

the Artling

A curated selection from Asia's
best artists and designers.

The Artling, 6 Décembre 2017

Between Life and Death: Luke Heng's 'After Asphodel' at Pearl Lam Galleries, par Yunyi Lau

At age 30, with the world still very much an oyster, you would think that death is something very much far from the mind of Singaporean artist Luke Heng. However, in his latest exhibition at Pearl Lam Galleries, Singapore, this young artist tackles the subject-matter head on through the medium of art with his solo showing of paintings, wax works, and - for the first time - a site-specific installation. We take a moment to speak to the artist about his inspiration behind the show and his fascination with eschatology.

The Asphodel is a plant that is associated with death, and the Asphodel Meadows is known as a section of the Ancient Greek Underworld wherein souls spent their afterlife. Could you start by telling us why you chose Asphodel as your theme for your solo exhibition 'After Asphodel'?

The asphodel plant was chosen precisely because of the connotation it bears, which aptly sets the theoretical framework for the show. The show was a response to my fascination with eschatology, Christian eschatology to be more specific due to my personal beliefs. Prior to this, my works have always been responding towards painting as a subject. Hence, even though thoughts of religion and death heavily influenced the making of the show, I felt that maybe I shouldn't introduce 'After Asphodel' with such a strong inclination. After much deliberation, I thought the show could be a response towards this idea of liminality, both mentally and physically. It was a move to divert the reading of the show away from the immediate state between life and death.

In your exhibition you will venture into installation and three-dimensional wax works, which is quite different from your paintings and wall-based sculpture? Why did you choose to explore these formats this time around?

During the initial meeting with curator-gallerist Josef Ng, it was clear for the both of us that the final output is not going to be a "another painting show". I suppose new possibilities and ideas arise when I was handed the exhibiting space of their Gillman Barracks gallery. The space is huge, compared to what I've dealt with previously; it was a tremendous undertaking but I was thrilled. I did have plans to expand my research on the use of wax, and it was apparent to me that it will be distinct from how I previously treated and presented the medium. The underlying notions of liminality, it added more layers to how I could respond to the materiality of wax, its temporality and fragility, in contrast with the hardness of steel; and yet both are not immune to the natural process of disintegration. We did talk about making a big hole in the wall to create extra space to work with - ideas develop all the time - but one thing that was pretty certain was our intention of working with the space, and I suppose that's how the installation came into the picture.

the Artling

A curated selection from Asia's
best artists and designers.

The Artling, 6 Décembre 2017

*Between Life and Death: Luke Heng's 'After Asphodel' at Pearl Lam
Galleries, par Yunyi Lau*



Mr Luke Heng in front of his installation work "Flatline"
Image courtesy of Pearl Lam Galleries Singapore

Speaking of wax, you have worked with wax in your paintings before, and so you are familiar with the medium. How did you develop an interest in the qualities of this particular material?

It was something that I worked on when I was on a residency program in Paris, as I wanted to develop my practice as a painter. It was a conscious decision to not take the 'oil on canvas' route for the program, because I know it's going to be messy and I don't wish to live in an environment filled with fumes for 3 months. Yes, it was a rather pragmatic decision. But it was also this decision that led me to relook at the materials I've used for my paintings. Beeswax was a part of it, and as far as quantity is concerned, it had a 'supporting' role compared to colored pigments and oil. Hence, I decided to increase the use of wax and reduce the amount of pigment and oil (wax is an oil-based material anyway.). After much boiling, melting and casting, I ended up with several slabs of wax lying around the studio apartment. (The room was still ruined.) What was really amazing is that these slabs of paraffin/beeswax somehow have an extremely painterly quality to it. It's not exactly encaustic painting per se. I felt that there's a lot more I could try with this material, and that's why it was developed and shown in "The Waiting Room" the following year.

Time is something that seems to be an undercurrent that runs through quite a few of your themes like "The Waiting Room" series, and even the idea of the liminal is almost a moment wherein time is suspended and where things transition through. Would you agree with this? Why do you think that you have this interest?

Yes, I agree that the notion of time is rather important in most, if not all of my works. I would have to say that using Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) as a subject had a great deal to do with it. A large aspect of the notion of TCM deals with nature and harmony between subjects, so of course the element of time plays a vital role while examining situations and the diagnosis. I used to draw parallels between a Chinese physician diagnosing a patient to a painter resolving a painting. It really altered my perception towards the use of oil paint as a material and the use of time while waiting for the paint to dry. I suppose all of this contributed towards my treatment of other materials, whether it's the selection process or the treatment of it.

the Artling

A curated selection from Asia's
best artists and designers.

The Artling, 6 Décembre 2017

Between Life and Death: Luke Heng's 'After Asphodel' at Pearl Lam Galleries, par Yunyi Lau

Preparing for a solo exhibition like this is quite a major undertaking. Talk us through your process of developing a show like this, is there any particular music you like to listen to or books you look to for inspiration?

As much as I like music, it doesn't really play its way into the working process. White noise however helps a great deal, it certainly puts me in the different head space, which helps when I am trying to negotiate with the painting or thinking about other forms of works. For 'After Asphodel', one of the biggest influences was Kenya Haras's "White" where he set out to investigate the essence of "White", something he sees as being closely linked to the origin of Japanese aesthetics.

Recently there has been a lot of interest in digital and video art, especially with the development of Augmented Reality and Virtual Reality. Yet, you continue to pursue more traditional art forms, like painting and sculpture. Why is this so, and what do you think painting's role will need to be to continue to maintain its relevance in this digital age?

I could recall the first time discovering for myself a self-portrait by Raffaello Sanzio and was absolutely smitten. I was probably 14-15 of age. Just last year, I got the chance to see it in the flesh at the Uffizi Gallery, and it reminded me of when I first learnt about the painting, but more. I couldn't really make anything out of it but just simply looked at it. I am pretty sure that's how I became attracted to the medium of oil. However, one's interest changes over time, and one would find different ways to deliver the results of that interest, but I was never quite interested in new media art, maybe not yet. I suppose there's a multitude of ways to look at what's relevant in today's art landscape. Video art has been around for a long time too, but with all technologies, it continues to develop and improve; it's like a new toy everyone wants to play with. Painting, however, still holds its place due to the constant shifting of time and context. As long as there are painters or the use of paint still exists, it will always be of relevance.

Having a solo exhibition at a major gallery such as Pearl Lam Galleries, with exhibition spaces all over the world, is quite a big milestone in your artistic career. For younger artists aspiring to achieve success and to be shown in a big gallery, what would your advice for them be? What are your own experiences?

It is definitely a privilege to be able to show with Pearl Lam Galleries, and to work closely with Josef, who is their Managing Director - Asia. I am still figuring things out for myself at the moment, but I would say that I always knew what my priorities were from the beginning. I think it's important to establish that as it will influence many decisions that come along the way.

**the
Artling**

A curated selection from Asia's
best artists and designers.

The Artling, 6 Décembre 2017

*Between Life and Death: Luke Heng's 'After Asphodel' at Pearl Lam
Galleries, par Yunyi Lau*

Although you must have been really busy preparing for 'After Asphodel', and it probably was the thing that was at the forefront of your mind, do you have any future plans? What would you like to work on next?

This show did open up possibilities within my own practice, having showed both an installation and a representational painting for the first time, I am excited to see how things develop from here on. I mean, I have fantasised about a series of representational or semi-abstract paintings, but you never know. I shall not speak too soon or too much for now.



Detail view of "Untitled (like death is such a bad thing)" by Luke Heng
Image courtesy of the artist and Pearl Lam Galleries, Singapore