

On the Impossibility of Recovery

How do we write about the body in a state of continuous recovery?

We are drawn to write about the body when the body fails. Somehow, in its decline or ill-health, the body becomes more material than ever, perhaps even strikingly and uncomfortably visible. Illness disorients us and unbearable pain renders us more sensitive to the world. No other time do we feel as heavy and weighed down as when the body aches. An arm that breaks loses touch with world, and a heart with a distorted rhythm navigates time differently, almost moving outside the time imposed by structures designed specifically to function according to the movement, speed, and rhythm of healthy and able-bodies. It's true - the aching body, whether broken, stretched, flabby, or swollen, becomes a site with malleable borders. Aching bodies shrink and expand, become light and heavy, lean and stiff, never settling into a predictable state of being. Their parts become more visible than their whole – in fact, the whole body gets reduced to its constituent parts: those scattered lumps that despite their malfunctioning and glitches, still stubbornly invent new ways and rhythms to function.

Perhaps it is an impossible task: writing about an aching body when the aching body is not yours. When laden with physical pain, the interior of another person's body appears to belong to an invisible geography that however present and real is never truly accessible nor comprehensible. To write about an aching body means to clutch the nearest metaphor, as if it's a prosthetic, to reach the edge of language in attempt to describe pain. Yet, pain comes *unsharably*. It comes in its elusive nature that pulses between certainty and doubt. It is precisely due to its unsharability and resistance to language that pain achieves its piercing and particular anguish in the body. Language, for the first time, fails to hold us, so much so that we regress to a state anterior to language, clutching on to the sounds, sighs, and cries we learned before we could speak. Just as how sickness shatters the body, physical pain shatters language. It dismantles its structure and its ability to affect. Aching bodies lean onto healthy bodies to speak on their behalf, and somehow in the fog of pre-verbal language and expressions, physicians and therapists coax our pain into clarity, throw labels, symptoms, and metaphors, and slowly bring into being the invisible geography of the aching body.

Recently, Malaysian artist Ivan Lam invited me to write about his latest and most intimate body of work *catharsis* (2022): an assemblage of bodily experiences that explore on a personal and collective level what it means to live with chronic pain. The work is comprised of a series of five large-paneled paintings that document the artist's struggle with progressive and excruciating physical ailments. This collection of work sees Ivan in search for new formats of expression, where time is given and taken for reflection and research, and where the master artist has finally given himself and his body a permission to be a beginner again. *catharsis* is both an investigation and an analysis of the sick body, or the body in a continuous stage of recovery. It attempts to wrestle with analysis of care, self-recovery, pain and fatigue, and through its performative features, it also touches on loss of agency, what it means to surrender to the body in the face of physical breakdowns, and the arduous journey towards letting go of mastery.

Immediately, I sensed that *catharsis* is an exhibition that happens in a state of negotiation, for it sees Ivan's sensitivity in tension with his decades-long renowned mastery of both subject and material. In this series, the artist contends with a new medical language of organs, symptoms, and cures. Since the nature of pain is unsharable, Ivan returns to the language of scientific textbooks - a language that is certain and collective. In this quest, he is a beginner again learning the language, terminology, and limits of the body. He is faced with the challenge of learning the lexicon of the aching body in order to make visible the invisible geography of his pain. Similarly, Lam makes the choice to be a beginner again through his art-making by deliberately choosing pastel crayons - a never-before-used material in the artist's nearly three decades of artistic practice. Pastel crayons catapult Lam into his early childhood, to a time where his family couldn't afford them. Today, he approaches this medium again to embody the feeling of being a beginner and to think through what it means to approach his art without inhibitions. But unlike other mediums, pastel crayons is an unforgivable tool. Any mistake, any mark made unintended, cannot be edited nor erased. Once the mark is made, any attempt to scrape it off will leave a stain, thus this medium is stubborn in its presence, a metaphor for the pain Ivan attempts to portray.

Slowly, we delve in the tensions underlying these works and immediately I'm struck by the astonishing precision present in the five paintings. The scientifically-precise anatomic drawings represent the artist's medical history, which includes various maladies throughout the body, from the inner ear, the pelvis, the skin, and to the heart. Each work showcases color-coding of nerve systems, annotated with Latin names of various organs, overall mimicking the aesthetics of scientific anatomy illustrations. In each painting, he dissects himself the way a doctor would during a medical exam. "*Why the precision when you could lean into metaphor?*" I ask Ivan. He tells me it's the certainty of the scientific visual language that allows him to make visible what isn't. Much of the pain he has endured has been imperceptible, whether it was the heart or the vertigo, it was only his inner body that would collapse silently without drawing exterior attention. Thus, there was freedom in giving into the instructive scientific lexicon that led him towards accepting a challenging, yet certain truth: the body fails. There is no metaphor that would have liberated him more so than giving in and leaning into truth.

There is perhaps another reason for a formal depiction of a pain that is so particular and subjective: privacy. Artists are masterful in their ability to conceal as much as they reveal, and in doing so, they create a small and empty space for the viewers to relate to the works through their own subjective experience. Ivan's jagged and fractured narrative of his illnesses is still embedded in the works, yet through the general and collective scientific language he borrowed, he's able to create works that can carry multiple narratives. There is a particular performative aspect to the work as well, one that asks viewers to exercise their agency. Performative features have been a recurring theme in Ivan's recent works since his evolution into performance art, such as in *Curating Human Experiences 66:06:06* (2017) and *Hymn* (2018). In each of these works, Ivan appears to hand the viewer more agency while he moves between presence and absence. In *catharsis*, Ivan has placed an electric light switch inside a doughnut-shaped resin mold in each work as to mark the location of pain. Viewers are invited to turn the molds on or off through a switch that is added to the sides of each panel. Despite his absence, Ivan communicates to the viewers through the title of the works that mimic the language of instructions: *Press here to time travel, press here to teleport, press here to appear, press here to disappear, and press here to reappear*. The viewer then possesses

agency to turn the works on and off, perhaps also to symbolically turn the pain on or off. Through this metaphor, Ivan and the viewers reclaim the agency and control what pain so strongly deprives us off.

In the liminal space of debilitating health and continuous recovery, *catharsis* views illness not merely as something abhorrent, but as an opening that can help people overcome a crisis or inspire them to reexamine their relationship with their bodies, and consequently with life. Perhaps the real catharsis Ivan points us towards lies in the acceptance that there are certain things in life that are impossible to recover from. Perhaps, recovery isn't a destination, but a continuous state of being. Sometimes our bodies, what Bryan Turner described as "*the most solid, the most elusive, illusory, concrete, metaphorical, ever present and ever distant thing*" will exist in a continuous stage of recovery, one that needs continuous attendance and continuous care. And since we are hopelessly anchored in ourselves, perhaps we can begin to see that our brilliant fractured bodies, even when broken into shambles, are still complete.

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