

**CONDITIONS OF
PRODUCTION**

Conditions of production, 11 juillet 2015

Stories : Luke Heng, interview

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Stories is an archive of exchanges and conversations between Euginia Tan and several artists, as part of the research segment of her curatorial mentorship with the Visual Arts Development Association Singapore (VADA). In the first edition of this on-going series, Euginia recalls her conversation with Luke, which considers the influence of his background in traditional Chinese medicine and the development of his art practice.



The artist's studio at Pasir Panjang.

I have always navigated via sight. Maps and topography fail me, there is something about knowing you are that speck in the vastness of projection on paper that flickers my focus, it's worse on the phone when you're shown as pulsating and in motion. So I am thankful that I've somehow found my way into Luke's studio with very little effort. I am now facing a stark white corridor. It is long, I imagine, echoey, and his enclave is all the way at the end. I'm thinking, so this is what it's like to really embody that speck on the map. This is almost what it feels like to be in Luke's paintings. The subject matter is the work, both work and artist pull each other in tandem, fully engaging sight, direction, reflex, with gravity formulating the final outcome. The demands are subtly strenuous. I gingerly tiptoe around his work.

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Luke's first job was when he had just reached adolescence, in a traditional Chinese medicine shop owned by his father, who was a *sinseh*, a Chinese medicine practitioner. "I developed a love-hate relationship with that shop, it's like I'm working and all my friends are outside playing football." And you can hear the tugs in his voice, of both pubescent impatience stifling the boy of twelve or thirteen and the gratitude now, of the artist who discovered the first glimpses that would provide the basis to his paintings and piqued interest in composition. "There were a lot of herbs in the shop, and I got really curious. So when I was bored, these herbs were my toys." This led Luke to observe his uncle, who was also running a Chinese medicine hall, in his preparation of the herbs. Skimming the counter would be a set of Libran weights and a pile of pink paper to be at arm's reach. The prescription was always illegible, hand-written, but these receptionists were finger smiths. The paper was plucked, placed and from there, navigating by sight and little contemplation, a multitude of herbs would then be, taken from shelves, weighed in sanctity with those sombre weights and finally positioned in the centre of this square pink paper which would be packaged and tied neatly with a red elastic band. That was Luke's first comprehension of a canvas.

In his very first works, like the paper containing the herbs, he painted with very clean borders, cluttered middles. It was colourful, expressive, and very much whimsical, from what he describes. He painted using perfect square canvases, then ventured into incorporating this influence with another eastern fixture; I-Ching, an ancient divination text which has today become more popular as a means of fortune telling via cleromancy (the production of random numbers i.e. rolling of dice, but in I-Ching's case a process using three coins and a sagely handbook). There was a lot of emphasis on finding the correct blend of elemental properties, and of course with these also accompanied visual cues such as deciphering colour and shape. This was step two in Luke's gradual unravelling of his work today - the introduction of lines and their focus and direction which doubled as visual prompts. He showed me his final year project for his diploma, dual paintings arithmetically derived from his steering of line, colour, texture and even the choice of using a duo as a tribute to I-Ching's numerical rituals. His burgeoning paintings are reminiscent of Robert Motherwell, whose writings Luke hands me to glimpse at from his table; which is very much reflective of that, a smattering of loud colour in the form of pastels on one pile, the more docile, intricate blueprints (of new work) looming in the background. But Luke was looking for reduction, extraction of the essences in all the oriental herbs and mathematical allegory. He was looking for the finesse that can be found in a steaming bowl of Chinese herbal soup.

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Installation view of *The Waiting Room* by Luke Heng at FOST Gallery. Image from FOST Gallery.

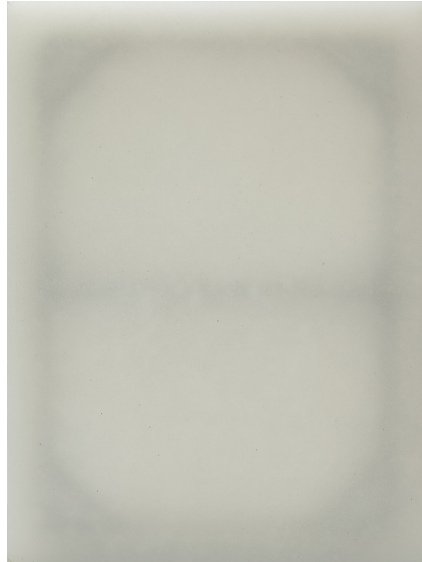
The most straightforward way to convey material onto his canvas was pouring it directly, and I say pour, because pouring is quiet strength. Too much on one end and you get an overflow, too little and nothing really gives it the rigour it requires. "But how do you know when it's completed?" I asked, wide-eyed at what I realized was soup in a bowl, Luke's rectangle (the squares had since been replaced) painting leaning sturdily on the wall, resplendent in its evolved, Lee Ufan finish. Then you hear the tugs in Luke's voice again, excitement and a tinge of hints of past resignation, when he explains that he now has to respond to the painting by unsubscribing to all the origins of what he is used to, rather, as the artist that he is today. He has become his own seasoned haggler, negotiating with the canvas as ease.

I asked Luke about his wax works at Fost Gallery, where we'd previously met as acquaintances during his first solo exhibition there. The root of the wax works were formulated during his time in Paris, while on residency, and he had initially wanted to reverse the processes of his painting, by giving drawings on paper whereupon the blueprints would be the final work. But it was out of touch with what he was interested in, and he went back to doing what he knew best, this time, with sculptural notions in mind. Experimenting with wax was tricky, and bringing back this new project to Singapore was even trickier, with the climate and inaccessibility of material. Still, he managed. Like reading one's own hand-written prescription, he found the right concoction to give the work the firmness and certainty a candle retains indefinitely, when left unlit.

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Chassis No.03, Paraffin wax on Steel frame
52 x 39cm, 2015.

Luke has been concise, succinct and consistent in the shifts of his work, in the expansion of their comfort zones. He has not shaken off the boy who once played with herbs, yearning for freedom. He has not shaken off the art student who was dabbling in experimental expression. He has not shaken off the fine art graduate who went to Paris and discovered he could make the work grow. As our conversation comes to a close, I chart these points in my mind, again, I navigate via sight, with very little effort.

Luke Heng was born in Singapore, which he currently lives and works. He has graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts from LASALLE College of the Arts, in partnership with Goldsmiths, College of London. Heng was a recipient of the Dena Foundation Artist Residency Program in 2014 held in Paris, France. Recently, Heng had his first one-man presentation at FOST gallery in Singapore. His interest in painting is focused on the materials itself, the process of materialising the painting and finally the perception of the painting.

Euginia Tan is VADA's 2015-2016 Curator. She has published three collections of poetry and is completing her first play. She is interested in the notion of stories (within stories, within stories) and how much of these are lost, or can be resuscitated, when converted into various other multi-disciplinary platforms. Euginia also graduated from Curating Lab 2014.