

"In Cezanne's paintings, 'edges aren't boundaries but places where paint, surging across the surface, changes color.' "

Peter Schjeldahl, 'Cezanne versus Pissarro', New Yorker magazine, 11 July 2005

Contemporary painting has been somewhat influenced by practices in conceptual art. The rise of modernity in the last 150 years has challenged the discipline with onerous taxation upon the usefulness and relevance of painting as a visual art. This is particularly in light of technological advances that have introduced photography and the multiple. Given the inescapable cascade of visual imageries across time and space with these instruments, painting itself becomes its own foil for critique, through re-evaluation and re-assertion of its practice.

The artist Boo Sze Yang was born in Singapore, and studied fine art at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Art (NAFA) where he graduated in 1991. He went on to pursue a postgraduate diploma in Fine Art in the UK, and also completed his Masters at Chelsea College of Art in 2005. As a teacher and painter, he has achieved a radical feat in merging his own experiments and practice with changing evaluations through the erudite evolution of the art within the scholastic context. In giving up his full-time post as a teacher at NAFA, Boo chose to concentrate on painting with more aggressive forays. It is this energetic burst that has led to the present exhibition, so named as the New Cathedral.

Locked in as a concept that acknowledges material culture beyond socio-cultural commentary, Boo's paintings of interiors are somewhat divorced for the social statement he articulates in words – that the shopping mall of today's world is the new sanctuary likened to a cathedral of the old world. In truth, this is not a new concept, considering that the cathedral of yore became an icon of commissioners and donors; made possible perhaps by wealth of a different kind, but a bourgeois wealth nevertheless, somewhat unrelated to the intrinsic value of the cathedral as a religious space.

Shopping malls are these modern cathedrals if you will, according to Boo. However, we overlook a critical edge if we simply accept in the first instance, this fairly rudimentary survey of shopping malls depicted by Boo's hands.

"The basic issue is this: in painting that draws much of its figurative and metaphorical depth from reference to a potentially limitless space, how is a sense of presence and concreteness to be achieved in the experience of the spectator?"¹

The reference Harrison makes to painting as a continuing tradition evaluates modern painting in the age of the Impressionists such as Monet for instance, as well as that of what came after, in painters such as Cezanne, Pissarro and Courbet. These painters challenged the mode of representation as realist during the advent of reproductive possibilities as immediate as the daguerreotype (early photography) or the lithographic transfer (print making techniques with textural accuracy). Instead, painting was evaluated as a means of invoking the depth of experience, through atmospheric constructs (such as the representation of light or changing colours). While some historians and contemporary critics may regard the Modernists as old hat, their visual conundrum was not unlike that which still dogs the contemporary painter, in his search for a new visual language that can adequately represent the cornerstones of contemporary experiences. And to say contemporary, we acknowledge the existence of flux: that globally, unbound by geography and nationalities, painting as an art, is now the practice of eternal transients, somewhat tied to, somewhat alien from, their own education and learned processes. By this we again acknowledge, that to paint in the contemporary setting is to unlearn the traditions that enabled our arrival to this very point: creating a lacuna of painterly grammar, out of which arises the soundless echoes between the palette and the brush; between the brush and the canvas; between the mind and the eye; between the act and the eye.

Painting as a practice is not simply the cerebral reflection that stows its physique in static conditions, however. For Boo Sze Yang, travels are not uncommon, and his sojourns have yielded temples and architectural splendours that are not found in Singapore or even in the average cosmopolitan city. His Angkor series studies interiors and exteriors; the passing of time and the capsule of time. His church interiors reveal an exploration of sacred and profane: a vivid study of space as concept and space as symbol. Beyond investing gestural invocations with the mastery of depiction and the gravitas of reflection, to paint the interior of a place of worship for instance, is to re-evaluate the space through making, through re-creation. The act of a gesture in paint, is to make a mark on the surface that is timeless yet time-based, implicating the moment of its manifestation. Even to remove the mark, is to take away by making another.

¹ Charles Harrison, *Conceptual Art and Painting*, MIT Press 2001, p. 110

Complete eradication would be impossible. In contemporary terms, we regard the painter's practice as one of enforcing permanence, an absolute: seeking to document, almost like photography does, the moment of death. It is a moment that exists in time, and subsequently cannot be repeated. It captures a emotive consonance, a question, an answer and a thought; a creation (to make something new) and destruction (to mark a space means to take away the void from something else).

Conceptually, to understand why painting is so important, is to believe that its potential goes beyond the representational facets of it as a means to an end, as visual art. Boo's paintings are not pictures as such. They render the impossibility of representation in an age of complex civilisation, in a time of ambivalence. This is particularly relevant for Southeast Asia and its relationship to Europe as having influenced key aspects of its artistic traditions. Painting and drawing of the traditional kind was imported into Asia in the early 20th century, and has stayed under the auspices of contemporary expression in modern and cosmopolitan societies. Boo's practice in part recognises the improbability of Western traditions to adequately represent a regional identity that resides in historical origins that are themselves fraught with contention, difference and doubt. Painting the architecture of economic infrastructures whether of malls or of churches, is more about the impossibility of real space, where layers of civilisation have existed for generations. In the cosmopolitan context, one generation of buildings gradually and surely replace another (the default of our disposable age), its usefulness or utilitarian possibilities determined by the current community that resides around that area. Migration patterns of the community largely determined by a global and mobile cosmopolis hark to the era of impermanence. And that precise impermanence responds directly to our questions of how buildings of any kind, symbolically tile our life passages to document who we are and what we do, and why those things are possible (whether we are shopping or attending religious ceremonies).

The qualitative draughtsmanship in Boo's works show a keen observational attitude becoming of both the thinker and the painter. Consequently, the renditions that apply swabs of pigment to drive form and contours, illustrate the rapid nature of transformation and change: that light changes a space every single moment of the day and the night; even artificial light, suffuses the localised environment with a staging effect that renders the mind inert but still curious. The eye travels as much as and as far as light does: this is how painting of this traditional kind or convention, responds well to the current and ever contemporary concept of how we see and why we see, what we see and why it is possible we understand what we see.

In short, to paint is also to evaluate a way of seeing: to demonstrate the possibility of seeing. The textural applications found in Boo's works are indicative of his own conscious and diligent manifestation (from pigment to canvas) borne from the exigency of his talent to not simply master, but humble his art – that the end product of the painted surface becomes a trajectory of known and unknown, and what is infinitely being arrived at.

"In fact there is no secret world for the viewer to glimpse. Art can only be made of materials that are already part of the critical consciousness of the culture as a whole – if not of its negotiable self-image. What is to be seen and faced is that which has made you what you are. The work indicates no remedy for lack of self-knowledge in this respect. The remedy is the work itself." (italics author's own)²

From the conceptual and cerebral plane, we return to the formal, and Schjeldahl's assessment of Cezanne's painting. The material consciousness corresponds to the critical consciousness. In Boo's paintings, they are like the seasonal heritage of painting convention: arising from the past, only to realise how much it has in common with the past, despite attempting to divest itself of that same past. For Boo, painting and making pictures compel transformation at levels of the formal that reveal the richness of surfaces and our physical and emotional response to those surfaces. To recognise an image is only to keep it safe; to be defamiliarised with that same image, is to set it free. This is perhaps how Boo's New Cathedral proposes the radical sum of contemporary painting in his practice and in the region.

Bridget Tracy Tan
Director
Institute of Southeast Asian Arts & Art Galleries
Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts

² Charles Harrison, *Conceptual Art and Painting*, MIT Press 2001, p. 167