

SQUARING THE CIRCLE
SOLO EXHIBITION BY BEN LOONG
CURATED BY SYED MUHD HAFIZ
13.03—18.04.2021

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**SQUARING THE CIRCLE:
LIFE, HISTORY AND ART-MAKING**



In recent times, ‘craftsmanship’ seems to be making a comeback especially in the contemporary arts scene. There was a period however, when the term was almost seen as derogatory by any aspiring contemporary artist. Usually associated with tradition (read: conservative), craftsmen were often seen as outsiders or too folk-ish – someone solely obsessed with technique (read: not into continental theory). To summarize a longstanding debate, at the heart of this unfortunate hierarchy of ‘art’ and ‘craft’ is a cultural ladder propped up by institutions of art, historians, critics, and other power players that hold sway in mainstream contemporary arts discourse.

Perhaps it is our ever-increasing reliance on technology or the unrepentant testosterone-charged art market, but there seems to be a yearning for a ‘return to the hand’, to something more tactile. As we seek solace in exhibitions and galleries, nothing seems more comforting than encountering a piece of pottery done by an artist who spent hours, even days, at the wheel. Textile artworks – sometimes known as ‘fibre art’ – where the type of weaving or even the identity of the weavers (read: indigenous communities) becomes the central topic of discussion, have been spotted in more than a few international biennales and art fairs.

Despite this recent revival, we must know that this is not an unprecedented phenomenon. History has often demonstrated its cyclical nature, not to mention trends in the art world. The Industrial Revolution of the 19th century spawned the ‘Arts & Craft Movement’ in Britain. The *Mingei* (folk crafts) Movement^[1] started in a rapidly-industrialising Japan in the early 20th century. Call it what you may but these historical ‘returns’ seem to imply a certain disenchantment with technology, or even perhaps at its pace, heralding an unknown future for artists and craftsmen back then.

Hence, I encountered Ben Loong’s practice with these preconceived notions of his position within the above-mentioned art world context. A young contemporary artist maintaining a ceramic studio in Singapore, I thought I had him figured out. Suffice to say, I could not be further away from the truth.

In an earlier solo exhibition with Mizuma Gallery at the 2020 edition of S.E.A. Focus, Ben’s monochromatic ‘paintings’ rendered

in plaster, hung austere amidst the frenzied environment of the art fair in Gillman Barracks. I mentioned ‘paintings’ not only because of the painter’s impulse that I felt was apparent in the presentation titled *MONO*; the format of the paintings hung on the wall and the composition of the works seemed deliberate, almost done to satisfy the conventions of a painting. They were interesting and intriguing paintings, but I thought they looked too comfortable and perhaps rightly so, if one were to view them in the context of an art fair.

Since then, Ben has developed his practice in more ways than one. While the art world paused its activities during the Circuit Breaker period last year, he gradually established a ceramic studio. As he was not formally trained as a ceramic artist, this would have represented a risky move for any young artist, bearing in mind the costs and logistics involved. Ben mentioned having been exposed to the works of senior ceramic artists in art school and getting their advice in his interactions with them but nothing of the master-disciple relationship, as most conventional young potters would have developed. When probed further about some of his inspirations for turning to the wheel, he mentioned the popular BBC reality TV show ‘The Great Pottery Throw Down’, where 12 amateur potters compete to be the winner throughout a season.

If the *MONO* works revealed a personal narrative to the usage of plaster for his art, *Squaring the Circle* expands his interest in the history of global trade, specifically the age-old medium of ceramics. *Chinoiserie*, a term coined by the West to describe the fascination of China or Chinese material culture, reached its peak in the 18th century and chief amongst this fascination was porcelain ware. Glazed and fired in Jingdezhen, a town near the Yangzi river in China, the porcelain produced here were renowned for their exquisite craftsmanship, often being used as imperial gifts in China and were coveted by the rich and connected in European societies. Due to the insatiable appetites of the *bourgeois* class and the arduous journey (for the porcelain ware) of the China-Europe trade route, it was only a matter of time before the Europeans manage to produce a locally-produced alternative to the Jingdezhen porcelain wares.^[2] Thus ‘bone china’ was born – a concoction of various materials including bone ash (usually cattle bone).

[1] Yuko Kikuchi, *Japanese Modernisation and Mingei Theory: Cultural Nationalism and Orientalism*, (London: Routledge, 2004).

[2] “Made of China; Porcelain”, *The Economist*, vol.429, no.9123, Dec 2018, pg.23



For *Squaring the Circle*, Ben utilizes bone china imported from China to produce flat 'compositions' using the slip casting method. Thus, in a singular gesture, he riffs on the irony of using a mass-production technique on a material usually associated with craftsmanship, not to mention China currently being the largest producer of bone china. However, the craftsman in Ben is still present in the way he approaches the flat surfaces.

For any potter, slab work represents one of the harder skills to acquire. With many variable factors including the firing temperature and the correct amount of clay, water and other chemical ingredients, the results of any firing process are never a forgone conclusion. Warping and cracks are common occurrences. Hence, this is where the craftsmanship of the artist comes into play – the resilience to overcome the many failures during any firing process. The cracks or ruptures that sometimes appear during the firing process have been treated and manipulated on the flat compositions. Viewed against the history of bone china, the cracks are

akin to cartographic lines, a poetic gesture to the pursuit of porcelain, still seen as a luxury good till today.

Anecdotes and history aside, the more conversations I had with Ben in preparation for his current solo exhibition, the more I realise his practice does not quite fit in the current contemporary art world. He does not seem to be one of the insiders and definitely cannot be seen as an outsider by virtue of this exhibition taking place in a contemporary art gallery. As for *Squaring the Circle* which alludes to the coming together of a few things that are not usually imagined together, Ben's latest series of works encapsulate this work ethos while at the same time, locates his curious position in Singapore contemporary art - the perfect position to be in for any artist, if you ask me.

Syed Muhammad Hafiz, 2021

SYED MUHD HAFIZ is currently an independent curator and a PhD candidate in the Faculty of Arts and Social Science at National University Singapore. He started out as a researcher for Singapore Art Museum in 2009 before joining National Gallery Singapore in 2012 as an assistant curator, where he co-curated the exhibitions *Iskandar Jalil: Kembara Tanah Liat* (2016) and *Between Worlds: Raden Saleh and Juan Luna* (2017). As an independent curator, Hafiz has curated exhibitions in various galleries in Singapore and Malaysia and written for private collections and art publications in Southeast Asia.

BEN LOONG

Born in Singapore, 1988.
Lives and works in Singapore.



EDUCATION

2014

BA (Honours) in Fine Arts, Chelsea College of Arts, University of the Arts London, United Kingdom

2012

Diploma in Fine Arts, LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2021

Squaring the Circle, Mizuma Gallery, Singapore

2020

MONO, S.E.A. Focus, Gillman Barracks, Singapore

2018

Aggregate, I_S_L_A_N_D_S, Singapore

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2021

We're Closed on Sundays because it's God's Day, Appetite, Singapore

UNTAPPED 2021, Visual Arts Development Association Singapore, Singapore

2019

Homecoming: Chen Wen Hsi Exhibition @ Kingsmead, Artcommune Gallery, Singapore

2018

FrictionaL, Pearl Lam Galleries, Singapore
Lingering Manifestations, Pearl Lam Galleries, Singapore
River Stories, Institute of Contemporary Art, Singapore

2017

Blank and White, AC43 Gallery, Singapore
Empirical Atlas, Pearl Lam Galleries, Singapore
Untapped Emerging, Visual Arts Development Association, Singapore
Materialised Condition, Pearl Lam Galleries, Singapore

2015

Kult Gallery Art Bazaar, Kult Gallery, Singapore
The Little Shop of Horrors, Kult Gallery, Singapore

2014

Ends, Harts Lane Studios, London, United Kingdom

2013

Translations, Triangle Space, Chelsea College of the Arts, London, United Kingdom
Joyless Unity, Mori + Stein, London, United Kingdom
Fabric[ate], Central Space, Faroe Road Studios, London, United Kingdom

2012

Din Hubbub, Institute of Contemporary Art, Singapore
Drawing Relations, Institute of Contemporary Art, Singapore

2010

Strobe Like a Butterfly, The Substation, Singapore
Raw, Institute of Contemporary Art, Singapore

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

University of the Arts London, United Kingdom



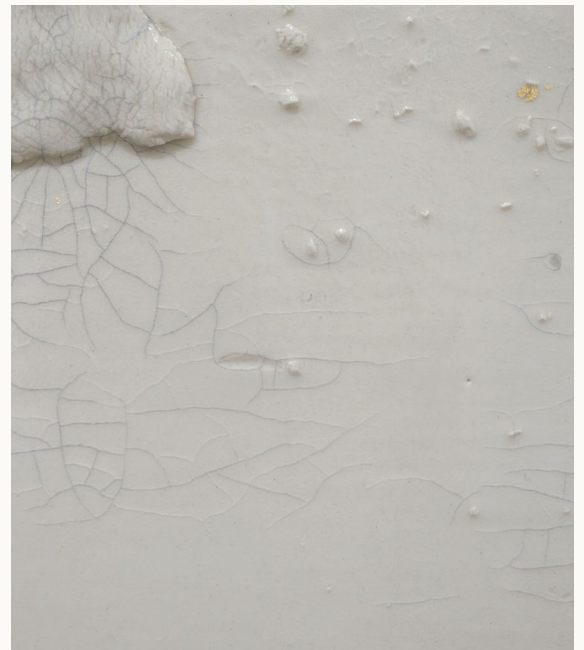
Tablet 1
2021
glazed stoneware, gold leaf, Chinese ink
20.3 × 26.7 × 3.2 cm



Tablet 2
2021
glazed stoneware, gold leaf, Chinese ink
20.8 × 26.8 × 3 cm



Tablet 3
2021
glazed stoneware, gold leaf, Chinese ink
20.4 × 26.6 × 3.2 cm



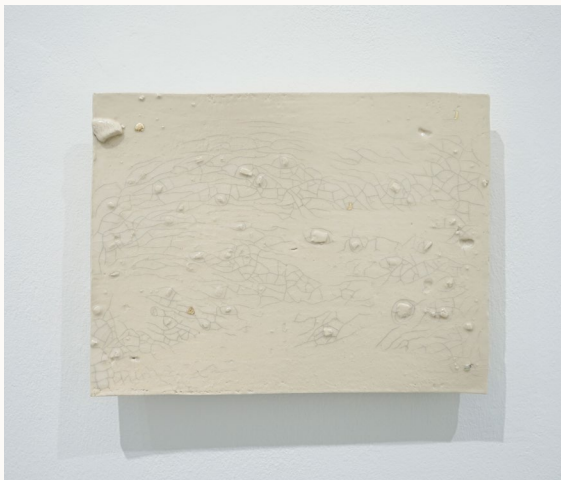
Tablet 4
2021
glazed stoneware, gold leaf, Chinese ink
20 × 26.5 × 2.5 cm



Tablet 5
2021
glazed stoneware, gold leaf, Chinese ink
20.4 × 26.5 × 3.4 cm



Tablet 6
2021
glazed stoneware, gold leaf, Chinese ink
20.2 × 26.6 × 3.2 cm



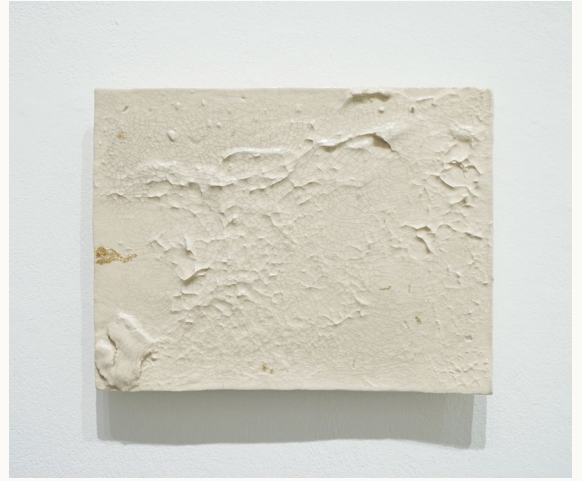
Tablet 7
2021
glazed stoneware, gold leaf, Chinese ink
20.2 × 26.8 × 3.9 cm



Tablet 8
2021
glazed stoneware, gold leaf, Chinese ink
20.2 × 26.5 × 2.7 cm



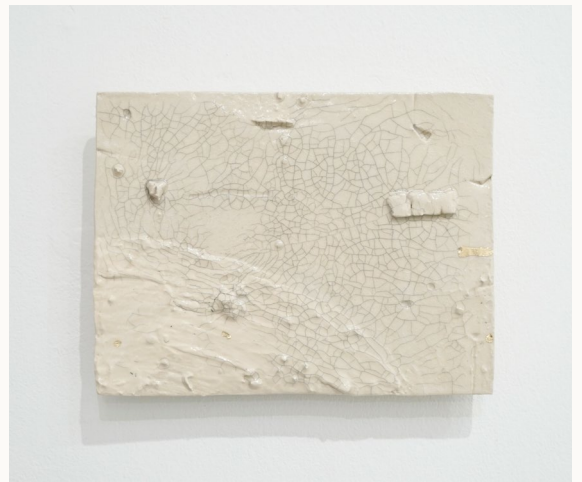
Tablet 9
2021
glazed stoneware, gold leaf, Chinese ink
20.4 × 26.5 × 4 cm



Tablet 10
2021
glazed stoneware, gold leaf, Chinese ink
20.2 × 26.3 × 3.1 cm



Tablet 11
2021
glazed stoneware, gold leaf, Chinese ink
20.5 × 26.5 × 3.3 cm



Tablet 12
2021
glazed stoneware, gold leaf, Chinese ink
20.4 × 26.9 × 3 cm



Tablet 13
2021
glazed stoneware, gold leaf, Chinese ink
20.6 × 27.5 × 3.6 cm





Tablet 14
2021
glazed stoneware, gold leaf, Chinese ink
20.5 × 27.4 × 3.7 cm



Tablet 15
2021
glazed stoneware, gold leaf, Chinese ink
20.3 × 26.7 × 3.3 cm



Tablet 16
2021
glazed stoneware, gold leaf, Chinese ink
21 × 27.4 × 4 cm



Tablet 17
2021
glazed stoneware, gold leaf, Chinese ink
20.3 × 26.5 × 2.6 cm



Tablet 18
2021
glazed stoneware, gold leaf, Chinese ink
20.3 × 26.5 × 2.7 cm



Mother
2021
glazed bone china, gold leaf
26 × 25.5 × 3.5 cm

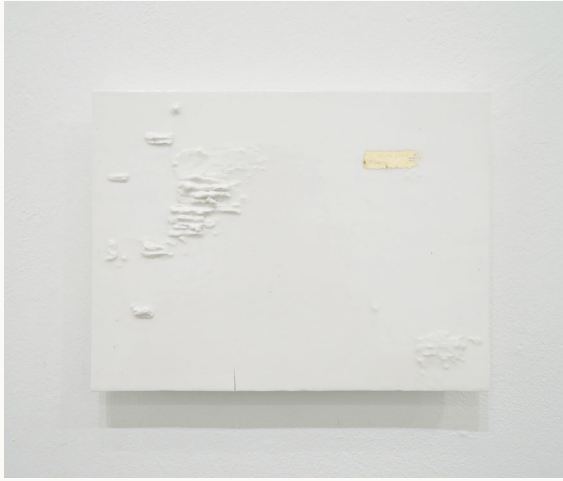


Plate 1
2021
glazed bone china, gold leaf
20.2 × 26.8 × 3 cm



Plate 2
2021
glazed bone china, gold leaf
20.5 × 27 × 3 cm



Plate 3
2021
glazed bone china, gold leaf
20.7 × 27.5 × 3.2 cm



Plate 4
2021
glazed bone china, gold leaf
21.1 × 27.9 × 3.7 cm



Plate 5
2021
glazed bone china, gold leaf
20.4 × 27.1 × 3.1 cm



Plate 6
2021
glazed bone china, gold leaf
20.7 × 27.5 × 3 cm



Plate 7
2021
glazed bone china, gold leaf
20.4 × 26.8 × 2.8 cm



Plate 8
2021
glazed bone china, gold leaf
20.5 × 27.2 × 3 cm



Plate 9
2021
glazed bone china, gold leaf
20.6 × 27.3 × 3 cm

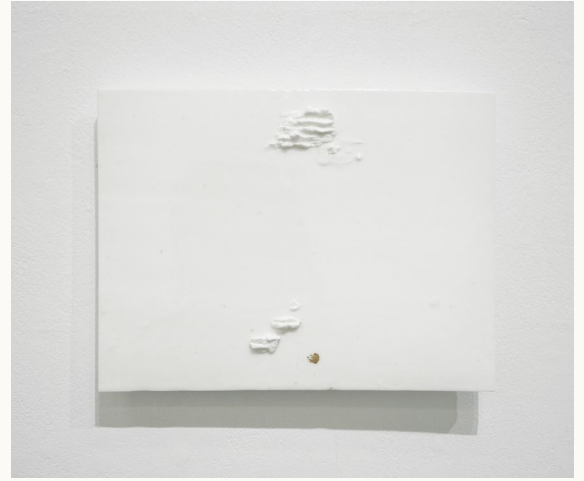


Plate 10
2021
glazed bone china, gold leaf
20.2 × 26.6 × 2.7 cm

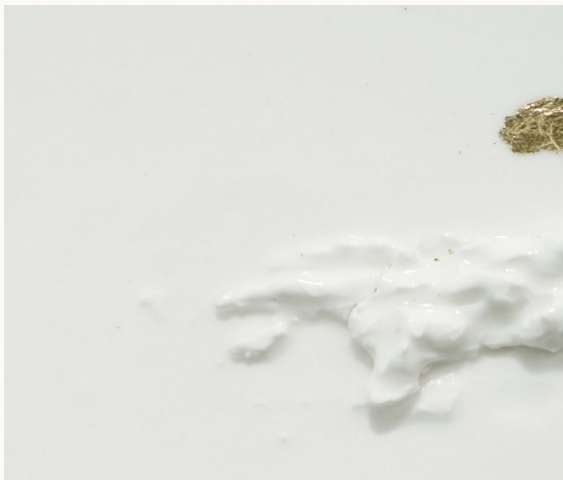


Plate 11
2021
glazed bone china, gold leaf
21.1 × 28.1 × 3.8 cm



Plate 12
2021
glazed bone china, gold leaf
21.4 × 28.3 × 3.2 cm

Executive Director Sueo Mizuma established Mizuma Art Gallery in Tokyo in 1994. Since its opening in Gillman Barracks, Singapore in 2012, the gallery aims for the promotion of East Asian artists in the region as well as the introduction of Southeast Asian artists to the international art scene. From 2014 to 2019, the artist residency space “Rumah Kijang Mizuma” operated in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, providing a new platform for dialogue by supporting exchanges between East Asia and Southeast Asia. In 2018, a new gallery space, “Mizuma & Kips” in New York, USA, as a shared collaboration between Mizuma Gallery from Tokyo and Singapore, and Kips Gallery from New York.

Mizuma Gallery features the works of Japanese artists including Aida Makoto, Aiko Miyanaga, Amano Yoshitaka, Ikeda Manabu, Tenmyouya Hisashi, and Yamaguchi Akira. Moreover, it showcases the works of renown East Asian artists such as Ai Weiwei, Du Kun, Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba, Ken + Julia Yonetani, and Zhao Zhao. The gallery also features the creations of prominent and emerging artists from the region including Agan Harahap, Albert Yonathan Setyawan, Angki Purbandono, Entang Wiharso, Gilang Fradika, Heri Dono, indieguerillas, Made Wianta, Mark Justiniani, Nasirun, Budi Agung Kuswara, Robert Zhao Renhui, Zen Teh, Ashley Yeo, and Ben Loong. Mizuma Gallery participates annually in international art fairs including Art Basel Hong Kong and The Armory Show New York, promoting Asian artists on an international art scale.

Set in a former military barracks dating back to 1936 and surrounded by lush tropical greenery, the Gillman Barracks visual arts cluster was launched in September 2012. Gillman Barracks’ vision is to be Asia’s destination for the presentation and discussion of international and Southeast Asian art. Today, Gillman Barracks is a place for art lovers, art collectors, and those curious about art. The cluster is a focal point of Singapore’s arts landscape, and anchors the development of visual art in the region and beyond. For more information: www.gillmanbarracks.com

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