

The Spaces In Between

In 1966, Andrei Tarkovsky directed *Andrei Rublev*, a cinematic masterpiece about the life of Russia's most renowned icon painters. Through its breathtaking photography, the film gathered a myriad of emblematic and emotionally-charged images to narrate a story that subtly questioned the relevance of art to life. In it, we witness a painter in a reluctant state of being. In one scene, he is engaged in a discourse with his teacher, Theophanes the Greek, interrogating the role of the artist in society, doubting dogmas that he had long cherished, and questioning faith and purpose. These are not weak-kneed questions of a struggling artist aloof within the comfort zone of his studio. Instead, they are the wanderings of an artist who is engaging with life, witnessing and experiencing its absurdities.

It comes as no surprise then that this scene of *Andrei Rublev* is the subject of *Copies*, one of the eight triptychs that form Sean Lean's latest solo exhibition, *3*. The triptych is composed of three panels, each depicting the same scene overlaid with a red banner that alarms the viewer with its word: *Copy*. The first panel is a print, the second a painting, and the third a scan of the painting. The repetitive depiction raises questions about authorship and authenticity. Yet, beyond the debate surrounding originality, the triptych plunges into another dimension, provoking the question: *Who is the artist?*

Copies raises more questions that it can answer. It is a study into the role of the artist and the importance of the artwork. It is indeed a difficult task to distinguish the copy from the original, and likewise, it is equally challenging to discern between your beliefs and convictions and those imposed on you through culture and tradition—especially as an artist—as your identity is always somehow interwoven into your artistic practice. In *Copies*, Lean establishes the central idea anchoring *3*: do our beliefs belong to us? Or, as in the triptych, have we become accustomed to perceiving borrowed convictions as our own?

The undertones of the exhibition reveal an uncanny resemblance to the film's philosophical questions regarding art and life. In *3*, Lean is painting a body of work that delves into his own history, but at the same time transcends his own individuality in its line of questioning tradition, religion, ways of living, dogmas, and long-held beliefs. Interrogating identity, navigating history, and questioning ways of being is a thread that runs throughout Lean's artistic practice. His previous exhibitions have followed a similar path. In 2015, *Motherland* navigated the dichotomy between an inherited identity and on that is acquired, and in 2013, *Flesh: Blacks and Whites* followed the artist's subconscious state as he underwent a period of introspection. In *3*, Lean's work continues to be informed by his lived experiences. This time, however, instead of mere reflections, Lean provokes and destabilizes his own histories and beliefs.

Despite its apparent formlessness, *3* is a precisely structured and aesthetically coherent body of work that is held together by the format of the triptych. The triptych, a pictorial convention within the Christian tradition where a central panel is adjoined by two subsidiary but associated ones, is the focal form and mode of presentation. Lean employs this format to produce an extended narrative and a striking set of pictorial creations that delineate between irony and discomfort, between abstraction and autobiography, and between the intimate and the political. Beyond adapting and appropriating the triptych form, Lean sought to challenge and disrupt its inherent symmetry. Size, style, and treatment of individual panels vary in attempt to create a space of tension and ambiguity, yet still maintain a unifying line of thought, both visually and conceptually, between the three panels in each triptych. Tension is inherently built into the format of the triptych, with each individual panel vying for attention or complementing and illuminating the other, if not both. Lean uses this mode of display and storytelling to create an intertextual space where elements are contrasted, playing off one another, and dramatising the visuals in the process. Thus, in each triptych there exists a contrast between two panels, where tension is built, and in the third panel, where tension is relieved. The second panel that

is always comprised of words or heavy text assumes a particularly important role, either functioning as a bridge to harmonize, amplify, or entirely undermine the line of thought contested in the previous two panels.

The subjects, like the format, linger between acts of creation and acts of destruction. At once, Lean introduces a fragment of his past and retracts it. There are themes of presence and absence, of past and future, and of resolution and hesitancy. These contrasts manifest in the gaps between the panels, which can be perceived as a sort of liminal and transitional space where the viewer can project his own meaning. Lean is subtle in how he leads the viewer into his work. He manages, without a shade of irreverence or a desire to seek the audience approval, to move the viewer between ideas and beliefs, and through several narrative voices.

The range of subjects depicted in the eight triptychs are a testament to the virtuosity with which the artist incorporates his own personal history into a critical examination of religious, political, and personal systems of beliefs. Lean begins with the personal, revisiting in *Self-Portrait* and *Until Death Do Us Part.*, memories that have long been archived. In the former work, Lean revisits his relationship with his father, a figure whose presence is recurrent in his work. The two portraits, the father and the son, are separated by a collage composed of Lean's school reports, certificates, and awards. The portrait of the father fades under shades of white, and Lean's self-portrait is obscured under shades of black, yet both project a pensive and hesitant gaze. The panel of collaged merit documents functions as a line of communication between the portraits of the father and the son. Upon closer inspection and when viewed as a whole, the triptych, titled *Self-Portrait*, seems to be not so much a self-portrait as a deep interrogation into the nature of a father-son relationship. In this context, the self-portrait is still somehow caged in fear, perpetually conscious of the gaze of its viewers.

While Lean interrogates and raises questions about his own past, he does not necessarily seek to answer them. In *Until Death Do Us Part.*, Lean's signature pixelated squares resurface to partially abstract the triptych. In the first panel, the identity of the figure in a wedding dress is obscured from the viewer, and similarly in the third panel, the intimate act of love-making is censored from the viewer. The middle panel reads *Until Death Do Us Part.*, with pixelated squares concealing the word *Death*. Vulnerable are the artist's thoughts and memories, displayed in abstracted fragments and immensely muted. At first, the viewer is an outsider peeking through the doorway of a private memory. However, Lean's triptychs refuse to cling to their personal roots. Instead, the triptych provokes the viewers and confronts their beliefs regarding the culturally patterned and integrated institution of marriage.

In 3, Lean further branches out of his own history and personal memory and reflects on the events that have shaped his country and his region. In *carpe diem*, the artist subtly hints at Malaysia's Scorpene Submarine affair. In *BANG BANG*, he references events in which Buddhist monks were involved in violent altercations for inciting religious hatred. In both works, Lean traces social, political, and religious tensions, disparities, and engages with stories that have shaped the collective memory of his region. Despite the seriousness of the issues, elements of humour find their way into the canvases, as can be seen in the first panel of *BANG BANG*, where a graffiti intervention overlays the image of a boy holding a gun. Similarly, in *carpe diem*, the title itself along with the first panel depicting a group lounging by the swimming pool, can be viewed as ironic once the viewer views them in relation to the last panel that hints at the submarine scandal.

Themes of excess, indulgence, and abundance circle back in *Prosperity* and *The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom*. In *Prosperity*, traditional images and symbols that the Chinese culture associates with abundance find their way into the three panels: Children, 福 [fú], and the symbol of pigs. In the latter work, which borrows its title from William Blake's *Proverbs of Hell*, the triptych forms

a statue of an abstracted Buddha. This triptych is the artist's plea to himself, and perhaps to his viewers, to live a life complete and immediate, not kept at a distance and seen through the veil of safety that has been handed from generation to generation. The painting, shockingly beautiful in its manipulation of the triptych form, adds a new decidedly philosophical and psychological element of examination to what Lean has offered before. And yet, as with every triptych in the exhibition, Lean does not attempt to address or answer any of his questions, he simply presents the work in all its complexity and inherent tension, letting the questions and doubts speak for themselves. Should one observe the limit or let it overflow?

Lean's 3, like the number itself, moves the viewer from a beginning, through a middle and towards an ending, creating a small totality. In 3, the technical narrative employed by Lean transcends its technicality and assumes a poetic function. Thus, the technique becomes a vital part of the story and not just a tool to its realization. Whether it is navigating familial relationships, critiquing religion, commenting on the present political tensions, questioning the institution of marriage, or grappling with art and the question of authenticity, Lean invites the viewer to ponder with him, and in the gaps between the panels, find a liminal space to meditate on those questions.

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