

Feb 8, 2021 — May 1, 2021

# We're closed on Sundays because it's God's Day

## Ben Loong

Ben Loong (b. 1988, Singapore) is an emerging Singaporean artist who investigates pathways of human communication and connection. Inspired by phenomena ranging from geologic features, to narrative and spiritual archetypes, to the earliest instances of visual expression, he abstracts these themes into the surfaces of his signature monochromatic drywall plaster pieces. Loong is represented by Mizuma Gallery, and in 2018 was named Highly Commended Established Artist in UOB's Painting of the Year competition. His recent solo exhibitions include *MONO*, S.E.A Focus, Gillman Barracks, Singapore (2020) and *Aggregate*, I\_S\_L\_A\_N\_D\_S, Singapore (2018).



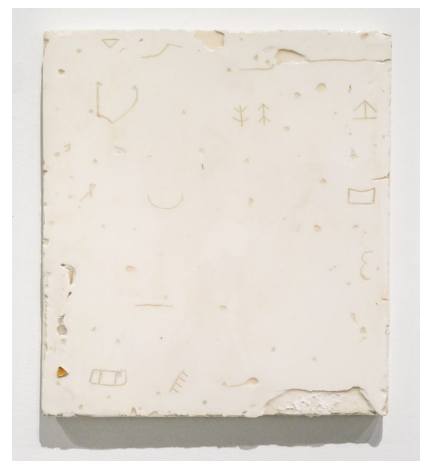
Ben Loong  
Glyph 5  
2020  
Resinated gypsum plaster and gold leaf on wood  
52 × 68 × 4.5 cm  
Mizuma Gallery

## In Conversation with Ben Loong

*Monolith* (2019) is an apt reflection of his practice. A smooth, undisturbed plane occupies nearly the entirety of the work's surface—an imposing presence framed by two rough edges, reminiscent of a rock relief. *Glyph 2* (2019) and *Glyph 5* (2020) feature more heterogeneous surfaces, with furrows, craters, and gold leaf-illuminated jags. True to their titles, these pieces are also inscribed with a multitude of glyphs that have origins in the Upper Paleolithic period.



Ben Loong  
Monolith  
2019  
Resinated gypsum plaster on wood  
127 × 111 × 5.8 cm  
Mizuma Gallery



Ben Loong  
Glyph 2  
2019  
Resinated gypsum plaster and  
gold leaf on wood  
57 × 51 × 3 cm  
Mizuma Gallery

Most commonly found carved into rocks and cave walls, these signs speak to an impulse for visual expression starting from the very beginnings of humanity's artistic tradition. Archeologically, the purpose and meaning of the symbols are unclear—theories range from emblematic clan signs, symbolic information about an area, or an early form of sign language. Nevertheless, they are indicative of a liminality in our earliest history, where art, language, symbol, and tradition—things that make us human—began to establish themselves. Most remarkably, these symbols have been found in caves and on rocks on every continent inhabited by humans.

For Loong, they serve as inspiration for his own work, and a validation of symbolic thinking and art as intrinsic aspects of human nature. Further, drywall plaster's contemporary connotations of labor, industry, and craftsmanship form a compelling incongruity in combination with symbols in use millenia before the development of written language. Loong's careful scoring of these glyphs into the material that the artist is familiar with reenacts simultaneously both primeval and modernized acts of production that would otherwise be isolated by time, and brings ossified, archeological works of art back to life.



Ben Loong  
Fragment  
2020  
Resinated gypsum plaster and gold leaf on wood  
44 × 44 × 2.5 cm  
Mizuma Gallery



Ben Loong  
Appendix 3  
2019  
Resinated gypsum plaster and gold leaf on wood  
107 × 76 cm  
Mizuma Gallery



Ben Loong  
Appendix 6  
2019  
Resinated gypsum plaster and gold leaf on wood  
68 × 70 cm  
Mizuma Gallery

Ben Loong  
Monomyth  
2019  
Resinated gypsum plaster on wood  
101 × 101 × 5 cm  
Mizuma Gallery



Exploration of fundamental ways of being, creating, and expressing is a unifying theme across his practice. Loong's *MONO* series—which includes *Monolith* (2019)—engages with the patterns common in myths and stories across cultures and through time, such as that of 'The Hero's Journey' or flood myths. The enduring power of these archetypes and their universal presence is their ability to show us that, in Loong's words, "either everything is made up, or that nothing is made up". With industrial plaster, he unearths threads of connection through time and space embodied in mythical paradigms and Stone Age symbols, and invites us to be open to discovering common ground in unexpected places.

*Appetite: While I was researching your work and practice, I learned a lot about the glyphs that feature in some of your pieces. I was fascinated by how they crop up in ancient rock art all over the world. How did you come across this archeological phenomenon, and what about them resonated with you so much that they've been incorporated into your art?*

Ben: I questioned why I was doing what I was doing, and why artists before me did what they did. This led me to research one of the first works of human art – cave wall paintings. It was proof of a need to express symbolic thought visually, and even more remarkable is how these same marks and symbols were made independently all over the world. I find this very uniquely human ability to represent concepts with abstract signs inspiring.

*A: What is the process involved in rendering these symbols into the plaster?*

B: Plaster is a very easy and forgiving material. When wet, interesting textures can be made using trowels and scrapers, and when dry, can be sanded down or dug into. To best accentuate these symbols, I sanded the base plaster layer smooth before scoring in the drawings with wood carving tools. A final coat of resin is applied to fix the composition.

*A: Additionally, a few of the titles of your pieces are references to mythological/literary archetypes and biblical allusions, and I'd love to learn a little bit about why these themes are significant to you!*

B: A lot of the stories I was first exposed to were from the bible, and being brought up in a religious household, my values growing up were very attached to religious teachings and maxims. A lot of my first exposure to visual art was also in churches I would go to every Sunday. The biblical references in my work are a reflection of how stories of religious characters can shape you and how you see the world.

*A: Your work touches on themes of human condition on scales that range from the anatomical, to the mystical/mythical, and to the inorganic environment we inhabit. What qualities of industrial drywall plaster renders it so versatile for engaging with these concepts?*

B: Plaster as a medium does not have the same weight of tradition and history as say, oil or ceramic, and yet has continued to play an important role in art history – from Renaissance frescoes to the walls of contemporary art galleries. This contradictory detachment and dependency makes plaster a very fluid medium in exploring artistic themes and concepts.

*A: Mythology (especially the Greek and Roman-derived canon of Western mythology) has a hefty legacy in visual culture, from Botticelli's Birth of Venus to Rothko's concept of art 'taking over' the role that myths and ritual used to play in channelling 'unconscious energies'. What's your take on the ways myths might still serve us in a (seemingly) demystified world?*

B: Acknowledging the commonalities in myths and ritual across cultures and time periods shows us that either everything is made up, or that nothing is made up. I find that hanging on to mysticism allows us to have more avenues for connection, something that is wearing thin these days.

*A: Is there anything in particular you're interested in exploring next that you haven't yet tapped into?*

B: I'm currently developing a series of bone china ceramic works. In the 16th century, Chinese porcelain became a cult item amongst the very wealthy in England. However, the journey the porcelain wares had to take meant that a lot of it would be damaged en route. So the English invented a form of ceramic that mimicked the appearance and characteristics of porcelain, made from a mix of animal bone ash and stone, and called it bone china. A form of porcelain could now be produced locally to feed the demand and being more affordable, flooded the homes of the masses. Today, the largest producer and cheapest supplier of bone china is China.

The new series will explore themes of industry and production, and made using the technique of slip-casting liquid bone china in plaster molds, borrowed from the factories that mass produce ceramic tableware.