



Art as a "universal language": an interview with Ruben Pang

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Born in Singapore in 1990, Ruben Pang is a young artist who is fast making a name for himself in the international art scene. With several sell-out exhibitions under his belt, and a prestigious residency programme with the Tiroche de Leon collection in Israel, Pang is known for his vibrant and dynamic compositions, treading the line between figuration and abstraction.

How and when did you decide to pursue a career in art?

I decided very early on that I wanted to be an artist. I was 17-years-old at the time, which, for me, isn't so long ago, and I had a very clear idea about the figure of the artist as a painter in a void, hidden away somewhere in a chaotic city, working almost in a vacuum. It was at around that time that I left school and enrolled at art school. It was actually the principal of the school I was leaving that recommended that I join LASALE college of the arts, which marked the beginning of my career in art. Art represented a form of escapism for me.

What are your preferred media or techniques?

In general, I use whatever material is available to me, however I've recently become very obsessed with a certain kind of technique, which involves applying alkyd resin and oil paint to aluminium sheets. What appeals to me most about this method is the coldness of the metal, and the way in which nothing is absorbed by the surface. It's the polar opposite of canvas, where every brushstroke leaves a mark very immediately and it's almost like a stain. On metal it's more like painting on a window, it's a negotiation of shapes and forms.

Do you begin your works with a clear vision?

It really depends. Most of the time I work in a very intuitive way, with the composition emerging as



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the work progresses. Now and then I come across a subject or figure that provides a kind of framework for a piece, and which makes my particular vision clearer. The portrait figure, for example a seated king or Pope, is one I often return to. I'm also very drawn to the image of the crucifix. It is a very powerful composition. It's actually very unusual for a composition to have a shape that sits right in the middle of the painting. It's something that works really well in an image.

Do religion or spiritual imagery play an important role in your work?

Religiousness is something I think that a lot of artists can relate to. Art can be a very ritualistic process. Much of the content of painting isn't factual; a painting can be the product of all sorts of accidents and arises from a whole host of different belief systems. For some, painting is akin to a religious craft, or a kind of alchemy.

Over the course of history painting has been a very powerful, even manipulative tool. Artists have built up this type of imagery, for example paintings of saints or biblical works, into something truly epic. For the longest time painting held an incredibly powerful position as the most potent and epic art form. Painting was spectacular in the sense that it represented a spectacle. It had the power to influence viewers and elicit strong responses. It was what cinema is to us today.

Would you say that art acted as a form of propaganda?

On one level it was clearly a propaganda vessel, but it was also manipulative from the artist's point of view. The artist had a job to do, which was to make the maximum impact on the viewer as quickly and powerfully as possible. The message of a painting had to be conveyed in a very short length of time, and to capture your interest straight away.

Is this still true of today's painters?

I think that the role of painters has changed greatly. Painting is longer really a vessel for propaganda, since there are now much more powerful forms of propaganda available. I would say that the artist now has a very clearly defined job. Art today, at least in the contemporary scene, is defined by what it's not; since the advent of photography, painting no longer fulfills a documentary purpose, which grants the artist a certain freedom.

As artists we are in a very privileged position, in that the market allows us to have a job. Obviously it's not always easy to make a living, but at the

same time you can get by without necessarily fulfilling the role of painter as documenter, etc. Today's artists recognize that they are creating an object in and of itself. It's like when the Cassio watch first appeared people no longer had to worry about accuracy, and from that point on any fancy complications in a watch exist solely for the purpose of being a luxury item. To a certain extent I would say art enjoys the same privilege today. It can be somewhat complacent, though that isn't something that we should necessarily embrace.

Your work seems to tread the line between figuration and abstraction. Are you more of an abstract or figurative painter?

I definitely see myself more as an abstract painter. There are many figurative paintings that I love, but I couldn't paint that way today. I think in a very abstract way. I like ideas, I think about composition, about colour, about the ways in which different elements come together in a work. It doesn't really matter to me what an object is. The experience is, for me, an aesthetic one.

Often when a work has a recognisable figure we automatically translate it into muscles, a face, we begin to ask questions about the person and their identity. When we look at something abstract, on the other hand, the experience can be more intense. Looking into the night sky we don't just see a collection of stars. At a certain point, you just appreciate that as an image in its own right. In a sense it can be a very meditative experience, although it's also incredibly stimulating for me, so perhaps meditative is not exactly the right word...

For me abstract painting can be like a drug; it has a certain intoxicating element. I felt that way in front of David Reed's paintings, and in front of some of Gerhard Richter's abstractions. I like the neutrality of abstraction; it's a universal language, and it's easy to enter into.

Are there any other artists that have inspired you in your work?

That's a really difficult question, and one whose answer changes over time. It is hard to pin down specific artists as inspiration; though I'm inspired by a lot of artists, that inspiration doesn't necessarily change the way I work. For example, I think Glenn Brown is an amazing painter, but he is not so much an emotional inspiration as a technical one for me. I think of his work as the art of using your eyes. Though his work may resonate slightly less on an emotional level, as an artist he has done so much for me. An artist that I really connect with

is Francis Bacon. I first began to develop an interest in his work at a time where I was looking at horoscopes a lot, and I found out that we share a birthday. In no way do I compare myself to him as a painter, of course, since he's one of the greats, but I think as people we share an impulsiveness, and emotional unavailability.

Finally, could you tell us about your residency programme in Israel?

All I can say is that it came out of nowhere! I am very happy to be here, and I'm enjoying every moment of it. It has been a really magical experience. I am surrounded by sky and horizontal land, and I don't think I'm going to get bored of that any time soon!

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