

Insight | Exhibition

Spirituality as Abstraction in Singapore

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If *We're closed on Sundays because it's God's Day* (8 February–1 May 2021) asks one question, it is this: what does contemporary abstraction in Asia look like today?



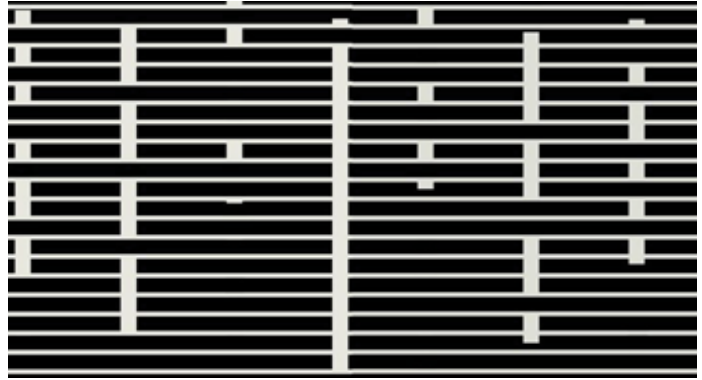
FX Harsono, *Writing in the Rain* (2011). Single-channel video. 6 min 2 sec. Edition of 5. Courtesy Appetite.

The group show is staged in a quintessential shophouse situated along Amoy Street in Singapore, which houses the multi-concept space Appetite.

Works by Gonkar Gyatso, FX Harsono, Luke Heng, and Ben Loong demonstrate poetic and materially diverse modes of artmaking that are engaged with, but not limited to, the capture of bodily movements, wordplay, all-out fantasy, primitive desire, and data visualisation.

The show's title makes for a curious entry point—a suggestion that spirituality is perhaps the most universal of all abstractions.

Belgian painter Michel Seuphor called a painting abstract when 'it is impossible to recognize in it the slightest trace of that objective reality which makes up the normal background of our everyday existence'.¹ On the other hand, Seuphor emphasised that all art can be viewed in terms of its abstract qualities, whether it is figurative or non-figurative, representative or non-representative, objective or subjective.



Luke Heng, *The Family*, from the series 'Periodic Seedlings' (2018). Inkjet on aluminium composite. 31 x 34 x 2.9 cm. Courtesy Appetite.

Luke Heng, 'Non-Place' (2019). Oil on linen. 150 x 115 cm. Courtesy Appetite.

In this exhibition, modes of abstraction connect with sensibilities that span temporalities and registers. The show opens with paintings by Singaporean artists Luke Heng and Ben Loong, whose abstract formulations invoke the Palaeolithic period as much as they do a deep and intuitive relationship with nature, as mediated by Loong in our present epoch.



Ben Loong, *Glyph 2* (2019). Resinated gypsum plaster and gold leaf on wood. 57 x 51 x 3 cm. Courtesy Appetite.



Ben Loong, *Fragment* (2020). Resinated gypsum plaster and gold leaf on wood. 44 x 44 x 2.5 cm. Courtesy Appetite.

With titles such as *Monomyth* (2019), *Glyph 2* (2019), *Glyph 5* (2020), and *Monolith* (2019), Loong's white gypsum plaster and resin works offer dramatic surfaces, replete with hollows and expanses imprinted with enigmatic signs and impulsively scribbled forms as well as fossil footprints or animal designs.

Whilst Loong's evocative renditions draw temporalities together in solid form, Indonesian artist FX Harsono's *Writing in the Rain* (2011) encompasses a more immediate experience that likewise connects history with the present.

' *We're closed on Sundays because it's God's Day* offers a vigorous alternative to Western forms of abstraction. '



FX Harsono, *Writing in the Rain* (2011). Single-channel video. 6 min 2 sec. Edition of 5. Courtesy Appetite.

In the six-minute, single-channel video, the artist writes his name in Chinese characters with an ink brush as water washes the ink away. Repeated strokes and lines form multiple Chinese characters before their marks are gradually reduced to abbreviated, minimalist forms, finally becoming abstracted to nothing.

Beyond Loong's and Harsono's emphasis on intuition and spontaneity, the rational and scientific is foregrounded in the

'Periodic Seedlings' series (2018) by Luke Heng, who uses programming techniques to make artworks based on a random assortment of I-Ching hexagrams.

On one wall are five framed aluminium works: *Open*, a striking red diptych that resembles patterned window blinds; *Without Embroiding*, a monochromatic, Frank Stella-esque striped structure; *Swallowing*, a pastel green diptych that resembles programming code and 'live' processes; *Articulating/Open*, a black and grey structure reminiscent of Suprematism, and a ventilation-unit-like work, *Sprouting*.



Luke Heng, *Open*, from the series 'Periodic Seedlings' (2018). Inkjet on aluminium composite. 31 x 34 x 2.9 cm. Courtesy Appetite.



Luke Heng, 'Non-Place' (2019). Oil on linen. 150 x 115 cm. Courtesy Appetite.

The look of 'non-art', at once anti-subjective and anti-expressive, contrasts sharply with the poetic imagery of Heng's 'Non-Place' series (2019), situated at the start of the show and in a separate room. Each painting was created by pouring turpentine over canvases thickly coated in layers of paint, creating swirling, swaying marks reminiscent of flames in the black of night.

Despite their differences, though, the two series share a keen engagement with the abstract language of forms and gestures, which in turn connects to the notions of spirituality explored in *We're closed on Sundays because it's God's Day*.

The show's signature piece is Tibetan artist Gonkar Gyatso's *Shangri La* (2014). The mixed media collage on aluminium-backed honeycomb panel presents a spectacular composition of abstract, geometrical, amorphous, and figurative shapes, starting with four tiered circular and square mandalas arranged concentrically in the centre of the frame, with numerous fires burning within.

Framing this enflamed core is a wide range of visual cues that draw on the sentimental, documentary, political, sexual, and religious. This is a work full of dramatic irony, with ancestral figures, mountains, animals, helicopters, guns, missiles, and dancing girls becoming disquieting presences, placed at once in common and in opposition with one another.



Gonkar Gyatso, *Shangri La* (2014). Mixed media collage on aluminium-backed honeycomb panel. 76 x 76 cm. Courtesy Appetite.

As a whole, *We're closed on Sundays because it's God's Day* offers a vigorous alternative to Western forms of abstraction, drawing on Eastern philosophy and human emotions to explore artistic gestures in which subjective experience is shared as a common experience of unique difference. Here, abstraction becomes a means of engaging with another's interests and experiences, thoughts and feelings. —[O]

¹ Michel Seuphor, *A Dictionary of Abstract Painting*, (Methuen and Co Ltd: London, 1960), p.3.