

The background of the cover is a complex, abstract composition of black and white ink and paint. It features a dense network of overlapping lines, some straight and some curved, creating a sense of movement and depth. There are large, dark, blotchy areas that suggest shadows or heavy ink applications, contrasting with lighter, more delicate lines and washes. The overall effect is one of dynamic energy and layered complexity.

CHOREOGRAPHED COLLISIONS

YEO SHIH YUN



Foreword

Yeo Shih Yun's new works in *Choreographed Collisions* mixes experimental play with serious intent. She modifies small battery-operated robotic toys and attaching makeshift brushes dipped in ink, lets them run across surfaces to create unexpected marks and surprising patterns. But this use of such an unusual art-making tool is part of her intent to surrender authorial control and overcome its set of limitations.

Working with Shih Yun has been a great pleasure. Her boundless energy, enthusiasm and dynamism materialises itself through her innovative approach, constant experimentation and openness to letting accidents and chance take a lead role.

And thank you to the tireless Kamillah Bahdar for putting this wonderful exhibition together.

Stephanie Tham
June 2014



Of Abstraction, Automation and the Anti-Gestural Paradigm

Louis Ho

"I am too accustomed to my own gestures."
—Yeo Shih Yun¹

Let's begin with what Yeo Shih Yun's latest work is *not*.

Take *Downtime* (2014), for instance: billowing over the upper portion of the canvas is a cloud of smoky grey which alternately lightens and darkens as it dissipates over the pristine background, ranging from an almost colourless pewter to a steely gunmetal and back again. In the manner of the so-called splashed ink technique of Chinese painting, or *po-mo* 泼墨, the chromatic tonalities shift with the spread of the wash. Over this soft chiaroscuro is a complex of bold, calligraphic gestures: wispy skeins and small splashes in the upper left corner gives way to thick, dynamic strokes of ink along the left section of the space, which look as if they were rendered in a particularly large brush, the bulging blotches tapering off in a dance of tendrils that resemble the bristles of the implement. Elsewhere, brushstrokes are massed in webs of dark lines that arbitrarily terminate in suspiciously straight edges. A faint path of what appears to be wheel-tracks, criss-crossed by threads of white, flows through another corner, above which is a radiating pattern of circles, limned in knife-thin lines and occasionally disrupted by messy flecks of ink.

The aesthetic lineage of Yeo's particular mode of visuality presents itself immediately. As she remarks of her forebears: "When I was at the SFAI [San Francisco Art Institute], I was introduced to the world of Abstract Expressionism. First Pollock, then I discovered other artists like Motherwell, Klein, Rothko, Frank Stella, and Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns."² The vigorous gestural strokes, the all-over quality of the surface (certain portions of empty space are covered in white paint), the visual correspondence to East Asian calligraphy – the legacy of Ab Ex in Yeo's work

is apparent, from the action-ism of Pollock to Kline's inscrutably Zen-seeming canvases.³

Her abstract use of ink on white surfaces, in particular, strongly suggests the oft-noted confluence of mid-century American art at its avant-garde best and traditional modes of East Asian visuality. As Harold Rosenberg famously formulated it, the significance of this new art was the fact that it shifted the freight of meaning from product to process:

"At a certain moment the canvas began to appear ... as an arena in which to act - rather than as a space in which to reproduce, re-design, analyze or express an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but *an event*."⁴ (emphasis added)

This event, the near mystical act of putting brush to surface, was observed by various commentators to bear more than a passing resemblance to the practice of ink painting and calligraphy; curator William Seitz identified what he termed the calligraphic brushstroke of American action painting, "which involves not only ... shape but the spirit - lyrical, violent, or tentative, in which it was executed." Elsewhere, scholar D.T. Suzuki observed of Japanese ink painting, or *sumi-e* 墨絵 - which proved a profound influence on yet another member of the New York school, Mark Tobey - that it was "poor in form, poor in contents, poor in execution, poor in material, yet we Oriental people feel the presence in it of a certain moving spirit that mysteriously hovers around the lines, dots, and shades of various formations; the rhythm of its living breath vibrates in them."⁵

To return to the opening disclaimer, however: despite the resonance with various art historical lineages, Yeo's work is not all that it seems.

Downtime - and its fellows in the same series, produced for the purposes of the present exhibition - is both less and more than what it appears to be at first glance. Contra the all too apparent parallels to other forms of aesthetic praxis, the almost knee-jerk comparisons to action painting and calligraphy, the piece is a deliberate, methodical departure from those gestural paradigms. Yeo's mark-making here does not partake of the "spirit" or the "rhythm of ... living breath" that animates the painterly strokes of a Pollock, a Kline or a Tobey; it denies those connotations of the spiritual, and the subjective. *If anything, her particular form of abstraction surrenders those very autonomies of gesture.*

The proceedings featured only two moments of direct contact between the artist's hand and the canvas: at the outset, when the initial layer of ink wash was applied, and again when successive layers of ink were screen-printed on. The first stage of production involved the pouring of ink onto the canvas, which was diluted with water - also poured on - and spread, manually, with a squeegee attached to a long handle. The movement of the wash was also manipulated by the application of air, shot with a little plastic syringe in the desired directions. Meanwhile, marks had also been made on a long scroll of paper, again with the aid of simple mechanical devices. Yeo had affixed brushes of both the painting and scrubbing variety, dipped in ink, to small, battery-operated robotic toys,⁶ and allowed these to move over the surface of the paper as and where the vagaries of chance took them. The marks thus obtained were then digitally scanned, and altered using the Photoshop program. The artist selected sections from this digital complex of marks, which ranged from long, continuous strokes to circular patterns to large splatters of ink, and rendered them onto individual silk screens. Finally, these designs were printed onto the canvas, in a manner of the artist's

choosing, in progressive layers and in both black ink and white paint.

There is of course aesthetic intentionality at work here, as well as traces of the author's hand – what Yeo has effected is not a complete surrender of intervention in the artistic process, but, rather, an abdication of the subjective and metaphysical dimensions of the discourse around gestural abstraction, its aspirations to individualistic heroism and spiritual attainment.⁷ If, as Clyfford Still opined, “a single stroke of paint, backed by work and a mind that understood its potency and implications, could restore to man the freedom lost in twenty centuries of apologies and devices for subjugation”,⁸ then it is those intimations of grand(iose) notions – male-oriented forms of thought and action (the term “potency” is telling), liberty of mind and matter – that Yeo relinquishes in her turn to largely mechanical means of art-making. She notes of her practice that “it is ... about the marks, how to get the most interesting marks without using my hands/body to create them.”⁹

Perhaps nothing could be further from the claims to personal emancipation, the expression of individual spirit, than the relinquishing of artistic autonomy to automated contrivances, the cession of the gesture to gadgets. What appears to be a visual citation of the graphological contours and inflections of the calligraphic stroke reveals itself to be, rather, the random movements of inanimate objects. The superceding of the human hand by the motion of machinery – it is a redolent theme, and one is tempted to read any number of socio-historical phenomena into it, from a sense of Weberian disenchantment to the Fordist-inspired urban landscape of post-independence Singapore.¹⁰ The last word on the topic, though, probably goes to the artist, Peter Halley, who put it such:

“Post-war abstraction was to be dominated by one overriding response to culture: spirituality and phenomenology supplanted by alienation as the guiding impetus behind abstraction ... it is the emotional blankness, emptiness and numbness of an abstract world where social relations have become as untethered as technology has.”¹¹

Louis Ho is an independent art historian, critic and curator, and is the co-editor of an upcoming journal of Southeast Asian art history, *Remote*. He has contributed articles and reviews to various publications, including books, journals and magazines, and also teaches art history at a number of local institutions.

NOTES

1 In an e-mail to the author, dated June 3, 2014.

2 E-mail to the author, June 3, 2014. Perhaps a short note on the matter of artistic influences is in order: as Yeo points out, Abstract Expressionism remains her primary reference. However, closer to home, Chinese calligraphy and ink painting, which arrived in Singapore with various waves of Chinese immigration, remains a vital contemporary practice here (even if Yeo, avowedly, does *not* look to those sources). For a brief history of cross-cultural exchanges between China and Southeast Asia during the colonial era, see Xia Shuoqi, "Nanyang Spirit: Chinese migration and the Development of Southeast Asian Art" in *Visions and Enchantment: Southeast Asian Paintings* (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum and Christie's International Singapore, 2000), pp. 18-21.

3 Kline, however, was personally less than enthusiastic about comparisons between his work and Japanese painting and calligraphy. For an account of his so-called "Asian denial", see Bert Winther-Tamaki's *Art in the Encounter of Nations: Japanese and American Artists in the Early Postwar Years* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001), pp. 56-62.

4 Harold Rosenberg, "The American action painters", *Art News*, vol. 51, no. 8 (December 1952), pp. 22-23 and 48-50.

5 Both Seitz and Suzuki are quoted in Bert Winther-Tamaki, "The Asian Dimensions of Postwar Abstract Art: Calligraphy and Metaphysics" in Alexandra Munroe, ed., *The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860-1989* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2009), pp. 145-157. The topic of Asian "influence" on the New York school has been much written about: Seitz was one of the earliest to point it out. For somewhat more recent commentary, refer to the essays in the catalogue for the Guggenheim exhibition, *The Third Mind* (cited above), as well as Charles Lachman, "The Image Made by Chance" in China and the West: Ink Wang Meets Jackson Pollock's Mother", *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 74, no. 3 (September, 1992), pp. 499-510.

6 Some of these include the Brush Robot and the Doodling Robot, educational toy models produced by Hong Kong-based manufacturer, 4M.

7 The New York school was perhaps less of a unified movement than a particular historical moment. As Michael Leja comments: "certain apparent similarities in ... [Abstract Expressionist] paintings rested upon very different sets of priorities, beliefs, and commitments." See his essay, "The Formation of an Avant-Garde in New York", in Michael Auping, ed., *Abstract Expressionism: The Critical Developments* (Harry N Abrams: New York, 1987), pp. 13-33.

8 Qtd. in Max Kozloff, "American Painting during the Cold War", *Artforum*, 12 (May, 1973), pp. 43-54.

9 E-mail to the author, June 3, 2014.

10 On the subject of Max Weber and the disenchantment of modernity, Jane Bennett's *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001) is an enlightening study. Robbie Goh has described Singapore's HDB-dominated topography as "the blank anonymity of standardised housing ... accorded with essentially Fordian methods of mass production appropriate to Singapore's state of economic development ..." See his article, "Ideologies of 'Upgrading' in Singapore Public Housing: Postmodern Style, Globalisation and Class Construction in the Built Environment", *Urban Studies*, vol. 38, no. 9 (Aug 2001), pp. 1589-1604.

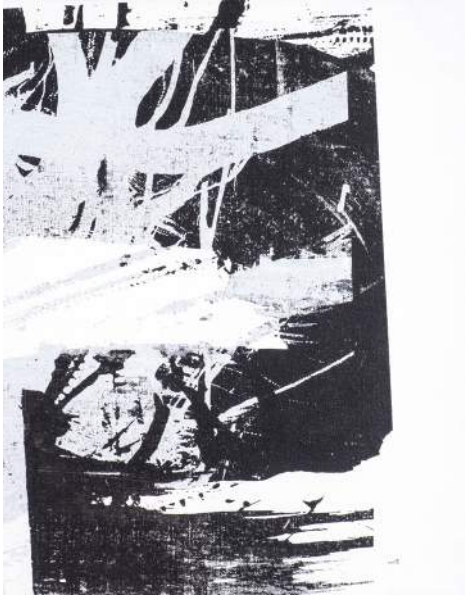
11 Peter Halley, "Abstraction and Culture" in Maria Lind, ed., *Abstraction (Whitechapel: Documents of Contemporary Art)* (London and Cambridge, MA: Whitechapel Gallery and MIT Press, 2013), pp. 137-42.



Above
frequency, 2014
digital print & silkscreen on linen
35 x 50 cm



Below
gravity, 2014
digital print & silkscreen on linen
35 x 50 cm



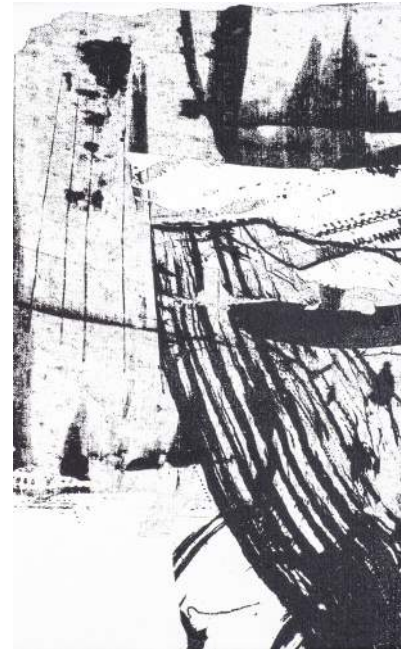
Above
burn-in, 2014
silkscreen on canvas
36 x 46 cm



Right
axis, 2014
silkscreen on canvas
36 x 46 cm



Above
fresh battery, 2014
silkscreen on canvas
36 x 46 cm



Right
harmonic, 2014
silkscreen on canvas
36 x 46 cm



Connecting the wires, 2014
ink & silkscreen on canvas
88 x 97 cm



re-charging, 2014
ink & silkscreen on canvas
88 x 97 cm



Left
uptime, 2014
ink & silkscreen on linen
130 x 200 cm



Right
downtime, 2014
ink & silkscreen on linen
130 x 200 cm



#1



#2



#3



#4



#5



#6



#10



#7



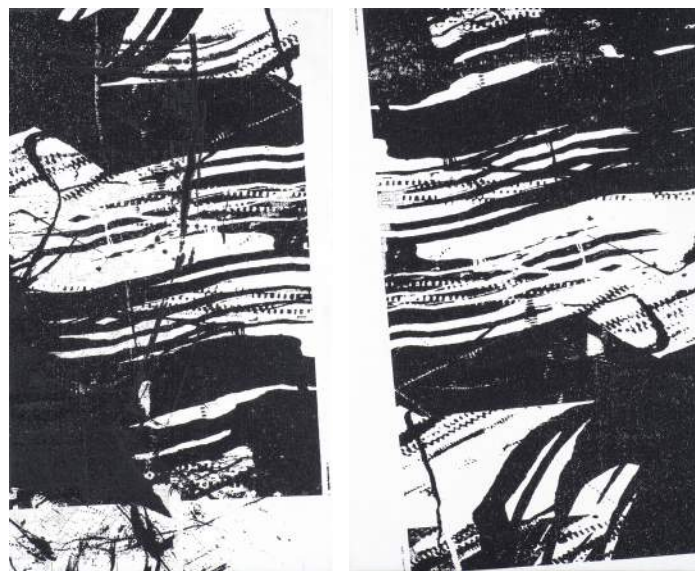
#8



#9

black wires series, 2014
silkscreen on wood
21 x 25 cm each

- L—R
#1, 25 x 44 cm
#2, 28 x 44 cm
#3, 33 x 44 cm
#4, 35 x 44 cm
#5, 26 x 44 cm
#6, 26 x 44 cm
#7, 36 x 44 cm





against the spring, 2014
ink & silkscreen on canvas
123 x 88 cm

Yeo Shih Yun

b. 1976, Singapore

Education

2002	Post Baccalaureate Program (Painting), San Francisco Art Institute, San Francisco, California	2012	<i>Robotic Love</i> (Yeo Shih Yun and Justin Lee), Youkobo Art Space, Tokyo, Japan
2001	Diploma in Communications Design (Distinction), LASALLE-SIA College of the Arts, Singapore		<i>Semi Automatic</i> , Lesley Heller Workspace, New York City, USA
1998	Bachelor of Business Administration (Merit), National University of Singapore, Singapore		<i>Rhythm Section</i> , Institute of Contemporary Arts, Singapore
			<i>Lyrical Abstraction</i> , Singapore Art Museum, Singapore
			<i>Global Village 2012, Projekt 072</i> , Alkmaar, The Netherlands

Selected Solo Exhibitions

2013	<i>Learning from Trees</i> , Art Forum, Singapore		<i>Sovereign Asian Art Prize Finalists Exhibition</i> , Marina Bay Sands, Singapore
2011	<i>Traces of Nature</i> , Community Wall, Esplanade, Singapore		<i>墨 (Ink)</i> , Jendela Visual Arts Space, Esplanade, Singapore
	<i>43200 Minutes in Munich</i> , LW44, Munich, Germany	2011	<i>New Readings</i> , Jendela Visual Arts Space, Esplanade, Singapore
2010	<i>408 Hours in Itoshima</i> , Studio Kura Gallery, Fukuoka, Japan	2010	<i>Singapore Internationale 10th Anniversary</i> , The Arts House, Singapore
2007	<i>In the Raw</i> , Knoll Gallery, Singapore		<i>Coney Island Abstract</i> , Campbell Studio, Brooklyn, New York, USA
	<i>Urbanseries II</i> , Pitch Black Gallery, Singapore		<i>Lineart 2010</i> , Flanders Expo, Ghent, Belgium
2006	<i>Black Rain</i> , INSTINC, Singapore		
2005	<i>Mini Me</i> , INSTINC, Singapore		
2004	<i>Urbanseries</i> , Anthropology Gallery, Singapore	Awards	
2003	<i>Log:one03</i> , Block43 Studio Gallery, Singapore	2012	Sovereign Asian Art Prize People's Choice Award
	<i>New Works on Paper 2003</i> , Atelier J. Larcoix, Singapore	2011	Sovereign Asian Art Prize Singapore Top 20 Finalists
	<i>Works on Paper (NEWFINDS 2003)</i> , Art Forum, Singapore	2007	26th UOB Singapore Painting of the Year Competition, Certificate of Distinction (Abstract category)
			26th UOB Singapore Painting of the Year Competition, Highly commended entry (Abstract category)

Selected Group Exhibitions

2014	<i>Project6581</i> , Japan Creative Center, Singapore	1999	18th UOB Singapore Painting of the Year Competition, Highly commended entry (Abstract category)
2013	<i>Abstract Innovation</i> , One East Asia, Singapore		

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Edition of 500 published by Galerie Steph, Singapore
Catalogue design by Vanessa Ban

With the support of



NATIONAL ARTS COUNCIL
SINGAPORE

"Choreographed Collisions by Yeo Shih Yun" exhibition presented by Galerie Steph in Singapore from 17 July through 30 August 2014 at Galerie Steph, ArtSpace@Helutrans, 39 Keppel Road #01-05, Tanjong Pagar Distripark, Singapore 089065.

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Image on front cover, inside front cover and back cover are details of *downtime*, 2014, ink & silkscreen on linen, 130 x 200 cm.



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