



Yeo Tze Yang

A LACK  
OF  
SIGNIFICANCE

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楊子揚

E-Published specially for the exhibition

**A Lack of Significance** 不重要的重要 | A Solo Exhibition by Yeo Tze Yang

Organised by iPRECIATION

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Front Cover Image: **Yeo Tze Yang** - Fruits and Vegetables Shop, 2018, 180x447cm  
(6 Panels), Oil on Canvas

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## Foreword

Born in Singapore 1994, Yeo Tze Yang 楊子揚 recently graduated from National University of Singapore with a Bachelor degree in Southeast Asian studies. As a self-taught artist, Yeo started to paint when he was in National Junior College, studying art history under the influence of his teacher, Lee Pheng Guan. His father and Elaine Navas, a Filipino painter based in Singapore, also played an instrumental role in inspiring him to become an artist. Yeo dedicated himself to researching from books and online videos on the history, style, techniques, mediums and aesthetics of painting. After countless practice and experimentation with various artistic approaches, Yeo finally found his voice as a painter and his preference for oil painting. As an artist not formally trained by any art institution, Yeo does not feel compelled to conform to the conventional art, giving him the freedom and flexibility to determine how he wants to approach his own paintings. He avoids contemporary conceptual approaches to art, instead, reverting back to a more direct and emotive approach to painting. His hard work and talent paid off when his “Ah Ma’s Kitchen” oil painting was awarded the Silver prize for the UOB Painter of the Year in 2016. This became a turning point for him as he gained recognition in the art scene.

**Helina Chan**

This exhibition showcases recent oil paintings that Yeo has laboriously worked on since early 2017. Recognising the sentimental value within the forgotten and neglected persons, objects and places derived from his experiences and retrospection in Singapore and within the Southeast Asian countries he travelled to, Yeo finds it worthwhile to paint their stories. From an old man sitting in what seems like the middle of nowhere, an empty vegetable and fruit store to a discarded lottery ticket, Yeo continues to memorialise the lives of ordinary people, paying particular focus on the neglected in our daily lives. His depiction of the banal through visual imageries of people, locations and objects, references familiar traditions and culture. While Yeo provides the visual cues for his viewers, he also encourages them to interpret the works for themselves. The result of such a process is an accumulation of images, thoughts, emotions, stories and memories, that in turn become allegories of both his life and the stories that his audiences weave into his works. I am delighted to debut and showcase Yeo Tze Yang’s latest series of oil paintings in iPRECATION. Even though Yeo has only turned into a full-time artist recently, his works have already been collected in Singapore, Malaysia, Philippines, Australia, the United Kingdom, the United States and in the UOB collection.

## Immigration checkpoint: Reflections on painting beyond labels, borders and nationalism

Yeo Tze Yang

*“Those who oppose the novel most vociferously today are of the opinion that intermingling with a different culture will inevitably weaken and ruin their own. I am of the opposite opinion. The Satanic Verses celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs. It rejoices in mongrelization and fears the absolutism of the Pure. Melange, hotchpotch, a bit of this and a bit of that is how newness enters the world. It is the great possibility that mass migration gives the world... The Satanic Verses is for change-by-fusion, change-by-conjoining. It is a love song to our mongrel selves.”*  
- Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* (1992)<sup>1</sup>

As I write this short reflection, it's almost two months before the show opens. I've a couple more paintings to complete before I can say I am

done, for the time being. The process has been rough, exciting and at times, mundane. Contrary to popular belief, art making does not fully escape the trappings of a routine life; as matter of fact, it depends very much on it. Paintings needs to get done. With that said, perhaps art making is very much like any other job too. It has its ups and downs, moments of satisfaction and insecurities. Like any other job, it's never easy.

Over this period of making, many of my thoughts centred around how the paintings have been and would be perceived. It's no accident that the gallery has decided to schedule the exhibition to coincide with National Day. My paintings have somehow managed to become associated with ideas of “local flavour”, “Singaporeanness”, “Nanyang style”<sup>2</sup>, to just list a few of these (loaded) terms. I am not surprised by this, by the way; the paintings

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1 Rushdie, S. (1992). *Imaginary Homelands*. London: Penguin Books.

2 Nanyang: Mandarin for南洋, which means Southern Seas; the seas south of China. In art history, it commonly refers to the style of painting of Liu Kang, Chen Chong Swee, Chen Wen Hsi, Cheong Soo Pieng and Georgette Chen, all of whom migrated from China to Southeast Asia, and were credited with developing a style unique to this region. This art movement and these artists are now celebrated by the state as pioneers of Singapore.

do reflect a lot of the life of ordinary people living in Singapore, such as myself.

With such thoughts, I find myself thinking about the artists who inspired my paintings several years ago; the ones who paid attention to the details of the seemingly uninteresting parts of life, and through art, have been able to say something poignant and sharp about our own lives. I've always wanted to do the same. The paintings have always been about looking at the insignificant things around me, and to look at them as they are, in the here and the now. I saw painting insignificance as an anti-thesis to social media posts of wanderlusts and expensive holidays faraway. They aren't of glamorous things. As British artist George Shaw once said, "If you can't find the sublime in your own bedroom, then I don't think it's worth finding at all."<sup>3</sup>

I wanted a simplicity to the approach of my paintings, one that didn't require a deep knowledge of art and art history to understand, but only required the heart; to feel, as that was the very way I approach the paintings too. I was heartened to see one of my paintings used, without permission of course, as a stranger's cover photo on his public

Facebook profile. From his pictures of racing cars and popular handphone game Mobile Legends, he didn't seem like a person from the arts either, and yet my work had come to mean something to him too. I've long believed, that amid all our differences as human beings, at the core of all of us are these emotions that we feel and can empathise with: joy, anger, disappointment, frustration, exhaustion, hope, just to name a fraction of a human being's infinite complexity. This has always been how I approach art, whether consciously or not.

My painting practice also emerges at a period of major changes around the world, and in Singapore too. In recent years, the world has seen the rise of right-wing nationalism, the tightening of nation-state borders and xenophobia. *Protect our own kind, keep the foreigners, aliens and immigrants out!* In the *Sejarah Melayu* (Malay Annals), there's a famous line by the hero Hang Tuah that goes: "Takkan Melayu Hilang Di Dunia." *The Malays Will Not Perish From This World*. It's been used widely in right-wing Malay ethnonationalism, as seen in Malaysian politics. But I do not think it's an attitude reserved for any particular group. If anything, it

says a lot about nation states. In a world where neoliberalism has taken centre stage as the ruling order, change, development and demolition spare no one, Singapore included. MRT trains are packed with the *foreign* faces of people migrating here from everywhere. Jobs are seen to be stolen from *locals* by *foreigners*. As that typical raging keyboard warrior often screams on Facebook, "70% caused this! FT GO HOME!"<sup>4</sup> Consecutively, forests, kampungs, cemeteries and old buildings of bygone eras stand in the face of bulldozers and cranes before being flattened to nothingness, as concrete, glass and steel shoot up like tendrils into the sky and all shout for tomorrow.

It's ironic then, that in a time of ever-smarter phones, ultra-futuristic skyscrapers and artificial intelligence, human beings have turned the other way, and turned to the past for comfort and sense of identity. Who am I, who are we, when faced with rapid change and uncertainty? And that is where I feel that my paintings have slid quite comfortably into a 'box' shaped exactly for my kind of paintings: art that showed some kind of *unique* Singaporean identity, that no one else could

possibly have, that made us special and therefore *Will Not Perish From This World*.

I was perplexed because the paintings have never been about such a narrative. It took me awhile to realise how simple acts, even in art, could take on political meaning too, even if unintended. As many say, the audience complete the art, and this has been how many have completed mine, even if unconsciously. I found the terms used on my paintings like *Singaporean*, that implied a national identity and *Nanyang*, that implied a (solely) Chinese-migrant identity mixed into the idea of Local. All of a sudden, to sip *teh tarik* at the *mamak* downstairs instead of craft coffee at the Melbourne-inspired hipster café made one Singaporean. Hence, nationalist? *Local* and *national* as two ideas had blended into one.

This slight unease came along also with my increased travels around the region, by bus, by train, by plane, by boat; alongside passengers, strangers, many who look, talk, think and live like me and the people I have grown up around all my life. And they aren't Singaporeans. I think about

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3 Shaw, G. (2004). George Shaw - What I did this Summer, artist talk at DCA.

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4 That 70% refers to 70% of the electorate which voted the ruling party People's Action Party (PAP) back into power in the 2015 general elections. FT is an acronym which means foreign talent, used to refer to migrant workers, and are often seen as stealing jobs of Singaporeans.

conversations en route through the highways of Peninsular Malaysia, Southern Thailand and Pulau Bintan, after dinner at a *daichao*<sup>5</sup> shop in Kuala Kangsar, at a *kedai tuak*<sup>6</sup> in Penang, my sketches of people in Ipoh; the humanity that linked all of us, beyond immigration checkpoints, borders and passports. People and places all once connected by history and culture, but now separated by politics, borders and nationalism. I therefore have never felt that my paintings are simply Singaporean or Nanyang. They are of all these places that look and feel so much like home, familiarity and humanity – the very core ideas of my paintings that are intrinsically linked. I find a need to question these politicised labels of Singaporean and Nanyang. I wish to not simply dispel the “Singaporeanness” of my paintings but also explore these connections

nearby that transcend borders and give us that feeling of *local*.

Art can be infinity and beyond. Art can say multiple things at a go, depending on your point(s) of view. As much as I share my experiences with the viewers, the viewers bring with them theirs too, and we meet in the painting of a street at night, a leftover meal, a discarded cigarette packet, a plate of *maggi goreng*<sup>7</sup>; common experiences as common people. Is my art political? It has turned out that way. Is my art spiritual? I guess. Is my art metaphorical? Perhaps, yes. Is my art Nanyang? Is my art Singaporean? If you insist. There are too many entry points. Feel free to enter, whichever door you may choose.

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5 大炒: Malaysian Cantonese for literally “big fry”, refers to homecooked dishes at a coffee shop or hawker stall.

6 Malay: Coconut wine shop

7 Malay: Fried instant noodles

## Retiming Timelessness: Moving between technologies in Yeo Tze Yang's art practice

Zulfadhli Hilmi

*"I'd describe it as being very "Coldplay," like the band! It's very accessible and I'm not pretending to be anything I'm not whenever I make a work."  
-Yeo Tze Yang's interview with Plural Art Mag, 14 October 2017*

Technology. A bane and a boon. Since the advent of photography in Art, painting has changed drastically. For many, the ideals of a painted scene no longer appeal as it is deemed too simplistic. Especially for a representational painter like Yeo Tze Yang, there is only a finite number of scaffolds that can be placed within the painting that allows the viewer to peel away from Tze Yang's main intent. As such, the contemporary art world has favoured for the artist who pushes their art form beyond the representational in pursuit of abstraction. However, this is something that Tze Yang has resisted thus far. He seeks to pursue the representational in his painting and strongly believes that viewers are still able to enjoy representations of the mundane if they look deep enough.

In a fast-paced world where documenting the picturesque is as easy as whipping out a mobile

phone and snapping a photograph, most of us are able to have instant gratification. Increasingly, with filters and mobile applications available at the palm of our hands, an image can be creatively distorted with just a push of a button. For many, that experience is sufficient for their encounter with an image. In fact, contemporary artists have presented their artworks as such, with some even using applications like Instagram and Facebook to share their creative space to the rest of the world. Tze Yang is attuned to these developments — instead of resisting it, he uses them as part of his processes. While conversing with him, he mentioned that he honed his skills in documenting the image through street photography. It was his first love. Through years of taking photographs from the streets, he trained his eyes to look for the nuances amongst the crevices of the landscape. Scenes became serendipitous from this development. This was something that he had adapted from street photography and into his practice of representational painting. He explained:

"I would still capture an image with my mobile phone first, apply my treatment in Adobe Photoshop, before painting the scene. When I begin painting, I paint in

my own style that I have developed without attempting to be photorealistic. The captured image acts purely as a visual reference rather than for accuracy.”

In essence, Tze Yang's method is a form of reverse engineering as he attempts to make a documented image into a work of art. While many see painting as dated, Tze Yang seeks to capitalize on the use of technology as an enabler for him to apply scaffolds to his intent. A scene is still a scene for Tze Yang but his messages emerges from his painting process. Often Tze Yang archives his images and work on a single painting at a time. He revisits them when he feels the urge to raise his brushes and put paint on the canvas. He revisits them when he feels the urge to raise his brushes and put paint on the canvas. This process takes time and Tze Yang will not rush a painting. He continues painting them, adding more nuances until he is truly satisfied. Tze Yang rarely paints his works in Plein air.

The first basis of Tze Yang's practice is one with familiarity. He wants the viewers to see the image in his artwork the way he sees it. As a representational

painter, familiarity is crucial when the artwork is viewed. It points to realism — the documented. He mentioned that many akin his style to the “Nanyang” or the social realist painters of the past. It was something that has plagued him since the start of his practice. However, in understanding the terms or categorization labelled on him, it does not faze him anymore. If that is how his viewers see them, so be it. As he mentioned, he described his works as being very “Coldplay” or vanilla. Something familiar, but not really that familiar.

Tze Yang performs his artistic gestures in two folds. Firstly, with an image he has taken from his camera, he doctors the image, digitally and physically, by strategically removing elements that he finds redundant to be included in his artwork. He highlights the main focal points through the use of contrast and lighting. After establishing the premises of the image, he begins to paint. In this second important process, Tze Yang would add texture and distorts the image further — he is not concerned if the lines or placement is to the detail. This is a skill he has learned via trial and error and observing other representational painters like George



Figure 1. Raw image before being turned into painting, Yeo Tze Yang



Figure 2. Aftermath of eating at a zi-char restaurant.

Shaw, Lucian Freud and Liu Xiaodong<sup>1</sup>, whom he looks up to. He makes his painting painterly deviating from the visual accuracy of the referenced image by painting with his emotions. Each stroke is a testament of his feelings as he applies them little by little. When he paints, he is keen to be apolitical by suppressing ideals that he feels can be easily articulated with words. However, as a keen observer of society, he acknowledges that he can never be detached from his opinions. Tze Yang begins to express them through emotions as he begins to apply his paint on the canvas, layer by layer. With this, he hopes that his viewers are able to sense his intent through the effect of emotions upon seeing the image. He would even go to the extent of being descriptive rather than placing an opinion when giving his works their titles. He forces his viewers to look closely, training their eyes to feel rather than just a direct act of seeing.

Juggling between two art technologies enables Tze Yang to achieve timelessness. Tze Yang breaks boundaries by dissociating his works with terms like

nostalgia or picturesque. He paints the unexpected but providing sufficiently enough cues for viewers to associate themselves with the subject matters in his paintings. He layers his thoughts and intent through the various focal points in his painting, allowing the viewers to experience them almost serendipitously. Tze Yang stays true to representational painting by choice, with abstraction only existing in his art direction and not superficially on the surfaced image or titles.

As such, his latest solo exhibition at iPreciation titled “A Lack of Significance” is a testament to his practice. He excludes himself from any pretence in his paintings. He encourages his viewers to see his artworks from their own lens by giving them sufficient cues to familiarise themselves with. Rather than calling his artworks “Coldplay” or vanilla, perhaps a better analogy would be a full-bodied espresso with subtle nuances of flavourful notes when one drinks it slowly and luxuriously. If all else fails, it becomes plain old Kopi-O — a humble local concoction you have daily but one you cannot live without.

<sup>1</sup> Interview with Art Plural Magazine, 14/10/2017.  
<https://pluralartmag.com/2017/10/14/just-call-me-coldplay/> accessed 01/07/2019



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**Zulfadhli Hilmi** graduated from Singapore Management University in 2014 with a Science Bachelor degree in Sociology and Arts/ Cultural Management, and an Arts Master degree in Southeast Asian Studies at National University of Singapore in 2016. He is a curator and researcher of Contemporary Art in Southeast Asia. He has co-curated (Re)collect: The Making of Our Art Collection (2018) and Lim Cheng Hoe: Painting Singapore (2018). He was also the curator of RE/

FORM/ING Patani, a part of Bangkok Biennial 2018, and Of Place and A Paradox at NUS Museum. As a researcher, he has done extensive research on the relationship between the sacred and the profane in modern and contemporary Southeast Asian Art. He has also been tasked by the National Gallery of Singapore to conduct research on Singapore's pioneering Malay artists, and Islamic aesthetics in Southeast Asia.

**Green Striped Shirt**

2017  
15x20cm  
Oil on Canvas



**Green Light**

2017  
40.5x61cm  
Oil on Canvas



**Night Bus**

2017  
40x20cm (L), 76x51cm (R) (Diptych)  
Oil on Canvas



**Trash**

2017  
76x102cm  
Oil on Canvas



**After Breakfast**

2017  
92x122cm  
Oil on Canvas

*Private Collection*



**Notice**

2018  
20x15cm  
Oil on Canvas



**Eyes**

2018  
20x20cm  
Oil on Canvas





**Maggi Goreng**

2018  
30.5x41cm  
Oil on Canvas



**Brown Suit**

2018  
35x45.5cm  
Oil on Canvas



**Tilt**

2018  
46x36cm  
Oil on Canvas



**Prata**

2018  
50.5x50.5cm  
Oil on Canvas

*Private Collection*



**Fallen Angel**

2018  
45.5x61cm  
Oil on Canvas



**View from the Car**

2018  
51x76cm  
Oil on Canvas



## Steps

2018  
61x76cm  
Oil on Canvas



01-06

2018  
76x102cm  
Oil on Canvas





**Pink Chair**

2018  
120x90cm  
Oil on Canvas



**Rotting Banner**

2018  
90x120cm  
Oil on Canvas



**For Good**

2018  
92x122cm  
Oil on Canvas



**Spectators**

2018  
122x155cm  
Oil on Canvas



Smashed Glass Door

2018  
150x200cm  
Oil on Canvas



# Fruits and Vegetables Shop

2018  
180x466cm (6 Panels)  
Oil on Canvas



## Lottery Ticket

2019  
15x15cm  
Oil on Canvas



**In The Morning**

2019  
61x91cm  
Oil on Canvas





**Seluar Joget (Dancing Jeans)**

2019  
60x120cm  
Oil on Canvas



**After the Evening Rain**

2019  
90x120cm  
Oil on Canvas

*Private Collection*



**Old Man Sitting**

2019  
180x90cm  
Oil on Canvas



**Welcome (Salah Guna Kuasa/  
The Abuse of Power)**  
2019  
135x180cm  
Oil on Canvas



## Opening Soon

2019  
150x200cm  
Oil on Canvas



## Yeo Tze Yang

**1994** | Born in Singapore

### Education

**2015-2019** | National University of Singapore, Bachelor of Arts and Social Sciences (Major in Southeast Asia Studies) **2011-2012** | National Junior College, Art Elective Programme

### Solo and Duo Exhibitions

**2019** | A Lack of Significance, iPreciation, Singapore **2018** | Cheap Spirits, George Wong and Yeo Tze Yang, OUR Artprojects, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia **2017** | Evening, OUR ArtProjects, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia **2016** | "That's All There Is" PG Lee & Yeo Tze Yang, That Spare Room, Singapore **2015** | A Place Behind My Eyes, Utterly Art @ ION Art Gallery, Singapore **2014** | Six Recent Paintings, Cups N Canvas, Singapore

### Group Exhibitions

**2017** | Undertone, iPreciation, Singapore

UOB Art Space @ Art Stage, Singapore **2016** | 140th Anniversary Art Exhibition, Victoria School, Singapore / UNTAPPED EMERGING, Visual Art Development Association, Singapore **2015** | Affordable Art Fair (November), Utterly Art LLP, Singapore / Urban Hysteria - White Noise, Flaneur Gallery, Singapore **2014** | Affordable Art Fair (November), Utterly Art LLP & Flaneur Gallery, Singapore / Singapore Affordable Art Fair (May), Utterly Art LLP, Singapore **2013** | Chungking Express, Kult Gallery, Singapore / SPECTRUM, ICA Gallery 1 & 2, LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore / Young & Unknown, Goodman Arts Center, Singapore / \*SCAPE Show It! Arts Festival, \*SCAPE Shopping Mall, Singapore

### Awards

**2016** | UOB Painting of the Year 2016 (Established Category - Silver Award) Finalist **2014** | Cliftons Art Prize

