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JANE LEE, *Solid Turn Liquid*, 2015, mixed media on fiberglass canvas and poured enamel, dimensions variable. Copyright the artist. Courtesy Sundaram Tagore Gallery, Singapore.

DEAR PAINTER

WEB REVIEW BY MICHELLE HO
SUNDARAM TAGORE GALLERY

SINGAPORE

The exhibition “Dear Painter,” at Sundaram Tagore Gallery in Singapore, took the occasion of the nation’s 50th anniversary to survey local art practices through the medium of painting. The exhibition title, drawn from German artist Martin Kippenberger’s the 1981 painting series “Lieber Maler, male mir” (“Dear Painter, paint for me”), can thus be read as curator June Yap’s question toward artists of multidisciplinary practices on the possibilities and challenges of expressing in this medium.

A considered survey that takes an earnest look at Singaporean art through formal, conceptual and material developments of contemporary painting aesthetics, “Dear Painter” is less concerned about charting new dimensions in the painting tradition. Rather, the curatorial rationale seeks to examine how notions of “paint” and “painting” can expand and translate into more conceptual strategies of art making, through the engagement with new technologies and material. While such associations, when made to support the endurance of painting, can occasionally be tenuous, “Dear Painter” manages to veer away from such an assertion.

Investigating the constituents of painting through form, frame and color are artists Jane Lee, Francis Ng and Warren Khong. Lee’s sculptural paintings *Solid Turn Liquid* (2015), is a continuity of her inquiry into the latent properties and potentials of paint as both material and object. Khong’s new series of four minimalist wall installations emanate subtle pastel hues that appear to be composed by light, but are in fact executed through concealed primary colors of paint. In his works, shadow becomes form, and paint transforms into light. Both Lee and Khong’s works are striking for rendering ambiguous the ontological status of their artworks, for medium has been mediated by material, and vice versa. Ng introduces the perception of painting as frame in *After Fontana* (2015), which is also reference to Lucio Fontana’s (1899–1968) iconoclasm as an act of creation, when the Argentinian-Italian artist slashed his canvases to illuminate painting’s three dimensionality.

Complicating the relationship between meaning and representation are the works of Chun Kaifeng, Kai Lam and Shubigi Rao. Chun’s series “In other words, put it differently, that is to say” (2015) objects operate on the assumptions of vernacular interpretations, but in fact, serves to signify an antithesis of meaning and function. Perforated orange-colored plates hint of the semblance of construction safety fences, but serve to frame his other artworks of reconfigured signs. Lam, an instrumental artist in driving Singapore’s performance art scene from the mid 1990s, presents a series of paintings that references performance art history, a practice more frequently recalled through photo and video documentation than painting. Here, this history is conveyed through Lam’s memory of past events. Rao’s series of five paper works that evoke biblical fables such as Jonah and the Whale, as well as figures like Descartes and Kafka are delicate, deceptive, and ultimately delightful. The artist deploys interventions on both real and fictional narratives as a basis for her work by playing with text and image, and the series concurrently serve as a conversation with each other.

The works of artists Chun Kai Qun, Martin Constable and Jeremy Sharma provide new entry points to reconsidering the composition of image and landscape, as well as the sources of representation. At first glance, Chun’s two-channel video *The Wait Without Waiting* (2015) appears as typical nocturnal scenes by the petrol station with the occasional hum of passing traffic. It is upon closer view that one notices the oncoming vehicles, solely of taxis—unfailingly available on one screen, and always unavailable on the other that—the artist’s playful wit emerges, in the composition of these both impossible scenes and scenarios.



WARREN KHONG, #089, 2015, acrylic, wall paint, wood, plaster, 184 x 80 x 10 cm. Courtesy Sundaram Tagore Gallery, Singapore.

A Matter of Life and Death (2015) is Martin Constable's recreation from the scene of a 1946 British film of the same title, where the artist took elements of the film in a 25-second pan sequence and presented it within a singular and uninterrupted frame. Objects from the original film clip, both in the foreground and background were extracted and subsequently layered to create a 2½D effect, a process that enhances the experience of the live-action scene. As Constable, who is trained in both classical and digital painting notes, with the advent of digital manipulation, films have conversely, taken on a more "painted" aesthetic, given the visual effects technology that allows computer-generated images to appear more authentic.

Prodding viewers to question the association between source and representation, and how this connection may be a way of deriving a sense of authenticity is Jeremy Sharma's *Melatone 4S_16S_-139_-120 (far side)* (2015). Since 2007, the artist's abstract landscape paintings have stemmed from his investigation of surface and terrain. His new work is made of polystyrene foam that has been cut with imprints of the moon's surface, based on data-mapped images of the moon that the artist has retrieved from moon observatory specialists. Sharma's turn to statistics as sources for image-making can be read in the wake of artists of research-driven practices seeking to align scientific material with representation, as a way of yielding more "honest" images, however alien they might eventually be.



CHUN KAI QUN, *The Wait Without Waiting*, 2015, two-channel HD video: 90 sec. Courtesy Sundaram Tagore Gallery, Singapore.

Taken in all, what is distinct about "Dear Painter," but perhaps not surprising, is that there are not many paintings in this exhibition of nine artists, either born in or are based Singapore. The city-state has an established history of 20th century painting, from the beginnings of the 1950s Nanyang-style aesthetic of combining Western stylistics with local subject matter, to the later development of 1970s and 1980s abstract and expressionist techniques of Singapore's Second Generation artists. However, since then, developments in this medium have yet to give rise to an ascribed and definitive chapter of new painting that is significant or largely recognized.

The oft-quoted proclamation of the death of painting, in light of the photographic image's invention, is not the first to pronounce the exhaustion of the medium. In 1939, British art historian Kenneth Clark purported that the art of painting will become an impossible one. As Clark expounded, "If a 'new style' is to emerge, it 'can only arise from a new interest in subject matter', as opposed to 'art for art's sake': 'We need a new myth in which the symbols are inherently pictorial', and which 'must contain the possibility of pictorial symbolism'."

To its benefit, "Dear Painter" does not seek to establish "a new myth" of Singapore painting, nor does it herald the finality of its passing, and quite rightly so—the young nation of 50 years is still in the nascent stages of defining its art history.

"Dear Painter" is on view at Sundaram Tagore Gallery, Singapore, until October 25, 2015.