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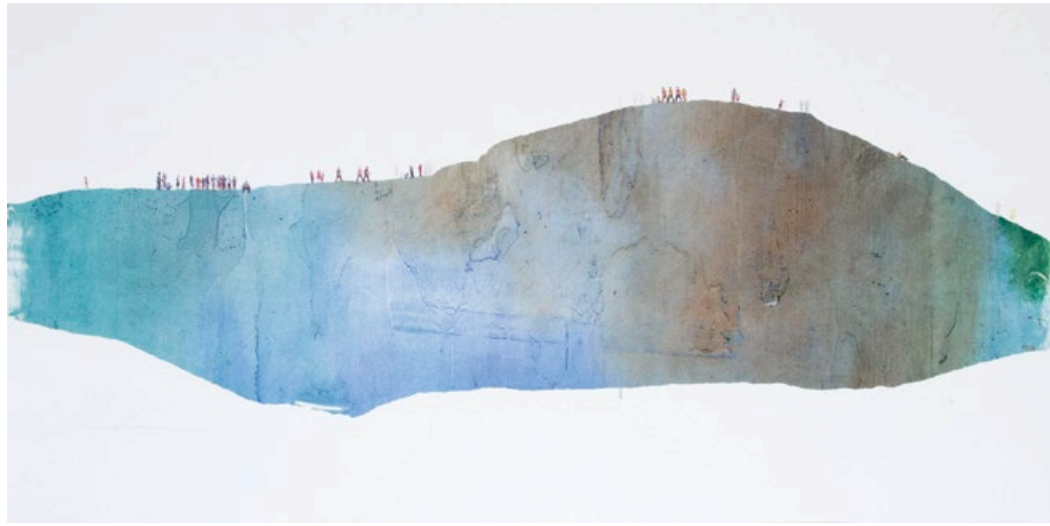
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Chen Shitong, *Divide no 2*, 2015, mixed media on paper, 108 x 55 cm



Close up of *Divide no 2*

Since its founding in 2007 by Singaporean Stephanie Tham, Galerie Steph has been presenting noteworthy international and local artworks that range from traditional to experimental. Housed in the industrial port area of Tanjong Pagar's Artspace@Helutrans, it is also dedicated as a platform for the promotion of emerging Singaporean artists. Its most recent showcase is 'Phrase, Rephrase', featuring the works of four local

artists – Shazwany Aziz, Vanessa Ban, Chen Shitong and Kanchana Gupta – whose diverse techniques and material palettes lent four interesting interpretations to the theme.

Aziz's works and Gupta's *Fragments in Time* three-dimensional paintings inspired the exhibition's title. Through a similar approach of repetitive strokes, resulting in culminated layers in their work driven by intuition, the artists create unique pieces that are both

compositionally engaging and charged with movement.

Aziz showcases two series: *Untitled* and *Results & Findings*. The former set of monotypes, created via painting on acrylic sheets and then pressing a piece of paper down onto the painted sheet, features multi layers of squiggly lines, paint blotches, drips and swashes, as well as colour patches that reflect a varied rhythm and pace of the artist's hand strokes dancing, stamping, pressing heavily or lightly sweeping onto the canvas;



Chen Shitong, *Earthscape*, 2015, mixed media on paper, 56 x 76 cm



Close up of *Earthscape*

A STUDY IN LAYERING

BY LUO JINGMEI | IMAGES COURTESY GALERIE STEPH

'Phrase, Rephrase', an exhibition at Galerie Steph (Aug 5 to Sept 19), showcased the works of four Singaporean artists exploring the themes of fragmentation, continuation, alienation and harmony.



Chen Shitong, *Red Cliff*, 2015, mixed media on paper, 76 x 56 cm



Close up of *Moonscape*, 2015, mixed media on paper, 56 x 76 cm

the latter set of monoprints is made using oil-based inks on paper with a well-used cutting mat as a plate, resulting in an energetic graphic.

These manoeuvres are Aziz's exploration of tones, textures, shapes and patterns within a composition that capture her attempts at 'experimenting, trying, to balance things off each other, or to counter balance each other.' The metaphor or movement is her way of trying to express and capture the fleeting moments of daily life. 'I view the drawing form as a representation of motion – of how it starts and ends in movement. It can carry on without closure or completion, continually part of a process, never ending,' she describes.

Gupta's method of layering is more sculptural in nature. The thickness of the pieces that protrude from the wall are created by painting layer upon layer of oil on canvas, burning them and then peeling and removing parts away from the canvas so that it appears incomplete. These are further arranged and assembled in a variety of ways to create the final compositions that are tactile and calls out to be touched.

'My work shifts between tension of one form to another as I manipulate the materiality of oil paint and transform it into something active and disruptive on the painting surface,' Gupta shares. 'Using processes of fragmenting, stripping away and taking apart the materials both literally and



Shazwany Aziz, Untitled VI, 2015, mixed-media monotype, 59.5 x 41.3 cm



Shazwany Aziz, Untitled V, 2015, mixed-media monotype, 29.7 x 42.1 cm



Shazwany Aziz, Untitled I, 2015, mixed-media monotype, 59.4 x 42 cm



Shazwany Aziz, Untitled IV, 2015, mixed-media monotype, 26.5 x 36.9 cm

figuratively in my works, a sensual surface would then ideally materialise.'

Fragmentation is a key topic of exploration in her works – in both process and object. 'A fragment can represent a new whole in its own right; it is also a reminder of the absence and permanence of its wholeness. It is a paradox questioning our notions of what a whole constitutes,' Gupta expounds. The constant acts of creating and destroying parts of the works is her way of phrasing and rephrasing. Unlike Aziz's fragments that visually bleed into one another reflecting a more open-ended process, Gupta's process is more about a steady build up, and a considered compositional play of conceal and reveal.

On the other hand, the fragments in Chen Shitong's prints present a sort of whimsical dreamscape. The textures of found stones and concrete surfaces found in the urban fabric serves as starting points. These textures are then applied onto a printing plate and oil-based ink is inked onto the textured plate that goes through a printing plate. Finally, miniscule drawn figures based on real city dwellers are silkscreened onto the paper.

If there is something vaguely familiar about Chen's artworks, it is their resemblance to the tranquil landscaped found in traditional Chinese landscape scroll paintings. 'I am interested...the idea of a utopic landscape in my works. What makes me enjoy my art-making process is the ability to create landscape-like shapes where I could

create a narrative for my hand-drawn figures to thrive in,' says Chen, who shares that the obsession with drawing stick figures in his childhood contributes to the human figure as a perennial focus in his works. In fact, there is an almost childlike quality to the prints, augmented by his choice of pretty pastel shades and gradation of tones. The prints also exude a surreal and otherworldly character that helps to evoke the notion of utopia Chen wishes to express – a utopia perhaps of a city that is at one with the nature and a place of respite as opposed to one that is drowned in cacophony, excesses and consumerist ambitions.

Vanessa Ban's artwork presents an interesting angle to the interpretation of phrasing and rephrasing



Vanessa Ban

representing her feelings of detachment and isolation after returning home to Singapore's predictable humdrum of pragmatism and consumerism versus the more liberal and artistic environment she had soaked herself in while in London. 'A new alienating experience occurred when my mental state had majorly shifted from that of the status quo...with everything from the

that is more cerebral than literal. The artwork's title Graveyard Souls and City Ghosts, spelt out in neon light, was conceived after witnessing the 2011 riots in London during her studies. 'I felt like a ghost in the distance, unable to relate fully and feeling foreign to the entire situation. The whole scene felt like a television show, and it was quite mesmerising despite possible attacks outside her home,' Ban narrates.

A layered reading sees the phrase also

last two years starting to diminish and feel irrelevant...,' says Ban. A third possible interpretation, she ponders, would be her deliberation on how to manifest the phrase in the form of an artwork before settling on neon light as a medium. 'Neon naturally creates mood due to the alteration in lighting. Then it's down to the words, or image, to dictate the mood and its presence – whether it's fun, sad, factual, cheeky, etc.'

This exhibition is also interesting for bringing together four artists from different backgrounds and at different points in their artistic journeys: Gupta's works are an extension of her diploma project (she is currently pursuing her MA in Fine Arts from LaSalle College of the Arts after giving up a corporate career); both Aziz and Ban have experiences in other creative fields – Aziz in multimedia design and Ban in graphic design; Chen was formally trained in painting but his works showcase his current fascination with printmaking.

Thus, 'Phrase, Rephrase' could also very well represent the lives of these artists – multi-layered, multi-textured – echoing the constant discovery and rediscovery of their selves through the making of their art. +



Kanchana Gupta, 16102014, 2015, oil paint burnt and stripped off, dimensions variable



Kanchana Gupta, 22112014, 2015, oil paint burnt and stripped off, dimensions variable



Kanchana Gupta, 28122014, 2015, oil paint burnt and stripped off, dimensions variable