

# Art – In – Sight

Presented by Ocula and Gillman Barracks, in this short essay contributor Sherman Sam considers abstraction through the practices of Singapore-based artists.



Words by Sherman Sam

Jeremy Sharma, *Terra Sensa-Lovell* (2013) (Detail).  
Courtesy the artist and Singapore Art Museum.

## How abstraction can improve your life

An obsession with the self seems to dominate the collective consciousness of our moment. In a cultural context, the critic Jerry Saltz described the 1993 Whitney Biennial as marking a turning point, reflecting on how it emphasised ‘the art of the first person’. He wrote of the Biennial:

For the first time, biography, history, the plight of the marginalised, institutional politics, context, sociologies, anthropologies, and privilege have all been recognised as ‘forms’, ‘genres’, and ‘materials’ in art. Possibly the core materials. That shift put the artistic self front and centre, making it perhaps the primary carrier of artistic content since the 1990s.[1]

Saltz was referring to works in the Biennial such as Daniel J Martinez's admission buttons, one of which read, 'I CAN'T IMAGINE EVER WANTING TO BE WHITE.', and Sadie Benning's 20-minute short film, *It Wasn't Love* (1992), shot primarily in the artist's bedroom. Instead of being grounded in materiality or pure conceptualism, the 1993 Whitney Biennial marked a move towards a focus on ideas of personal subjectivity.

Even in its diversity, abstract art seems to tend away from this occupation with the self; it appears to offer something of the opposite. Much abstraction developed from notions of purity, with artists seeking to distil form such that the work was autonomous of context, void of figuration and askewed specific meaning, à la Kazimir Malevich's geometric forms, Jackson Pollock's drips and splatters and Mark Rothko's bands of colour. The sheer materialism of Minimalists like Donald Judd or Robert Ryman can be read as another type of essentialising aesthetic. Thus, it is quite easy to interpret late 20th-century abstraction as fulfilling a certain reductive end goal. Yet 'a movement of abstractionists', wrote critic Barry Schwabsky in 2009, 'would be a contradiction in terms, like a church of atheists. Abstractionists, like atheists, are united only in what they reject.'<sup>[2]</sup>



Ian Woo, *The Grab* (2015). Acrylic on linen. 200 x 180 cm. Courtesy Tomio Koyama Gallery, Tokyo. © Ian Woo.

In the context of Singapore (the older generation of pioneers such as Goh Beng Kwan and Anthony Poon aside), it is the Singaporean Ian Woo and the older Yugoslav émigré Milenko Prvacki (both educators at LASALLE College of the Arts) who have offered different approaches to a young contemporary art scene. Woo says of his work: ‘I think abstraction chose me as I had difficulties talking about my feelings regarding what I wanted in my art. I was more interested in the atmosphere, form and sensation of images rather than meaning.’ Woo’s gestural abstraction seems constructed with a stuttering and varied collection of marks. The result is a fragmented and juddering ‘image’, as if his gestures are trying to coalesce into a picture. Are gesture and image contesting each other? Or is it his thinking on display? In contrast, Prvacki first made representational, politically and socially engaged works before turning to abstraction, because he realised that ‘my narratives [were] not addressing the correct audience, they [were] not competitive with text, film, video...’. The resulting paintings, though, are neither devoid of word nor imagery. Rather, Prvacki’s art still remains grounded in the pictorial.



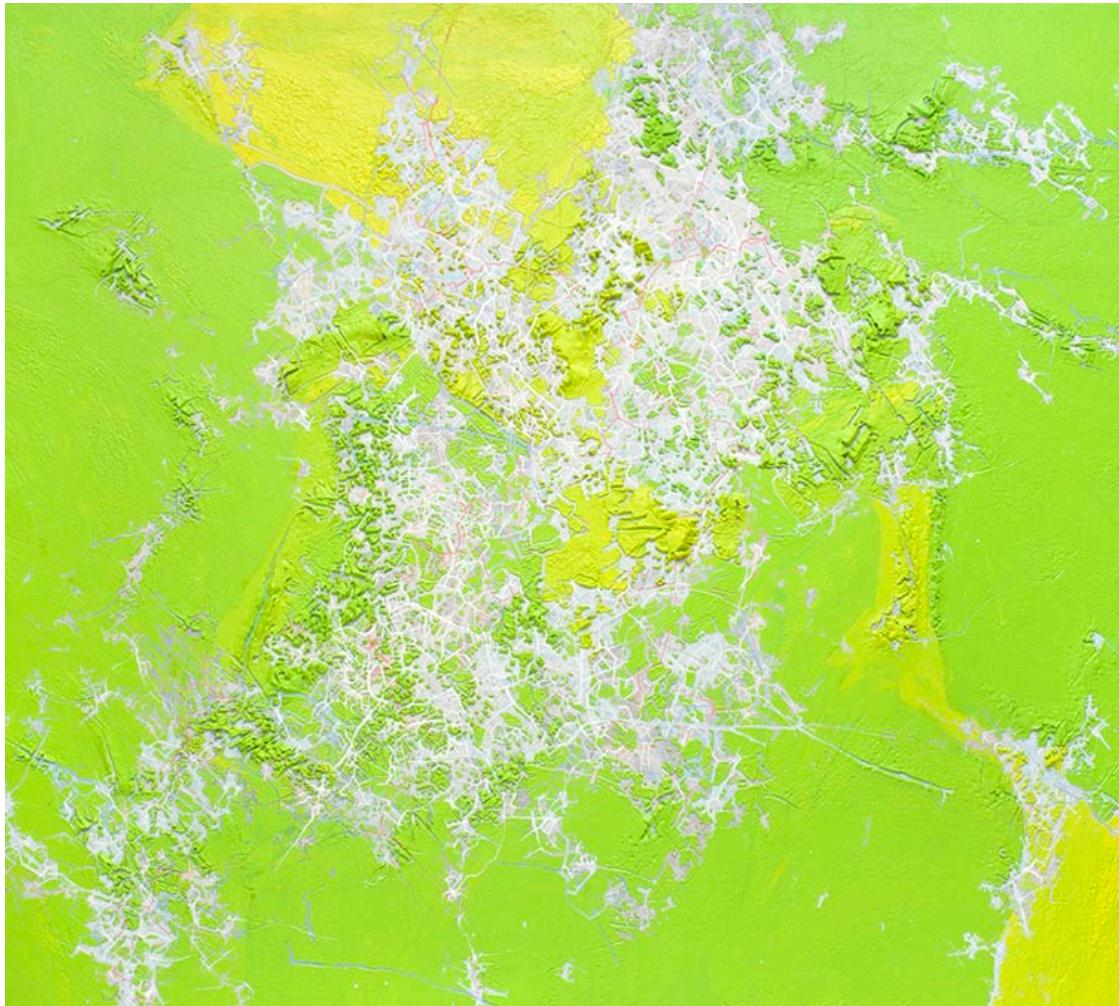
Milenko Prvacki, *Abstraction for Beginners* (2017). Acrylic on linen. 160 x 160 cm. Courtesy the artist.

If that was the approach of the mature artists in Singapore, then what of the younger generation? Multidisciplinary artist Jeremy Sharma says that he does not ‘consciously work with abstraction, it's not like a theme or starting point for me. Maybe I think very abstractly and obtusely. It's in my nature. I always think about what you can't represent.’ Sharma—using paint, polystyrene foam, sound and light—creates abstract objects. ‘I don't really paint anymore’, he says, ‘but I'm interested in the legacies of abstraction in the form of concealing, disclosure, translation, embedment, dissemblance, erasure, gesture, invisibility ... the monochrome, texture, surfaces, time...’. For instance, his 2013 Singapore Biennale contribution, *Terra Sensa–Lovell* (2013), consists of four large, undulating pieces of polystyrene foam which resemble sound waves made physical, or a replication of stratum, and are in actuality based on electro-magnetic data generated by dying stars and gleaned from the internet. Here, the data is merely a starting point to create form.



Jeremy Sharma, *Terra Sensa–Lovell* (2013) (Detail). High-density polyurethane foam, robotic milled. Installation view: Singapore Biennial 2013, Singapore Art Museum (26 October 2013–16 February 2014). Courtesy the artist and Singapore Art Museum.

The paintings and installations of Ng Joon Kiat are also inspired by information. Singapore’s policy-making, recent historical conditions and the nation’s policy demarcating ‘nature and territory’ provide ‘data’ for his art production. Unlike Woo or Prvacki, Ng’s paintings are less lyrical or poetic. Instead, his explorations lead to interesting non-representations full of densely textured surfaces with strange and awkward marks.



Ng Joon Kiat, *Untitled Cities 3* (2016). Acrylic on cloth. 200 x 180 cm. Courtesy Gajah Gallery.

If Sharma and Ng use data as springboards for art-making, there are still those who focus purely on more traditional materials and language. With her lush accumulations of paint on chunky stretchers, Jane Lee's painted objects continue to explore painting's 'thingness'. Though not quite monochromatic, they offer a similar sense of singularity. Consisting of paint, canvas or other such surfaces, and stretchers or support, Lee works at paint's limits to question the form's possibilities. 'But', she says, 'I do see my work as relating to my life. I think of my paintings as constructions, where the tools that I use are objects that you can find in daily life, and in this way [I] make art relate more to everyday life.'<sup>[3]</sup>



Jane Lee, *Melt V* (2016). Acrylic paint and heavy gel on Fibreglass. 180 x 151 x 8 cm. Courtesy Sundaram Tagore Gallery, Singapore/New York.

Expressions of painting's material nature need not be dense. Both Luke Heng and Tan Guo-Liang offer the opposite: the ethereal. By accumulating many thin washes or layers of wax, as Heng does, or stains and flows of watery paint, as Tan does, they both allow colour—that other material element of paint—to be expressive. The results are delicate. By layering colour upon colour, wash upon wash, Heng's process naturally suggests ritual, whereas Tan describes his approach more cerebrally. He says:

... abstraction is very useful as a way for creating distance and holding space. Generally, I'm not so keen on the idea of direct expression, or worse still 'communication' in art. We have other domains in life to do that, for example design, media et cetera. Abstraction allows me to be present and attentive even though I have no idea what I'm attending to. Perhaps, I am more interested in the space of listening than that of speaking.

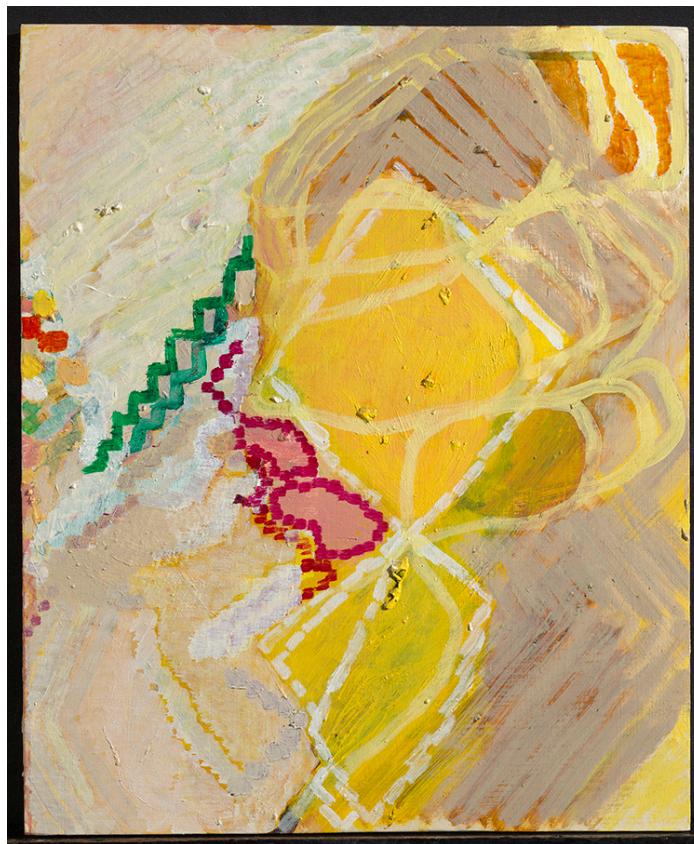


Luke Heng, *Non-Place* (2017). Oil on linen. 154 x 119 cm. Courtesy Pearl Lam Galleries.

The operative word in Tan's statement is 'allowing'. As an abstract painter and a contemporary of Woo, I arrived at abstraction because, initially, it was the most difficult thing to comprehend and then make. It still is. Maybe, I allow it to happen.



Guo-Liang Tan, *Untitled (Cassiopeia)* (205). Acrylic on fabric and wood. 151 x 131 cm. © Guo-Liang Tan. Courtesy Ota Fine Arts.



Sherman Sam, *Disco Heaven* (2015). Oil on panel. 41.6 x 34.4 cm. Courtesy the artist.

Abstraction today, as we see in considering Singapore's art scene, is as myriad as its artists. Following a formulaic rise of orthodoxy in late 20th-century

abstraction, a widespread rejection of the form occurred and as Schwabsky wrote, ‘once again, abstraction could become an art for aesthetic dissidents.’<sup>[4]</sup> From the ‘debris’—a word Woo uses—of abstraction’s first big bang of invention, it is as if artists have picked through the ruins or rubble of its possibilities. Abstract art can be process-driven, reductivist, essentialist, humanist, post-structural, post-internet, to name a few approaches.

And just how is abstraction also relevant to today’s ‘self-obsessed’ world, and to the ‘art of the first person’? Well, pause, look, see. In Tan’s words, ‘be present’, and perhaps you will find an answer. In the Singaporean art ecosystem, there seems to be much handwringing and ideation. It is arguable the obsession with exploring subjectivity is, in its attempts to be legible, often overly didactic, leading us further away from a deeper contemplation of ourselves and others. Looking and seeing, feeling and being, thinking and digesting, then thinking again, as prompted by some abstraction, is just what’s needed. That is the thing about abstract art—the work comes from the artist, but it expects that the viewer will bring themselves to meet the work. It is in that ‘allowing’ that the possibility for a contemplative exploration of the self and others becomes possible.

*Sherman Sam is an artist and critic based in London and Singapore. He has exhibited his paintings and drawings internationally, in addition to appearing in numerous group shows, Sherman has participated in one-person shows at The Suburban (Chicago), the Rubicon Gallery (Dublin), Lugar do Desenho (Porto), Some Walls (Oakland, California), Equator Art Projects (Singapore), and at Annka Kultys Gallery (London), and most recently at Ceysson & Bénétière in Luxembourg. Sherman curated the exhibition A Poem for Agnes and Raoul at Ancient and Modern (London) in 2014.*

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[1] Jerry Saltz and Rachel Corbett, ‘How Identity Politics Conquered the Art World: An Oral History’, published online, *Vulture*, 21 April 2016. <http://www.vulture.com/2016/04/identity-politics-that-forever-changed-art.html> [2] Barry Schwabsky, ‘The Resistance of Painting: On Abstraction’, published online, *The Nation*, 16 December 2009. <https://www.thenation.com/article/resistance-painting-abstraction/> [3] Interview with Eugene Tan, in *Jane Lee*, exhibition catalogue, 2010, published online, <http://www.janelee.sg/pages/press> [4] Barry Schwabsky, ‘The Resistance of Painting: On Abstraction’, in *The Nation*, December 2009. <https://www.thenation.com/article/resistance-painting-abstraction/>