

HYMMEN



WAA

PROJECT

# Bloody Mary

Blood in art, especially when associated with issues around sexual reproduction, such as the loss of virginity and the start of menstruation, is still a critical and ambiguous topic: interesting, fascinating, irritating, frightening and touching. In the West, the menstrual blood is perceived as painful, as commonly linked to “the curse of Eve”, God’s punishment of all women for Eve’s role in the Biblical Fall. But it is also strikingly beautiful for its reproductive capabilities, securing human existence. Collapsing menarche – women’s first menstrual bleeding – not only to womanhood but likewise to fertility, is a heavily discussed topic that finds its roots in ancient cultures and in contemporary feminist-spiritualist agents.<sup>1</sup> During the course of human revolution, vaginal and uterine blood has been constructed to signal “taboo”, not primarily in the benefit of women. Attributes and meanings connected to this kind of blood were mostly in opposition to the reality and, moreover, served to (negatively) influence and control the female body. Until today the topic stands for merging social, religious, cultural and political contexts.<sup>2</sup> Real (female) and symbolical blood (the male Body of Christ), the purifying holy blood (the nubile perfection and the Blessed Virgin Mary) and unclean menstrual blood, can find their way altogether in religious spaces such as Jewish or Christian temples. By dealing with the female vaginal or uterine blood these spaces become gendered.<sup>3</sup> Iconic female artists such as Judy Chicago, Vanessa Tiegs, Ingrid Berthon - Moine and Rupi Kaur use the material and the subject of the “female blood” to uncover the suppressive mechanisms that have been built up over centuries to invoke the way men and women alike think of female bodies. Although blood related to puberty, fertility, concepts of sexual activity towards virginity or the idea of “pureness” towards being “unclean” in art is not new, it is quite unusual to meet a male artist questioning the constructed body politics around female bleeding.

So here he is again, breaking artistic and social boundaries: Lam is not afraid to approach this usually hidden issue, reflecting upon biological and social meanings around sexually or rather reproductively connoted female bleeding and their (male) agents, as well as the blood’s aesthetic dimension. The project perturbs at first with its bold title *Hymen*, addressing the membrane which, other than commonly supposed, only partially closes the vagina, but whose presence is traditionally taken to be a mark of virginity.<sup>4</sup> This small, apparently minor piece of mucosa opens a broad, globally led discourse around the maturation of a young woman and her bleeding in connection with the first sexual intercourse – which actually may or may not occur – as well as the commencing menstruation. How can this discourse be properly visualised in a courageous and dignified approach?

The first thing to be noticed when observing Lam's work are only three simple and disparate materials, coming together in a performance simulating female bleeding. There is a green netting common in Malaysia for securing construction sites which the artist uses as a symbol for the hymen. He pours red paint over it, which in a slow process, drips through the net onto a numbered diaper cloth surface instead of a classical canvas. This process is being repeated with nine other nettings, with changes being made to the height but also the paint colour – from originally pure red to 90% black red at the tenth layer, symbolising the oxidation of blood known from menstrual blood. And although the communication of the first vaginal and uterine bleeding through construction materials and a large cloth canvas with red dye is a very abstract form of the real, unembellished bleeding process, the performance Lam is sharing with us is unambiguous – there are no other explicit signs necessary to understand what is being shown. Maybe it's the red, fluid colour that automatically reminds us of blood, or the white diaper cloth that leads us to think about menstrual pads or the blood on a bed sheet after defloration.

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1 See the feminized trope of the (predictably red) rosebud – tight, protected, innocent and untouched – representing the pre-menarcheal girl who, once she begins to bleed, becomes open and accessible. She is now physiologically ready for sexual reproduction and can claim the identity “woman”: “Red Bud Blossoming/You are Opening/Bleeding is Flowering/A New Woman Walks on the Earth.” Stark weather, Alisa: A New Woman Walks on Earth, Daughter of the Earth (CD, 1997). Quoted after: Bobel, Chris: *New Blood. Third-Wave Feminism and the Politics of Menstruation*, New Brunswick/New Jersey/London 2010, p. 91.

2 Also the idea of holy vs. pagan blood meaning the juxtaposition of antique and early Jewish and Christian animal offerings in temples vs. the symbolical blood of God (the wine being drunk during the Sacrament of Eucharist) and the blood of the Mother of God. Cf. Branham, Joan R.: *Blutende Frauen, blutige Räume. Menstruation und Eucharistie in der Spätantike und im Frühen Mittelalter*, in: *Die Ordnung des Materials*, ed. by Georges Didi-Huberman, Berlin/Boston/Mass. 1999 (= *Vorträge aus dem Warburg-Haus*; vol. 3), p. 131-150.

3 Cf. Branham 1999, [passim].

4 Cf. *English Oxford Living Dictionaries: Hymen* (2018), in: <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/hymen> [11.02.2018].

Yet the performance and the installation are a much stylised, maybe even a “designed”, purified sexual and menstrual process. Lam decides to leave the brush and the classical canvas behind, refusing to depict a realistic scene with human agents and their bodies. Minimising the figurative, naturalistic aspect and enhancing the metaphors, Lam chooses a rather clean and reduced artistic language to illustrate the definitive maturation from a female child to a grown-up woman. The numbers one to ten, reminding us of counting in the first school year, are mapped on the medium surface, and the medium itself, actually a diaper cloth, can accordingly be read as attributes of a childhood that is slowly diminishing.

Furthermore, this “passage” from childhood to puberty has to be understood as a process, not a quick moment in time. Rather than a still canvas, the performance is the appropriate art form to address the transition from one stage in life to the next – due to its mobility. As during the show the netting gets denser by adding new ones onto the previous nets, their height is accordingly changing, too. Until the fifth layer we get to see an up and down, back and forth movement which unavoidably reminds us of the specific activities exerted during sexual intercourse. We get to understand that the passage from child to woman not only means menarche and the growing fertility but also the passage from “innocence” to sexual desire and all the other, mostly negative attributions being prescribed onto a sexually reproductive – and bleeding – woman’s body. According to the Levitical purity law (Lev. 15:25ff. and 29ff.) a menstruating or a bleeding woman associated with childbirth is ceremonially “unclean” and cannot have sexual relation with her husband or approach the temple for a certain period. Moreover menstrual blood is seen as foul and dirty; on the other hand, failure to excrete was taken as a sign of disease.<sup>5</sup> Even more, a woman bleeding after giving birth to a girl meant danger as she multiplied the generative potential and therefore competed with the divine creation.<sup>6</sup>

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5 Cf. Martin, Emily: *Medical Metaphors of Women’s Bodies: Menstruation and Menopause*, in: *Writing on the body: female embodiment and feminist theory*, ed. By Katie Conboy/Nadia Medina/Sarah Stanbury, New York 1997, p.15-41. Here p. 17.

6 Cf. Branham 1999, p. 136.

All these differing natural processes of bleeding – after defloration, while menarche and menstruation or even after childbirth – are being traditionally and cross-culturally used as an essential issue of (male) power over women and their bodies. Lam's green netting is therefore much more complex on the inside than its abstract aesthetics. Its original role to keep building rubble from the streets and protect the people passing by construction sites, is in the performance being used to symbolise the protective abilities a net such as a hymen might have. Simultaneously it is questioning the false widespread idea of the hymen as a defensive net, which in reality cannot control the blood or even be controlled. Although the net got thicker after adding more and more layers during the performance, the symbolised blood poured onto it always found its way to the diaper cloth canvas. And interestingly enough – leaving behind the same size of blood motif on all the 10 image carriers. This disclosure may help to tear up the entrenched “net” of social, religious and cultural restrictions of women based on their vaginal and uterine blood loss.

The truth is – a net is never a closed system, neither is the hymen, nor human nature in general. A netting can be strong, but seen in its temporal dimension it is in fact a very fragile bonding, a short-termed one, like the construction netting that cannot hold back all the building rubble from falling on the street. Likewise, the “blood” Lam is pouring during his performance onto the symbolised “hymen” stays on the surface for a glimpse of time before seeping through the net. Even the social net we are constructing around our children to protect them, cannot withstand their inevitable detachment from mother and father during physical and mental growth. A lesson each parent is learning with a heavy heart.

Lam's project is again a bold undertaking, an ongoing analysis of own beliefs and working methods. By letting himself “fall” through the net openings, he dares to take a new path. This is where a very complex theme, such as the bleeding female body and its biological and social parameters, start merging with a specific, minimised aesthetic. As shown, the blood attached to the female body has a difficult and deep social connotation, but Lam never misses to address the formal aspect, too. The passage from a girl to a woman, from an “innocent” to a sexually reproductive person, the process of losing blood, as well as its constant renewal, stand for endings and new beginnings in life and art alike. So the Hymen project is not only a father's declaration of love to his growing daughter, his struggle with and acceptance of the natural process of attachment versus releasing. Nor is it only a universal, courageous statement of an enlightened man towards a commonly suppressive thinking on

women and their natural body processes. As an artist, Lam recognises the existing aesthetic and content quality behind a shameful and long-time hidden topic and gives it a new, unusual, and stunning shape – a higher level on his ongoing journey of questioning life and art.

“[...] as if this process is less natural than breathing. as if it is not a bridge between this universe and the last. as if this process is not love. labour. life. selfless and strikingly beautiful.”<sup>7</sup>

### **Dr. Hanni Geiger**

*Dr. Hanni Geiger is an art and design historian and theorist. She studied fashion and textile design in Zagreb, Croatia, as well as art history, art education and intercultural communication at the Ludwig-Maximilians-University of Munich (LMU), where she completed her doctorate in 2014 with a dissertation on the British-Cypriot couturier and artist Hussein Chalayan (form follows culture. Entgrenzungen im Konzept-Design Hussein Chalayans, Vienna, Cologne, Weimar: Böhlau 2016 [= mode global; vol. 1]). From 2015 to 2016 she undertook a research period in Malaysia and Singapore and, to date, has collaborated with Wei-Ling Gallery in Kuala Lumpur. Previously, from 2013 to 2015, she was a research associate and lecturer at the Institute of Art History at the LMU Munich. From 2011 to 2012 she was part of the research project Exile, Migration und Transfer at the Center for Advanced Studies in Munich (led by Prof Dr Burcu Dogramaci). Further career steps include among others the project work at the Goethe-Institute Croatia, as well as the editorial work for the reviewed (art) history academic online journals sehepunkte and lesepunkte. Her research focuses on modern and contemporary art, the interdependencies between (fashion) design, art and migration and the relationship between mobility, exile, transculturality and identity building, as well as postcolonial artistic positions.*

... to all the daughters in the world.

# A Body of One's Own

In 1989, postmodern artist Barbara Kruger famously proclaimed “Your Body is a Battleground” on an art poster designed for the pro-choice march on Washington (Morgen, Sutton, and Novkov 2008, 233). The analogy between female bodies and battlefields has been a recurrent theme throughout history, one that female artists and writers have returned to navigate again and again through their creative work. The female body, impregnable by social, cultural and historical factors, is considered a capacious topic, specifically because women bodies do not stand in an external relation to power, but are shaped, acted upon and regulated by religious and political institutions (Donaldson and Kwok 2002). To understand the power relations that have colonized the female body, one need to look no further than Hélène Cixous’s seminal essay “The Laugh of the Medusa”, in which she spoke of the body as an entity confiscated from women and turned into an “uncanny stranger on display” (Howell 2006, 58). In a similar vein, Margret Atwood did not shy away from slicing her fictional female bodies wide open, unabashedly showing the reader how power structures are written onto the female flesh. In the *Handmaid’s Tale*, Atwood navigated colonized bodies – specifically female bodies – which were depicted as contested sites of power that have been marked, inscribed and engraved by social pressures. In the dystopian novel, a woman’s anatomy dictated her destiny. If not state-owned “two-legged wombs” as referred to by Atwood, then the female body is drafted as another socio-cultural document, left to navigate territorial disputes between being virginal (pure) or sexual (tainted) (Zabus 2007). Treading the fine line between these territories, women bodies, as echoed by Elizabeth Grosz, are neither neutral nor universal. They are not “ahistorical, precultural, or presocial,” but always linked in one way or another to a system of power and representation (Yegenoglu 1998, 113). Writing about the female body, then, or positioning it as a subject of artistic inquiry is an inescapably critical act that speaks of the wider cultural and political forces that produce the female body and dictate our perception of it. And while the desires, pains and pleasures of the body differ in articulation depending on the culture, the narrative engraved in the female body resonates universally.

One artist, interestingly, a male artist, has set to explore this narrative, and through artistic inquiry, offered a poignant commentary on the sexual politics attached to a specific part of the female body, the hymen. In his latest performance work, *Hymen*, Malaysian artist Ivan Lam delves into a new territory, one that has predominantly been explored by feminist scholars, writers and artists. Yet, Lam approaches this territory with precision and care. As a male artist, he is careful not to take up too much space, or in modern



terms, not to 'mansplain'. Lam's presence, as well as his artistic touch, and to some extent his voice, are all absent from the actual performance. Even his artistic vocabulary has been reduced to show and communicate only what is necessary, and his choice of materials was limited to the use of only what is essential. What is left to hang on the walls of the gallery is the outcome – the trace that remains after an ephemeral performance.

Women bodies, too, leave traces. They are ever-changing sites onto which narratives are marked by blood. From the onset of menses, loss of virginity, childbirth, and finally menopause, blood appears and disappears to signal different stages of womanhood. The centrality of blood as a symbol of a woman's life cycle is a vital element in Lam's work. The red paint used is suggestive of blood, which Lam uses to simulate female bleeding. In the *Hymen* performance, the thick texture of the red paint slowly drips through the green netting onto a numbered diaper cloth. This performative process is repeated again and again, with the artist gradually altering the height between the green net and the diaper cloth. The green netting, too, gets denser as new layers of green nets are added onto previous ones. Finally, a difference in the value of the red paint can also be spotted. Whereas originally the value was pure red, the final work that is comprised of ten layers sees the red evolve into 90% black red. The performance culminates in 10 pairs of image carriers (green nets and their corresponding white diaper cloths) that are marked by one motif, a single red dot. What is visually arresting about *Hymen* is that while the process is repetitive and the motif is the same across the twenty pieces on display, each piece speaks of a different stage in the journey of womanhood and conjures up a different memory. The elements and their symbolism are captivating enough to behold the viewer's gaze and, for the female audience, looking at the body of work is an act of remembrance. In fact, it is in the value of the red paint that one sees the progression of womanhood, from being seen as 'innocent' to being viewed as a 'sexual' being. Set against the white cloth, the presence of 'blood' refers to a multitude of memories, either that of white pads associated with menstruation or white bed sheets associated with defloration. In imposing a set of limits upon his artistic language and choice of materials, Lam was able to portray the passage from girl to woman in a manner that is unambiguous, demanding meditation, not explanation, from the viewer.

Minimal in presentation, yet heavy with symbolism, the nature of the female blood exists within a paradox. While menstrual blood carries with it the stigma of that which is abject and unclean, virginal blood signals purity. Regardless of the context, female blood provokes and shocks. Its uncontrollable and chaotic

nature, a blatant reminder of women's procreative power, threatens the patriarchal aspirations to control and assume ownership over female bodies. In an effort to contain what cannot be contained, laws of purity and pollution have marked women bodies by 'codes' that serve to control their autonomy both physically and metaphorically. Where there is a flow of blood, there is life, and when women are too close to the divine life force, their bodies become marked as taboo. Whether it is the shame associated with menstruation, which under patriarchal monotheism was perceived as a "curse" and a punishment for Eve's primal disobedience, or the sanctification of virginity as seen by the institution of patriarchal marriage, the female body is reduced to less than the sum of its parts and made manageable under male control (Isherwood and McEwan 2016, 136).

In Lam's latest work, the focus is on the sexual politics attached to the hymen. The hymen occupies a liminal space, standing in-between the inside and outside of a woman, and at once sewing confusions between opposites (McAlister 2016, 45). The "little curtain of flesh", an embodiment of the moral virtue of chastity, signals the melding of two disparate ideas: open/close, presence/absence, virginity/consummation, and finally as Jacques Derrida theorized in "The Double Session" in *Dissemination*, the "jewel box of virginity" also stands in-between "desire and fulfilment" (McAlister 2016, 45). At once tainted with vice, yet sacred, the hymen is a metaphor for the undecidable and the in-between. The paradoxical logic of the hymen is symbolized in Lam's choice of materials. The green net, used as a metaphor for the hymen, is the same material used in construction sites, its original purpose being to protect and guard against the rubble from the building site. Yet, despite its protective qualities, and regardless of how dense it is, the paint dripped on to it always seeps through and finds its way onto the white diaper cloth. The hymen that the culture has imposed on the female body also carries within it the sentiment of protection. The hymen is "there" so it must be "safeguarded" and because it is "safeguarded" then it must be "there", writes professor Kathleen Coyne Kelly in her analysis of the virginity myth (Kelly 2002, 118). This phantom membrane – now you see it, now you don't – possesses an anxious and uncertain existence, yet it is still thought of as a shield guarding the interior of a women's body. In thinking of it as an obstruction, the hymen becomes a monumental pendant, simultaneously associated with shame and honour, and an instrument of control designed to regulate female sexuality. What Lam's performance piece highlights is that the existence of the hymen is not so much rooted in the scientific and the medical field as it is entrenched in the social, cultural and religious fabric that has caged

the female body and imbued it with a set of codes. In an effort to protect, the protected loses agency and becomes a property. Likewise, the female body that is embroidered with cultural codings is on a quest to reclaim agency, and perhaps in a constant search to write its own narrative. As Lam's construction nets show, the veil of protection that we have constructed around our daughters is fragile. More often than not, the veil turns their womanhood invisible, and rather than protect, it distorts their perception of their own bodies.

“Where does woman belong?” and “What belongs to woman?” asks Derrida in “Double Session” (Oliver 2016). In the *Hymen* project, Lam attempts to answer. The rustle between attachment and detachment, between the want to protect and the need to let go permeates throughout the performance. Lam has set up the protective net, he has poured the paint. Now, he lets go. In relinquishing control, the artist becomes a distant observer of his art. Perhaps Lam's unique answer to Derrida's question lies in stepping aside and listening to the wisdom in the answers of the girls, women, daughters and mothers of the world.

### **Line Dalile**

*Line Dalile is a writer based in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. She studied art history and graduated in 2017 with a Bachelor of Arts (Visual Culture) from Curtin University, Perth, Australia.*

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**Layer I (white)**

Diaper cloth, Vinyl, Synthetic polymer paint,  
Clear perspex on board  
52cm x 52cm  
2017



**Layer I (green)**

Plastic green netting, synthetic polymer paint,  
Clear perspex on board  
52cm x 52cm  
2017



**Layer 2 (white)**

Diaper cloth, Vinyl, Synthetic polymer paint,  
Clear perspex on board  
52cm x 52cm  
2017



**Layer 2 (green)**

Plastic green netting, synthetic polymer paint,  
Clear perspex on board  
52cm x 52cm  
2017



**Layer 3 (white)**

Diaper cloth, Vinyl, Synthetic polymer paint,  
Clear perspex on board  
52cm x 52cm  
2017



**Layer 3 (green)**

Plastic green netting, synthetic polymer paint,  
Clear perspex on board  
52cm x 52cm  
2017



**Layer 4 (white)**

Diaper cloth, Vinyl, Synthetic polymer paint,  
Clear perspex on board  
52cm x 52cm  
2017



**Layer 4 (green)**

Plastic green netting, synthetic polymer paint,  
Clear perspex on board  
52cm x 52cm  
2017



**Layer 5 (white)**

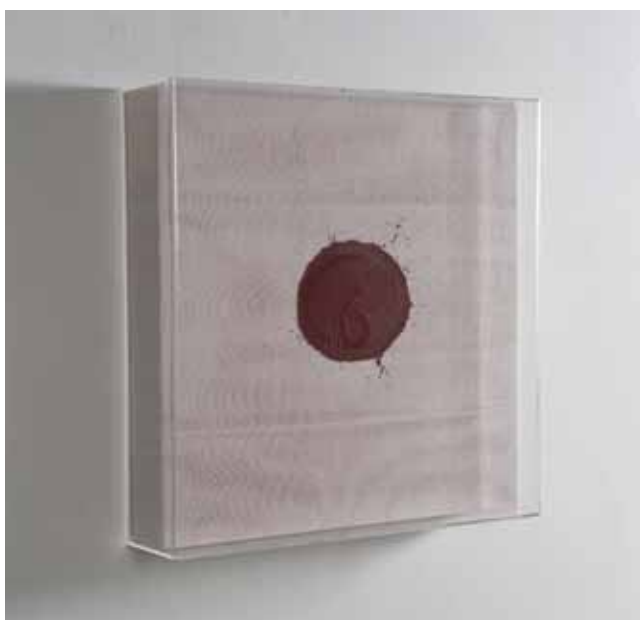
Diaper cloth, Vinyl, Synthetic polymer paint,  
Clear perspex on board  
52cm x 52cm  
2017



**Layer 5 (green)**

Plastic green netting, synthetic polymer paint,  
Clear perspex on board  
52cm x 52cm  
2017





**Layer 6 (white)**

Diaper cloth, Vinyl, Synthetic polymer paint,  
Clear perspex on board  
52cm x 52cm  
2017



**Layer 6 (green)**

Plastic green netting, synthetic polymer paint,  
Clear perspex on board  
52cm x 52cm  
2017



**Layer 7 (white)**

Diaper cloth, Vinyl, Synthetic polymer paint,  
Clear perspex on board  
52cm x 52cm  
2017



**Layer 7 (green)**

Plastic green netting, synthetic polymer paint,  
Clear perspex on board  
52cm x 52cm  
2017



**Layer 8 (white)**

Diaper cloth, Vinyl, Synthetic polymer paint,  
Clear perspex on board  
52cm x 52cm  
2017



**Layer 8 (green)**

Plastic green netting, synthetic polymer paint,  
Clear perspex on board  
52cm x 52cm  
2017



**Layer 9 (white)**

Diaper cloth, Vinyl, Synthetic polymer paint,  
Clear perspex on board  
52cm x 52cm  
2017



**Layer 9 (green)**

Plastic green netting, synthetic polymer paint,  
Clear perspex on board  
52cm x 52cm  
2017



**Layer 10 (white)**

Diaper cloth, Vinyl, Synthetic polymer paint,  
Clear perspex on board  
52cm x 52cm  
2018

**Layer 10 (green)**

Plastic green netting, synthetic polymer paint,  
Clear perspex on board  
52cm x 52cm  
2018



Installation view



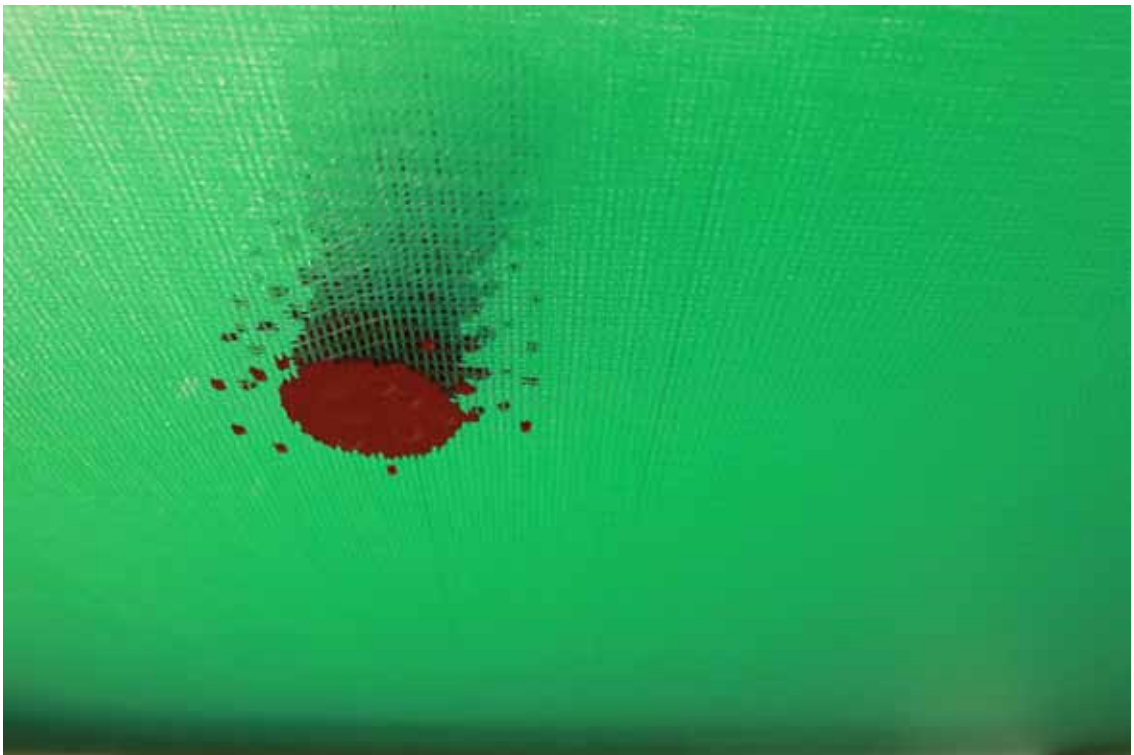
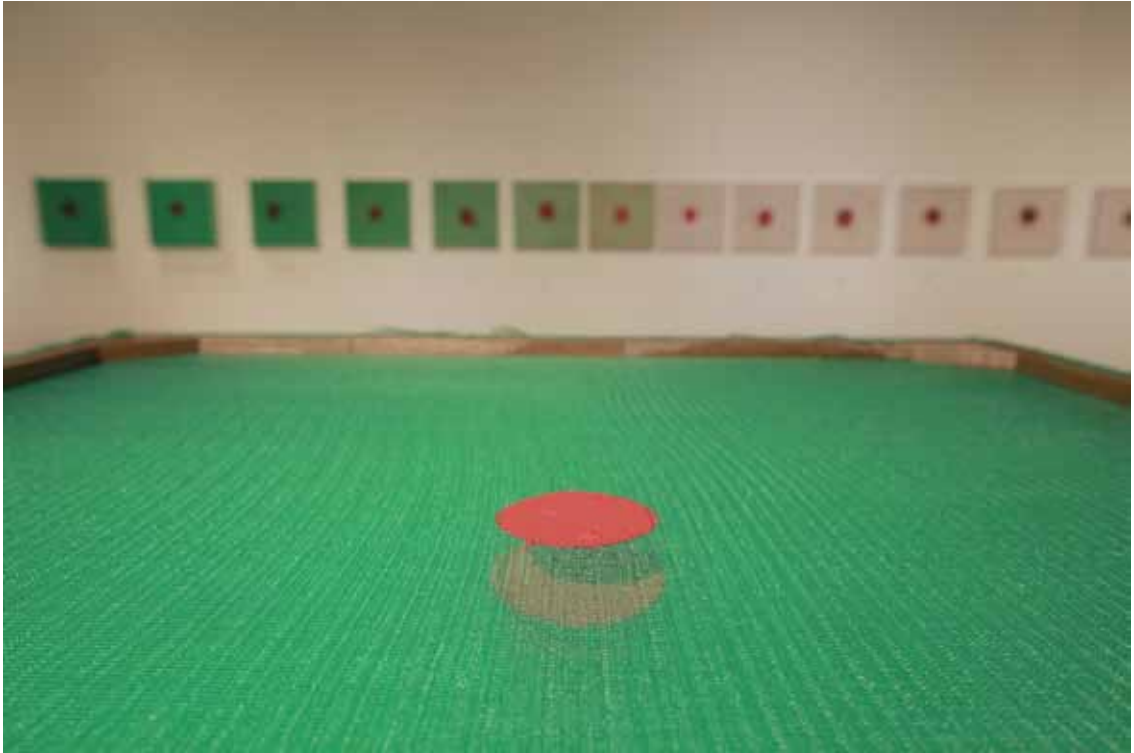
Installation view











**Layer 1-10 (white)**

Diaper cloth, Vinyl, Synthetic polymer paint,

Clear perspex on board

52cm x 52cm

2017-2018

**Layer 1-10 (green)**

Plastic green netting, synthetic polymer paint,

Clear perspex on board

52cm x 52cm

2017-2018

Total 20 pieces artworks plus 1 single channel video (edition of 3 + 2 APs)

**Price SGD34,000**