

A MODEST PROPOSAL: APROPOS PAINTING

By Charles Merewether

Over the course of his artistic career, Jeremy Sharma has been very much engaged into an enquiry into different modes of painting and its place as a contemporary practice in relation to a received history of modernism. More than ever, Sharma over the past two years has been spent immersed in the exercise of discovering different ways of painting, and the application of different materials such as beeswax, oils, acrylic, enamel, lacquer, photographs and graphic computer-generated images.

This exhibition offers not so much a review, but rather an exploration of what can be identified as seven modes of painting produced in these past two years. Such an exploration has been about how these modes of practice interact to create an interplay and distinction from one other. This approach may not be the normal basis of an exhibition but, notwithstanding, such an approach provides a more open sense of Sharma's internal conversation about painting. And yet, there is a hidden risk because the selection of work is not entirely based what is best or what artwork stands out as exceptional from others. Rather, it seeks to go to the heart of each path, to detect the condition and logic of each of their being.

As the exhibition seeks to present, Sharma's work takes risks, explores, teases, extends and pushes. Or, it starts again, beginning elsewhere, turning and returning at a different angle if only to move by virtue of erasing, scratching, layering, dis/closing and covering. Hence in its very beginning, it flirts with ruining itself in the process of its own making, as if conditional of its foundation. One might say this is a precarious form of risk management. The painting of Sharma leaves a trace, a trace that becomes in turn something else. This is indicative, in part, of recognition of imperfection, of a space resulting from that of negotiation between the artist and the industrialization and technology of the practice, in this case, of painting. In some cases gesture is utterly eliminated, in other cases, it is dramatised. There is nothing else. But if there is one constant, it is the idea of narrative or of an external reference is denied. It is a subject to be denied, abused, worked over, ignored, whose agency is relegated to that of 'once upon a time,' a kind of spirit life, nothing more or less than a trace. Running through all of this is the idea of failure. Control cannot be entirely subject to the artist's determination. The artist comes after working with what is given. Hence, there is a risk, always already a risk which is very real in one degree, conceptual in another.

One of the principle directions of the Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore can be defined as exploratory, that is, to be open to work in progress for which the installation of art work is seen as part of that process and that may or may not be successfully achieved. Or, perhaps we may say that an exhibition is formed through an engagement with the artist's studio, showing the workings of a studio practice, unedited to a degree and installed to reflect a sense of dialogue with or within the studio space. This choice may be akin to publishing a poet's drafts, although this is about the process of refinement of one poem and not variations or distinct work. For what is important in the case of this exhibition is to recognize not the subject or underlying schema but even behind this: the problematic or issue(s) of engagement. This should not be seen as foreclosing the matter of quality but, rather, that it opens

up the question as to how we judge the work. The question is, in part, developed on in reference to the concept of variation in a manner that recalls the music of John Cage. Each variation was a distinct work. Yet, this was not in the manner of an improvisation but, rather, was guided by an original score. In regard to the process Sharma initiates, it seems that that which is painted becomes a marker of a variation which informs the options taken next. There is no going back but, always irrevocably forward.

In the process of selection of Sharma's work within this time-frame, I identified seven paths of practice that were loosely distinguished by virtue of their medium or approach. Each of these can be characterized in a certain distinct manner. Moreover, in a manner for which each path is distinct, they also resonate with the history of art and with that of painting, in particular. In notational form I would distinguish these paths in the following manner:

i. Photo-based paintings that entail the use of photographs, that is postcards or a photo-based image that is then painted over. The process of painting over, however, does not erase the original, but allows it to survive, to be recognizable in part, almost a trace of what it was. The painting itself is abstract, uncommitted to the original. For instance, it may be a postcard of a Geisha whose face has been covered by a loaded palette of paint or, in another instance a postcard of a building is then obliterated by vertical rising strokes of paint.

ii. Loaded paintings are produced on thinly coated cardboard (picture-postcard size) surfaces. They are characterized by an intense application of paint, layered by a palette knife. Through their application, Sharma builds a form, albeit abstract, but a visceral and almost physical construction. They recall Gerhard Richter in the intensity of their construction and color. Through this intense attention to coloration and tonality, Sharma produces what appear also as playful reminders of the water lily paintings of Monet and the work of this generation of French artists. These artists gave great attention and weight to the painting itself thriving in their autonomy as surface rather than as determined by the representational or spatial. In Sharma's case, some of these works are also more confrontational in this refusal as, for instance, where a figure is drawn only to be denied, painted roughly over, almost like a smudge that pushes back the image and denies its integrity.

iii. Wax-based paintings that are, in part, a continuation of the photo-based work. However, they are larger than the postcard size, although barely define themselves as paintings. The application of wax over the surface wraps the image, gives it another exterior surface. Sharma uses 'Playboy' covers or girlie cover images from magazines, provocative in their display of themselves but now waxed up and sealed. However, this does not relegate the image to oblivion. Rather, the wax surface beckons the audience to an even closer looking, to reading the covered image. We are reminded of the field of 'scopic desire' and the erotic power of the un/disclosed, of the partially revealed. This response forces recognition of the viewer's actions to look, a response that is not dissimilar to that of looking at art.

iv. White Field paintings are based more directly on the idea of erasure and trace as a process of producing an image. Looking at Sharma's work recalls the impulse towards iconoclasm that is embedded in the history of modernism. The artist returns to the idea of an image-saturated culture out of or over which an image is so often built. There is no such thing as a tabula rasa, the step to be taken first is that of erasure. We may recall Rauschenberg's famous white painting 'Erased de Kooning' (1953). When they were exhibited for the first time, John Cage wrote a statement for these paintings "... No subject/No Image/No taste/No object/No beauty/No message/No talent/No technique.../ No idea..."

v. Prisms of Light paintings appear as that which has not been painted except as it appears as a white primer surface. Yet, by virtue of remaining exposed, this surface becomes the ground. There is no evidence of a paint brush, palette, hand or instrument of application that would become the 'signature' of the individual artist or maker. Rather, the paint has been applied by airbrush or by soaking the canvas in a bath of liquefied paint. These works mimic the style of North American color-field painting in the Sixties. They are completely antithetical to that of gesture and expression, such as in the paintings of Pollock or de Kooning for instance. The paintings of Sharma suck up the light into its surface that become the atmosphere. Depth, illusion, spatiality become incidental.



v. Striation paintings are a small group of artwork that purely attend to the marks made in the process of painting the surface of a canvas. These marks are the result of the same repetitive gesture and cause a disturbance over the across the surface as the subject itself. The paintings are about themselves, a form of ontology, a painting whose existence is by virtue of its being. In some respects, this series bear relation to that of the monochrome painting. Both carry a logic that interrupts the position if not status of the artist.

vii. Monochrome imperfect paintings that are each disrupted by simple irregularities. These irregularities occur involuntarily, generated by the canvas or the paint itself. Perception is distracted, away from the overriding concept of austerity by which the tradition of monochrome painting asserts its authority towards the incidental and minute detail. Rather, like a fly in the ointment, each painting builds its surface, only to be trumped by the occurrence of these fatal incidents.

Entering a studio of an artist is an experience of immersion because one sees art in its making. It is akin to going to a foundry to watch the making of objects. In Sharma's studio, we are in the midst of every step as if there is no boundary between them. The array of work unfinished/finished, resolved/unresolved, all together, almost indistinguishable from one another occupy different corners, walls, floor and tables, benches, window sills, table and walls, stacked, unsorted, lying on the floor, on newspapers, books, magazines or adjacent to small baths of paint and equipment for production.

This exhibition Apropos offers a space of interplay between these seven types of work, an exploration of these intersections, of their tensions and contradictions, the desire and fusion of aspiration and gentle yet persistent obsession of an artist at work.