

Ivan Lam: Either Or

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The problem is always where to begin/end. Often, in writing, I'll accumulate a loose list of things: details of an artwork that strike a particular chord/dissonance; moments from books or films that offer what feels like insight into an artist's work or way of working; stray thoughts that somehow feel relevant.

For example: writing this text, I compile a series of notes on Ivan Lam's portrayals of the everyday – about his large paintings that depict seemingly innocuous moments of, for example, a cat sleeping on a table in café, a piece of cake on plate ready to be eaten, a pair of worn running shoes, alongside his smaller works of words spraypainted onto blocks of wood that seem to capture stray thoughts, words or phrases that might occur throughout a day; or notes about the title of the exhibition, 'The Dichotomy of Opposites', and how it seems to offer a sort of contradiction in itself, how the definite article of the 'The' casts the phrase as almost overdetermined in designating all opposites as dichotomies, and vice versa. Surely, I think, there are things that are oppositional but not binary, or even singular words or thoughts that can be in themselves self-contradictory; words that we now know to mean their exact opposite, like when a supermarket says *fresh* or a politician says *truth* or the hackneyed example of words that become flipped by slang, like *bad* all those decades ago or, more recently, *fire*. Opposition is contextual.

Alongside these notes, I also write down/up on my list about Lam's own presence in the work itself. How, although he isn't visually present or depicted in any of the works, there's a sense of snapshots from his life, a sense of autobiography in the café scene, the disclosure of the jumbled running line stencilled boldly in black onto a yellow background of the painting *Revisions* (2025): 'This what is happened when you second guessed yourself, this is what happened when vision became revisions...', as if telling himself off. And then how there, clearly set out in sharply defined letters across the middle of each of the larger paintings is the artist's full name: 'Ivan Lam Wai Hoe'. Such a positioning, naming himself in the centre of the three canvases, spurs me on to a half-remembered quote about the contradictions and materiality of the autobiographical gesture, a line that I find eventually in 'From Work to Text,' a 1971 essay by Roland Barthes: 'The I that writes the text is never anything but a paper I.' Is the Ivan that paints, I note, separate from the painted 'Ivan'?

The problem that arises from compiling such a list, though, is then finding where to start/stop. Lam's works have a deceptive casualness in their portrayal of the seemingly mundane: *Hanako* (2024) is an oversized depiction of the aforementioned cake, the image constituted of thousands of small strokes of marker. The cake itself – which I might guess to be some sort of matcha cheesecake – bristles with marks of reddish brown, yellow, and various shades of green along its top layer, as if verdant with moss. The circular plate it rests upon is shaped with such strikes of purple, blues and black that closer you look, the less it resembles a small dish than the opening of a swirling, vertiginous vortex. All of this on top of a tabletop surface of quietly explosive dashes of turquoise, yellow and fuchsia that gesture towards an infinite expanse that continues off the edge of the canvas. Add to that the offhand meta-gesture of purple text listed down the yellowed-cream body of the cake: 'IVAN LAM WAI HOE / KUL\MA B 1975/ HANAKO / MADE IN THE YEAR / TWO THOUSAND TWENTY FOUR/ MEDIUM USED / COLOURED MARKERS & / ACRYLIC MARKERS / ON CANVAS ON BOARD / SIZE / SEVENTY FIVE INCHES / BY / FIFTY SIX INCHES'.

Each of the canvases in the series of *Hanako*, *Catto* and *990* all hold this dictation of their own existence on their surfaces, incorporating what information might be on a wall label or hand-out into the work itself. It gives the works an odd displacement, lending them a feel akin to a film poster, where names and credits are enlisted surrounding an image from the film. The addition of the text feels like a small, familiar gesture; but then it puts the work at a fundamental remove, as if Lam had created the cake-image, but someone else (a gallery, say, or a museum, a designer, or some other authority) had placed the text on top; as if we were looking not directly at the work, but at an advertisement for the work; as if the painting of the cosmic moss-cake were still somewhere else, waiting to be seen.

The incorporated text-description seems to hold you at a deliberate distance, casting the audience as a sort of cinema-goer, looking at a film poster just outside of the theatre: not quite immersed but not quite excluded, as if always positioned at the point of entry/exit. It's here, captured somewhere coming/going between the dichotomies that his exhibition title proclaims, that feels the best place to begin/end with Lam's work.

A few of these dichotomies that Lam is exploring are set out in the rambling text of *Revisions*: visions/revisions, decisions/indecisions. But other oppositions also emerge from the alignments of the works. *Revisions*, notably, is directed towards a 'you' in the past tense; the mistake has already happened. Hung just next to this canvas, uncomfortably close, is a small panel with the word *Doubtfull* (2025) sprayed in a blurred red on a purple background,

as if commenting and casting shade on *Revisions*' line of thinking. The other smaller one-word works – *Questions*, *Ambiguous*, *Hesitance*, *Cacophony* (all 2025) – act similarly, as punctuation marks and footnotes to the larger works, grumbling and undercutting them. Between these shouting stencil-works and the large paintings are other dichotomies that Lam suggests: the poles of hesitation/action and doubt/certainty are there, staged with a sort of self-conscious coyness. But also running beneath these is the tug between past/present, sense/nonsense; the works toggle between being direct/indirect, and also seem to pull between elevation/levelling, in their attempts to be honest/dishonest about everyday thoughts and imagery, and the you/Ivan that enacts them. Amongst all these, the works play out a rough divide, that of an internalised or inner voice, speaking in the past tense 'you' of the spraypainted works; while the works in marker offer Ivan's external view, a vision that manages to evoke an unsteady sense of presence and nowness. The past is literal, clear; the present, less so, necessarily undefined, in the process of emerging.

Opposition is contextual, but it is also constant. But rather than be restricted by these oppositions that at times feel like they define you, your life, Lam instead seems to take the dynamic of their push/pull as an engine, a means to move with/through. Writing on the limitations of expression, Roland Barthes – a lapsed structuralist who was also partial to the allure of a dichotomy – wrote in his anti-autobiography *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1975): 'The very task of love and of language is to give to one and the same phrase inflections which will be forever new, thereby creating an unheard of speech.' The diptych painting *Indecisions* (2025), a sibling to *Revisions*, begins with a different resolve in black lettering on white in the present tense: 'This is what happens wh...' As if casting aside the conscious wavering and self-chastising of *Revisions*, *Indecisions* simply goes for it, to the point of illegibility: other words stencilled on top jumble and obscure the rest of the canvas, a cacophony that I'd like to read as a joyful release – from literal sense, from choosing either decision or indecision, vision or revision: an unheard of speech. What we might see/hear in Lam's sense/nonsense is that there is no beginning/ending, just a commitment to the irresolvable push/pull of being.

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