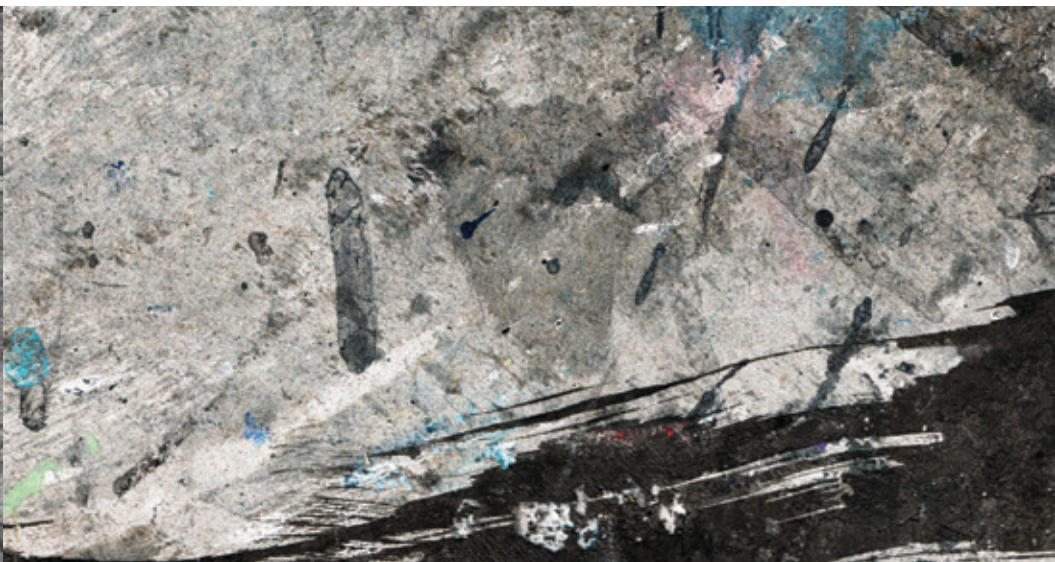


Yeo Shih Yun
Diaries, Marking Time and
Other Preoccupations



Published on the occasion of the exhibition

**Yeo Shih Yun: Diaries, Marking Time
and Other Preoccupations**

Official opening: 30 August 2018

Cover

Marking time (2011 till now) #1, #2 and #4 (detail),
2018. UV print on gesso board, 30cm x 90cm each.
Edition of 5 (A/P). Collection of the artist

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NUS MUSEUM

University Cultural Centre
50 Kent Ridge Crescent
National University of Singapore
Singapore 119279

T: (65) 6516 8817
E: museum@nus.edu.sg
W: museum.nus.edu.sg

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(Extra)ordinary, 2018. Acrylic and silkscreen
paint on found fabric, 300cm x 150cm.
Collection of the artist

Exhibition Preparations – Mulling Things Over

Foo Su Ling

Since 2015, NUS Museum has presented a permanent display of Chinese inks in our Lee Kong Chian Gallery. Ink paintings of the traditional genre are installed along with “more current articulations” to motivate research into the development and evolution in the medium.¹ To further the discussions on Chinese ink, temporary exhibitions are organized to showcase the increasingly diverse approaches and techniques emerging from contemporary ink practitioners. The exhibition *Scholars and Ink: Artists from NUS and the Alumni* in 2015 was a group show of five artists, including Yeo Shih Yun who presented works from her series *Conversation with Trees*. The curatorial essay accompanying the exhibition discussed the centrality of the “brush” as a tool for conveying ink to paper while noting that over time, the techniques used to manipulate this device, and indeed its very form, have taken unexpected turns.² The present exhibition revisits that preliminary observation of Shih Yun’s novel deployment of the brush and furthers the survey of her practice, particularly her conception of artworks that involve initially selecting the parameters to control and thereafter allowing spontaneity to take its course.

When NUS Museum first began discussing with Shih Yun about an exhibition, she was in the midst of finalizing the publication of her book *Inkpulse: The Art of Yeo Shih Yun* which consolidates her practice from 2000 to 2017. The book gave us an insight into Shih Yun’s evolving interests and approaches in art making and provided information for developing a broad curatorial consideration for the exhibition. Shih Yun agreed that her ongoing fascination with capturing “moment[s] that cannot be repeated” would make an interesting point from which we could start to think about the project.³ She sees time as a continuum of transient and unique moments and seeks to make art that “freezes” the ephemeral occurrences around her. As discussions progressed, the studio emerged as an unexpected treasure trove for advancing this artistic idea in the form of random marks found on the floor and on a piece of cloth. These marks – each a remnant of an instance of artistic activity – are mobilized for two works that are central to this exhibition – *Marking Time and (Extra)ordinary*.⁴ The marks are also records of Shih Yun’s sustained interactions with the studio and prompted ruminations on the role of this physical space in art making.⁵ Over the years, Shih Yun maintained a studio in several locations, each with differentiated spaces and resonance. These varying environments correlate to shifts in formal and conceptual approaches in her practice, and offers an avenue for examining the relationship between the artist and her studio, and its potential as a laboratory of creation and improvisation.

Shih Yun introduces the element of randomness into her paintings by including alongside her own gestures the marks of toy robots or tree branches. The interplay of accident and intent – chance art – has a long history among art practitioners. Mi Youren, a Chinese painter of

the Southern Song period developed the style of applying watery ink dots to form mountain ranges shrouded in mist.⁶ Eighteenth century English painter Alexander Cozens, referring to Leonard da Vinci’s precedence in finding inspiration from stains on old walls, splashed blots on to paper which he then built up into images of landscapes.⁷ Jackson Pollock moved his brush and sometimes a paint can through the air, allowing the falling paint to form seemingly chaotic images on canvas. Mi, Cozens and Pollock were not entirely in control of the form that a splosh would take or how the paint would pool and spread – chance was at play here. Yet, the random marks in their art cannot be said to have been the result of absolute chance; the coincidental outcomes were introduced through conscious and inspired methodology. Pollock’s technique allowed him to replicate again and again the colourful and dense network of squiggles that gave the same basic texture and consistency to his paintings. On Pollock’s production of all-over paintings, artist Allan Kaprow wrote that “We accept this innovation as valid because the artist understood with perfect naturalness “how to do it”. Employing an iterative principle of a few highly charged elements constantly undergoing variation... Pollock gives us an all-over unity...”⁸

A similar attention to methodology defines Shih Yun’s practice. Preparing for a work like *Choreographed Collisions*, for instance, involves first organizing a team of toy robots as her aides in random mark making.⁹ The motions of the robots produce webs of haphazard lines and curves that are void of any visual intent. Shih Yun selects the marks and transfers them to a final canvas with silkscreen printing and to the piece she adds her own brushstrokes that are contingent on the prevailing aesthetic order of the image. Here, we come to another aspect of chance art, which is that its final aesthetic quality is rarely ever a product of absolute chance. With each layer of paint, Shih Yun pauses to look at the work before taking the next step. If she is unsure, she gives herself a longer time to consider, and she knows when a composition has achieved the optimal tension of positive and negative spaces. This is artistic intuition at work and is the kind of instinct that chance cannot substitute.

As we discuss Shih Yun’s strategies for making random marks, my attention was drawn to a set of five images from 2015 that are printed on round frames. They were made by loudspeakers that the artist had set up to play “We are Singapore”, a song composed for the nation’s 1987 National Day celebrations. We picked this set of artworks as another example of the unexpected outcomes from Shih Yun’s use of diverse objects as a “brush”. A few weeks later, we heard the announcement that the song had been revived and updated for this year’s National Day – an unanticipated addition to our exploration of coincidences!

Foo Su Ling is a curator at the National University of Singapore Museum.

¹ Chang, Yueh Siang. “Scholars & Ink” in the publication for the exhibition *Scholars & Ink: Artists from NUS and the Alumni*. Singapore: NUS Museum, 2015. 3.

² Ibid. 3.

³ Yeo, Shih Yun. “LOG : ONEO3” in Kelly Cheng, ed. *Inkpulse: The Art of*

Yeo Shih Yun. Singapore: INSTINC, 2017. 44.

⁴ “Of Art and Other Preoccupations: Conversations with Yeo Shih Yun” in this volume. “The Studio” and “Pictures and Process”.

⁵ Ibid. “The Studio”.

⁶ Lian, Duan. “Paradigm Shift in Chinese Landscape Representation” in *Comparative Literature: East & West* (Vol. 1, No. 1). 96-113. Accessed August 13, 2018. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/25723618.2017.1339507>

For other innovations by Tang and Song painters, see Lachman, Charles. “The Image Made by Chance” in China and the West: Ink Wang Meets Jackson Pollock’s Mother” in *The Art Bulletin* (Vol. 74, No. 3, Sep. 1992). 499-510. Accessed August 10, 2018. https://www.jstor-org.libproxy1.nus.edu.sg/stable/3045896?seq=2#page_scan_tab_contents.

⁷ Turner, Christopher. “The deliberate accident in art: Blots” in *Tate Etc.* (Issue 21, Spring 2011). Accessed July 31, 2018. <https://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/articles/deliberate-accident-art>

⁸ Kaprow, Allan. “The Legacy of Jackson Pollock” in *Art News* (57, No.6, October 1958). Reprinted in Pepe Karmal, ed. *Jackson Pollock: Interviews, Articles and Reviews*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1999. 87

⁹ “Of Art and Other Preoccupations: Conversations with Yeo Shih Yun”. “Pictures and Process”.

We are Singapore: Lion Roar, Life, Stand Together, Future, Peace, 2015. UV print on plexiglass, 30cm diameter each. Edition of 5 (2/5). Collection of the artist



Of Art and Other Preoccupations: Conversations with Yeo Shih Yunⁱ

THE STUDIO

FSL: When you first started your art practice, you worked from home but later decided to set up your studio in a separate location. Do you still maintain a workspace at home?

YSY: No, my workspace at home is just a study room where I do the ‘boring’ things like checking emails, writing and printing proposals, etc. The room is not large so after placing the study table, there is not much space left. At home, I read and write down any ideas I may have in my notebook. All art creation is done in my studio.

FSL: The surroundings of the studio as a source of artistic inspiration is something that you have spoken about. During your residency in Norway, the ocean prompted paintings made with the movement of twigs through pools of ink.¹ There is also the video that we initially considered for the exhibition in which you recorded the reflections on the water surface with the changing daylight. Over the years, your studio was in different locations in or near the historical heart of Singapore. Did the rich past or present landscape of these areas influence your artworks?

YSY: Yes, the surrounding is important and it inspires you in a way you are not aware of. Only looking back at the works do I begin to see the influence of the studio space on them. Just after I came back from San Francisco in 2002, I worked from home, in my room or the living room. The works were kind of constraint. Then in 2004 I decided to rent a space in New Bridge Road, on the 4th floor of a commercial shophouse. The 1st floor was a shop selling all kinds of traditional snacks. It was always bustling in Chinatown and that somehow influenced the paintings in *Urbanseries* where I mixed acrylic and Chinese ink on the

same canvas.² The works also have a lot of energy and are colourful, subconsciously influenced by the beat of Chinatown I guess...

This space had two sections – the exhibition area for INSTINC and a huge uncovered balcony which I used for my studio. I put up a canopy to get some shade but I needed to bring the works inside every time I finished my painting session so that they won’t get wet when it rained. The paintings were somewhat smaller in size.

In the same year, I met Valerie Ng and Wyn-lyn Tan, both abstract painters and we hit it off immediately. They were looking for a studio space and found a cool shophouse in Emerald Hill, it was a fantastic location in the heart of Orchard Road but very quiet and conducive for art making. We used the bedrooms as our studios and the living room as the exhibition space. It was awesome but this lasted just one year as the landlord had the intention of a major renovation. My works grew in size as I no longer needed to keep taking them in and out like I did in the Chinatown studio. After the lease ended in Emerald Hill, I moved to a shophouse in Mohamed Sultan with my NUS classmate Sophia Ang who has her own publicity company and another printmaking artist Chan Mei Hsien. It was a beautiful longish space with great lighting and much bigger than the room I had at Emerald Hill. In here, I was doing medium and large works and with the larger space, I also started using silkscreen in 2007.

FSL: Your current studio is in an industrial estate on the western side of the island. What prompted you to choose this space?

YSY: After the rental at Mohamed Sultan expired, the property market boomed and it became quite hard to get



Scanning the studio floor for the making of *Marking Time*
Images courtesy of Yeo Shih Yun

the same rates that I had paid in the past for an accessible location. After unsuccessfully looking for some time, I discussed with my mum about using a SOHO space that she owns at Clarke Quay for INSTINC and also my studio. The timing was just nice as it was empty so in 2009 I moved in and used the loft as my studio. I had a hard time with my larger works as the space is small and the ceiling is just two meters. After two years, when the INSTINC artist-residency took off, I moved out of the Clarke Quay studio. I was looking for a location that is connected by expressways and not too far out and found this industrial space in Bukit Batok. It is convenient. There are many food places just downstairs and hardware stores nearby. It is also near Clementi center where I can get almost anything I need and is just a 15-minute drive from my house. My current studio is the longest I have been in, almost 8 years. I am very happy with this studio and the bonus is that it has a private bathroom where I can wash my tools and silkscreens.

FSL: One of our early discussions was about presenting an artwork conceived from your fascination with the ephemeral nature of life. You then came up with the idea of using the markings left on the surfaces of your studio; each drip, smear and patch being a record of a distinct moment of artistic labour. The piece *Marking Time* emerged from this discussion and you chose the marks on your studio floor over those on the large work table or the wall. Can you tell us a bit more about this choice?

YSY: When I walk on the streets or in carparks, I am always fascinated with the marks on the ground, some are paint stains and oil stains left by cars. They give this sense of “freedom”, they are not placed there on purpose but are “happy accidents”. One day, I was looking at my studio floor and I had a lightbulb moment – there is this gold mine right there, all 8 years of marks accumulated on a single surface ready to be tapped! I was not interested in the marks on my table or wall as they are not the main surfaces

that I paint on. The table is mostly for cutting and placing paints and tools while the wall is used occasionally when I prop up a painting to look at it. Painting and silkscreen work are done on the floor. I can relate to what Jackson Pollock describes: “On the floor I am more at ease. I feel nearer, more a part of the painting, since this way I can walk around it, work from the four sides and literally be in the painting.”³

To prepare for the work *Marking Time*, I went around the floor to look for the marks that I found interesting and placed masking tape around them. My idea was to scan and recompose them in Photoshop, then print on a substrate that looks and feels like paper. I did not want glossy materials like plexiglass or metal. In the end, I chose UV print on gesso boards, with a white border at the top and bottom to allow the marks to stand out.

I encountered many technical difficulties documenting the marks on the studio floor. The image from the hand-held scanner was quite dark and the flat-bed scanner does not have a removable lid so it was hard to flip it around to scan the floor. Taking photographs was not ideal as the light source makes certain marks appear shiny. It was only during a work trip in Seoul that fellow artist Wei Xin recommended a scanner that was just right for this task. Really thankful to her for sharing this with me.

PICTURES AND PROCESS

EL: With recent technologies, do you see your practice taking a digital turn towards the use of software, stylus and tablet rather than brush and canvas? Your work with toy robots already involves digitizing the marks of the robots so incorporating your own compositions digitally seems like a natural step forward.⁴

YSY: I do like to use technology, it is only natural as I

ⁱ These edited texts are from the dialogues between Yeo Shih Yun (YSY), Foo Su Ling (FSL) and Eunice Lim (EL) between May to July 2018. Eunice Lim is an undergraduate at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, National University of Singapore. She was an intern at NUS Museum.



Using the silk screen as a painting tool
Images courtesy of Yeo Shih Yun

have a graphics design background so incorporating scanning and using Photoshop is second nature. Having said that, I am still fascinated with the tactile quality of ink and paint. Many of my friends have gone fully digital and use iPads for drawing which eliminates the need for a physical studio and inventory of paintings. It's pretty innovative but that is not my cup of tea. I just love mark-making with free-flowing ink, its organic nature, the unpredictability when you mix mediums together, the splatters (that you can and cannot control), the materiality of physical medium. Robert Motherwell said that painting is like wine in that it is old, simple and primitive but with vast expressive potential. Going digital is just too "un-primitive".

FSL: Let's talk about your explorations with ink – you have used ink on unusual mediums like 16mm film, applied it with 'tools' such as frozen ink cubes and rollerblades, and also used it in powdered form.⁵ How much further do you think you can stretch this medium?

YSY: There are so many surfaces which I have not tried. For example, the series *Marking Time* made for this exhibition is printed on gesso board which is a material that I have not used in the past. Today we really have a lot of interesting mediums for art making compared to say 30 years ago when you could only think of paper, wood, canvas or linen. I am excited about all these new materials and how they can be used differently, even light boxes and neon lights. I would like to do larger installations and video works with techniques and forms of expression that reflect my time, context and experiences. Sometimes, when a traditional material is used in a new way, there is a twist and something interesting is created. I like this idea of chasing opposites like old and new, nature and technology, traditional and modern, organic and precision, raw and polished, black and white. So far I have explored mainly paintings, drawings and prints. With time, my



Work in progress for *Choreographed Collisions*

experimentations will hopefully lead to diverse applications and interpretation of the ink aesthetics.

FSL: Black is the predominant colour in your works, but there are occasions when you incorporate other colours. What prompts the use of additional colours?

YSY: I started my art exploration in San Francisco Art Institute in only black and white, nothing else. When I came back in 2002, I used some colours in *Urbanseries*. I am always oscillating between the black and white and colour phases, it adds variety. Even if you like a certain thing, you can't have too much of it, and in my art practice I like to work in these phases: monochrome to colours, small scale to large scale, nature (trees) and technology (robots).

(Extra)ordinary is one of two works in this exhibition with multiple colours. I was not consciously working on it but it kind of found its way into the exhibition. It started when I used this curtain from my old studio to clean Chinese brushes. Ink sticks to the brushes and it is very difficult to get them completely clean again so there is always this light tone of grey that remains. In *(Extra)ordinary*, you see some of these light grey tones near the edges. I didn't think much of it and continued to use it as a rag. At one point, I was using blue paint for some works and after cleaning the brushes and rollers, blue stains were left on the cloth. Then it started to get interesting. When I opened this rag, there were many marks which looked very organic. There was even some silk screen paint on it because I had used the cloth as support while doing my silk screen work years back. The colours blend into the fibres of the fabric and both sides can be seen... I was attracted to the translucent quality of the piece and decided to work on it. I am a fan of Helen Frankenthaler and this work is inspired by her colour-field paintings. I poured ink and paint on the cloth and let it seep through.

The next day, the cracklines of the cement floor had transferred to the cloth too. I added brush strokes and marks from screen print till I was satisfied with it. I am thrilled to present this piece in the exhibition. Seems like the dark horse to me.

FSL: Your practice deals with abstraction but there are a few artworks which may be recognizable as representational. In the series *Conversation With Trees*, you painted what appears to be branches and trunks in response to the marks made by the trees.⁶ *Urbanseries* was influenced by the density, clutter and bustle of Chinatown which makes it tempting to see the prevalence of rectangular blocks in the paintings as architecture.⁷ Is this your way of synthesizing the abstract expressions of modern art with the earlier tradition of representation?

YSY: I never really thought about the works in the way that you described... For *Conversation With Trees*, my main concern was how to create balance in the composition. The marks of the trees were all tiny and sketchy and I needed to add something that had weight to the whole painting and hence the trunks appeared in the works. Otherwise the painting will not be balanced and will lack contrast. In my works, I use many elements of design like balance, contrast, harmony, movement, rhythm etc. They are all at the back of my mind, I don't consciously think about them but they are there...

FSL: Artists use preparatory sketches to conceptualize the eventual form of an artistic production. Your preparatory work, on the other hand, is engaged with the meticulous design of process and the methodology for execution.⁸ The markings that arise from the process are random and to this you include your own gestures that are spontaneous. In starting without an anticipated final image in mind, how do you decide when to stop?

YSY: Before I start on a piece, I decide exactly which series to work on, for example the series *Choreographed Collisions* in this exhibition. I think about the size that I want the work to be, I prepare the linen, stretch it on a wooden stretcher, prepare the gesso and coat the linen, usually with a minimum of three layers. I make in advance the silkscreens with marks of the toy robots and bring out the paints and tools that I want to use. All these are the preparatory works for me. It takes weeks to months to conceptualize and manufacture.

For paintings like *Choreographed Collisions*, I first pour the ink and use a large scraper or brush to make some kind of movement/gesture on the linen. As the ink is mixed with a lot of water, I let it dry for a day and this also gives me time to look at the painting. The silkscreens are tools, like brushes, and I choose the ones that I feel

would work best for the painting. This process goes on repeatedly with layers of my brushstrokes and layers of marks from the silkscreens. I add but remove too, sometimes covering the previous marks, choosing which ones should surface and which would reside. Playing with negative and positive space, interchanging the negative and positive spaces, balancing blacks and whites, all these create tension in the painting. A lot of time is spent looking at the work and waiting for layers to dry. I do this till I feel that the painting is complete. Sometimes when I am unsure, I leave the painting out for a longer time instead of being too impulsive and adding strokes straight away. Less is more, always. You can add if it is really necessary but once you add too much, it is doomed. Like when you add too much salt into your dish, it's ruined.

How do I know when to stop? That is the art of "painting abstract" I guess. In the same way, the art of cooking, art of composing music... when does a composer know when his piece is done... when does a chef know it's time to stop adding more ingredients to the dish? It has a lot to do with experience, intuition and balance. Is the painting/music/dish interesting? Does it have a focus? Is it balanced? I stop when I feel that the work does not need anything extra, when an extra stroke or mark may throw everything off balance...

FSL: Art critic Harold Rosenberg suggested that the abstract expressionist "no longer approached his easel with an image in his mind". The gestures of the artist as he interacts with the canvas are spontaneous and this absence of premeditation gives an outcome that "must be a surprise" even to the artist himself.⁹ Does this describe your sentiment when you step back and look at a painting that you have just completed?

YSY: Yes this describes very well how I feel. Rosenberg's most famous quote is "At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another 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."¹⁰

This may sound a bit cliché but when we are painting, we become one with the painting. We are completely engrossed. So much is going on on the painting, I am concerned with moving the paint, controlling the tool I am holding, managing the amount of paint and water. It is a great multi-tasking juggle and once that 'event' is over, I look at the painting and discover interesting parts of it that I was not aware of earlier, in a way "surprising" myself. Sometimes the surprise is pleasant and sometimes less so.

WOMEN IN ART

EL: There are as many women as men graduating from fine art schools but career gaps emerge between them afterwards.¹¹ British artist Tracy Emin believes in being either “100 per cent mother or 100 per cent artist”.¹² It reflects the notion that mother and artist are equally demanding roles and pursuing both concurrently is an aspiration that is bound to fail. On the other hand, there are women who challenge this mindset and for whom motherhood has enhanced an appreciation of intimacy, bringing greater sensitivity to their artworks.¹³ How has it been like for you juggling the roles of mother and artist?

YSY: Coincidentally, I just watched Ali Wong on Netflix and she said that after the birth of her baby girl people asked how she balances career and family. No one will ever ask a man this and it is a sexist question, Ali quipped. I feel that nothing is absolute, everything in life is inter-connected and can inspire art. When I paint, I am 100% artist and I do not think of anything else for that moment. Sometimes I have music in the background and put my mobile to silent mode so that I can focus on the painting. My art career stopped for five months when my child was born and after that I was invited to an artist residency in Youkobo Art Space in Tokyo. It was invigorating to get back into action!

Time management is extremely important. After my son arrived, I felt that I learnt to make optimal use of my time in the studio. Having said that, it doesn't mean I have to be productive and painting every single second. Sometimes I go to the studio just to read, put my thoughts/ideas down and look at unfinished paintings to think of solutions for the next session. I do not have the luxury of going to all the openings, late night events and overseas trips but I am now more selective in what I attend. Having a supportive family is very crucial, my husband, mother-in-law and mum help with the care of my son at times. I feel very blessed to have them around. Maybe if I live overseas, I may not be able to practice as I will not have this support structure. A schoolmate from San Francisco Art Institute told me that after her children were born, she stopped painting totally.

Being a mum and artist – both roles bring different challenges as well as immense joy and satisfaction. I think this journey has made me a stronger artist, more focused and better at multi-tasking. Contemporary Chinese artist Lin Tianmiao asserts that motherhood is not a debilitating factor but a strengthening boost. She said this which I totally agree with: “Becoming a wife and mother changes you dramatically, both emotionally and physically. Motherhood makes you strong, and also very, very

sensitive. You have to become stronger and also enlarge your whole approach to life.”¹⁴

EL: You count among your art heroes the artists associated with the abstract expressionist genre including Jackson Pollock, Robert Motherwell and Mark Rothko.¹⁵ The abstract expressionist movement was dominated by male artists and the women who worked in this domain struggled to find a voice.¹⁶ Corinne Michelle West, for instance, used the name Michael in the belief that it gave her more opportunities.¹⁷ Yet, you were not put off by the historical gender-biased baggage of this genre. I think it has to do with the adventurous nature of your character, something that also reveals itself in your experimentation with medium and process.

YSY: When I was studying in San Francisco Art Institute, I went to SFMOMA whenever I could as we had free access as students. The paintings that spoke to me most were the ones by the abstract expressionist painters but I did not initially know of this movement. It was only after more research that I found that the artists whose works I admired were all part of this group. I became quite obsessed with reading the books and catalogues that featured these artists, especially the writings of Robert Motherwell who wrote the most. The more I read, the more I could relate to them and this made me aspire to paint like them. I did not look at them as men but as great artists. When I returned to Singapore, I kept on painting in this manner and never looked back. I never really gave the question of gender biasness much thought as it didn't matter to me whether they were men or women. In the end, it is the work that is most important.

EL: Female artists are underrepresented in the collections and exhibitions of institutions and galleries and the fact that there are still shows specially organized to bring awareness to their works is an indication that the imbalance remains very much a reality.¹⁸ Do you feel that the art scene in Singapore has been favourable to the development of women artists?

YSY: I don't feel that Singapore is unfavourable for women artists. There are many of us with successful art careers like Jane Lee, Sarah Choo, Grace Tan, Dawn Ng and Donna Ong, to name a few. There are opportunities in Singapore and abroad and you just need to seize them.

Brazilian artist Lucia Koch has this to say: “Focus on your work and what you feel you need to do, rather than on what people expect you to do. It's not about pleasing others. Stand for your work and rest assured that it will have the space, lighting, and the context it needs. Work hard, think hard, do not get satisfied easily, no matter if you're a woman or not (a woman artist can give advice to



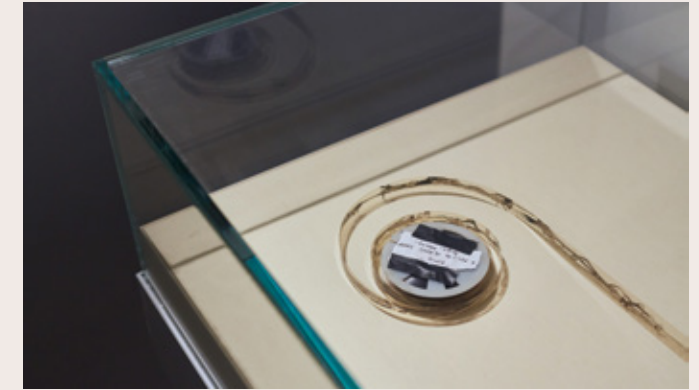
Marking Time #3 and #4

men, too). Avoid participating in “women artists” shows. They are made to keep us constrained in a category, as if we are not just artists, like men are. Have you seen shows of only male artists? A lot, of course, but it's not written in the title or part of the curatorial statement.”¹⁹ Next week, I am participating in an exhibition at the Hong Kong Visual Arts Center that is curated by a female curator, Hilda Chan. There are 5 female artists from Hong Kong and 2 female artists (including me) and 3 male artists from Singapore.²⁰

COLLABORATING WITH ARTISTS

FSL: You started INSTINC Studio followed by INSTINC Artist-In-Residence programme and two years ago, you formed INSTINC Collective. INSTINC Studio was already a platform where you invited artists to collaborate and exhibit. What then motivated the latter two initiatives?

YSY: Back in 2008, I was active in residency programs in Europe. I was accepted to one in Brussels called the Bains Connective which was in a defunct swimming pool. It was a 3-month residency and during that period of time I was invited with 11 other artists to an artist colony in Lendava, Slovenia for 10 days. We were each paired randomly with another artist and the idea was to create a series of works together with someone you were meeting for the first time. I was paired with the only other Asian, his name is Hirofumi. Through chatting with him, I discovered that he was running a small residency from his home in Fukuoka, Japan. I told him I was keen to start one myself but thought that I needed a large space to do so. Hirofumi enlightened me with his approach of starting small. He would invite one artist each summer from Berlin. He was very inspiring and I started INSTINC Artist-In-Residence programme the following year in 2009. I enjoy the company of artists and having this programme means that I get to meet people from different parts of the world



Paintings in Chinese ink on 16mm clear film strip

who are connected by a passion for art making. From hosting one artist in 2009, we grew to three a month. I learnt different techniques from my interactions with them and it was not just visual artists that we hosted but also dancers, photographers and musicians. Such experience and exchange is special and priceless to me. I still keep in touch with many of them and a few have become good friends whom I meet up with in different cities. To date, INSTINC has hosted more than 70 artists.

INSTINC Collective was started two years ago. We wanted to get together a group of artists, not just from Singapore but all over the world, who would meet at least once a year to exhibit works with no constraints from institutions or galleries. The works that we show are as much for ourselves as for the viewers. We exhibit our latest works and get feedback from one another. I believe in this synergy – one piece of coal on its own can burn but it won't last very long, put the pieces in a pile and they generate a bigger fire and much more heat. Each artist has connections in his or her city and local knowledge so we can have shows in different parts of the world. Travelling is enriching and combining it with an art exhibition is divine. It is a simple idea, like friends sharing a good meal or watching a movie together or musicians jamming, an exhibition is the artists' way of connecting, interacting and sharing.

FSL: Artist collectives usually grow quite organically with members who are resident in the same geographical location but INSTINC Collective was based on the idea of an international community. Is this in response to a globalizing world that is increasingly interconnected? How do artists join INSTINC Collective?

YSY: I feel that art, like music, is universal. I'm not fond of labels like “Singapore art”, “Singapore artist” or “Singapore collective”. INSTINC Collective is for artists from everywhere, regardless of age, race, religion or

media. They only need to be engaged in contemporary art. Technology has changed the world, how we live and connect with one another. The only thing that works against us is time difference but physical distance is no longer an obstacle. With Facebook, Instagram and chat apps, we are constantly sharing ideas and art with one another, it is as if we are all in the same space.

I started INSTINC Collective in 2016 with a good friend Chang Hui Fang. She is an artist from Taiwan who is now based in Singapore. I sounded out to her this idea of a collective with the motivation for exhibitions and exchange with other artists. She liked the idea and that is how we got started. We first invited a few artists that we knew and whose works we admired like Ulrich Lau and Justin Lee. This was followed by an open call to recruit members. Our slogan is "Artists, dream makers, creators, geniuses, if you eat, sleep and breathe art, JOIN US". We had a membership of 15 artists after the first open call in 2016. We rejected a few whom we felt did not fit with our philosophy or whose works did not match up. The difference between INSTINC Collective and some of the others is that the membership is just for one year, so artists can join and leave anytime. If an artist is too busy with other projects or simply doesn't like the group dynamics or how we do things, then he or she leaves and there are no hard feelings.

We had another open call in 2017. Some artists stayed, some left and there were new artists who joined too. I recently met with the members of our collective and suggested changing from the open call method to a nomination system which allows an artist to join us if more than half of our members support the nomination.

FSL: So with today's communications technology, geographical distance poses little challenge to group dynamics?

YSY: There is actually not much difference when compared to working on joint projects with local artists. We use the same systems – emails for information like deadlines and submission guidelines, WhatsApp for on-going discussions and brain-storming and Google Drive to upload project information. So really, technology has helped to make us much closer.

EL: Collectives tend to have some overarching vision; it may be fostering experimentation and social engagement,

cultivating innovation in the traditional art forms, or embracing a distinctive aesthetic style through their projects.²¹ Is there a core philosophy or goal that the members of INSTINC Collective share?

YSY: To be honest, we do not have a very clear and distinct collective voice yet. This is something that needs time, like fine wine, it gets better with age, the best is yet to come... I have been following a collective from Japan called teamlab. It was founded in 2001 by Toshiyuki Inoko and has 400 members from various disciplines like art, architecture, science and design.²² Each project is a huge collaboration. They are very successful in large-scale immersive digital media works with many shows in museums and commissions from institutions. I think one of the factors of their success is that they have had time, a good 17 years, to perfect the model that works for them. INSTINC Collective is still very much a baby and we need to time to suss one another out, do more projects, figure out what works and what doesn't ... it is a long journey and it won't be easy. The thing that ties us together is just this vision I have had for INSTINC since day one: cultural exchange, collaboration and friendship. I am confident that if each and every artist in the collective is fully committed to these ideals, we will move forward together.

EL: Besides collaborating with other artists, some artists who have spouses in the creative arena produce works as a duo. There are also artist couples who engage in frequent conversations about art, but maintain their individual practice as separate and distinct.²³ Your husband is in the creative industry. Have your artistic journeys intersected along the way in the form of joint projects?

YSY: He studied classical animation after doing computer engineering in NTU and loves art and design. I can share my works with him freely and he understands me as an artist. Whenever I need help to do 'geeky' stuff like editing my films to fit into the scrolls (*Diary: 4-15 April 2009, Bergen, Norway* in this exhibition) and converting my films to different formats, he is the person I go to, kind of like my personal IT consultant. I have always wanted to turn my 2D paintings into 3D sculptures with his expertise on 3D modelling but we haven't found the time to do it. He is extremely busy with his media school and it is difficult. Hopefully we will create a great work together one day!

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- 5 Lenzi, Iola. "New Readings: Chinese Ink and its Aesthetic in the 21st Century" in Cheng 2017. 153. Yeo used graphite powder in her series *We Are Singapore* (Yeo, Shih Yun. "We Are Singapore" in Cheng 2017. 292-299).
- 6 Yeo, Shih Yun. "Conversations With Trees" in Cheng 2017. 166-167, 176-177, 188-191.
- 7 Yeo, Shih Yun. "Urbanseries" in Cheng 2017. 66-80. Yeo also reflects on the influences of Chinatown on *Urbanseries* in this conversation (see "The Studio").
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Robot paintings and other tools

Marking Time #1 and #2 (right) and
Diary: 4-15 April 2009, Bergen, Norway (left)





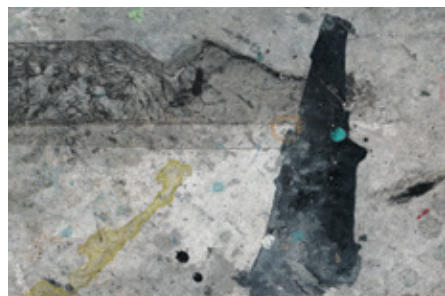
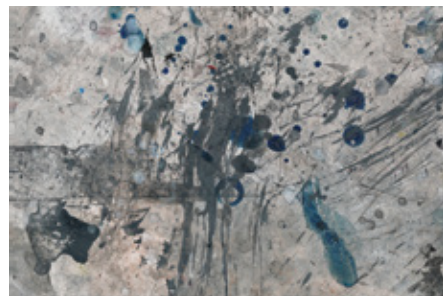
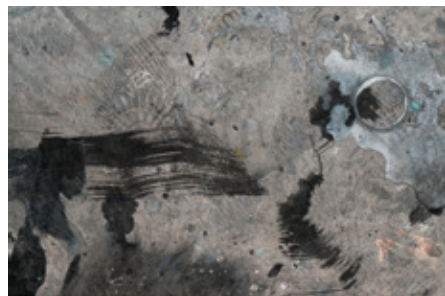
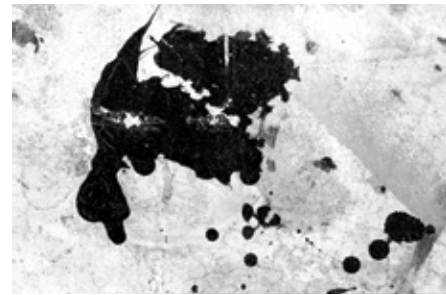
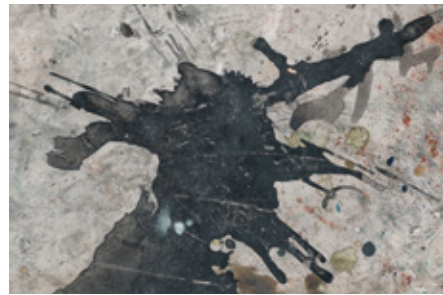
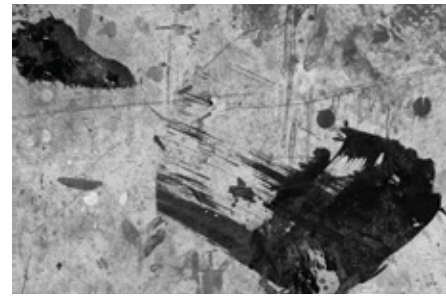
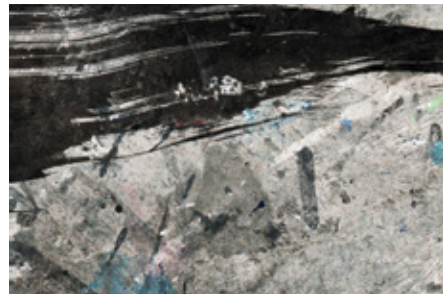
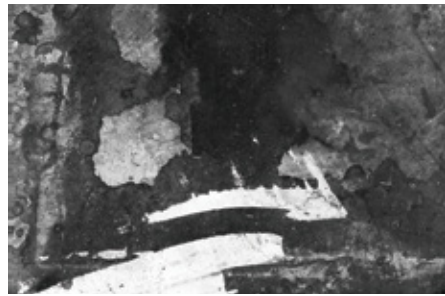
Choreographed Collisions (Tribute to Steph) #1-5,
2018. Acrylic, pigments, and silkscreen paint on
linen, 200cm x 120cm each. Collection of the artist



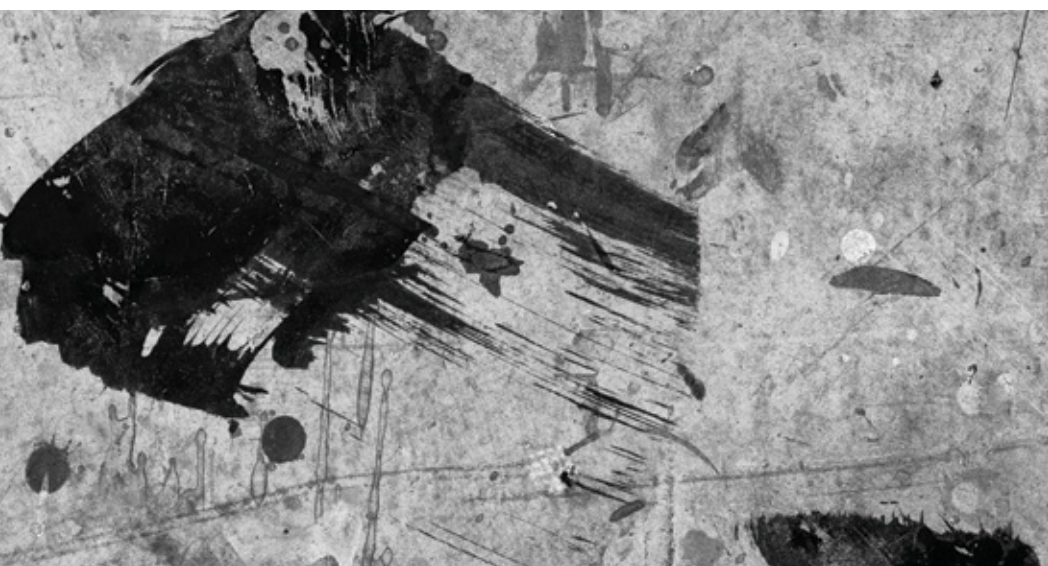
New Paintings, 2005. Digital video (4 minutes 10 seconds). Collection of the artist

Stills from **Diary: 4-15 April 2009, Bergen, Norway**, 2009. Digital videos on scrolls (4 minutes 22 seconds). Collection of the artist





Marking time (2011 till now) #1-4,
2018. UV print on gesso board, 30cm
x 90cm each. Edition of 5 (A/P).
Collection of the artist



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