

# 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 exactingly, 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  
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