

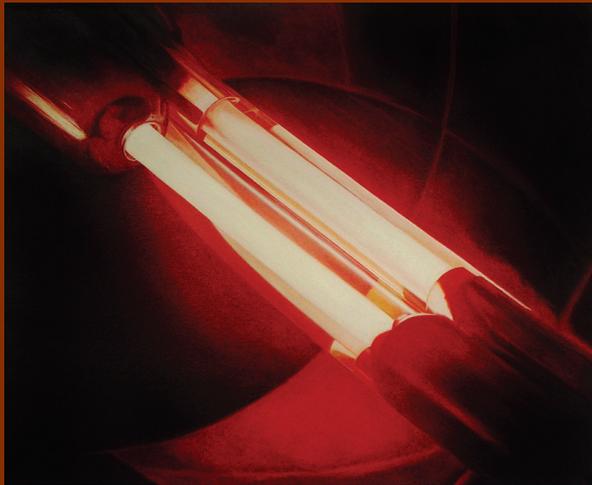
Gan Siong King

THE PLEASURES OF ODDS AND ENDS

Landscapes, Figures and Still Lifes

DOUBLE MIMICRY, OR, THE PLEASURES OF GETTING THERE AND NOT QUITE

by Tan Zi Hao



L.A.S.E.R. a.k.a. I Love Malevich,
2006, oil on canvas,
45.5 x 68.5 cm,
Collection of Ng Sek San

'I don't consider myself a painter,'¹ said Gan Siong King. Yet, how elusive is this statement, when presented as a prefatory remark, it risks understating his oeuvre? It is all the more mystifying when the works exhibited in *The Pleasures of Odds and Ends* are all painted. But they are paintings only as they can be called 'paintings', and Gan is a painter only as he can be called a 'painter'. Likewise, as suggested in the subtitle — '*Landscapes, Figures and Still Lifes*' — the classical trinity of standard painterly genres is similarly assaulted, since, these genres are proper only to the extent that each can be called as such. Gan navigates through all of them as if they are undifferentiated.

By way of introduction to Gan's painterly subterfuge, we skirt along his semantic manoeuvrings in a painting's title — *A figure in a landscape presenting a still life*. This is a painting of Carl Sagan presenting a prototype model of the Viking lander in Death Valley, California. The descriptive title states the obvious, it de-historicises Sagan's frustration with NASA's Viking mission,² and at the same time, dissolves the classical taxonomic excessiveness of paintings by blatantly reminding us that his figure, his landscape, his still life, constitutes one plane of visualisation. As such, these genres are equally, simultaneously, urgent. With *Ancestor (or Non-Bumiputera)*, Gan gets into mischief again. Is his painting of the skeletal fossil known as the Turkana Boy a 'figure' or a 'still life'?³ Gan's sarcasm is more pungent than mere semantics. The classification of paintings determines the ontology of the subject. To this end, he makes a speculative

¹ Through personal conversation with the artist.

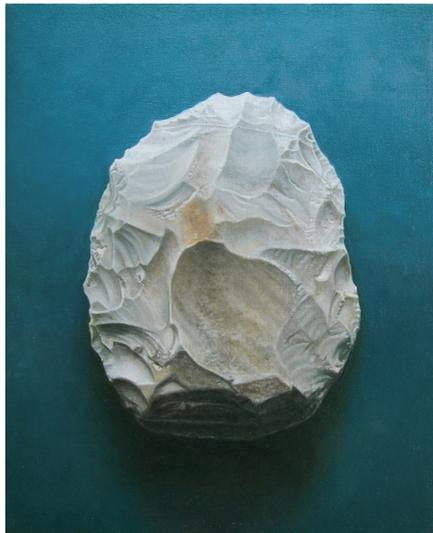
² David Morrison, 'Man for the Cosmos: Carl Sagan's Life and Legacy as Scientist, Teacher, and Skeptic,' *Skeptical Inquirer* 31.1 (2007), pp. 29–38.

³ Discovered by Kamoya Kimeu in a team led by Richard Leakey, Turkana Boy (also known as the Nariokotome Boy) was the most complete skeleton of *Homo erectus* to date. Since 1984, the discovery has led many scientists to speculate the life of subhuman species.



*A figure in a landscape
presenting a still life, 2014,
oil on canvas, 68 x 93 cm*





TOP *Ancestor (or Non-Bumiputera)*, 2005, mixed media on paper, 26.8 × 21.3 cm



BOTTOM *Excalibur*, 2014, oil on canvas, 30.5 × 25.5 cm



exhortation: the intrusive parenthetical 'Non-Bumiputera' beseeches a political sensibility that calls for no hasty response – is the 'Non-Bumiputera' a figure, or *figurative*, a *still life*, or a living stillness not unlike the Turkana Boy, a death awaiting to be museumised?

In the act of classifying, lies a corresponding act of falsifying. Gan's paintings are serious but candid, his titles are literal but suspicious. As a painter, he refuses to be a proper one. His verisimilitude is a way of distortion, posing an unexpected warning as our gaze closes in without hesitation: representational veracity is a sham, realism is unreal. Gan's painterly pursuit plays out these ambivalences, he articulates the pleasures of getting there and not quite.⁴ Gan wavers: 'I have a bad relationship with paintings.'⁵ His allegiance towards painting is his treachery against painting.⁶

Creativity, the most dreaded task of artists, withholds many from creating. But Gan is inured to this sacred fancy: 'image-making is not always creative.'⁷ Whereas the paintings are of Gan's labour, none of them could be considered as his creation. By a degree of intention and chance, each image was stumbled upon on the Internet via Google Image, Pinterest, Getty Images, Twitter, and many more. Choosing and replicating the images become his sole 'creative' process. Creativity becomes relative, experiential, and the rights to creation are democratised and Google-fied. Gan's creation is a recourse to *mimicry* marked by an interdependence between 'imitation' and 'originality'.⁸ It is a form of camouflage, a redefinition of creativity as specious and cunning.

To acknowledge a creation, to appreciate creativity, is a mere convenience of thought singling out a product from a process, divorcing the ends from means. The 'invention', the 'discovery', the 'breakthrough' are subjective points isolated from a nexus of contingent reactions. As a

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- 4 Hereafter, 'there' in the phrase 'the pleasures of getting there and not quite' refers to an unnameable destination, or in psychoanalytic convention, the unattainable real.
 - 5 Personal conversation with the artist.
 - 6 Gan: 'The most rebellious thing I could do was to go back to formal painting. The form is not dead. It's how you look at it. Just as you cannot say history is dead.' Quoted in Yee I-Lann, *The Painting Show*, exhibition catalogue, The Annexe Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, 2008.
 - 7 Personal conversation with the artist.
 - 8 'Mimicry reveals something in so far as it is distinct from what might be called an itself that is left behind. *The effect of mimicry is camouflage*. It is not a question of harmonising with the background, but against a mottled background, of becoming mottled – exactly like the technique of camouflage practised in human warfare.' [Emphasis mine] Jacques Lacan, *Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan, New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1977, p. 99

painter who is hesitant to admit his trade, whose paintings are hostile to painterly classicism, Gan postulates a critique against creativity. Painting found images, his creations are non-creative. But Gan's creativity need not be truly inventive.

It is no coincidence that several pieces take up the subject of creation. There is a conflation between Gan's artistic form (of creativity) and content (of creation), specifically in *Excalibur*, *In search of meaning in faraway places*, *Leviathan*, *Sisyphus* and *The productive drudgery of simple, repetitive functions*. These are paintings that denote moments of technological advancement; and these advancements are manifold. Triangulating the prehistoric hand axe in *Excalibur*, together with Watt's steam engine (circa 1780s) in *Leviathan*, and the magnetic-core memory (circa 1950s) in *Sisyphus*, the old and new 'creations' speak to each other. If a 'creation' is meant to be *new*, the technological advancements from the past that are shown here are no longer 'creative' as they are no longer *new* today. The *old* and *new* are but intermittent exposures of a temporal continuum, positional and *as-of-today*. What *was new is old*, what *was old can be new* – as is pursued in this exhibition with a new attitude in the medium of painting. It is in this spirit of perceiving the painting medium itself as a project⁹ that Gan's act of painting is creative, in that he *creates*.

Even now, as it was in the past, the ability to *create* (out of nothing)¹⁰ is an anachronistic belief. It presupposes that nothing exists before 'creation'. Creationism is reductive reasoning. As replications of Internet images, Gan's mimicry de-actualises our identification towards an original

'creation'. Esteemed denomination such as 'invention' – which connotes a preoccupation towards an original new – while conveys a sense of the potential of a thing in linear time, detaches the object from the history where it first emerged.

Gan questions our notion of inventiveness, either scientific or artistic, with his (non-) creations centered on close renditions of images downloaded elsewhere. Creations imitate. Creativity mimics. Any invention, any newness of thought, is a condensation of erstwhile knowledge then bursts forth against its shadow. In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), Kuhn contends that a scientific revolution is invisible, gradual, and new creations are by-products of counteractions resisting episodic anomalies in scientific truths.¹¹ The basis for a *paradigm shift* is equivocal: out of crisis, we create; out of doubt, we contrive a novelty. If Kuhn demythologises scientific inventions, Gan demythologises creativity by mimicking (and thus mocking) the representations of inventions. Form and content converge into one in Gan's mimicry of mimicry: his paintings are re-representations of representations of 'creations'.

Through *double mimicry*, Gan stages a camouflage not very dissimilar from Warhol's *Brillo Box*.¹² Yet, where is the 'art'? What exactly is the artist painting? Gan is not painting an object per se, he is painting a photograph or a photographic image of an object. But we commit a mistake once we presume Gan's paintings is anti-illusionist. For illusionism remains through a short-circuiting of the gaze in a ternary entrance, formulaically expressed as 1 (1.1 [1.1.1]):

9 Simon Soon speaks of a shift in the thematic direction of Malaysian contemporary painting, of which Gan is a part: 'Painting, in this sense, even when it becomes the *primary medium* or the *only medium* [emphases original] in which the artist works with, is seen as expedient to a *greater social project* [emphasis mine] rather than a medium with its own set of knowledge models that can be hermetically explored.' Soon elaborates: 'This return [of painting to painting] does not signify a regression towards institutionalised formalism. Instead, it can be read as a method of rethinking formalism as a complex body of theoretical models that allows us to expand upon what we understand of painting as well as employ these models to create more sophisticated modes of expressing or responding to our experiences.' This context is important to yield a fruitful discussion of Gan's work. Simon Soon, 'Returning to Painting as Painting,' *Tukar Ganti: New Malaysian Paintings*, exhibition essay [online], Valentine Willie Fine Art, Singapore, 2008, retrieved from: <http://www.vwfa.net/tukarganti/> (Accessed 5 November 2014).

10 According to OED, the English 'create' stems from the Latin 'creāt-', which can be compared to the Anglo-Norman "crier", that is, to produce *out of nothing*. OED definitions of 'create' include: 'To bring into being, cause to exist; esp. to produce where *nothing was before*' or 'To make, form, set up, or bring into existence (*something which has not existed before*); to produce (a work of imagination or *invention*; an artefact).' [Emphases mine]

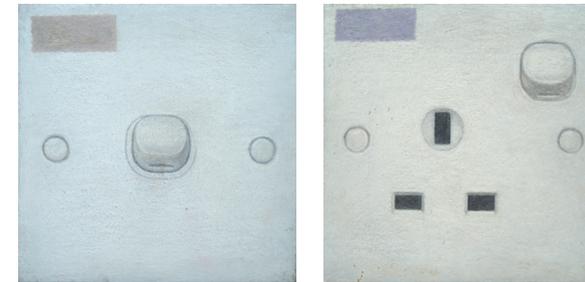
11 'Discovery commences with the awareness of anomaly, i.e., with the recognition that nature has somehow violated the paradigm-induced expectations that govern normal science.' Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1962, pp. 52–53.

12 Danto's seminal thesis 'The Artworld' (1964), which he employs Warhol's *Brillo Box* as a case study (pp. 580–584), is dated today, but nevertheless provides a much-needed reminder about the dynamics of an *artworld* so deprived in Malaysia. To Danto, the *artworld* constitutes the 'atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art' (1964, p. 580) as well as 'historical beliefs' (1994, p. 7) – in the 21st century, I hasten to add: the art scene, the art market, and the cultural or culture industry (the former imbued with a neoliberal disposition, and the latter, neo-Marxist) – necessary to substantiate new conversations about arts, to postulating a Hegelian aesthetics of meaning (as opposed to an aesthetics of form), and perhaps, one that could serve as a *divertissement* from the Malaysian market's fetishism for the painting medium. Malaysia needs a *Brillo Box*! See Arthur Danto, 'The Artworld,' *The Journal of Philosophy* 61.19 (1964), pp. 571–584; Arthur Danto, *Embodied Meanings: Critical Essays and Aesthetic Meditations*, New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1994; Arthur Danto, 'Symposium: Arthur Danto, The Abuse of Beauty – Embodiment, Art History, Theodicy, and *The Abuse of Beauty: A Response to My Critics*,' *Inquiry* 48.2 (2005), pp. 189–200.

1. The inaugural gaze (illusionism): the viewer sees through the painting and perceives the painted object as the *object itself*;
- 1.1 The analytical gaze (anti-illusionism): the viewer, upon knowing that the painting is a representation of the object itself, sees the painting as the *image itself*, thus bypassing illusionism (here, the viewer encounters Magritte's 'This is not a pipe' conundrum);
- 1.1.1. The returning gaze (re-illusionism): the viewer who realises the tricks of illusionism in the representation of the *image itself*, falls further into illusionism because the painting is an image of a (photographic) image, only painted, which is in itself an *image-object proper*, a screen, a pure painting.

Subverting illusionism with illusionism, 'creation' (i.e.: a product, an invention, a painting) redoubles and implodes. Illusionism is camouflaged through exaggeration.¹³ The viewers are almost always *getting there*, about to achieve a new subjectivity through the apprehension of the paintings, *and (still) not quite*. What exactly is the artist painting? The *object itself*? The *image itself*? The *image-object proper*? Gan's artistry compels us to scrutinise his painterly surface.

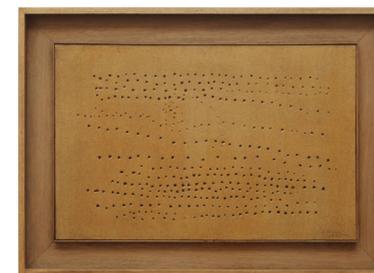
A similar complication was headlined in several works among Gan's impressive showcase in *The Painting Show* (2008) and *The March Surprise* (2009).¹⁴ In both exhibitions, he demonstrated how a painting could be a sculptural object, made possible through a manipulation of the canvas surface, chiefly, in *It'sshow time*, *Long and Short*, *Switch*, *Socket*, and *I was once told* "It's not what you show, but where you show, that matters". The texture and materiality of the depicted objects, such as a light switch or a piece of wood, are meticulously painted on the surface. Moreover, the paintings were hung at a specific height from the viewing public



LEFT *Switch*, 2008
RIGHT *Socket*, 2008

(especially *It's.....show time.*, *Switch*, *Socket* and *I was once told...*) so as to make-believe a realistic semblance of the actual objects (a clock, a light switch, a socket, a label).

Despite his playfulness, Gan's tactic always provokes a pressing question: Is painting not always already anti-painting? Parallel to the anti-illusionist rhetorics of the Italian art movement, Spatialism, the surface of the canvas itself can take on sculptural qualities. In the case of Lucio Fontana, the canvas is subjected to the violent gestures of slicing and puncturing. Paraphrasing the words of art critic Joan Rothfuss on Fontana: '...there was no illusion anymore. It's almost like painting as sculpture, painting as an object.'¹⁵



Lucio Fontana, *Spatial Concept*, 1949–1950
Source: <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/fontana-spatial-concept-t03961>

On the other hand, Gan's paintings remain illusionistic because he is not fixated with the question of whether his art is categorised as 'painting' or 'sculpture'. Instead, his works toy with the limits of our classification. His paints can either add dimensions to the flatness of surface, or, flatten

¹³ Amidst the 'end of painting' debate, Thomas Lawson advocates a return to the painting medium as a subversive form for appropriation: '...the idea of tackling the problem with what appears to be the least suitable vehicle available, painting. It is perfect camouflage, and it must be remembered that Picasso considered cubism and camouflage to be one and the same, a device of misrepresentation, a deconstructive tool designed to undermine the certainty of appearances. The appropriation of painting as a subversive method allows one to place critical aesthetic activity at the center of the marketplace, where it can cause the most trouble.' Thomas Lawson, 'Last Exit: Painting,' *ArtForum* 20 (October 1981), pp. 40–47.

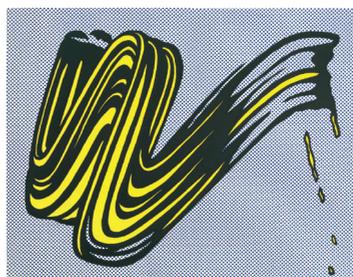
¹⁴ *The Painting Show* (2008) was a three-painter show curated by Yee I-Lann, featuring Hamir Soib, Phuan Thai Meng and Gan himself, held at The Annexe Gallery, Kuala Lumpur. *The March Surprise* (2009) was a solo exhibition, held at the Project Room in Valentine Willie Fine Art, KL.

¹⁵ Joan Rothfuss (Associate Curator of Visual Arts, Walker Art Center) commenting on Lucio Fontana's *Concetto Spaziale – Attesa* (1964–1965), during the exhibition *Art in Our Time: 1950 to the Present* (1999) held at Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. Retrieved from: <http://www.walkerart.org/collections/artworks/concetto-spaziale-attesa-spatial-concept-expectation> (Accessed 5 November 2014).

a dimension through pure representationalism. In *Means Becoming an End a.k.a. 5 Colours*, he re-painted paints, reminiscent of the humour in Lichtenstein's *Brushstrokes* series. Yet, his depiction of brushstrokes tends towards realism, which, despite being antithetical to the comedic flatness of pop art, endorses and exaggerates its rhetorics. Paint as the material substance of painting is demoted in Gan's simple gesture. *Means Becoming an End a.k.a. 5 Colours*, while paying tribute to Lichtenstein's pastiche, it also revisits the exuberance of Abstract Expressionism's gestural mark making. In this double mimicry (a double mockery?), Gan celebrates and challenges the painting medium, in connivance with, and in defiance of, its hypothetical death.¹⁶



Means Becoming an End a.k.a. 5 Colours, 2008



Roy Lichtenstein, *Brushstroke*, 1965
Source: <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/lichtenstein-brushstroke-p07354>

Could the minor anarchy in Gan's paintings obliterate his purpose to paint? A detour after another, Gan's conceptualism and representationalism override his formalism. His paintings suffer a double-whammy: with each gaze, his paintings vanish not once but twice. For a gaze could see through and cut across his paintings, to identify straightforwardly with the represented (without ever resorting to the *returning gaze* and to confront the painting medium in a formal sense); but once bitten, twice shy, illusionism makes a come back as an *image-object proper*. Gan's paintings (mis)guide the viewers through an illusionist trickery in three acts as abovementioned: (1) illusionism, (1.1) anti-illusionism, (1.1.1) re-illusionism. From double mimicry to *double transparency*, Gan's re-representation of

¹⁶ Douglas Crimp, 'The End of Painting,' *Art World Follies* 16 (Spring 1981), pp. 69–86; see also Footnote 11.

representation is almost invisible and may seem futile.¹⁷ At this juncture, Gan's paintings can appear redundant, a product of repetition, a mere seductive decoy to our scopophilia.

The above difficulty should hark us back to understanding Gan's artistic practice, one of which is about *repetition* itself.¹⁸ The act of repeating and re-painting is creative as Gan anticipates change 'only against a background of sameness.'¹⁹ That Gan's replication is redundant is true only if we regard, *a priori*, the gaze as convincingly truthful. The truthfulness of sight, however, is not a passage to truth.²⁰ As a part-time videographer, Gan is most aware that 'what one chooses to show or not to show is equally important.'²¹ For this reason, a closer inspection on Gan's paintings is never really satisfying because his paintings never elucidate despite being 'realistic'. The irredeemable pleasure from our scopophilic drive prompts us to repeat our failure towards achieving it. Our insistent pleasure to see 'what exactly is the artist painting?' reiterates Gan's repetitive and redundant act of double mimicry. His realism serves as a distance we could never bridge. Desire, in a psychoanalytic sense, lies precisely in this gap between the real and symbolic. "*The Pleasures of Odds and Ends*" speaks to the pleasures of getting there and not quite, for our gaze can only see what is visibly available, and what is available, has existed, long before he chooses to paint it.

Desiring the real calls for futile but necessary repetition. Desiring comprehension of Gan's paintings brings about re-illusionism. Our insistence of pleasure is repetitive, so as the various creations, inventions, discoveries or voyages Gan has depicted – they are likely products of vain repetition; the pleasures of odds and ends we never admit to. At the same time, should we choose to recognise this desire, we also fear being removed from the pleasures of desiring. Consider this point in light of

¹⁷ That is, if we were to follow Scruton's conservatism (what does this mean?) in his photographic transparency thesis, for the sake of discussion. Roger Scruton, 'Photography and Representation,' *Critical Inquiry* 7.3 (Spring 1981), pp. 577–603.

¹⁸ See Yee I-Lann, *op. cit.* and Karim Raslan, *The March Surprise*, exhibition essay [online], Project Room, Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, 2009, retrieved from: <http://www.vvfa.net/kl/pgProgrammeDetail.php?ppid=50> (Accessed 10 November 2014).

¹⁹ Gan's personal statement from Yee I-Lann, *op. cit.*

²⁰ '...gaze defies understanding as surely as it resists the eye.' Maria Scott, 'Lacan's "Of the Gaze as *Objet Petit a*" as Anamorphic Discourse,' *Paragraph* 31.3 (2008), p. 327.

²¹ Personal conversation with the artist.



Objects of desire,
2014, oil on canvas,
150 x 150.5 cm



Gan's *Objects of desire*, which shows a magnified depiction of neodymium magnets.²² Widely used in various electronic devices, these magnets are the ones made out of alloys that make up rare earth minerals so tenaciously sought after by Australian mining giant Lynas in Malaysia. Profit-making notwithstanding, their business is also connected to our collective desire for electronic devices. This is a complicity of the consumer culture often imperceptible to the middle class. We desire the electronic devices but we protest against the extraction of rare earth materials, essential to the devices' mechanism [FIG.1](#). The Lacanian *objet petit a* is transcribed in Gan's *Objects of desire*.²³ Through our scopophilic drive, we see only what is readily, symbolically, available – that is, the magnets as desired by a duplicitous other (Lynas), and from which we – the hypocrites – relinquish ourselves from the ecology of desire. In the same manner, the failure to locate an answer to 'what exactly is the artist painting?' speaks of our hypocrisy and the failure of our politics.



[FIG.1](#) The *objet petit a* splitting the desiring self who refuses to acknowledge the complicity in the pleasure of desiring, astutely pointed out by a protestor in a protest rally against Lynas (held in February 2012 at Maju Junction Mall): 'Among the 17 rare earth elements are used for smartphones, laptops, camera lenses. Shouldn't we start thinking of our CONSUMPTION NEEDS TOO?' Photo from author

If in the act of classifying, lies a corresponding act of falsifying, then, upon seizing the real, one encounters symbolic castration. Our desire to create, to identify, to apprehend, is an impossibility that leaves us to continue wanting and to repeat our failure – in total redundancy but for the pleasure of pursuit – inasmuch as Gan's double mimicry gets us there and not quite.

22 The magnification and dramatisation of ordinary objects resonate with Gan's constant quest for the 'epic in the banal'. See Yee I-Lann, *op. cit.*

23 *Objet petit a*, literally, the 'object little other' represents an object of the lack, a source for the unattainable desire (the real) *signified* as a tempting 'other' that can be pursued (the symbolic).

PAINTING IN THE AGE OF POST-DIGITAL REPRODUCTION

by Wong Hoy Cheong



Tiangou, 2013,
oil on canvas, 41 × 43 cm;
41 × 45.5 cm (diptych),
Collection of Hanif Idris

Our contemporary relationship with art cannot, therefore, be reduced to a “loss of the aura”. Rather, the modern age organizes a complex interplay of dislocations and relocations, of deterritorialisations and reterritorialisations, of deauratisations and reauratisations. What differentiates contemporary art from previous times is only the fact that the originality of a work in our time is not established depending on its own form, but through its inclusion in a certain context, in a certain installation, through its topological inscription...

We are as unable to stabilize a copy as a copy – as we are unable to stabilize an original as an original. There are no eternal copies as there are no eternal originals. Reproduction is as much infected by originality as originality is infected by reproduction. By circulating through the different contexts a copy becomes a series of different originals. Every change of context, every change of medium can be interpreted as a negation of a status of a copy as a copy – as an essential rupture, as a new start that open a new future. In this sense, a copy is never really a copy – but rather always a new original in a new context.

Boris Groys, The Topology of Contemporary Art, 2008

I.

Locating Gan Siong King’s works within the current bravura of gesture, image and scale in the topography of Malaysian painting is difficult, if not altogether futile. His paintings stand terribly apart in so many ways. There is no parallel. They are curiously cerebral and do not solicit a consumptive spectatorship from the viewers nor the discriminating yet disinterested gaze proverbially seen at painting exhibitions. Lavish with details, and clarity, the surfaces of these works are rendered in soft but confident glazes. However, these paintings are not photorealistic in any conventional

manner. In the exhibition, *The Pleasures of Odds and Ends: Landscapes, Figures & Still Lifes*, Gan opts for images that lay out of the visual scope and experience of most people. While often striking familiar chords, both subject matter and titles remain obscure and demand the spectators to work hard in accessing their meaning. 'What are they?' will be a recurring question.

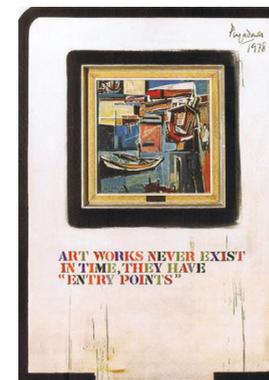
First, he reels you in with whimsical and enigmatic allure, then shuts the door on you and sends you on an elliptical journey of interconnected paths, hunting for signs and entry points which then loop you back to the start, albeit one with new coordinates. To Gan, his paintings and what he chooses to paint are ensconced within a feedback loop of knowledge and meaning-making, both of which exist in a constant flux and along a continually shifting historical horizon and space-time continuum. He has chosen not to take the well-trodden path of celebrating the intuitive act of painting and passive spectatorship but instead, he interrogates painting as a conscious act and spectatorship as reflexive and dynamic.

Such are his quixotic preoccupations and propositions.

II.

In 1978, Redza Piyadasa appropriated a painting by another artist, Chia Yu Chian – which depicted some boats by a jetty in a village painted in the fractured and flat pictorial planes of Nanyang, post-cubist considerations – and it within his own work. On it was stenciled: Artworks never exist in time, they have “entry points”. He proposed that the existence of an artwork was not contingent on its location within chronological time; on the contrary, “entry points” was the keystone, the linchpin to an artwork. Without it, an artwork collapses and is rendered meaningless, and since the spectator has no access to its *raison d'être*, for all intents and purposes, it does not exist.

Having just returned with a postgraduate degree from the USA in 1977, Piyadasa clearly articulated some of the international art discourse that was current at the time: *entry points* define the pathways into artworks; *time* is neither linear nor definitive; *appropriation* is not plagiarism but accepted strategy; *reflexivity* in image production is privileged over spontaneity. (Some of this discourse still exists today.) The iconography and socio-cultural context of Chia Yu Chian's painting would have functioned as a conduit and paradigm to understanding Piyadasa's own



Redza Piyadasa,
Entry Points, 1978,
Collection of National Visual
Arts Gallery, Malaysia

work. Cognition and cognisance were instrumental in meaning-making and socio-cultural constructions; they constituted the entry points. The propositions of Piyadasa were highly obscure and difficult for most audiences of 1978 unless they had prior knowledge of such discourse. But such knowledge existed in closed systems and the gates to them would have remained shut unless the spectator had the means, privilege and time to unlock them. For most, it must have been rather infuriating and alienating.



¹ *Fountain* (a.k.a inside this vessel, a magic drug is brewing), 2014, oil on canvas, 30.5 x 38 cm



Fast-forward thirty-five years.

Standing in front of Gan Siong King's *Fountain* (a.k.a *inside this vessel, a magic drug is brewing*), I see a realistically executed painting suffused in elegant cool and warm grays. It is a simple painting of an object, a 'vessel' I am informed through the title. Its shape is quaintly familiar – a rectangular receptacle with an upturned curious neck – but nevertheless remains obscure. The delicately painted surface reveals patina of wear and tear. On the top right edge of this object is written 'M.6668'.

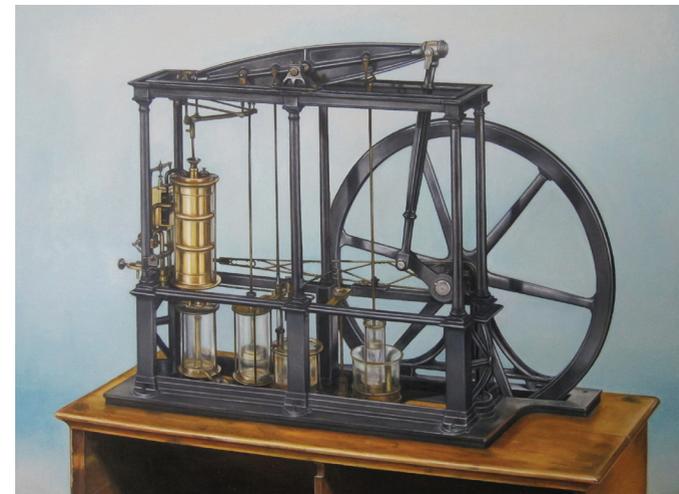
Confronted with such impenetrability, a host of questions arise as I attempt to find entry points to the work. Is 'M.6668' a cataloguing or reference number? Is this odd-looking object from an archive or museum? What was its use? Is the 'magic drug' a hallucinogen? Is it a vessel for some bodily fluid since Duchamp's urinal was also titled *Fountain*? An ancient bedpan perhaps?

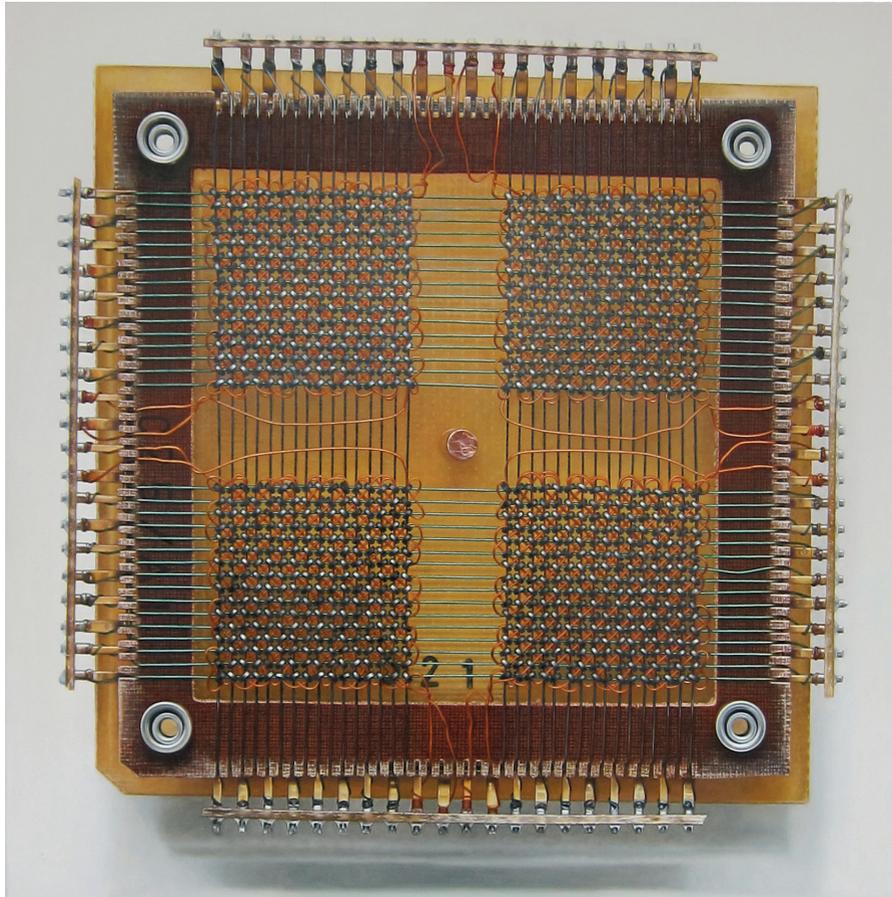
On the exhibition label are two QR codes. Curiosity draws me to scan these codes with my smartphone. With 4G connectivity, I am hyper-linked within seconds to YouTube. The first link is to a video titled: *Untitled film showing penicillin production (nd)*. It is a silent film of a remote gothic world which depicts a man in a science laboratory transferring liquids in and out of archaic glass instruments, many of which bear some semblance to the 'vessel' in the painting. The second hyperlink takes me to a video, in full colour, of art curators standing beside Duchamp's *Urinal* and discussing its iconography and history. I see for the first time, and in close up and fine detail, the shape and scale of this urinal. Curiosity led me further along the cyberspace trail, so I google various keywords: penicillin, penicillin vessel, penicillin production. Within sixty seconds or less, I find the exact digital image of the porcelain penicillin vessel the artist downloaded and copied-painted. And as I wandered further in this virtual vastness, I learnt that penicillin was the first modern antibiotic and those porcelain vessels, like the one painted by Gan, made possible the mass production of penicillin. This antibiotic saved millions of lives and transformed the course of medicine and healthcare forever. I asked myself: is this is why Gan painted the penicillin vessel, much like how Duchamp's appropriation of the ready-made urinal transformed the dynamics of art production forever?

As I release my mind from this timeless and mesmerising digital web of infinite tunnels and paths, lifting my thumbs off the virtual keypad and raising my head, I am looped back to the painting before me and I see it

with new clarity and permutations. I have found entry points. This image is not merely an inert 'M.6668' locked in the cabinet of a science museum. It is a receptacle that cultured a 'magic drug', one which changed the world forever. Through a continuous cognitive feedback loop between the virtual and real, the time-less and time-bound, the intellectual and the sensorial, Gan's painting of an innocuous vessel assumes an aura, giving it an elegant profundity it previously did not possess. The initial opacity has given way to luminance, much like the glowing depth of cool and warm grays made vivid through layers of glazes and washes.

An experience like this would not have been possible standing in front of Redza Piyadasa's *Entry Points* in 1978. The world that Piyadasa practised in and critiqued has radically changed. It was an age where such entry points – in the instantaneously accessible, entertaining, multilayered and intertextual world of cyberspace – did not exist, let alone imagined possible by most. Closed analogue systems of knowledge access and production have given way to radicalised and porous systems through digitisation and interconnectivity. Knowledge, discourse and its production are no longer bound by geography or distance nor isolated in silos of books and libraries, archives and museums nor merely legitimised by professors and universities. The public now has direct access and, with a bit of curiosity and effort, is both mediator and interpreter. Internet has engendered this agency, and empowered the public in ways thought inconceivable not too long ago.





3

As images, *Leviathan* and *Sisyphus* are less enigmatic. The former is of a mechanical contraption made of metal with a large rotating wheel connected by armatures to a series of pumps. The latter, resembling an embroidery or tapestry, on closer look, is actually some kind of electrical circuit board. Both look antiquated. Again, I am lured by the QR codes. For *Leviathan*, I am transported to the 18th century – a documentary on James Watt and the Steam Engine. Surfing this virtual playground, I learnt how the steam engine fuelled the industrial revolution; I learnt of its use in factories, trains and ships; I learnt how it transformed production and productivity, changing notions of power, speed, time and distance. Even today the steam turbine drives nuclear power stations. Through the fluid matrix of hyperlinks, windows and sites, I further learnt that *Leviathan* alludes to many things: it is a large sea-monster referred to in the Book of Job in the Biblical Old Testament: ‘Smoke pours from his nostrils as from a boiling pot over a fire of reeds. His breath sets coals ablaze, and flames dart from his mouth’; it is also a book on the statecraft and social contract by Thomas Hobbes. William Blake, the romantic poet, railed against the industrial revolution and considered the mammoth coal and steam engines which propelled factories that spat fire and brimstones, ‘satanic mills’.

The *Sisyphus* QR codes led me to two YouTube videos. The first is a BBC documentary on human development, cognition and memory. Memory, in the human brain consists of complex cognitive and neurological processes of receiving, processing, storing and retrieving. The second is an instructional video by the US military in 1961 – during the height of the Cold War – on ‘magnetic core memory’; the video was used for data processing such as in communication and cryptography equipment. Intrigued, the Google-reflex gene in me triggered a search for further information. Wikipedia’s entry explains that this technology became obsolete in 1975 and has been replaced by smaller and more efficient memory devices – the most recent being our thumb-sized SD cards. It is comprehensible why the artist used this image of an obsolete magnetic core memory to allude to *Sisyphus* – the myth of a Greek King who was eternally condemned to carry a large boulder up a steep hill, only to let it drop and roll down just as he reached the peak. Like *Sisyphus*’ absurd task, the magnetic core memory made up of repetitive and endless coils of wire rolled around endless magnets eventually became obsolete and useless. Both allude to a relentless futility. And perhaps even alludes to the artist’s grimly laborious act of painting this work.

² *Leviathan*, 2013,
oil on canvas,
66 × 90.5 cm,
Collection of Hanif Idris

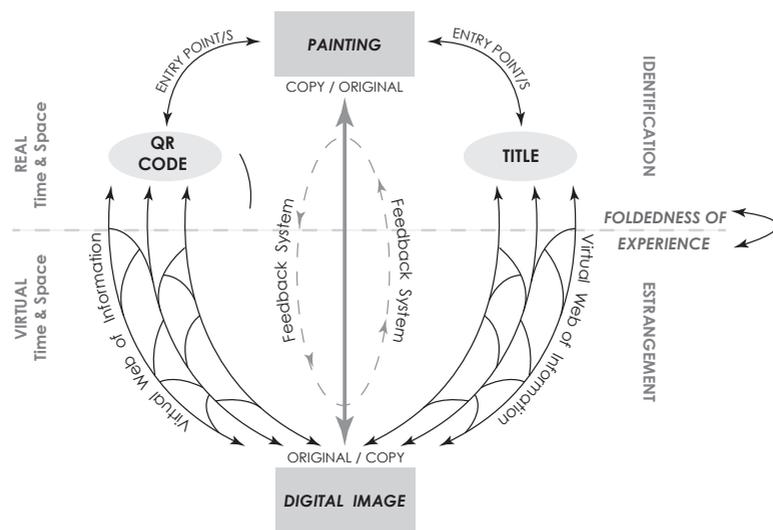


³ *Sisyphus*, 2014,
oil on canvas,
80 × 80 cm



III.

If there is a stoic restraint, a tethering of effusive bravura in Gan's paintings, he more than compensates for it in the playful heuristic devices he contrives for the audience. He begins by positing two worlds which fold into each other: the work we see is an original painting but it is also a hand rendered copy of a digital image he retrieved from the internet; the digital image, on the other hand, is the original image from which the painting was copied but it is also a digitised copy of an original object, be it a magnetic core memory or a porcelain penicillin vessel. In Gan's proposition, copy and original are inter-exchangeable and exist in both the virtual and real worlds. The copy is made an original; the original is made a copy. The present informs the past; the past informs the present. The there is here; the here is there.



A nuanced understanding and appreciation of Gan's paintings necessitate this: the folding of the real and virtual worlds, which are in constant tension and flux. This foldedness-of-experience, i.e. the experience of being-in-the-world (*In-der-Welt-sein*) vis-à-vis the overcoming of subject/object dichotomy in real time and space, recognises that the slippages in the real-virtual continuum are integral to contemporary life. In this day and age, negotiating through social constructions and meaning making – entry

points as such – are contingent upon this 'foldedness'. Subject and object connect with and transform each other in a continuous feedback loop. The two key devices that Gan uses which allow for this foldedness-of-experience are the QR (Quick Response) codes and titles to the paintings.

QR codes are graphic matrixes in which information is embedded in a grid of square dots. When scanned and analysed by the optical reader in a smartphone, they are optical labels that are auto-linked to websites. These pictorial codes are wormholes; they puncture real time and transport the spectator to a virtual world of information, opening up pathways of exploration. By using QR codes, Gan posits that a more complete experience of his works necessitates both digression and diversion to knowledge – entry points – beyond the edges of his paintings and the walls of the gallery. Like performative Brechtian devices, the QR codes momentarily pull the spectator out of the experience of 'identification' in the act of viewing the paintings in the present within the bounds of four walls to a different space-time continuum. This temporary 'estrangement' in the virtual web allows for a revision of understanding and critical reflection that then enables the spectator to loop and fold back to the present moment equipped with a reflexive and deepened appreciation for the paintings.

The titles to Gan's paintings are mostly oblique. They do not reflect or describe the works. Instead, they allude. An image of a magnetic core memory is titled *Sisyphus*, a steam engine is *Leviathan*, a penicillin vessel is *Fountain* (a.k.a *inside this vessel, a magic drug is brewing*), a heart-shaped diamond is *Bodhisattva*, a prehistoric stone axe is *Excalibur*, a moon is *Terang Bulan*, and so on and so forth. The last example, *Terang Bulan*, exemplifies the most complex layering of allusions. One QR code links us to 'Terang Boelan', a compilation of jump-cuts of an array of voices singing this Indonesian song. The other QR code leads us to 'Dark Side of the Moon: Stanley Kubrick and the Fake Moon Landings', a mockumentary of Stanley Kubrick's *'2001: A Space Odyssey'* and his apparent involvement with the US government in creating a fake moon landing. The allusion to an Indonesian popular song – also the tune for Malaysia's National Anthem – evokes the occasional recurring disputes of cultural ownership and Nationhood between Indonesia and Malaysia. The allusions to Stanley Kubrick's film, Pink Floyd's music, NASA, the Cold War, the USA and Soviet Union in the fake documentary encapsulate the slipperiness between fact and fiction, history and conspiracy, dominance and impotence. Viewing Gan's *Terang Bulan* will never be the same again after these excursions. A



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small and simple painting of the topographical surface of the moon has become a site and an embodiment of the contestation of history, politics, art and culture.

IV.

Are such devices and excursions necessary or do they merely circumvent the visual and sensorial experience of viewing painting or art? On the contrary, these diversions – the act of being online, of being connected to a network – are no longer auxiliary experiences. The digital revolution is over; it is no longer disruptive. It is now fundamental to our being. Being connected is at the tip of our thumbs and fingers; the phone is an extension of our limbs and kinesthetic proclivities. Straddling between the real and virtual has become second nature. If surfing and social networking are no longer disruptive to daily life, why should reading up about penicillin or Leviathan be at opposition to the experience of viewing painting?

This foldedness, as I have argued, is reinforced by Gan's choice of subject matter and process. The images are of scientific and historical inventions and discoveries that propelled human development. They are digital images downloaded from the internet and *re-aura-tised* as paintings, as originals. His *re-aura-tisation* of the digital copies are suffused

with wonderment of human tenacity and will, much like his manner of painting. There is visual detail and indulgence: the eyes rove over the surface, enjoying the delicate resonating textures, admiring how the pigments and tints and are patiently glazed in layers upon layers to reveal not only physical structure, but a glowing translucence. Gan's paintings are not hard-edged photo or hyperrealisms. His painted images float in colour and spatial voids – like meditative dreams – rather than tangible or realistic contexts. The contexts or the entry points for these 'voids' lay in what we discover in our temporary 'estrangement' in a parallel world – the digital online.

In our post digital contemporaneity, the matrix of visual splendour, endless entertainment and information and heightened emotions are fluidly criss-crossing media and contexts – real and virtual, analogue and digital. We are constantly moving, and the horizon line constantly shifts as we move. The dualities and contradictions that not so long ago were viewed as disruptive and alienating have been absorbed and interwoven into our daily existence – the negations negated. *In-der-Welt-sein* is *here-now-real* and *here-now-digital* inextricably conjoined.

⁴ *Terang Bulan*, 2014, oil on canvas, 30 cm (diameter)





Bodhisattva, 2013,
oil on canvas,
98 × 96 cm,
Private Collection



ABOUT THE ARTIST

Gan Siong King (b. 1975, Malaysia) wears many hats as artist, production designer for feature films and art worker in numerous community based projects. Gan received his Diploma in Fine Art majoring in oil painting from the Malaysian Institute of Art (MIA) in 1996. Gan has taken part in several exhibitions including *Cartographical Lure* at Valentine Willie Fine Art (2009), *Tukar Ganti* at Valentine Willie Fine Art, Singapore (2008), *The Painting Show* at The Annexe Gallery (2008), *Sama-sama* at Lost Generation Space (2007), *Seriously Beautiful* at Reka Art Space (2007), *Seni: Homefronts* at Singapore Art Museum (2004), and *3 Young Contemporaries* at Valentine Willie Fine Art (2001). In 2009, he held his solo exhibition *The March Surprise* at the Project Room in Valentine Willie Fine Art. As a production designer, Gan's credits include Liew Seng Tat's *Flower In The Pocket* which has won the PRO Tiger Award at the 2008 Rotterdam Film Festival, Fahmi Reza's *Sepuluh Tahun Sebelum Merdeka* and Tsai Ming Liang's *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone*.

ABOUT OUR ArtProjects

OUR ArtProjects is an art consultancy and project platform established in 2013. It is helmed by Liza Ho and Snow Ng, both art world professionals with extensive years of experience working in the commercial art sector. They are assisted by curatorial associate, Simon Soon, who is currently completing a PhD in modern and contemporary Southeast Asian art history. Playing to the strength of our existing networks and experiences, OUR ArtProjects focuses on identifying and representing important practices in Malaysian art, with an emphasis on emerging and mid-career talents. This is complemented by an exhibition programme that introduces significant art that have emerged from our insular Southeast Asian neighbours (Philippines, Singapore and Indonesia), as well as, future programmes that looks into exciting new developments in the regional mainland. OUR typical exhibition programme features artistic practices that navigate through socio-cultural issues, conceptual experimentation, political commentary, aesthetics and processes, anthropology, as well as art history by way of its curatorial agenda and ambition. This also follows from our interest in activating new ways of contextualising the art practices of Malaysia and Southeast Asia – to infuse them with compelling and engaging narratives.

Gan Siong King
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Landscapes, Figures and
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*In search of meaning in
faraway places (detail),
2014, oil on canvas,
40.8 x 58.5 cm*

