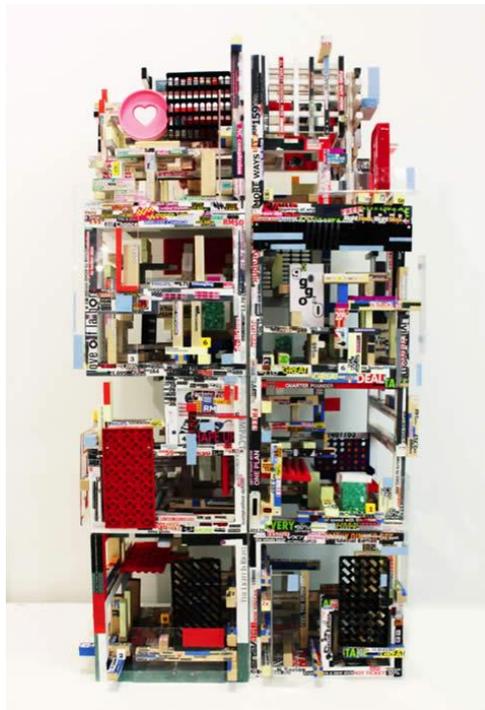
Mixed media and collage on wood

108cm x 181cm

2011



New city - grid and neon graffiti  
153cm x 153cm  
Mixed media on canvas  
2011



Shopping Ghettoes - Absolute Towers  
Mixed media on wood  
124cm x 92cm x 38cm  
2010/2011



Shopping Ghettos - Instant Child

Mixed media on wood

32cm x 92cm x 38cm

2010/2011



Shopping Ghettos - eyes of the beholder

Mixed media on wood

30cm x 61cm x 35cm

2010/2011

## Essay on 'Here and Now'

# NEW

Cut from popular magazines and shopping brochures, or painted with graphic verve floating above densely collaged layers, the word new is visibly repeated across this body of work. It is part of an incessant chatter – choose, go, subscribe, now, gain, spend – words that populate Choy Chun Wei's recent exhibition "Here and Now". While they might scream for our attention with the zeal of their commercial origins, one wonders to what level do we filter their noise within their spatial context? To call upon T.S. Elliot,

**My words echo  
Thus, in your mind.  
But to what purpose  
Disturbing the dust on a bowl of rose-leaves  
I do not know. 1.**

In our contemporary world we are bombarded with textual stimuli, a fraction of which we absorb. On buses, bus shelters, billboards, store signage, it grows across a city's structure like barnacles. But this assertive use of text is more than spatial clutter in the hands of Choy Chun Wei. Like a dervish whipping up a dust storm, it enlivens his new works. And, when pushed into a three-dimensional dialogue as his canvases are expanded into freestanding sculptural constructions, it becomes palpable.

Across Choy Chun Wei's career his works have been framed against the accelerated urbanism of our built environment. While the foundations of architecture – its visual stacking, striation, spread and geometry define the spaces we occupy – this body of work pushes beyond that singular dialogue. Architectural critic George Katodrytis wrote, "The city has definitely ceased to be a site: instead it has become a condition." 2.

Katodrytis's comment strikes at the heart of Chun Wei's exhibition. An evaluation of the space we occupy must also examine who we are. Take this word new that recurs across the work like a pop-up event. It is a word riddled with complexities. While it heralds a pushing forward in fresh directions, it is also a surging new that threatens the balance of the social structure – rapid development, consumer consumption and globalisation – a bitter sweet pill we swallow. The psycho-economic space trumps the physical space.

Speaking with Chun Wei about these new works he explained, "Modern development has inscribed and demarcated space as a meter of value, essentially commodity pragmatism. The shopping mall is a massive air-conditioned box fashionable for the modern lifestyle. It is the NEW convenience. It is the absolute future. There is something definitive about this contemporary symbol of urbanity and its commodities, metaphorically fenced in, defined by its imposed boundaries."

Architecture has increasingly become a means of manipulating society based on tactics of inclusion / exclusion – the corporate skyscraper, the gated community, the shopping mall. Increasingly Chun Wei turns to these codified spaces as his primary subject. A good example is the painting *Absolutely New* (2011), which plays out this demarcation graphically through a black line; a definitive last gesture that seemingly 'fences off' sections of the painting. Apart from the word 'new' that is badged across the work in a Constructivist palette of red and black, this collage is littered with discount price tags that play a new graphic role. Chun Wei describes them as, "...the very core existence of urban markings, signposts for survival." Increasingly our world is a zone to be navigated.

These tags occur again in his huge triptych *Instant City (Yellow)* (2011), a painting of billboard proportions it uses the vernacular of advertising to speak about consumerism. Here the 'price spot'

is stripped back to its most elementary form, floated across the surface with pop abstraction. Yellow symbolises everything from wisdom, an imperial position and happiness to the colour executioners once wore in ancient Spain. Chun Wei uses yellow as a subliminal register reassigning commercialism with a positive psychedelic tone – a retinal ping.

Instant City (Yellow) is less about landscape per se and more about its fragments of text exorcised from their original source and recontextualised within a structural field that alludes to our built environment. It is interesting in comparison to another work of similar scale in this exhibition, Master Plan - Right Here Right Now, which blocks out the landscape with graphic clarity. Again there is a Constructivist echo to this bold line; the mechanics of a city inscribing itself 'over' the place.

Both paintings have patterned across their surface grouped horizontal and vertical lines almost like machine templates that pick up their palette, red and blue in Master Plan and black in the case of Instant City. Their deliberate repetition takes on a texture of their own. Chun Wei says of these marks, "They are controlled and random pressing down onto the skin of the collage." Skin is an interesting metaphor. It holds our scars, our age, our colour and is our first line of defence to the world. Like a tattoo, Chun Wei inscribes his voice over the noise and clutter of the city through these marks.

It offers an interesting leap to Chun Wei's more sculptural works. Architecture of Desire and Web-goal flutter between 2 and 3-dimensional space. Through wooden battens Chun Wei lifts the text off the canvas in Architecture of Desire, bringing that illusionary depth of field that has defined much of his earlier work into physical relief. The battens sit in an orchestrated rhythm between horizontal and vertical, stacked at varying heights creating a surface tension and energy.

In Web-goal the text is collaged onto ribbons of canvas that are woven and held aloft from the substructure of the canvas. Colour becomes inconsequential to the text. The repetition of the word 'goal' threads across this construction and parallels the kind of bland aspirations of contemporary society – material aspiration, competition in sport, at the office - uniting people in the constant forward surge, caught in its web. A delightful aspect of this work is the way it flirts with the protocols of painting moving beyond the canvas edge as rogue pieces find their way into the gallery space.

It is an easy leap to Chun Wei's most ambitious mixed media works to date, his Shopping Ghettoes series. Architectural historian Sabrina Foster notes, "Architecture addresses our metaphysical, philosophical and cultural identities within a material context..."<sup>3</sup> Chun Wei takes that material cue to push his work into unexpected spatial and temporal frameworks that lift everyday objects into a world fantastical and surreal, like a sci-fi skyline populated with nostalgia.

Composed with a good dose of improvisation, these timber and paper constructions have grown organically like a city. Take Shopping Ghettoes: Absolute Towers for example; its airy construction gives it a fragility and yet encrusted with text it stands defiant like graffiti on a concrete structure. 'Absolute', like the word new, is heavy with connotation: unwaivering, conclusive, blind sighted – there's no going back. It grows ever taller; ever ambitious.

While it is loosely defined by a stacked box-grid, Chun Wei's tower is consumed from within with almost baroque excess. This fetish tone of consumer kitsch is best played out in Shopping Ghettoes: Instant Child, its array of plastic toys and building blocks a blatant comment on this highly marketed industry.

The labyrinthine structure of Chun Wei's Shopping Ghettoes, deceiving everyday, layers urbanism, mythology, commercialism and domesticity in a complex system of order and knowledge. Spatially, like Web-goal, they extend beyond their own physicality playing off the architecture of the gallery

and, placed at eye-level to the gallery visitor, allow us to connect across and through their forms to his canvases.

Architecture, we must remember, is a catalyst for the socialization of space. The very title of Chun Wei's series Shopping Ghettos sets up that stage – a new landscape and language that sits at the core of this exhibition. To return to Elliot's question, 'my words echo but to what purpose' we can only conclude that above the drone of commercial text and contemporary boundaries, there is a humanity that breathes resilience into the frameworks around which we build our lives. Chun Wei's see-through cities are dynamic and terribly exciting metaphors for that place where occupy, and the tone of experimentation and individuality that carries this exhibition is one to be championed in our 'boxed-up world'.

### **Gina Fairley**

1. TS Elliot, "The Four Quartets", Quartet No. 1. "Burnt Norton" 1936, sited <http://www.tristan.icom43.net/quartets/norton.html>
  2. George Katodytis, "The Dubai Experiment: Accelerated Urbanism", published in Al Manakh, Gulf Survey, 2007, pg. 38
  3. Sabiha Foster; "Multiplicity in Unity", in Islam + Architecture Issue of Architectural Design, Vol. 74 No. 6, (London), Nov/Dec 2004, pg 5.
- All quotes by artist from email conversation with the writer, October 2011.

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2011

ABSOLUT 18@8

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Choy Chun Wei  
Shopping ghettos  
Acrylic, oil paint, collage on wood  
47cm x 48cm x 53cm  
2010



Choy Chun Wei  
Letter to Yang  
Acrylic, oil paint, collage on wood  
56cm x 50cm  
2010

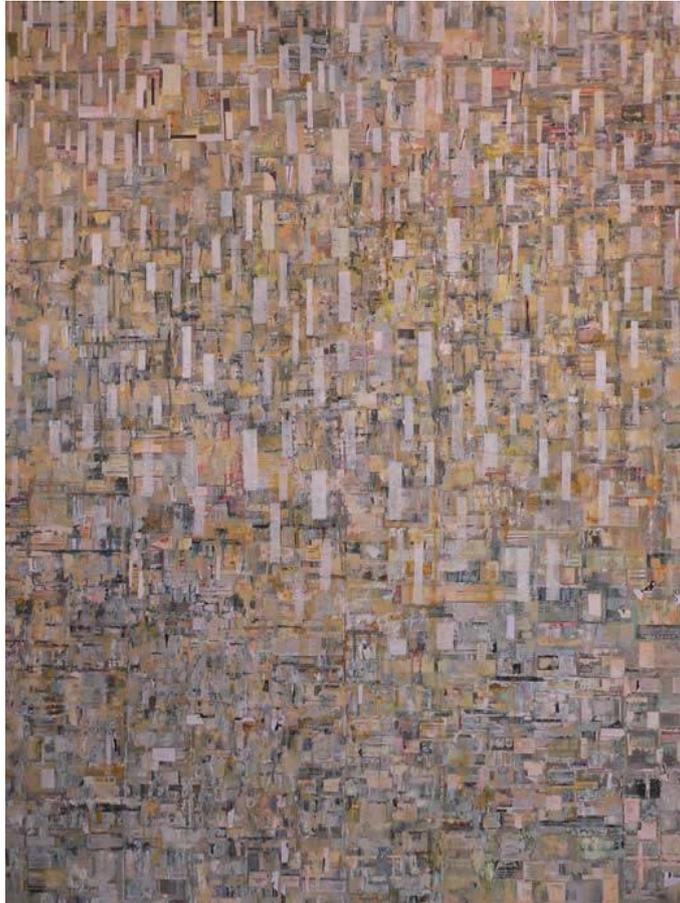


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2008

18@8, Vice & Virtue

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Invasion of great souls - Moderation  
Oil paint, acrylic sand gel, acrylic paint & printed papers  
183cm x 138 cm



Noise of passionate chaos – Gluttony  
Oil paint, acrylic sand gel & printed papers  
183cm x 138 cm  
2008

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2008

CIGE (China International Gallery Exposition)

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Built to destroy  
Mixed media on canvas  
183cm x 138cm  
2007

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2007

Kaleidoscopic Landscapes

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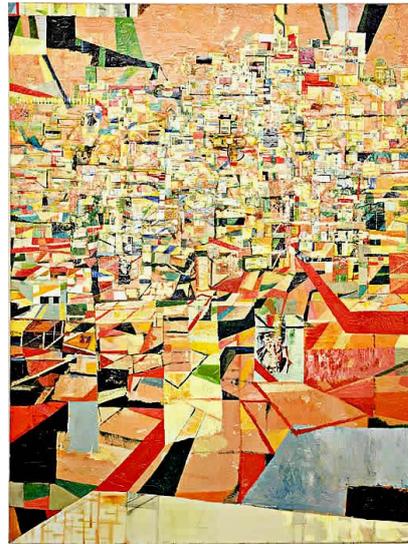
Trappings  
Mixed media on canvas  
183cm x 414cm  
2007



Fabricate and Parade  
Mixed media on canvas  
153cm x 305cm  
2007



Built Layers & Stacks  
Mixed media on canvas  
153cm x 122cm, 2007



Passages  
Mixed media on canvas  
183cm x 153cm, 2007



Speed Builder II  
Mixed media on canvas  
165cm x 165cm, 2007



Speed Builder I  
Mixed media on canvas  
165cm x 165cm, 2007



Rush  
Mixed media on canvas  
183cm x 138cm, 2007



Reclaim  
Mixed media on canvas  
153cm x 122cm, 2007



Overabundance  
Mixed media on canvas  
153cm x 122cm, 2007



Built to destroy  
Mixed media on canvas  
183cm x 138cm  
2007



Build Touch  
Mixed media on canvas  
153cm x 122cm  
2007



Excavation I  
Mixed media on canvas  
79cm x 62cm  
2007



Build and Illuminate  
Mixed media on canvas  
153cm x 244cm  
2007



Blatant Vision  
Mixed media on canvas  
150cm x 120cm  
2007



Shredding  
Mixed media on canvas  
122cm x 122cm  
2007



Organic tracks  
Mixed media on canvas  
168cm x 214cm  
2007



Excavation II  
Mixed media on canvas  
30.5cm x 102cm  
2007



Built to Sense  
Mixed media on canvas  
214cm x 76cm  
2007



Untitled  
Mixed media on canvas  
153cm x 122cm  
2007

### Essay on 'Kaleidoscopic Landscapes'

## **Choy Chun Wei: Unexpected Trails**

'Finally, architecture is a dangerous profession because it is a poisonous mixture of impotence and omnipotence, in the sense that the architect almost invariably harbours megalomaniacal dreams that depend upon others, and upon circumstances, to impose and to realise those fantasies and dreams.' – Rem Koolhaas

Sanford Kwinter in interpreting the work of Koolhaas, describes his mode of operation as ways 'to convert optimism into danger and to make that danger speak', he continues, 'architecture becomes dangerous when it forgoes all that is 'pregiven' – in this case fixed types and predetermined matter – when, rather, it takes the actual flow of historical conditions as its privileged materiality (not the habitual discrete domains of geometry, masonry, stone and glass), and works these, adapts these through transformations and deformations, in order to engender and bind its form. The effect of danger derives here from the fact that this radical view of materiality is a perfectly active, fluid and mobile one: it describes a materiality that actually moves and changes as it is worked, one that envelops and releases its own spontaneous properties or traits, carries its own capacities to express itself in form – all beyond the arbitrary reach of external control.

Malaysian-born artist Choy Chun Wei's works have been variously described as 'urbanscapes', 'mappings', 'imaginary scapes', 'cityscapes', 'urban encrustations', 'emotive private landscapes', and 'fragmented narration and shattered surfaces'; descriptions that attempt to capture his method of overlapping, layering, assembling and deconstructing the space around him into the space of the canvas. The notion of cartography applied to his work goes beyond physical location and into the conceptual and hypothetical; it is a cartography of boundary, definition and resistance that the artist engages with, that of 'discovering new potential in existing conditions'. This act of sifting through the driftwood, the fragments, the

remains of the system, picking through the ordinary and the consumed takes on a markedly different quality when compiled and framed in his work, it becomes, as in Koolhaas' optimism, an affirmation of life, of 'the wildness of *life* – of the life that resides even in places and things.

Representations of landscapes as an attempt to participate in or envision the environment, presents a form of a worldview, reiterating, accentuating and validating a way of seeing the world, or imbuing space and surroundings with particular desires and attributes. It is a simultaneous process of emptying and filling a site that gives it the potential to be a highly charged domain. In Chun Wei's early works from 2001 and 2002, we find these landscapes populated with a density that is almost oppressive. In the 'Link-House' series (2001), the demarcations of space are hard, boundaries appear immovable, and a certain breathlessness pervades the allotments. In a similar way, within the 'Construction' series, we find these boundaries further weighed down by a vertical development of the space from the base of the painting, expanding upwards and intensifying into fantastic citadels that remain sealed off to the eye, dissuading approach. (Fig.1) The artist describes this period of his practice as a more pessimistic time that became reflected in the largely monochromatic greys used, and the depiction of 'dead looking buildings' and 'static living objects'.

From around 2004, Chun Wei's works took a new direction – a different plane is introduced, on the one hand becoming less organised around the subject of spaces such as in houses, facades, kitchens, and on the other hand shifting from a vertical orientation to a more horizontal dimension. The accumulation of materials and layers of the work is realised as weightlessness upon the surface of the canvas rather than endeavours to build up and conceal, while pointing to an obscured interiority. It appears as if the artist enters into direct dialogue with the pictorial space itself, rather than in exertions from without. The shift during this period results in explorations of landscapes and gardens in the 'Constructed Landscape' series, creating textured surfaces that flatten and allow for a greater visual engagement with the work. With aerial views, the work takes on a more lofty and bountiful feel, generously spreading across the canvas, the use of collage and the layers of paint becoming a means to develop the effect of a spirited and organic growth rather than encumbrance. This change according to the artist began with 'Constructed Landscape: Murmur of the Idyllic', a work that won the Juror's choice award at the National Young Contemporary Exhibition at the National Art Gallery in December 2004, a delicately nuanced work, with a calm and gossamery attractiveness. (Fig.2) The work parallels developments in the artist's own experience of leaving home and setting up his own abode, creating a familial environment for himself. Another development around this period saw the inclusion of found materials such as in *Feeding Machine* (2006) and works such as 'Living Momentos Series: Speed Passages' (2006) (Fig.3) where drinking straws, plastic disposable cup covers, bottle caps, cigarette packs and packaging are found drifting above the juxtaposed texts and images of collaged print materials. Not a smoker himself, he however sees the cigarette butts he incorporates into the works as 'beautiful cylinders', harbouring a lingering trace of the person whose breath it seems to still carry. Recalling Arte Povera's exploration of commonplace, humble and ephemeral materials, these works also attempt in employing these ubiquitous trimmings, to dialogue with the conditions of the city, where a disposable culture renders objects and experiences as fleeting and provisional. This sense of openness and acceptance towards the variety and approach on materials transforms the surfaces of his work into active spaces, where contestation and conflict occurs; the work self-consciously seems to deprecate the efforts taken to incorporate these layers and the great amount of detail. Yet the method of incorporating these signs of the urban consumer remains pleasing to the eye through the use of colours and resins that give the works a light-hearted feel.

This increasingly emotive orientation in Chun Wei's work appears through his residency at Rimbun Dahan in 2006, as well as a deeper consideration of abstract ideas and the relationships that can be evoked through his works. In 'The Construction of Metaphysical Site I' (2005), 'Changing Mindscapes' (2005) and the 'Mental Sketch' series (2006) (Fig. 4), strong colours or deliberately muted shades, though less forbidding than the monochromatic greys of the past, are used in a freer fashion, creating almost unstable conditions within the work that invite greater visual engagement. As the artist describes of the effect he was looking for in his choices of colours used as both 'spatial and subtle', however more telling perhaps is his method of working. He characterizes it as a construction rather than a picture, composed of

painting, pasting and cutting, though not in any particular hierarchy of methods, and moving from section to section, working quite closely to the canvas, only stepping back occasionally to view the full breadth of the work. Chun Wei's relationship to his works is one that is inherently immediate and personal, he undertakes the task of expanding the possibilities of the materials he has on hand, again as the Arte Povera artists did, into a process that attempts to find a visual language of his own, a process that he admits he finds pleasure in as well. While not in the formal language of Angela de la Cruz's paintings, stretching action painting and the limits of the canvas, and probably more akin to German artist Kurt Schwitter's collages and assemblages constructed from materials he had taken off the streets, Chun Wei's works contain a certain spontaneity and randomness, yet there is a sense that the direction the work takes isn't quite as casual as it seems. Chun Wei's explorations of materials and attempts to fuse them with acrylic gels and resins into the landscapes and perspectives he produces sees the inclusion of straws, plastic coffee swizzle spoons, tags used on bags for bread with their use-by dates visible, texts and images from magazines, packaging materials, newspapers, cardboard sheets, bottle caps, traces of the double cheese burgers he consumes and sawdust in the most recent works presented at the exhibition at Wei-Ling Gallery. Hardly precious items, but in the hands of the artist they become curious and mutable. Speaking of moving through matter and looking for new possibilities, in relation to architecture but applicable to art as well, Kwinter describes a vitalist universe where 'by manipulating the focus, viscosity, direction and 'fibrosity' of these material flows, complex natural and artificial reactions take place, and from this, the 'new' and the unexpected suddenly become possible. All *techné* is at bottom the husbanding and manipulation of these fluid relations to produce new shapes of order'.

Within Chun Wei's new works presented at this exhibition is found a refreshing dynamism that seems to have begun with a series produced for the Art for Nature 2006 exhibition. Titled 'Glitterati' and 'Glitz and Glamour', the works enter into a dialogue with the urban environment picking up on its confluences and flows of media, through the incorporation of materials from popular magazines such as Her World, HELLO, LifeTV, Le Prestige and Marie Claire. Naturally these magazines were not purchased for the work, but have fulfilled their usefulness at hair salons; again, as with his earlier materials, these too are transient objects, quickly consumed and as hastily tossed aside. Navigating the barrage of advertising imagery, the artist continues his survey of the consumer environment, interspersing these with other printed materials from corporate instruction booklet, annual report charts, sale brochures, flyers and catalogues. 'Trappings' (2007) a triptych and 'Fabricate and Parade' (2007) (Fig.5) following from the mentioned series also sees the introduction of the body into the work, incorporating faces, eyes, mouths, arms and legs from fashion and trend magazines including Couture, Female, Her World, OK!, Stuff, Vogue, Inside, Legend, the Malaysian Women's Weekly, Cleo, Juice and New Tide. The flurry of news and announcements found in the popular media that stridently impresses upon one's consciousness emerges as splintered tracts in shattered reflections upon the canvas. I have had the privilege of watching these works develop, the progress of layer upon layer, transforming the canvas from abstract swatches of colour into a highly detailed and condensed compilation; spaces that were once solid hues were gradually overlaid and plated such that only slivers and fractions remained, though this time less as if a landscape as a kaleidoscope, drawing patterns and reflecting relationships across the variegated surface. The work seems to herald another shift in Chun Wei's work, from the vertical composition, to a flattening and expansion of space, to the present as a multi-dimensional theatre in flux, where act of creation is an attempt to see beyond the immediate, the boundaries and limits of the objects, paints and resins. While still bearing the trace of the architecture of scaffolding that so fascinates him – the notion of temporary and mutable frames and forms, these recent works seem to present a less than idyll landscape. As bodies and figures converge and diverge on this unbounded surface, they appear as recesses and apertures, tracking across the broken surface and lending a narrative feel to the works. Introducing a new depth to the canvas surface, the works take on a texture that demonstrates a maturation of the artist's process and his attempts to find new limits and boundaries to operate from. No longer a simple landscape, or fragments of spaces, the recent works build upon the process of returning or circling, as the artist describes, 'akin to the looping of a movie strip'. While land and landscapes have been associated with the body in analogy and transposition, in Chun Wei's works, they do not merge, and it is this tension between the boundaries of one body (figure) against another body (space) that makes it

compelling. Embedded within the work, one encounters texts the artist has found. Without endorsing their values, these texts bring a certain humour to the work, gently chastising our consumer-oriented and unexamined way of life. 'Improve your immune system and total well being', with Royal Jelly with Ginseng, says one; 'Washing instruction, handy tips' says another, recommending that one 'read the care labels carefully'. These images and texts, woven together, represent the impressions and expectations that often hamper our attempts to be as we would otherwise, diverting us from our own interpretations.

In describing Koolhaas' method of working and his optimism, Kwinter draws an analogy with fighter pilot Charles Elwood Yeager's ability to manage complex maneuvers, pushing the envelope and working on the edge, 'for the architect, this means to take your focus to infinity, do not linger on objects but rather enter the space tactilely and prospect the space in search of breaking developments. Scan for changes and fluctuations, then respond as if part of a cycle, as if you had always been a causal part of those flows'. Chun Wei's recent works appear to operate as well on the level, developed with a keen sensitivity to the course that the work can take and at the same time challenging and transforming from its original ambitions. In 'Intimate Wall' (2007) (Fig. 6), creamy colours are daubed gently over the found text polished with the glazed yellow paint, creating an unexpected subtly dappled effect that may be seen as a further development of his earlier 'Mental Sketches' series. Similarly in 'Organic Tracks' (2007) (Fig. 7), his proclivity for topography develops a more rhizomatic approach that briefly surfaces his personal physical and conceptual developments and circumstances, in search for more natural and integral formulations. In teaching pilots how to fly, Yeager is remembered for a quintessentially simple piece of advice, to 'fly the bullet', referring to the condensation of the series of complex decisions and calculations needed in a dogfight into an instinctive response, 'don't even think about turning. Just turn our head or your body and let the plane come along for the ride. When you take aim, *fly the bullet into position*', a depiction that seems apt in understanding this artist's works. Speaking with the artist, it would seem there almost isn't an end-point to each work, layers of resin applied do not signal completion, and within his studio, any moment might see a work transform further as new elements are applied. Perhaps the works find stability having arrived at the gallery, having left the artist's hands; but then again, perhaps this is not entirely the case as our eyes sweep across the work, scouring for hidden details. Following a line of sight that is not preordained, we savour the unexpected journey – of each detail as it rises to our attention, and again as it then drifts and settles back again into the variegated surface, it is a journey that does not seem to end, and one that is gently guided by our own senses.

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Images:

Fig. 1 'Construction Series 7: Façade' (2002)

Fig. 2 'Constructed Landscape: Murmur of the Idyllic' (2004)

Fig. 3 'Living Momentos Series: Speed Passages' (2006)

Fig. 4 One of the works mentioned: 'The Construction of Metaphysical Site I' (2005), 'Changing Mindscapes' (2005) or 'Mental Sketch' series (2006),

Fig. 5 One of the works mentioned: 'Trappings' (2007) or 'Fabricate and Parade' (2007)

Fig. 6 'Intimate Wall' (2007)

Fig. 7 'Organic Tracks' (2007)

Rem Koolhaas, Lecture 1/21/91, in Rem Koolhaas: conversations with students, USA: Rice University School of Architecture & Princeton Architectural Press, 1996: p.12

Sanford Kwinter, Flying the Bullet or When Did the Future Begin, in Rem Koolhaas: conversations with students, USA: Rice University School of Architecture & Princeton Architectural Press, 1996: p.68-9

Ibid. p.69

Ibid. p.71

Ibid. p.81

General Chuck Yeager, 'How to Win a Dogfight', Men's Health, November 1994

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2007

18@8 Contemporary Art from Malaysia and Beyond

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Organic Passages  
Mixed media on canvas  
168cm x 214cm  
2007

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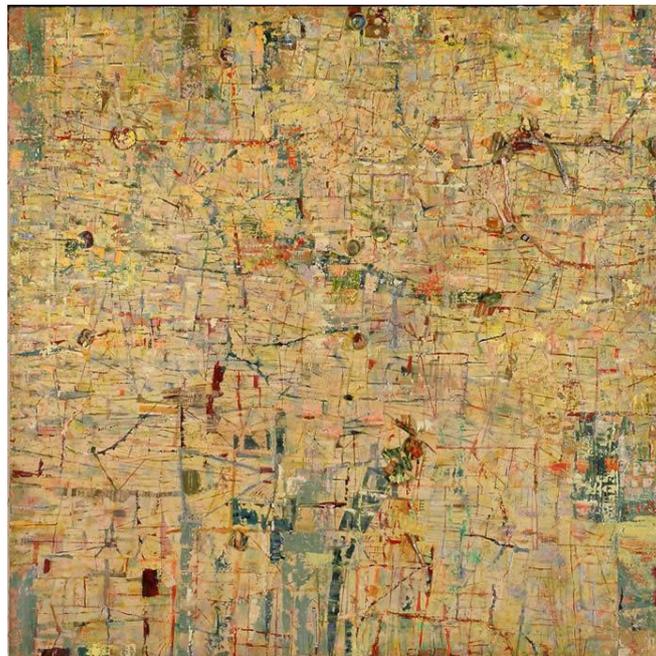
2007

18@8, Kuala Lumpur-Karachi

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Living Mementos Series: Speed Passages  
122cm x 122cm  
Mixed media on canvas, 2006



Living Mementos Series: Marginalized Garden  
122cm x 122cm  
Mixed media on canvas, 2006

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2005

18@8 Contemporary Artists from Malaysia & Beyond

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Garden Objects  
Mixed media on canvas  
122cm x 183cm, 2005



Hanging Garden Series  
Mixed media on canvas  
122cm x 183cm, 2005

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2005

ROOSTER MANIA

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Charging Rooster



Wise Rooster I



Rooster Conversation