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"Ataraxy": Singaporean painter Ruben Pang and the art of introspection – in pictures

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Ruben Pang stuns with his ethereal portraits, delving deeper into introspection and the artistic subconscious.

Singaporean artist Ruben Pang's new series of paintings retains the vibrant etherealness of his previous works while venturing into darker waters.



Ruben Pang, 'Aneurysm', 2014, oil, alkyd, acrylic and retouching varnish on aluminium composite panel, 60 x 75 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Chan Hampe Galleries.

Entitled "**Ataraxy**", Ruben Pang's fifth solo exhibition, runs until 8 February 2015 at **Chan Hampe Galleries** in Singapore. The young artist returns to his hometown after a busy stint abroad; his recent international shows include "**Aesthetic Portraiture**" (2013), a solo exhibition at Primae Noctis Art Gallery in Lugano, Switzerland, and "**DEEP S.E.A.**" (2013), a group exhibition held at **Primo Marella Gallery** in Milan.

Between abstraction and representation

Ruben Pang (b. 1990, Singapore) adheres to a unique artistic process: he does not begin a painting with any premeditated final image in mind. When *Art Radar* interviewed the artist in 2013, he explained that chance was a crucial part of his process, and that **if he committed to a composition prematurely, the final composition would lack vitality**. According to **his artist statement**,

Without a preconceived image of the final composition, Pang's artistic process evolves throughout the painting's genesis, removing the boundary between abstraction and representation. This approach allows the motif to surface spontaneously, which Pang describes as "visual syncopation, like searching for a melody in white noise".



Ruben Pang, 'Colossal', 2014, oil, alkyd, acrylic and retouching varnish on aluminium composite panel, 60 x 75 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Chan Hampe Galleries.

Methodologically, Pang alternates between layering and sanding down paint "in search of a point of opportunity". He uses oil paint and alkyd resin on aluminium panels for greater flexibility, and paints and scratches away the

material using brushes, knives, sandpaper as well as his own hands.

Introspective phantoms

The results of such an organically spontaneous process are vibrant, captivating canvases that shimmer with a ghostly vitality. His previous signature portraits consist of blurred, dissolving figures that are hauntingly alive in spite of barely recognisable features. In this new series of works, Pang experiments with giving his phantoms a more solid, defined form while delving deeper into their consciousness.



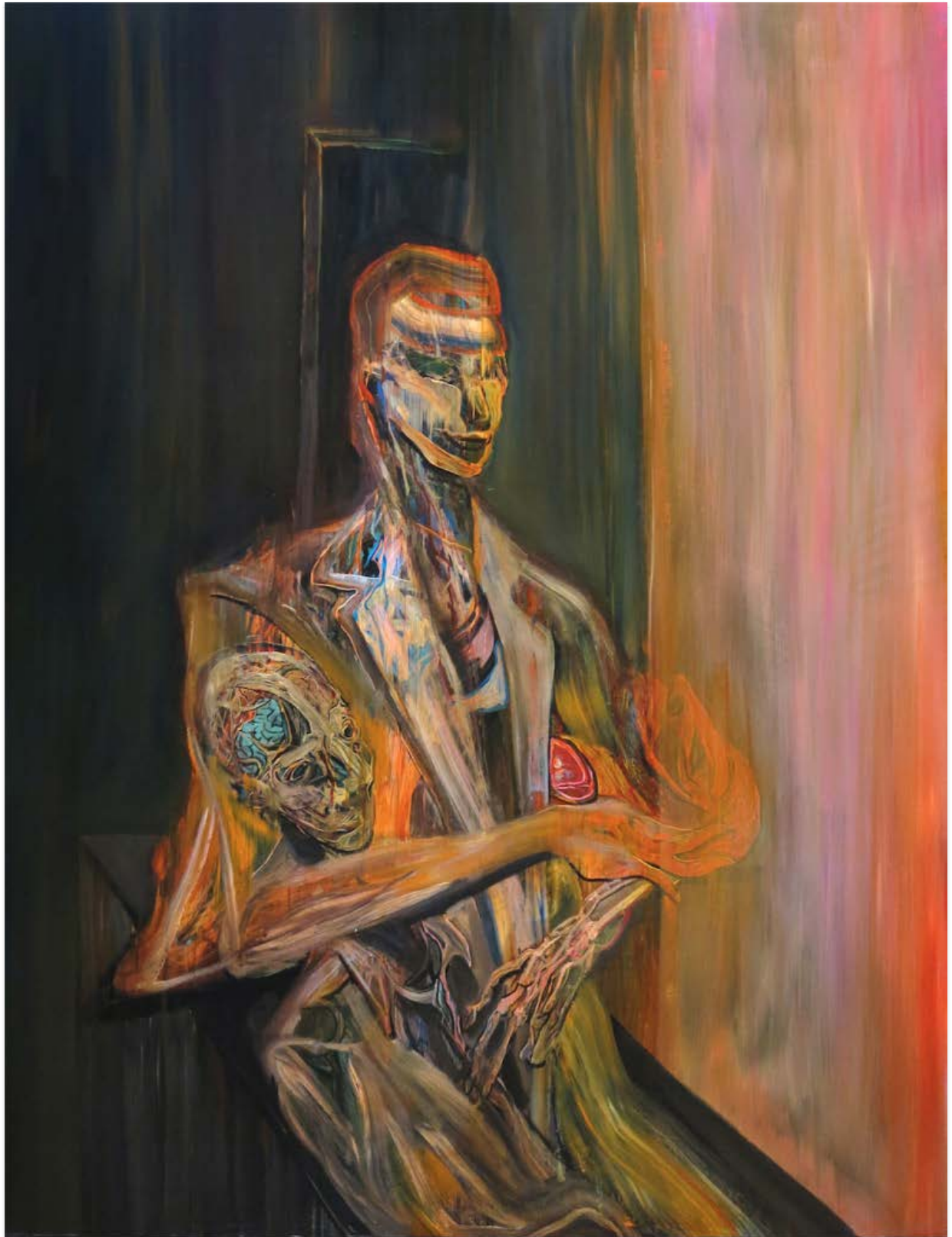
Ruben Pang, 'Birdwatcher', 2014, acrylic, alkyd, oil and retouching varnish on aluminium composite panel, 77 x 99 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Chan Hampe Galleries.

According to the exhibition press release, Pang is using his paintings to explore the introspective creative process of artistic minds:

In each painting, various artistic personalities find themselves in psychodramatic scenarios with their subconscious drives, personified through figures in constant change, [...] surgically reconfigured and twisted into conversations with one another and their surroundings.



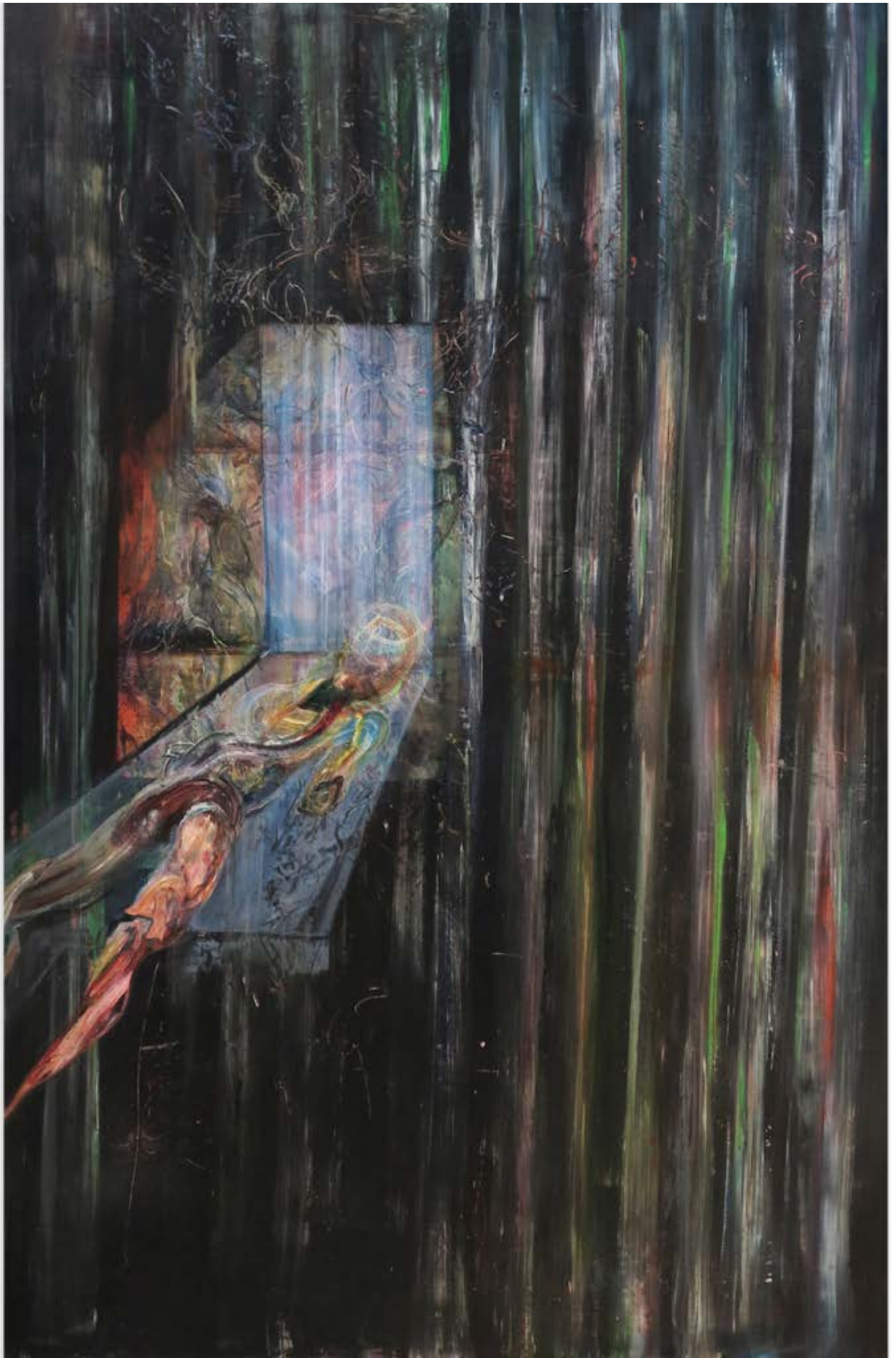
Ruben Pang, 'End of the Road (After Rudyard Kipling, If: A Father's Advice to His Son)', 2014, oil, alkyd, acrylic and retouching varnish on aluminium composite panel, 122 x 150 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Chan Hampe Galleries.



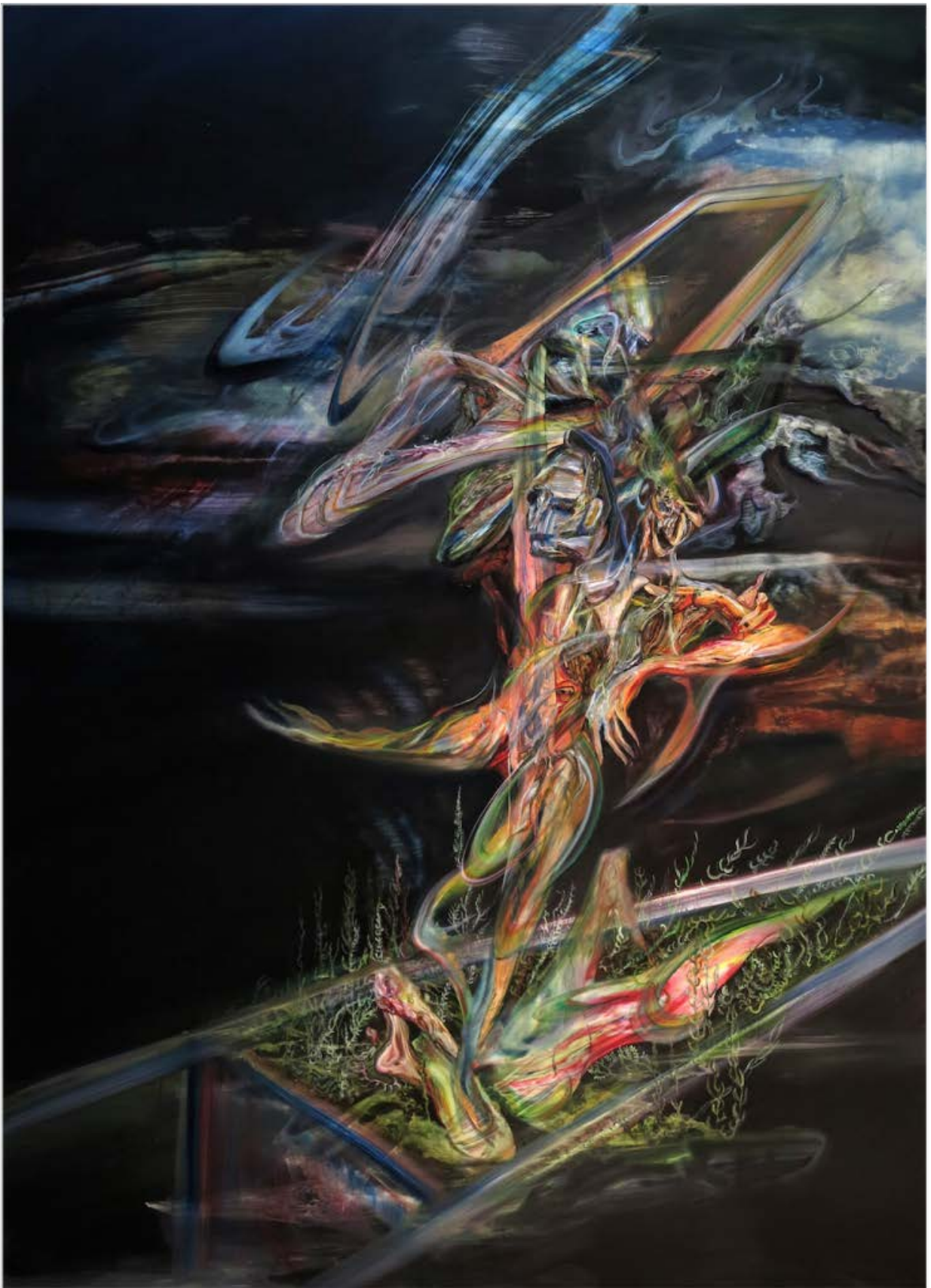
Ruben Pang, 'Holding it Together, 2014, acrylic, alkyd, oil and retouching varnish on aluminium composite panel, 77 x 99 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Chan Hampe Galleries.

The artistic subconscious

In *Holding It Together* (2014), for example, we see a compulsive method actor juggling multiple states of mind. *Passenger* (2014) depicts a floating figure hovering in the elusive dream state between sleep and wakefulness, while in *Building the Triad* (2014) three musicians contort around each other, trampling a fourth who is caught in the invisible waves of a tremouring tuning fork.



Ruben Pang, 'Passenger', 2014, acrylic, alkyd, oil and retouching varnish on aluminium composite panel, 110 x 166 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Chan Hampe Galleries.



Ruben Pang, 'Building the Triad', 2014, oil, alkyd and retouching varnish on aluminium composite panel, 140 x 192 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Chan Hampe Galleries.

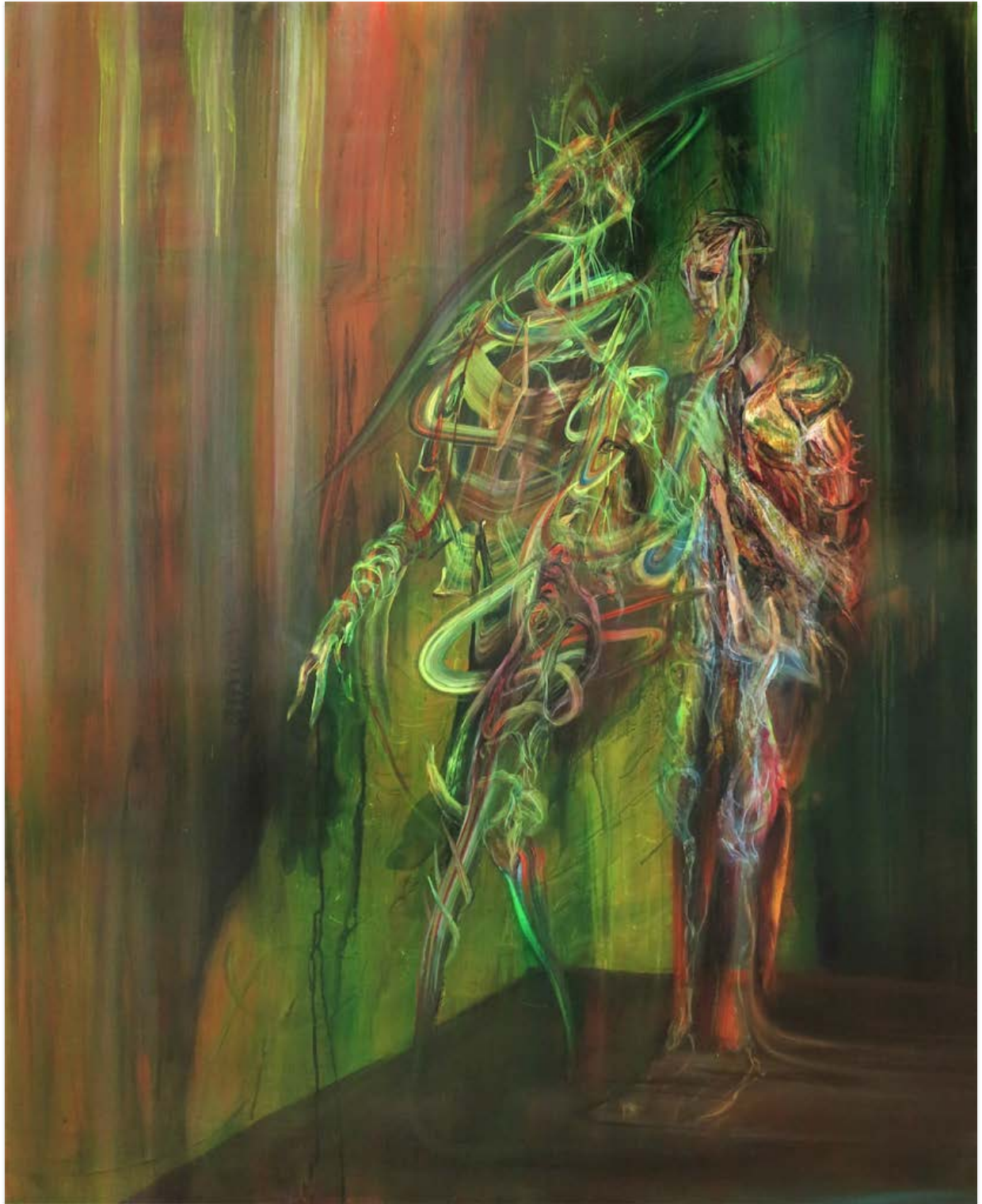
The exhibition press release states that the musicians in *Building the Triad* are in search of “that elusive plum that borders dissonance and harmony”. Pang **explains further in an interview** with Singaporean art magazine *Muse*:

[...] *Building the Triad* is about the trials of a musician. It's a single figure split into four

levels of consciousness trampling over each other in a clumsy attempt to align themselves with a tuning fork – they are chasing melody, finding music.

From chaos to “Ataraxy”

With canvases almost seething with chaos and disorder, Pang’s exhibition is paradoxically entitled “Ataraxy” – a word referring to a state of serene calmness and tranquillity. Perhaps the artist is projecting the calmness after the storm, or perhaps he refers to another kind of serenity – the trance-like, meditative state attained during the most intense and profound creative endeavours.



Ruben Pang, 'Binary Stars', 2014, oil, alkyd, acrylic and retouching varnish on aluminium composite panel, 112 x 140 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Chan Hampe Galleries.

During such artistic processes, dissonance and entropy coexist with a unique harmony – a soft ‘hum’ of acute concentration and latent creative energy. Pang’s canvases, at once electric and ethereal, capture this coexistence. As *Muse* writes:

Pang [...] expertly evokes the mental endurance that artistic work requires. [...] We can begin to better appreciate the contemplation, journey, sense of arrival and transformation that artists undergo as part of their vocation.

Michele Chan

610

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