

THE ARTIST ROOM

JUSTIN RUI HAN: SHATTER ZONES

22 February – 23 March 2024

Private view: Wednesday 21 February 2024 6–8pm

Opening times: Tuesday–Friday, 11am–6pm and Saturday, 12–5pm

The Artist Room presents *Shatter Zones*, an exhibition of new paintings by Justin Rui Han (b. 1999, Rochester, New York).

The exhibition's title is a term that anthropologists have appropriated from geologists. Taken from anthropologist James C. Scott's book *The Art of Not Being Governed*, it refers to areas of refuge, "where the human shards of state formation and rivalry accumulated willy nilly, creating regions of bewildering ethnic and linguistic complexity." Where in Scott's case this describes the vast highlands spanning mainland Southeast Asia, 'shatter zones' are generally peripheries resisting the oversight of state and empire. In the eyes of colonial mapmakers and would-be bearers of civilisation, such territory appears perilously confused, ill-disciplined, and all too often impassable.

Densely composed, Han's paintings are likewise comprised of shards of ungoverned material. The titles of the paintings suggest the beginnings of narrative, while a closer look reveals a patchwork of specificity: local areas of command, conflict, and exchange. Han's paint may describe objects with inviolable ties to places and cultures, but they resist identification and deny citation. The works are likewise populated by figures whose business is unknown and whose motivations we can only guess.

Tsuchigumo's Playthings depicts autonomy through the eyes of the tsuchigumo, a monstrous spider from Japanese folklore. It owes its name to tuchigumori (土隠), which in an 8th-century chronicle referred to renegade tribes who lived in caves and evaded the imperial court. Here, the tsuchigumo sits in a corner near a silk-spinning station. The objects in the painting are projections of its sadistic play. The viewer enters the bathhouse it occupies from above, dangling vertiginously. An adjacent painting, *Risk and Sanctuary*, responds to Satsuo Yamamoto's 1979 chronicle of silk production, *Oh! The Nomugi Pass*. Juxtaposing the silk workers' lodgings is a snowy landscape and hulking vehicle alluding to a promotional trans-Himalayan expedition undertaken by the automotive manufacturer Citroën. Both canvases are littered with objects, rendered in the borrowed style of ukiyo-e (translated as "floating world") woodblock prints, produced primarily in Japan between the 17th and 19th centuries. They become almost interchangeable, and there is something insidious about this slippage: an agricultural tool might be a toy; a toy might double as a shelter or a tool or a weapon.

In *Stonecutter's Revisions*, a saw cleaves a block of patterned stone, making a terrible sound. Like many of Han's paintings, it pulls imagery from anti-colonial and socialist cinema. Its architecture is drawn from Youssef Chahine's social drama *The Land* (1970), as well as from various stone workshops Han observed in Southeast Asia, including one near the reconstructed temple of Borobudur.

Fishery and Semaphore at Day's End is an ode to the sea divers of Jeju Island, South Korea. Devices for naval communication, reconstructed from models in the Rijksmuseum, puncture this windblown landscape. A lighthouse – like one used by the Dutch to mark the contours of their empire in the East Indies – casts more shadow than light, presiding over a restive archipelago.

Attendant and Desecrators depicts a terraced cemetery as a contentious site of memory and mischief. The lone attendant, sagging on his perch, is helpless to prevent the advance of grinning vandals. This painting was prompted by Han's visit to the terraced St. Michael's Catholic Cemetery in Hong Kong, a city

where traditional funerary practices have been adapted to a dense and ultramodern setting. One proposal, for instance, imagined a floating structure that would be filled with urns. The painting, however, does not belong to a single time or place: its wooden water wheel is drawn from a Chinese agricultural manuscript, and the offerings on its periphery were observed from burial grounds in Ridgewood, Queens.

Nearby, *Peddlers' Feud (A Breath of Wind Merits Release)*, which pays tribute to Djibril Diop Mambéty's revenge drama *Hyenas* (1992), documents a failure of exchange, with two merchants leaving one another. Sometimes you have to hold onto what you have and walk away. Water flows through a field of opium; irrigation opens after being closed for days.

Occupational Hazards is an accident waiting to happen. Blades sit beneath a tarp, biding their time – a form of trap drawn from a premodern military manual. Looming overhead is a skeletal structure from Lino Brocka's film *Manila in the Claws of Light* (1975). On the right, blue material is processed through a chute: the imperative of production exerts itself totally, like gravity.

In Han's work, references collide and collude, frustrating attempts to account for their origins. It is impossible to take an adequate census of them. We might ask of any of them: How did this object enter this space? What are the systems that brought it here and imported it to this place? Han's paintings emerge from curiosity and wonder in the face of an object's alterity: the beautiful and terrible forces that congeal in the presence, here – in a street market, a museum, a digitised manuscript, a film still – of something from far away.

The art historian Joan Kee asks: "How can artworks that differ from, clash with, and even undermine one another coexist without capitulating to the logic of domination and subordination?" Han's works don't necessarily provide an answer to this query, but each one proposes a specific situation of convergence, alliance, and dissensus. For the artist, a painting can aspire to produce a feeling of historic opening, as the 1955 Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung or the global revolts of 1968 did for Third World liberation. Though these events may not have produced the kinds of utopian global relationships that their participants proposed, his paintings are redolent of a dusty meeting hall, where things and nonhuman beings are substituted for people: a space for civic assembly or communion, where something yet might happen.

But it would be a mistake to say that these paintings "call back" to a golden age of solidarity or "prefigure" a pluralistic society to come. Han is drawn to objects for their indigestible complexity, their infinite internal variety. They are too particular – too peripheral – to consent to being enlisted for long. They make an appearance and keep going.

– Zach Ngin, Curatorial Assistant at MIT List Visual Arts Center

NOTES TO EDITORS

Justin Rui Han (b.1999, Rochester, New York) lives and works in New York, USA. In 2022, Han graduated with a BFA in Painting from Rhode Island School of Design, USA, and a BA in Archaeology from Brown University, USA. His paintings are imagined spaces that touch on the circulation of cultural capital, whether through trade or conquest, by way of land, sea, or survival in time. The compositions each attempt to invent new communities from existing pictorial residues. He assembles their components from film stills, direct observation, and archival sources.

Recent exhibitions include *The Lafayette Rendezvous: Contingents and Convergences*, RAINRAIN Gallery, New York City (2023); *Eccentric Spaces*, The Artist Room, London (2023); *Would That: Expressions of Possibility...*, Providence Public Library; *Arecibo: Missed Connections*, RISD Memorial Hall Gallery; *Residual Hauntings*, Gelman Gallery, RISD Museum; *Mem Hall Senior Show*, RISD Memorial Hall Gallery; *Painting Senior Thesis Show*, RISD Woods-Gerry Gallery; *Translation: 14th BRDD Exhibition*, Granoff Center for the Arts (all in Providence, Rhode Island, USA, 2022).

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