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GERALD TAY
IN SEARCH OF THE BEYOND

13 JULY—11 AUGUST 2024

Haridas Contemporary is a gallery founded by Christiaan Haridas that aims to support and grow alongside Singapore's burgeoning contemporary art scene. The gallery endeavors to create a home for emerging and mid-career Singapore and Singapore-based artists, while maintaining a satellite program with regional artists.

With 15 years of experience in the Southeast Asian art market, Christiaan hopes to advocate for promising art practices that are sensitively crafted and offer interesting entry-points into the stories and concerns of contemporary life.

The gallery is committed to supporting artists throughout their artistic careers by seeding opportunities for exhibition, dialogue, and professional counsel. Haridas Contemporary will rally for exciting local practices to be recognised across regional and international platforms.

Beneath the Surface

by Ian Tee

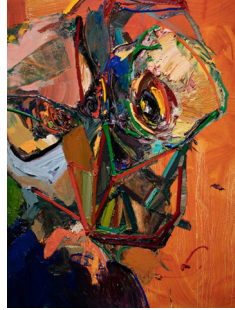
To look beneath the surface is to go deeper than appearances. This metaphor refers to the act of probing into the underlayers or substructure, to see or understand what something is made of. The notion of a surface suggests a separation between outside and inside. Ironically, I find it is a useful framework to think about painting, a form of art in which two-dimensionality is its main attribute. It is also a helpful theme to approach Gerald Tay's body of work thus far. When applied to thinking about Gerald's practice, the framework of looking beneath the surface is explored in two main ways: formal structure and the repository of images "behind" his paintings.

What I aim to do with this essay is to establish key cultural influences that have shaped Gerald's work as well as personal observations about the way he synthesises these sources. The essay will take a chronological look at his practice, beginning with early paintings that explicitly reference the mask as a motif, into the new body of work that has a spiritual inflection at its core. In this development, I see the focus of his work moving from the external surface to the inner world. That said, Gerald's approach remains constant - these ideas are worked out through the formal qualities in his paintings. He articulates his thoughts through formal structure and the emotions they elicit.

Masks



The Envious Mantis, 2019
Oil on Canvas, 102 x 76 cm



Alpha Mom, 2019
Oil on Canvas, 102 x 76 cm

The idea of the mask is a central device in earlier works such as ‘The Envious Mantis’ (2019) and ‘Alpha Mom’ (2019). These paintings are psychological portraits of sorts, with facial features that are scrambled and at times violently collided. Visually, they recall the Cubist experimentations with deconstructing the image into multiple overlapping planes. Of course, the Spanish artist Pablo Picasso was famously influenced by the form of African masks which opened an avenue towards a different aesthetic paradigm. In a way, Gerald’s interest in the mask returns this aesthetic to its source and it becomes a means to reflect on the genre of portraiture.

The mask is often thought of as a façade that hides or protects an individual’s identity. Fittingly, ‘The Envious Mantis’ nods to the orchid mantis, a species from Southeast Asia which mimics the appearance of orchid flowers. The mantis “hides” in plain view and preys on unsuspecting insects that come in to pollinate flowers. This metaphor about the tension between appearance and intent is carried through in the juxtaposition of different textures. The soft smooth underpainting in tones of peach and green is contrasted against aggressive thick applications of paint that either came straight from the tube or were spread using a palette knife.

We can interpret these Mask paintings as portraits where the subject's appearance is broken in. Like peeling an onion, the topmost layer is the mask seen by the outside world, and the different dimensions are revealed as we peel back. The painting shows fragments of the façade, the thick and heavy surface, as well as layers beneath that it sits on, right down to the thin washes coating the canvas. In that sense, the mask is not a separate shield but also constitutes aspects of one's personality.

Eyes and Altars



The Elemental Kingdom, 2019
Oil on Canvas, 203 x 152 cm



The Altar, 2019
Oil on Canvas, 203 x 152 cm

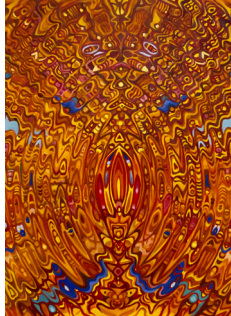
Gerald's inquiry about the relationship between the subject and viewer is carried through into a set of paintings that employ the structure of stacked figures. While the individual's personality is being considered in their full complexity in Gerald's Mask works, these Altar paintings do not have a singular subject or sitter. Instead, the viewer is confronted by a sea of figures who seem to look back.

The crowded composition brings to mind the way deity statues are arranged on Taoist altars, with upper and lower decks housing deities who overlook different domains. The principal deities

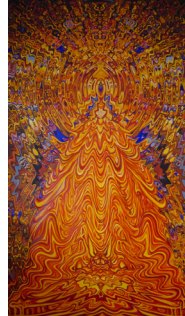
are positioned on the upper deck, reflecting their privileged status. It is this hierarchical structure that drew Gerald's interest. He connects the formal structure of these stacked figures with the structure of power dynamics, where the true figure of authority is often in the background. What is being underscored is power as relations among entities, rather than power represented as symbols.

Extending this dynamic from the painted image into the viewer's space, Gerald sets up a situation that challenges the relationship between the observer and the observed. In 'The Elemental Kingdom' (2019), a contingent of masked faces are painted with a direct frontal profile. They become smaller as the figures recede into the pictorial space, with undefined spectres hanging overhead. A sea of eyes returns the viewer's gaze, creating an unsettling sense of being watched that is amplified by the painting's large format.

Inner Worlds



Starlit Spells, 2024
Oil on Belgian Linen, 76 x 56 cm



The Universe Within, 2023
Oil on Canvas, 215 x 125 cm

Having laid down the context of his past works, we are better equipped to understand recent developments in Gerald's painting practice. A process he carried over from the Altar paintings is the use of photo editing software to create preparatory sketches. Different source images are collaged and digitally manipulated to produce compositions which are then loosely transferred

onto canvas. In his recent works, we can see this process being employed to a greater extent through effects such as distortions, mirroring, and repetition. This results in compositions that suggest boundless space that sits flatly on the picture plane, without the illusion of depth.

This screen-like quality of Gerald's new paintings nods to digital interfaces we interact with daily. However, I think this flattening also marks an introspective turn in his practice. In order to "enter" the painting, one needs instead to look inwards. 'The Universe Within' (2023) is an image of radiant splendour emanating from the tip of a stupa-like formation. Its shape resembles a candle flame or the Manaskar Mudra, the gesture of bringing both palms together. In my conversation with the artist, he shared that 'The Universe Within' was inspired by depictions of Thousand-Armed Guanyin, a Bodhisattva of compassion. Though it is largely abstract, one can make a direct connection between the painting's composition and iconography of the Thousand-Armed Guanyin. The halo-like rings mirror the Bodhisattva's many outstretched arms, while the base structure can be likened to the lotus platform Guanyin stands or sits on.

Returning to the title 'The Universe Within', one is also nudged towards the notion of an inner world or inner truth. To me, the paintings in 'In Search of the Beyond' are attempts at giving form to moments of spiritual connection. These works tap into his personal experiences with sacred objects and spaces. In turn, the paintings inevitably draw from broader Buddhist and Taoist concepts as well as religious practices, even if the artist does not overtly or consciously reference them.

A new work 'Starlit Spells' (2024) hones in on the ripple motif in 'The Universe Within'. It is a gesture of isolating one part of the painting and iterating on it, as if to extract one moment from a larger experience and clarifying it. However, 'Starlit Spells' is not a cropped reproduction. Minute but significant changes were made in the patterns within the ripples. Rather than having a fish-eye effect around the central point, the visual weight of the distortion is evenly distributed. The outcome is an even flatter effect where background and foreground is a unified whole.

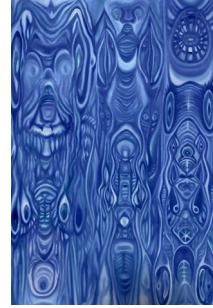
Monochrome and Repetition



Cocoon, 2024
Oil on Belgian Linen, 90 x 60 cm



The Vigil, 2023
Oil on Canvas, 215 x 150 cm



Woven Ancestry, 2024
Oil on Belgian Linen, 90 x 60 cm

This methodology of reworking past works is employed throughout the show. Another example is 'Cocoon' (2024), which is based off 'The Vigil' (2023). However, 'Cocoon' neutralised the sense of hierarchy and projection of power in the earlier work. The mask faces and piercing eyes are rendered into cell-like structures with ambiguous boundaries. These cells seem to multiply and spread across the painted image into a flat plane, eliminating any sense of depth.

A new formal strategy working in tandem with the flattened pictorial space is Gerald's monochromatic palette. By limiting the range of colours in each painting, the artist highlights other qualities such as line thickness, opacity, and tone. He plays with these three features to generate different rhythms across the canvas. This is most accentuated in 'Woven Ancestry' (2024) where variations in the cell patterns create a calm but dynamic pulsation. The viewer's concentration is sustained as figurative elements are pulled in and out of focus. Without a clear separation between forms, they coalesce into a vibrating wave.

There is a trance-like quality to these new works that I find most intriguing. The way these pulsating repetitions unfold reminds me of the rich visual tradition of visualisation practised by some

schools of Buddhism. It is a technique of activating the mind and immersing oneself in symbols or descriptions from the sutras. Mandalas and depictions of the Western Paradise are examples of such visualisations rendered in concrete form. In a conversation with the artist, he mentioned how he took inspiration from artefacts displayed in museums such as the Asian Civilisation Museum in Singapore and the Taipei Palace Museum. Forms are abstracted from sources including Shang dynasty bronzes, wooden ancestor figures from Sumatra, as well as Southeast Asian ornamental sculptures and textiles. These objects are connected by their use within religious contexts.

While Gerald's works do not follow a specific scripture or religious iconography, there is something to be said about how he synthesises these cultural ideas and forms into a private visual language. They are images that are held by the mind's eye. It is through understanding his interest in ancient beliefs that one is better able to understand his practice.

In thinking about Gerald's work within a wider art historical context, we can consider regional modern artists such as A.D. Pirous and Ahmad Sadali, who incorporated Islamic calligraphy and Javanese symbols like gunung into their abstract compositions. Thawan Duchanee and Busui Ajaw are also relevant references who draw on folk stories and local aesthetics. Gerald contributes to the layered tapestry of spiritually-inflected Southeast Asian art.

Conclusion

This essay has provided an overview of Gerald's works in the last five years, leading into what promises to be a new arc in his painting practice. Here, we come full circle to the theme of "beneath the surface" as a throughline in the artist's work. The Mask series looks behind the façade and into the psychological aspects of portraiture, while Altar works speak to power structures and players who remain in the dark. These are observations of the external worldly mechanisms that underpin interpersonal relationships.

With this exhibition, he turns inwards and reflects on spiritual moments that have touched him. The new body of work is born through metabolising past paintings, and evolving them to produce a markedly different visual sensation. Formal elements found in temples and sacred objects are abstracted into cells that grow into dense irregular patterns. The resulting compositions possess a psychedelic quality that evokes different mental states. They are not symbolic representations of any source imagery nor are they meant to illustrate a concept. The paintings are guided by a formal logic that Gerald settles into by intuition. I think he is looking for something that is not necessarily hidden on purpose, but fine-tuning his sensitivity towards a connection that is always there.

GERALD TAY

Figs of Memory, 2024, Oil on Belgian Linen, 90 x 120 cm



GERALD TAY

Severance, 2024, Oil on Belgian Linen, 90 x 120 cm



GERALD TAY

Fire Wall, 2024, Oil on Belgian Linen, 75 x 100 cm



GERALD TAY

Empress, 2024, Oil on Belgian Linen, 100 x 75 cm



GERALD TAY

Cocoon, 2024, Oil on Belgian Linen, 90 x 60 cm



GERALD TAY

White Flame, 2024, Oil on Belgian Linen, 90 x 60 cm



GERALD TAY

Woven Ancestry, 2024, Oil on Belgian Linen, 90 x 60 cm



GERALD TAY

The Elders Speak, 2024, Oil on Belgian Linen, 90 x 60 cm



GERALD TAY

The Council, 2024, Oil on Belgian Linen, 90 x 60 cm



GERALD TAY

Mind Gardening, 2024, Oil on Belgian Linen, 76 x 56 cm



GERALD TAY

Starlit Spells, 2024, Oil on Belgian Linen, 76 x 56 cm



ARTIST BIOGRAPHY & CV



Gerald Tay (b. 1992, Singapore) art practice comprises primarily of drawing and painting. He uses figurative subject matter as a point of departure to explore the motif of the mask and the act of being masked. While a mask serves as a facade that shields the identity of each individual, it can also expose segments of their true personalities - with expressions that change based on moods of the moment. For the artist himself, the mark-making, stacking and overlaying of figures are ways to reflect his mental states, thoughts and feelings.

Tay graduated in 2018, with a Bachelor of Fine Arts from LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore. In 2019, he won silver in the UOB Painting of the Year competition (established category) and has exhibited in leading Singapore-based galleries; Gajah Gallery and Chan + Hori Contemporary.

EDUCATION

2018 Bachelor of Fine Arts, LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2024 In Search of the Beyond, Haridas Contemporary, Singapore

2019 Eye, Chan + Hori Contemporary, Singapore

GROUP EXHIBITIONS & AWARDS

2023 Haridas Contemporary Inaugural Exhibition, Haridas Contemporary, Singapore

2020 WHERE THE SIDEWALK ENDS, Chan + Hori Contemporary, Singapore

2019 UOB Painting of the Year, Singapore (Established Category: Silver Award)

2018 The New Now II, Gajah Gallery, Singapore

2018 The LASALLE Show, LASALLE Institute of Contemporary Arts, Singapore

2018 A Dive, Splendid!, BA (Hons) Fine Arts Graduation Showcase, LASALLE Winstedt Campus, Singapore

2018 To leave home is already half the journey, LASALLE Institute of Contemporary Arts, Singapore

WRITER BIOGRAPHY



As an artist and writer, [Ian Tee](#) (b. 1994, Singapore) is interested in both art-making as well as how it is considered in historical and cultural contexts. He has written monographs on underappreciated modern artists such as Vincent Hoisington, Fadjat Sidik, and Nashar (forthcoming). In 2022, he curated 'We're Young Once' a group exhibition that contends with what it means to be a young artist at different points in Singapore history. Ian is also Associate Editor of Art & Market, an online platform focusing on Southeast Asian art and its communities.

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CONTEMPORARY

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Opening Hours

Thursday to Saturday: 12 noon – 7 pm

Sunday: 12 noon – 5 pm

Wednesday by appointment only

Monday, Tuesdays & Public Holidays: Closed

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