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An interview with Ben Loong, on the topic of medium and material in his solo presentation at I_S_L_A_N_D_S
"Aggregate" (24 February - 31 March, 2018)



Ben Loong works in the medium of painting and sculpture and explores networks that underlie human communication. Following a fascination with geography and the natural world, his current Terra Blanca series examines geographical and geological phenomena, and considers it in a contemporary context. Working primarily with drywall plaster, these works engage with the industrial, inviting the viewer to question the value of our physical world.

With "**Aggregate**" these material investigations are taken a step further. Base materials with an original and specific function are appropriated and reassembled according to new processes and decisions here. Objects are not defined by their inherent properties; rather, their conceivable value is shaped by the chance and contingencies of placement and consumption.

We've been following your Terra Blanca series for some time now and what's most interesting is how it touches upon contemporary aspects of art and labour. In using plaster, a base construction material as the foundation of your abstract compositions, your work speaks to ideologies of art production and cultural hierarchy, as well as the role of the artist within the creative economy. What's your take on this?

This series is about exploring these themes through a very deliberate working process, using the same materials, gestures, and tools as a construction worker would use to build a wall, but instead producing an art object. When I started experimenting with plaster as a medium, I saw it for the connection to the relationship with my father, him being the one who first exposed me to the material, showing me how to patch a chip in a wall at a young age.



Ben Loong, *Grout*, 2016, resinated drywall plaster on canvas, 40 x 30 cm.

Image courtesy of the artist.

Later on while working at a gallery, I observed how workers built new exhibition walls for displaying fine art, and applied their techniques and processes to my work. They knew which tools worked best for flat surfaces, acute corners, obtuse corners, and which methods were best for joining seams and concealing holes. The flow between blue collar and blue chip fascinated me, and I admired the workmanship. So, I wanted this construction and materiality to show in my work.



Short documentary by the artist, which follows a day in the life of a construction worker in Singapore.

“Aggregate” is a lot more experiential and physical than your past works. It activates the exhibition site as a museological display for the viewer to ponder the representation and construction of material culture. Could you tell us more about how you envisioned this project in order to create dialogue between object and audience, and what considerations came into play as you developed the idea and put together the pieces (literally or otherwise)?

My immediate response to the space and the area around it was to work towards a display of mock precious stones, sold by a fictional jewellery manufacturer, dealing more with advertising and visual merchandising. The stones were sculpted out of polyethylene foam, a packing material used to protect more valuable objects during shipping and transportation, and then finished with plaster and resin. The objects were more deliberate and symmetrical in form, and questioned material value from a consumerist angle.

After further discussion, it developed into this imagined rock specimen exhibit, very much like the display in a natural history museum, and the foam forms became more organic and varied.



Ben Loong, **Aggregate**, found rock and mineral fragments, resin, plaster, gold leaf, PE foam, dimensions variable. Detail from installation view at I_S_L_A_N_D_S, 24 February – 31 March 2018. Image courtesy of the artist and I_S_L_A_N_D_S.

Mixed in with these sculpted rocks, were "real" rock fragments collected from the estate around my studio in Bukit Merah. I was looking out for pieces that had broken off from pavements, kerbs, roads, humps - features of my urban landscape. I selected the ones with an interesting form or story, brought them back to my studio, washed them, and grouped them together loosely based on type, such as decorative and landscaping rocks, road divider and hump fragments, road fragments, etc.

Your early work was significantly influenced by the arte povera movement from the 1960s and 70s, which was characterised by a range of unconventional processes and non-traditional, 'everyday' materials. Apart from plaster, you also work with a range of other industrial matter such as plywood, resin, and gold leaf. Describe the material and metaphorical qualities that drew you to them.

I've always been drawn to materials and objects that carry a bluecollar or working class spirit, and when I discovered the work of artists like Jannis Kounellis and Giovanni Anselmo, I really appreciated how their compositions could elevate object and material.



Ben Loong, *Ant Mill*, 2012, burlap, flour.

Image courtesy of the artist.

Ben Loong, *Stick you*, 2012, oil on canvas.

Image courtesy of the artist.





Ben Loong, *Temple*, 2012, timber, glazed ceramic, stockings, meat hooks, hemp, bandage, shellac.

Image courtesy of the artist.

Resin is used industrially to weatherproof pipes and ships, and gilding as a profession can be traced back to the ancient Egyptians. There are practical benefits from using these materials, but I find these industrial qualities really resonate in the work.



Ben Loong, *Vug*, 2017, resinated drywall plaster and gold leaf on canvas 36 x 25 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

There's an improvisational, DIY sensibility in your process that most of us can identify with, and yet it's apparent that the texture and finish of the works are very considered. How has your experience working as a gallery technician affected the way you approach art-making?

The two activities complement each other a lot. While working on a piece, I often have to stop and continue after a few days of work at the gallery, so there's an exposure to many different artists in between sessions in the studio. I'm also using the same materials and tools both as a technician and as an artist, and I am constantly learning new ways of using them.

So far, you've explored geographical and geological phenomena in your work, as a way to explore the value of the individual vis a vis the world at large. What are you keen to look into next?

Geographical and geological phenomena serves as a visual and thematic reference for my works, and I'm especially drawn to empirical nature of geography. There's still a lot more to tap into, but moving forward I would like to explore human geography and the relationship humans have with their physical landscape. The impact geographical factors have on shaping cultures and beliefs, migration, ways civilisations respond to their geographical situation.

What do you like to rock out to while working in the studio?

I'm a big music fan, but I find I'm most productive when listening to sports podcasts and punditry. I really like to listen to the hosts argue about really trivial issues – it helps me to be more spontaneous and decisive with my work.

Thank you!

Ben Loong – <https://www.benloongstudio.com>