Sensual abstracts play peek-a-boo

Jeremy Sharma uses rich textures, smoky shades and high gloss to evoke tactility and depth

review art

APROPOS: JEREMY SHARMA
ICA Gallery 2/Till May 11

huang lijie

Sensuality in grey hues is a delicious paradox nesting in artist Jeremy Sharma's paintings.

Some works are awash in greys, with betraying hints of dusty rust. Columns of midnight blue-grey and charcoal grey trespass boldly through them. And in one, streaks of cerulean play peek-a-boo from under a coat of grey.

You encounter the strange bedfellows in Enamels (vertical grey, decalcomania) (2012), a series of works at his seventh and latest solo exhibition. As the word apropos in the show title suggests, the solo is meant to be an intimate peek into the painter's artistic journey over the last two years; not unreasonable for a display of 108 works at the Institute of Contemporary Art Gallery on the Lasalle College of the Arts campus where Sharma teaches fine arts.

In a way, Sharma's smoky-shaded works embody the essence of the show, which also celebrates the vivacity of colour and paint.

One's visual pleasure in gazing at his large (1.7m by 1.2m) grey-scale abstracts and their variegated tones is heightened by the high gloss enamel paint used – the same type of paint that makes cars shiny and sexy.

This series is reminiscent of German artist Gerhard Richter's ongoing series of grey mirror works that emerged in 1991, where the back of glass panels are coloured with enamel paint.
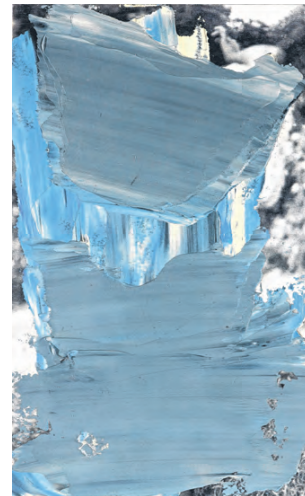
Unlike Richter's pieces, that resemble coldly reflective panels of a wall, Sharma's sleek aluminium paintings appear sheathed in a softly translucent film, giving the liquid mercury-like surfaces a touch of dreaminess.

And while Richter's work plays up the dialectic between representation and abstraction with elegiac grace, Sharma's series brings new life by intensifying the sensual. It rings true of his interest in the sensation of paint on a surface, how it responds to light and evokes tactility, illusion and depth.

In Enamels #6, the hyperflat surface is interrupted by patches. In those areas, a layer of still-wet

Jeremy Sharma's Pantheon series (above left) tease with saucy images veiled in wax. Among the artist's more conventional works are the Parergon series (above right) and the Gaussian series (right). PHOTOS: JEREMY SHARMA & INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ARTS SINGAPORE.

nia referenced in the work's title, was invented in the 18th century to transfer images onto pottery and was later used by painters to make abstract images.

The partially exposed areas, creased with wrinkles of paint, stem from Sharma's interest in the value of painterly imperfections. But they are more than carriers of Sharma's philosophical curiosity as they add tension to the surface and make the viewer itch to rip the prophylactic veneer off the work.

Layered, hide-and-seek surfaces pop up elsewhere.

In the Pantheon series (2010-2012), lad magazines with saucily clothed cover girls are cast in a mould of

magazines are attached to wooden mounts, with the grain of the wood evoking leaves of a closed book. Recent iterations are propped up at an angle on a shelf, bringing to mind tablet computers.

The beeswax surface veils the glossy covers in murkiness, yet what is less becomes more as curious spectators – interest aroused regardless of gender – peer hard to decipher what is beneath the waxy skin.

Dramatic action also occurs on the surface of his more conventional, painterly works.

In the Gaussian (seascape) series (2012), brush strokes make striations on surfaces layered thickly with paint – white, green, yellow and blue.

shimmer like sunlight dancing over waves. While the effect is reminiscent of a natural landscape, its approach has something mathematical about it: the Gaussian function of probability theory, also known as the bell curve, is alluded to in the series' name.

Indeed, Sharma works off images and pictures that have been digitally manipulated, enlarged and blurred, for the series. But he reclaims the image through painterly gestures and the use of texture.

The Gaussian seascapes themselves are a distilled and more sophisticated continuation of the artist's earlier work, 2006's Sea-Slab, in which he painted the sea as a solid slab in cross section.

Done in the last two years, the works in the show are an interesting departure from the artist's previous representational pieces. His recent paintings are an inspired study on the interaction between paint, colour and surfaces.

The show itself, however, could have done with tighter editing.

Paintings, Spectrum #3 and #4 (paintfall) (2010) feature riotous use of colour. Yet, despite the overwrought layering and removal of enamel paint from the surface, in the vein of Richter's abstract oil paintings, Sharma fails to carry this discussion of visual power and randomness further.

Similarly, some works in his Parergon series (2010-2012) lack conviction. In it, postcards of landscapes, portraits and reproductions of works by other artists such as Egon Schiele are painted over in bold gestures and often in thick layers of enamel paint.

Sharma undergirds his series with an aesthetic concept by hijacking the dense term parergon for his title. Parergon, a word coined by German philosopher Immanuel Kant, is used by French philosopher Jacques Derrida to argue against the existence of an intrinsic beauty or nature in a work of art.

The idea, however, is not articulated convincingly in his pencil drawings of simple forms, including an ellipse and stacked figures, on whitewashed postcards. The use of postcards as an anonymous surface to meditate on the purity of forms is superfluous here.

Sharma's works are most eloquent and evocative when they claim the abstract as sensual. In an age where other mediums such as computer-generated prints and installations are seen as au courant, these paintings give hope.

✉ lijie@sph.com.sg

view it

APROPOS: JEREMY SHARMA

Where: ICA Gallery 2, 1 McNally Street, B1-06, Lasalle College of the Arts
When: Till May 11, 10am to 6pm, Tuesdays to Sundays, closed on Mondays
Admission: Free