



IVAN LAM
CATHARSIS

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"We often force ourselves to say all is fine. There is always an urge to hide. When I think of it, why be ashamed? It is time I wear my heart on my sleeve."

- Ivan Lam

Malaysian contemporary artist Ivan Lam presents 'catharsis' - his most personal and important series to date. Consisting of five large-panelled paintings, 'catharsis' encapsulates Lam's years of experiencing, understanding and accepting the depths of excruciating physical pain.

Dealing with debilitating health matters throughout his life, Lam felt the only way to "end" his suffering was to embrace it wholly. Each painting presents an almost scientifically-precise anatomical drawing of a body part which has tormented him in the past: the skull, the inner ear, the pelvis, the skin, and the heart. His personal library is filled with art literature, and is rivaled only by books on human biology-the latter from which he scoured for his research. From colour codings of nerve systems, to the latin names of various organs, the visuals in this new series bring a familiar feeling, as it mimics the aesthetics of scientific anatomy illustrations, albeit with a twist.

The drawings come into play with the eloquent strokes of pastel crayons; a never-before-used material in Lam's nearly three decades of practice. A deliberate choice of material which transports him back to his enfanse; something he has always been tempted, yet hesitant to explore because it catapults hun back to a harrowing past. Unable to afford crayons due to his family's limited finances, Lam was left to his own tools - sticks and leaves - to create marks on the ground. He has not looked back

since. Reminding us of gratitude, the artist commiserates

Despite the sombre theme, nuances of pastel colours combined with Lam's signature resin coat gives an inspiring aura: a duality the author is acutely aware of. To 'lighten' the mood, Ivan's dry wit is perfectly injected via an electric switch added to each side, complete with pertinent instructions which culminated into the piece's title – *Press here to time travel, Press here to teleport, Press here to appear, Press here to disappear, and Press here to reappear.*

As a way of identifying the sources of pain of each body part, Lam placed donut-shaped moulds, (cast in resin and painted scrapes from his artist palette), onto the exact locations where pain was unbearable. This act of "paint-pointing" as he labelled was a meditative process of self-awareness. It was perhaps through this gesture that Lam's true revelation arose, resonating with the legendary Mexican painter Frida Kahlo's words, "*At the end of the day, we can endure much more than we can think.*" Much like her, it was also through agony Lam realised the true meaning and cathartic quality of painting.

This series is particularly meaningful to the artist, as it brings him full circle to the lightboxes with which he launched his first solo exhibition in Malaysia in 1999. It has taken him 23 years to return to this medium-which was in itself ahead of its time. He encapsulates the series with this quote

"The heart has no crayon. You couldn't stain your past, be angry at the situation. It was still the best thing that could have happened."

"To seek the clarity of the past, so that I can be ready for the future, while working in the present."

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 *Hymen* (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

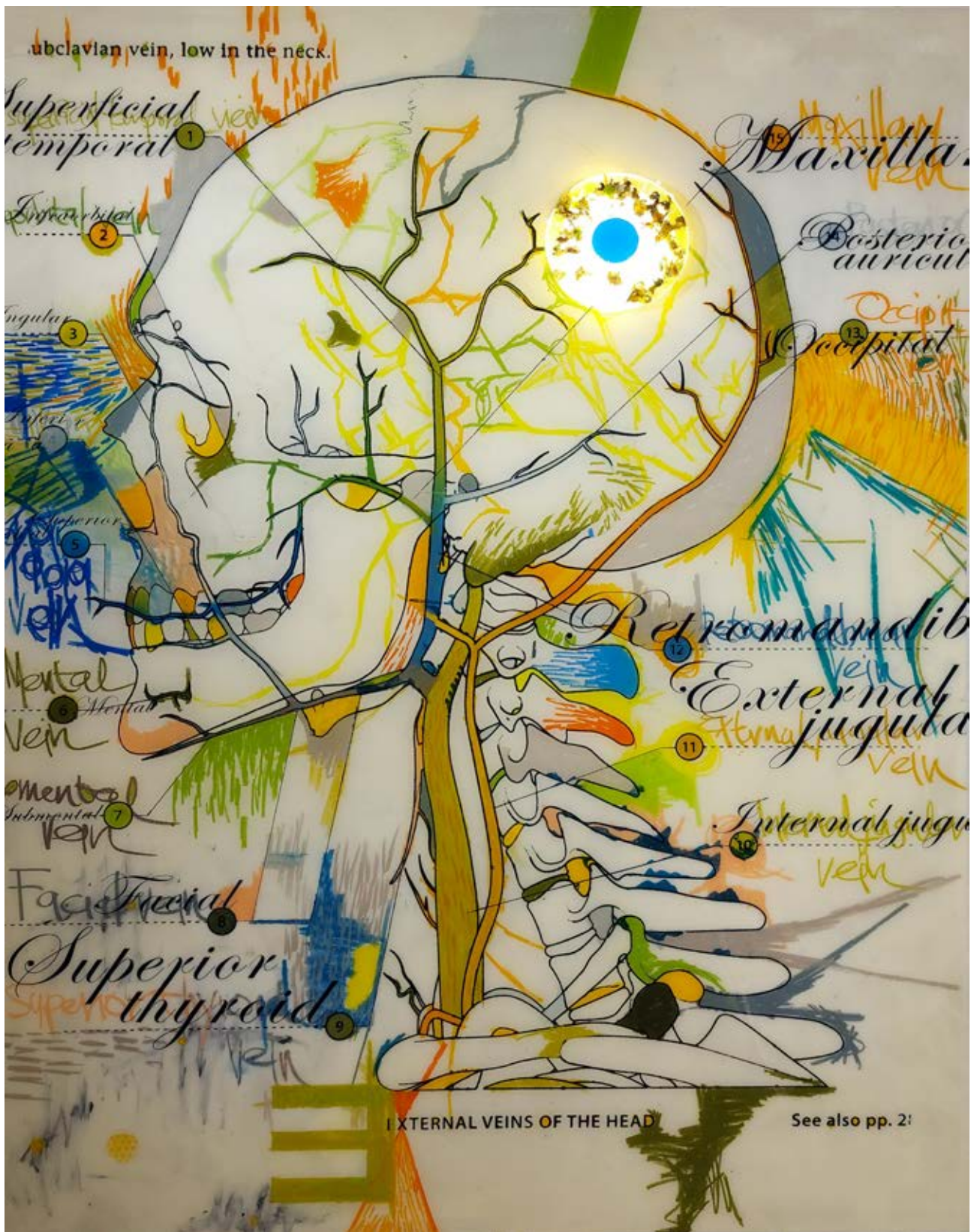
each work as to mark the location of pain. Viewers are invited to turn the molds on or off through a switch that is added to the sides of each panel. Despite his absence, Ivan communicates to the viewers through the title of the works that mimic the language of instructions: *Press here to time travel, 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.

Line Dalile

April 2022

Line Dalile is an independent writer, curator, and an art-based researcher at Vrije Universiteit Brussel in Belgium.



Painting in 'Interdependent Mode' (resin donut light switched on)

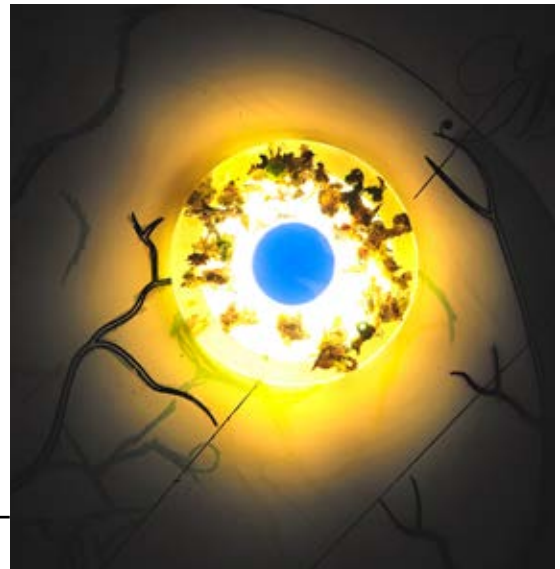
Press here to time travel

Oil pastel, oil crayon, synthetic paint, vinyl stickers, led light and resin on board

162.5cm x 122cm

2020-2022

For a conceptual artist like Ivan Lam, the mind is pivotal, defining how he 'juggles' perspectives, dualities and dichotomies. The artist suffers from Migraine, which at numerous times robbed him of focus. The skull is illustrated here with precision - drawing both the bone structures but also the nerve system that it hides; one that is multi-connected to the rest of his body.



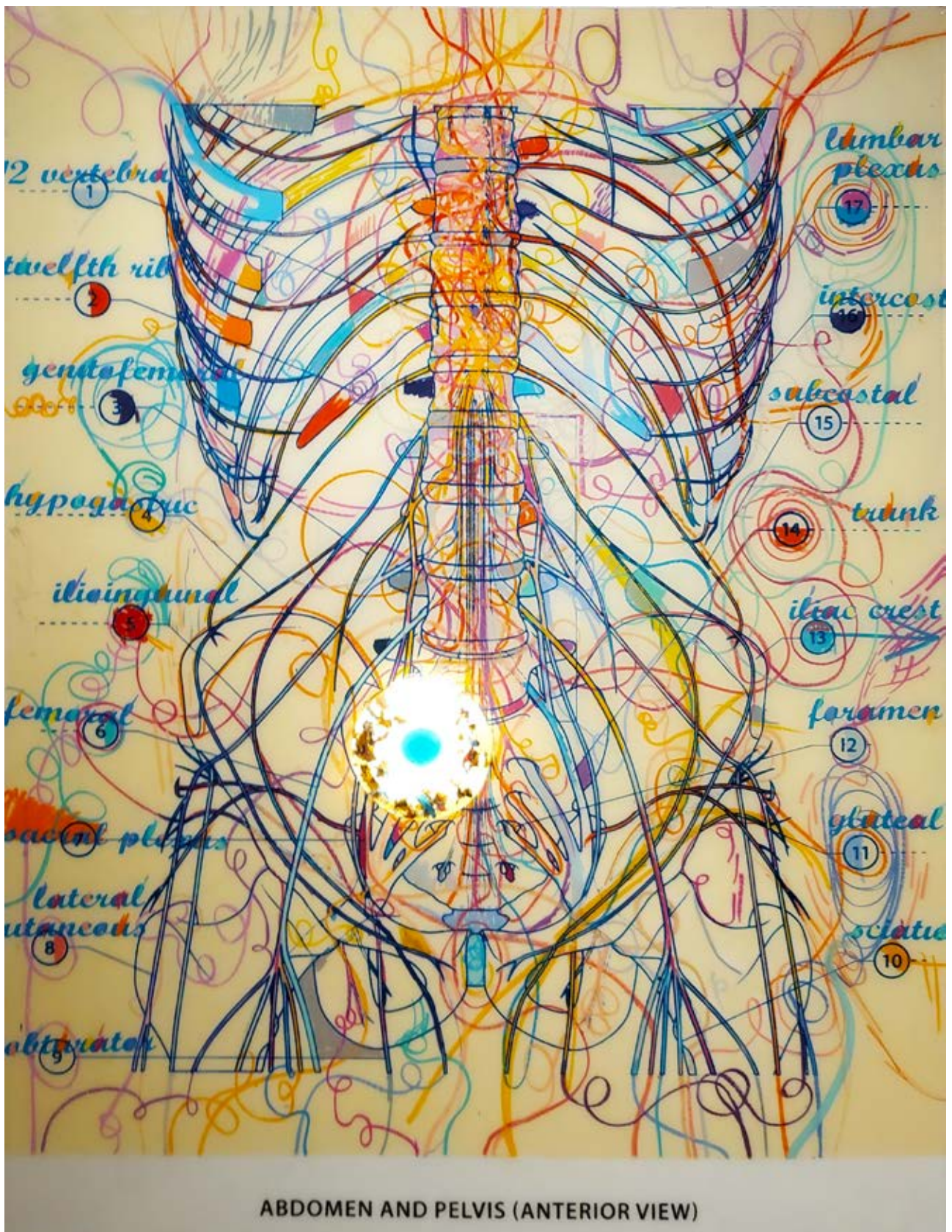
Each painting has a second phase which can be seen with a LED light installed within the resin. The LED light can be switched on at the side of each painting with individual switch.



Painting side view



Painting close up views



Painting in 'Interdependent Mode' (resin donut light switched on)

Press here to disappear

Oil pastel, oil crayon, synthetic paint, vinyl stickers, led light and resin on board

162.5cm x 122cm

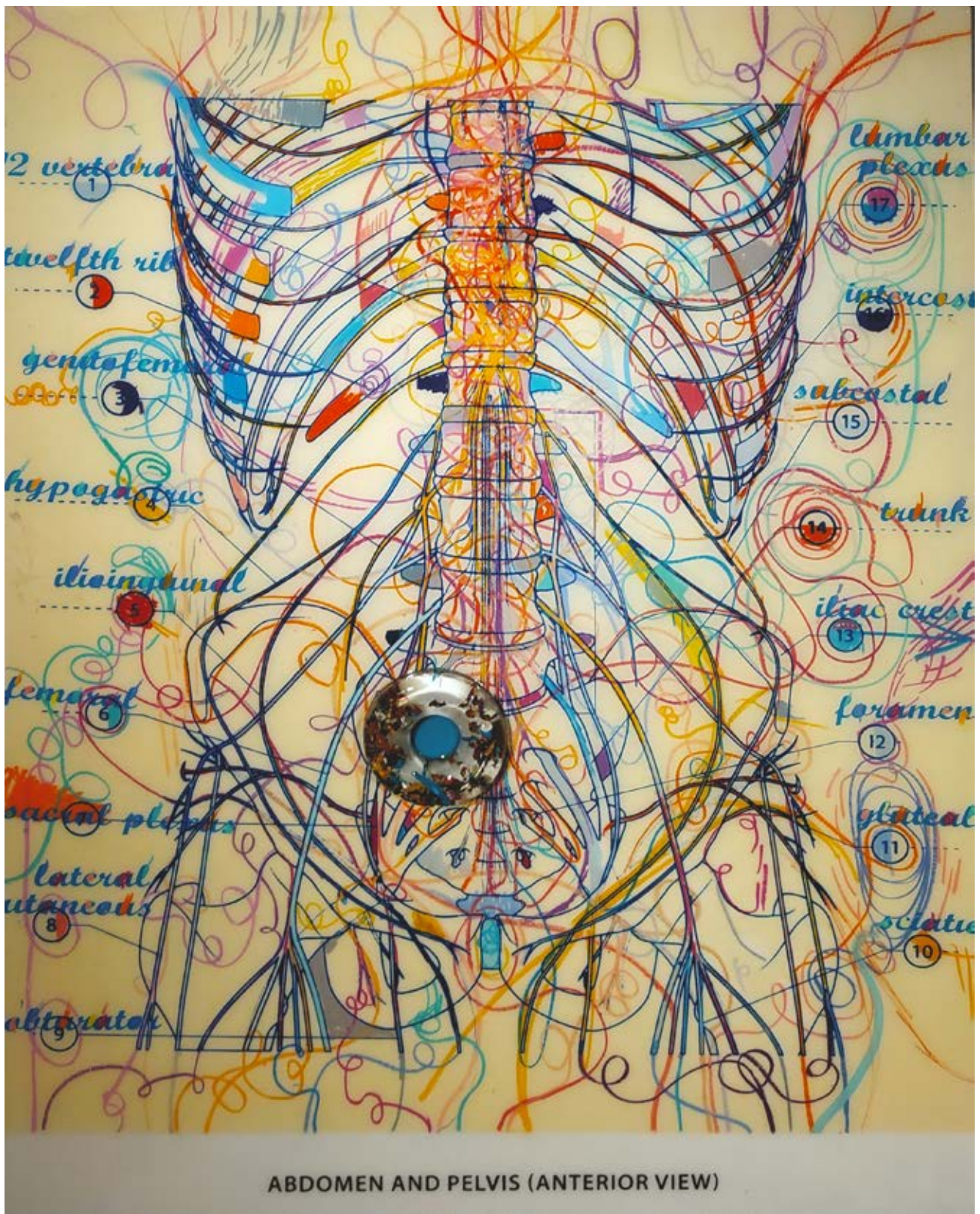
2020-2022

Constant pelvic pain plagues the artist, making this particular work euphorically liberating. The structure is meticulously drawn, then progresses to nerves whilst improvising lines and curves. It's the result of a cathartic act.

Resin donut light close up



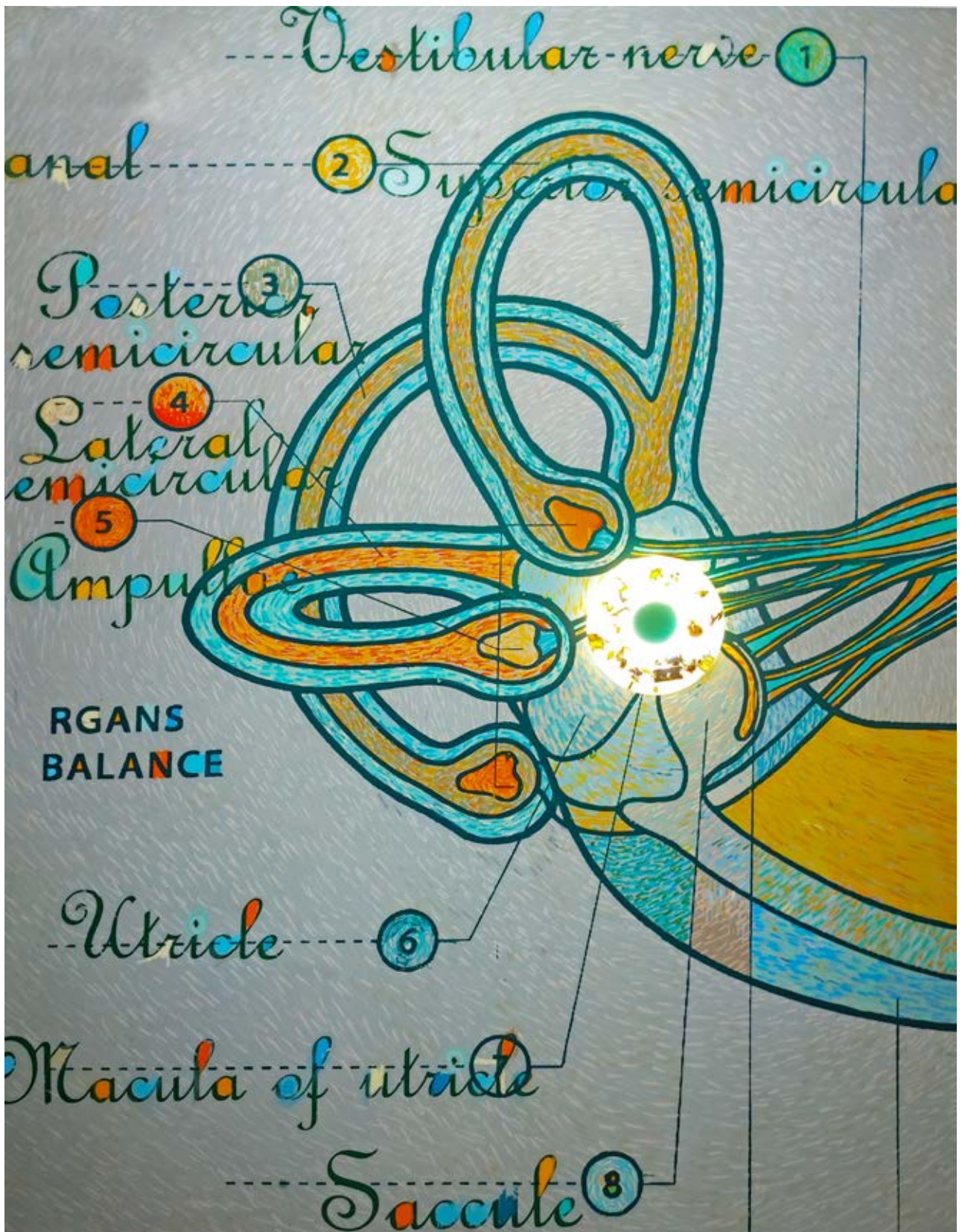
Painting side view



Painting in 'Dependent Mode' (resin donut light switched off)



Painting and resin donut light close up views



Painting in 'Interdependent Mode' (resin donut light switched on)

Press here to teleport

Oil pastel, oil crayon, synthetic paint, vinyl stickers, led light and resin on board

162.5cm x 122cm

2020-2022

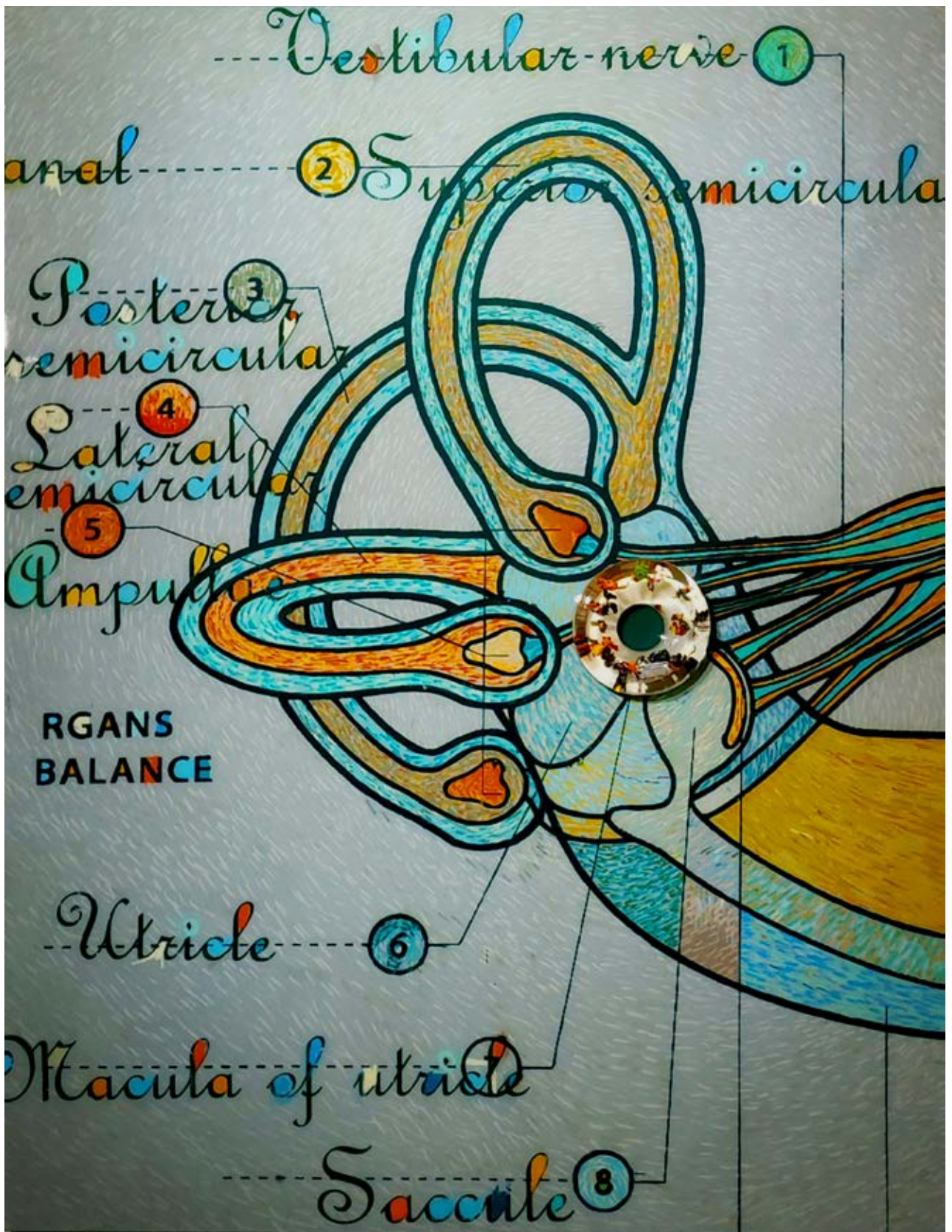


Painting close up view

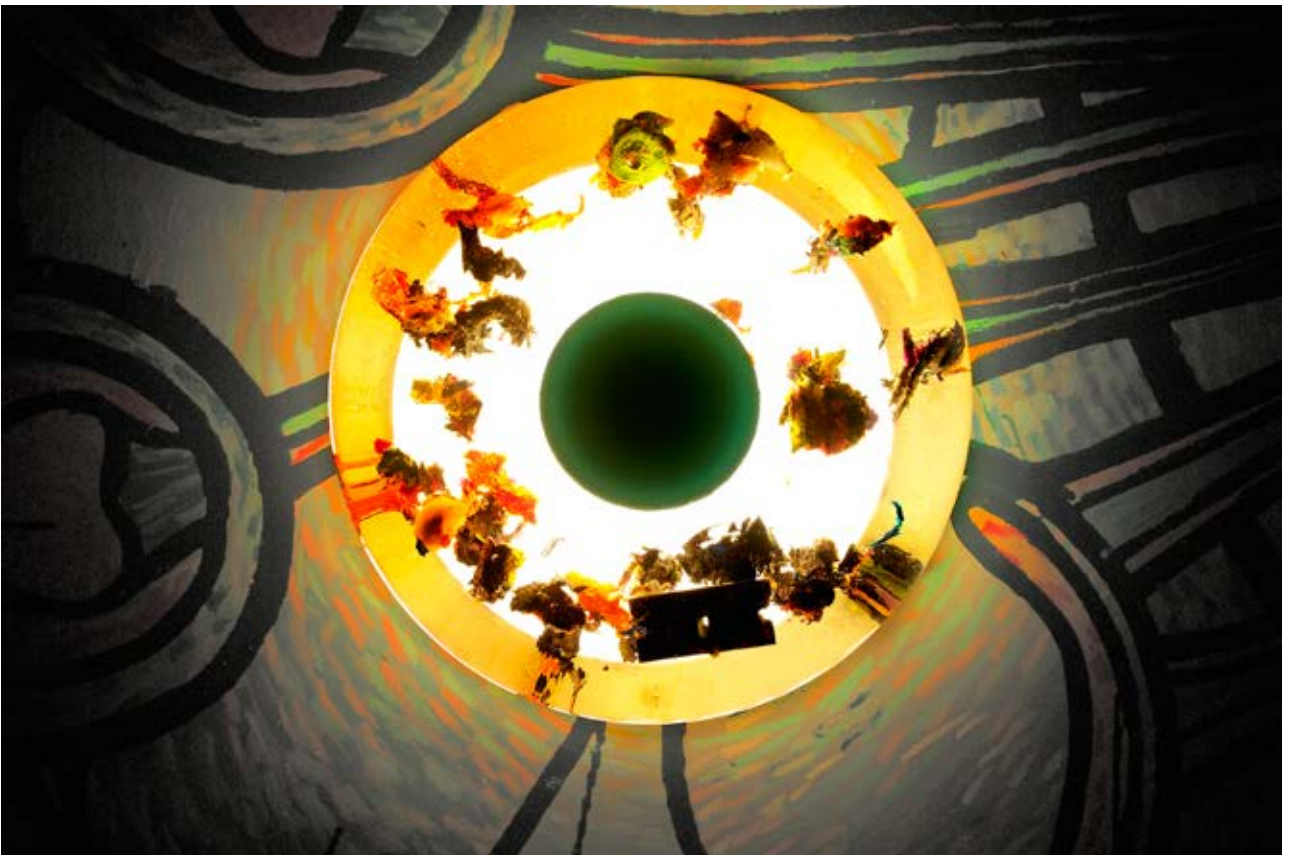
Ivan Lam's *Vertigo* affects both head and ears, the latter resulting in agony and nausea. Mimicking the role of a doctor or medical analyst for himself, the artist zooms into the area that causes discomfort, drawing and colour coding the micro organs, labelling each one with a number and its medical term.



Painting side view



Painting in 'Dependent Mode' (resin donut light switched off)



Resin light donut close up views (light switch on and off)



Painting in 'Interdependent Mode' (resin donut light switched on)

Press here to appear

Oil pastel, oil crayon, synthetic paint, vinyl stickers, led light and resin on board

162.5cm x 122cm

2020-2022

The hexagonal pattern and red hues predominates this painting, akin to The Overlook Hotel in Stanley Kubrick's horror film 'The Shining' (1980). Ivan uses an almost exact carpet motif. Inspired by the film's take on fear, he created a biological drawing of human skin's inner layers. This became a way of channeling his personal anxiety.



Painting close up views



Painting in 'Dependent Mode' (resin donut light switched off)



Painting side view



Resin donut light close up



Painting in 'Interdependent Mode' (resin donut light switched on)

Press here to reappear

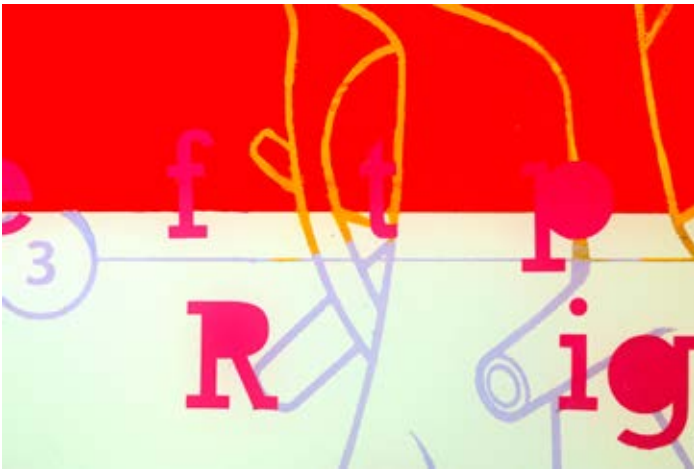
Oil pastel, oil crayon, synthetic paint, vinyl stickers, led light and resin on board

162.5cm x 122cm

2020-2022



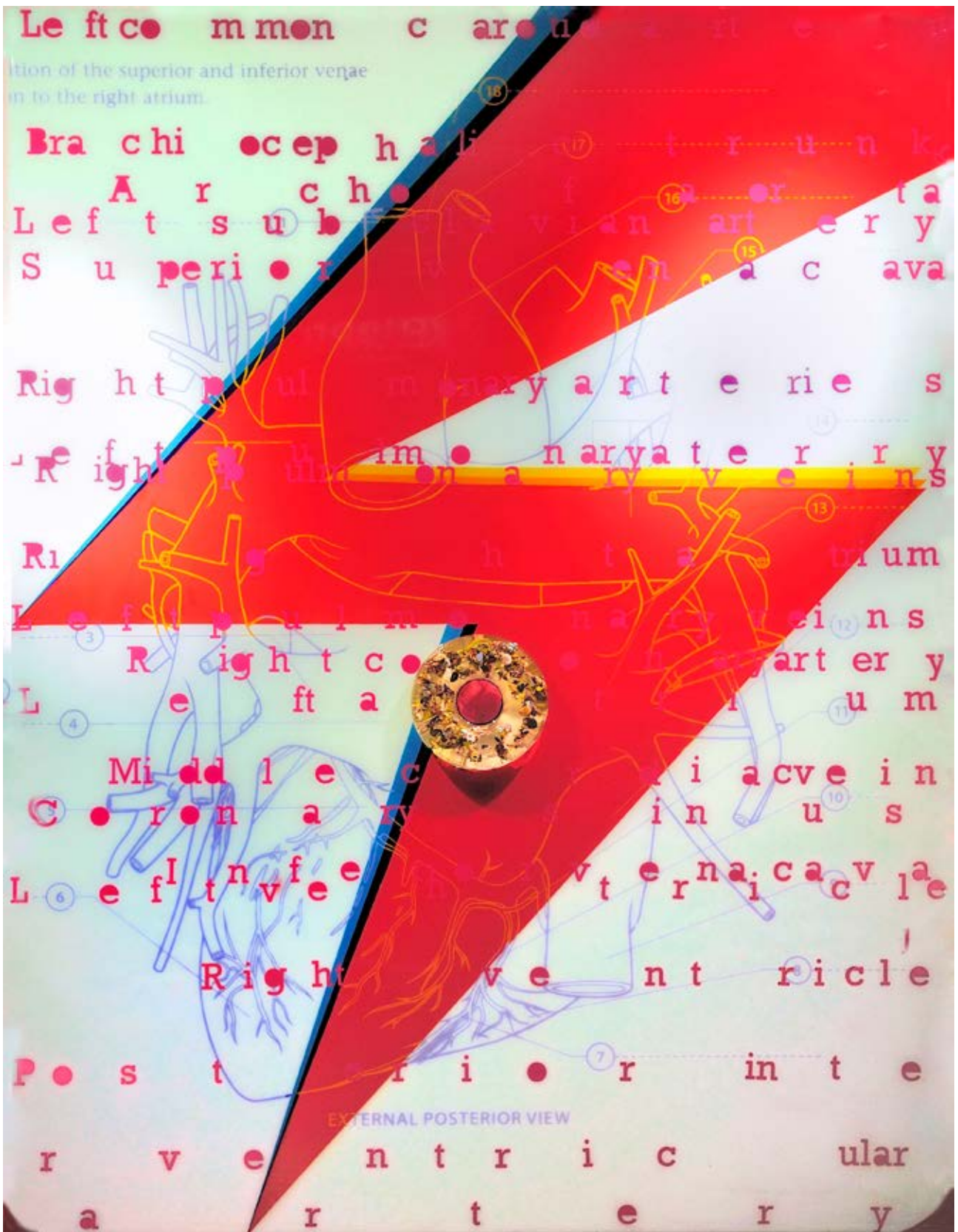
Last but not least is the most conceptual painting of the series, with a giant red flash sign juxtaposing a subtle drawing of the human heart. It is a symbol that plays a dual meaning in this series; of heart palpitations and the universal Fragile sign stamped on packages. Unlike the other panels, colourful strokes of crayon are nowhere to be seen as the work encapsulates silence, coldness, and isolation felt when in severe pain.



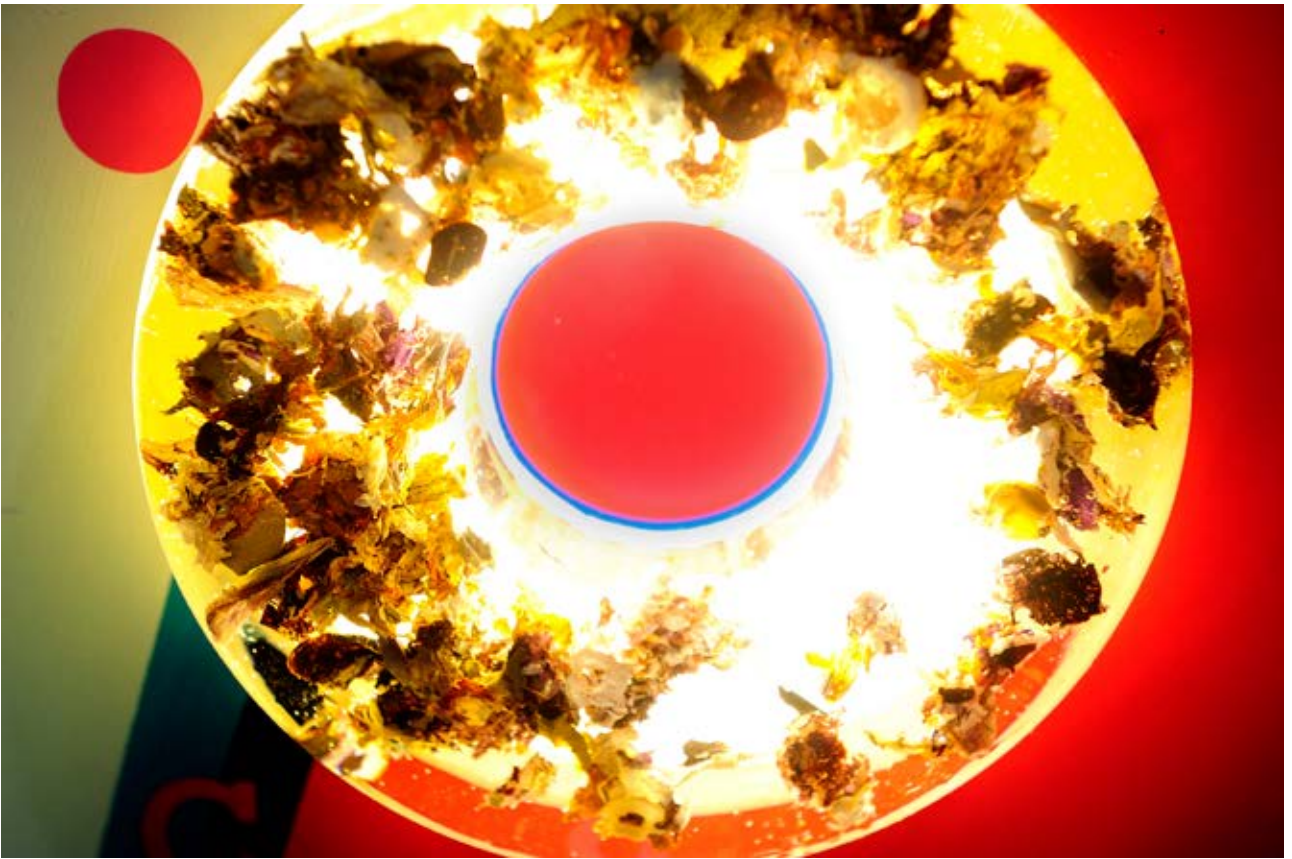
Painting close up views



Painting side view



Painting in 'Dependent Mode' (resin donut light switched off)



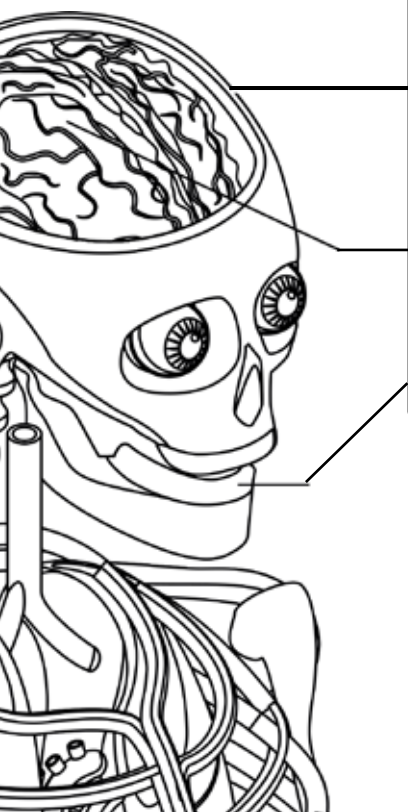
Resin donut light close up views

IVAN LAM (B.1975)

Ivan Lam (B. 1975) has earned a reputation as one of Malaysia's leading contemporary artists for his continuous ability to push the boundaries of his art practice. Unafraid to take risks and never content to lean on the familiar, he is constantly posing himself new challenges through experimentation with techniques and mediums, taking his art practice to the next level. In so doing he has evolved into an artist of critical acclaim who is answerable only to himself, consistently striving towards conceiving and actualizing new concepts and ideas.

Over the last 23 years he has charted new territory on the contemporary Malaysian art scene with his mastery of printmaking, his conquering of contemporary painting, through his trademark use of resin both imbuing his paintings with a technical ingenuity and transforms the narrative tone of the work – adding hyper-reality to the natural, distance to the familiar, pragmatism to pathos. Other dualities and dichotomies abound within his paintings and conceptual works, both harmoniously and in tension, underpinning his enquiries on popular culture, current affairs, art history and autobiography. His practice has recently taken on a more conceptual bias, raising questions around authorship, the role of the artist and the very nature of art itself.

He has exhibited widely in the local and international arena and has also garnered multiple awards in a career laden with solo and group exhibitions.





Ivan Lam has been recognized for his achievements and has been collected by reputed institutions in Malaysia, Europe and the USA. He was the first and only Malaysian artist selected to present a one-man project at the inaugural Art Basel Hong Kong in 2013, and was the first Malaysian artist commissioned by Louis Vuitton for their collection in 2014.

In 2017, he presented a performance work entitled '*Curating Human Experiences: Human Experience 66:06:06*' in Kuala Lumpur, and was the only artist from Malaysia invited to create a project for the Karachi Biennale in the same year.

Ivan Lam was one of four Malaysian artists to represent Malaysia at the country's first ever National Pavilion at the 58th International Art Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia in 2019. The work presented, *One Inch* (2019) explores dualities and dichotomies which sit both harmoniously and in tension in Lam's work, beguiling the viewer to discover the multiple meanings within.

In 2020, he launched 'The Ivan Lam Giveaway' an online platform where art is used as a tool to promote action.

EDUCATION

- 2006 University of East London, UK, MA in International Contemporary Art and Design Practice (Final Semester, Graduating Jan 2007)
Professors: Hedley Roberts, Dr. Daniela Leva
- 1998 Maine College of Art, Bachelor of Fine Arts, Painting (Full Honours)
Professors: Johnnie Ross, Honor Mack, Peter Sucheki, George Larou
- 1994 Lim Kok Wing Institute of Technology, Graphic Design Certificate

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2022 catharsis, Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2021 THE SOIL ON WHICH I BLEED, Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2020 small works + drawings, Wei-Ling Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2019 FAUX, Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2018 Hymen, Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2017 Curating Human Experiences 66:06:06, Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
You said you'll never leave, Karachi Biennale 2017, Narayan Jagannath Vaidya, Karachi, Pakistan
Vanity Project X, Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
For those who don't believe, no proof is possible. 56/200, Art Stage Singapore 2017, Southeast Asia Forum - Net Present Value: Art, Capital, Futures, Marina Bay Sands Exhibition Centre, Singapore
- 2016 Cutting the lines that bind, Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
VOLTA NEW YORK 2016, The Pier 90, New York, USA
- 2014 IVAN LAM: TWENTY, Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2013 Day Zero Night Hero, Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Art Basel Hong Kong 2013, Hong Kong Convention Centre, Hong Kong
- 2012 MACHINES, Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2011 Together Alone, Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Art Stage Singapore 2011, Marina Bay Sands Exhibition Centre, Singapore
- 2009 Panorama, Wei-Ling Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2007 Ivan Lam: After all these years...Wei-Ling Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2004 Plosive, Taksu Gallery, Singapore
- 2004 Plosive, Taksu Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2002 911, Taksu Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 1999 Bright side night light, Gallery Wan, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 1998 Ins and Outs, Crank, Portland, ME, USA
MECA Senior Thesis Show, Institute of Contemporary Art, Portland ME, USA
Exit Removals, Artworks Gallery, Portland ME, USA

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2021 The Field Beyond, Lim Hak Tai Gallery @ NAFA Campus 1, Singapore
 “Aesthetics of Silence”, Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
 100 Pieces: Art for All, Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2019 18@8 Turning Points, Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
 Holding Up a Mirror, Malaysia Pavilion, Palazzo Malipiero, 58th International Art
 Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia
- 2018 Teh Tarik with The Flag, curated by Wei-Ling Gallery, in association with The
 National Visual Arts Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
 Seen, Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2017 18@8 RIGHT HERE! RIGHT NOW!, Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur,
 Malaysia
- 2016 The Past Is Never Where You Think You Left It, curated by Gowri Balasegaran,
 Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
 Art Stage Singapore 2016, Marina Bay Sands, Singapore
- 2015 The Space Between, curated by Anurendra Jegadeva & Rahel Joseph, Wei-Ling
 Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2014 The PEAK Group Show- HO MIA, Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2013 18@8 Mirror, Mirror on the wall, Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2012 18@8 KUL-SIN, ION Art, Singapore
 18@8 KUL-SIN, Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
 Timeless, Group Exhibition, Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
 Directional Forces, Artoll, Bedburg-hau, Germany
- 2011 18@8 Save The Planet, Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2008 18@8 Vice and Virtue, Wei-Ling Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
 Christie’s SEA Art Auction, Hong Kong
 CIGE (China International Gallery Exposition) China World Trade Center, Beijing,
 China
 Force of Nature, Pace, Petaling Jaya, Malaysia
- 2007 Filtered, Wei-Ling Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
 The Force of Nature, Darling Muse Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2006 Larasati Art Auction, Singapore
 “18@8”, KUALA LUMPUR-KARACHI, AMIN GULGEE GALLERY, KARACHI,
 PAKISTAN (in collaboration with Wei-Ling Gallery)
 Au Naturel, Darling Muse Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
 3 Young Contemporaries (1997-2006), Valentine Willie Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur,
 Malaysia
 Nasi Campur 2006, Taksu Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2005 “18@8”, Wei-Ling Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
 Identifying Landscape, Darling Muse Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2004 Philip Morris Asean Art Awards 2004, National Art Gallery, Bangkok, Thailand
 10th Anniversary, Taksu Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
 Footsteps, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
 ArtFair Singapore, Singapore
- 2003 Taksu Singapore Opening, Singapore
 Taksu Jakarta Opening, Jakarta, Indonesia
- 2002 ArtFair Singapore, Singapore
- 2000 <1000, Valentine Willie Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
 Transformations, Sculpture Square, Singapore
 Untitled, Galeri Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia
 Arus: Flow (Australia-Malaysia Electronic Art, Joint Show), National Art Gallery,
 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1999 Philip Morris 99, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Aku: 99 Portret Diri, Galeri Petronas, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 1998 Sequence 11, Timed Based Art, Imaging Center, Portland, Maine, USA
- 1997 Maine Art Auction, Selected for Live Auction, Portland, Maine, USA
Artworks, Portland ME, USA

AWARDS

- 2006 Group Exhibit, Sovereign Art Prize (Top 10 Finalists), Hong Kong
- 2003 Group Exhibit (Grand Prize Winner), Philip Morris 2003, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2001 Group Exhibit (Honourable Mention), Phillip Morris 2001, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 1999 One person Exhibit, Bright Sight Night Lights, Galeriwan, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 1996 Merit Scholarship Exhibit, 1st Place, MECA, Portland, ME, USA

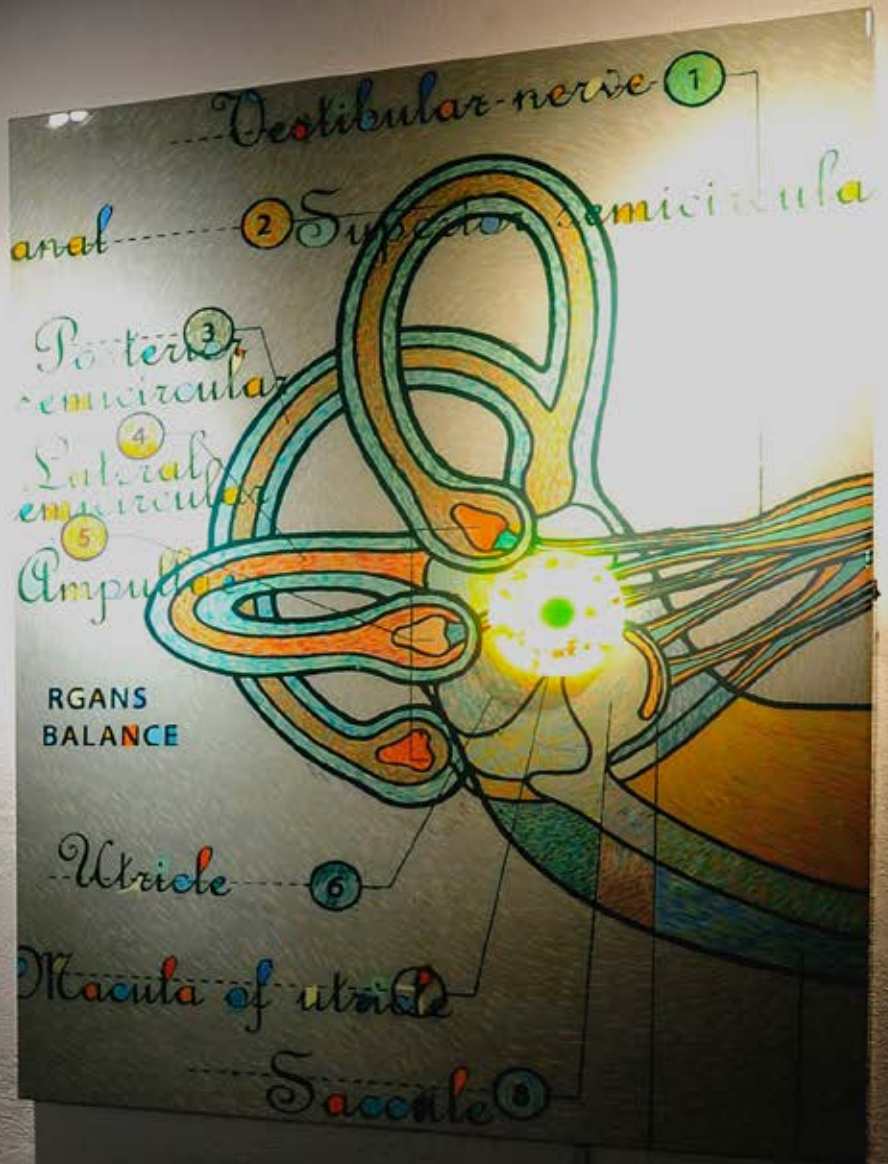
SELECTED COLLECTIONS

Artoll, Germany
Catlin Re Collection, Switzerland
Crank Design Consultant, Maine, USA
Galeri Petronas, Malaysia
HSBC, Malaysia
Louis Vuitton
Merrill Lynch, Maine, USA
National Art Gallery, Malaysia
The Aliya & Farouk Khan Collection, Malaysia
Private Collectors





Installation view at Wei-Ling Contemporary





Produced by Wei-Ling Gallery

To accompany the exhibition entitled '*catharsis*' by Ivan Lam from 1st March - 16th April 2022

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COVER IMAGE | *Press here to teleport (2020-2022)* (close up)

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