

21.05.2022
- 23.07.2022

YEO TZE YANG

TRUTH
WE
TOLD

Recent photo abc
painting ppl.

FOST

KAU ORANG APA?

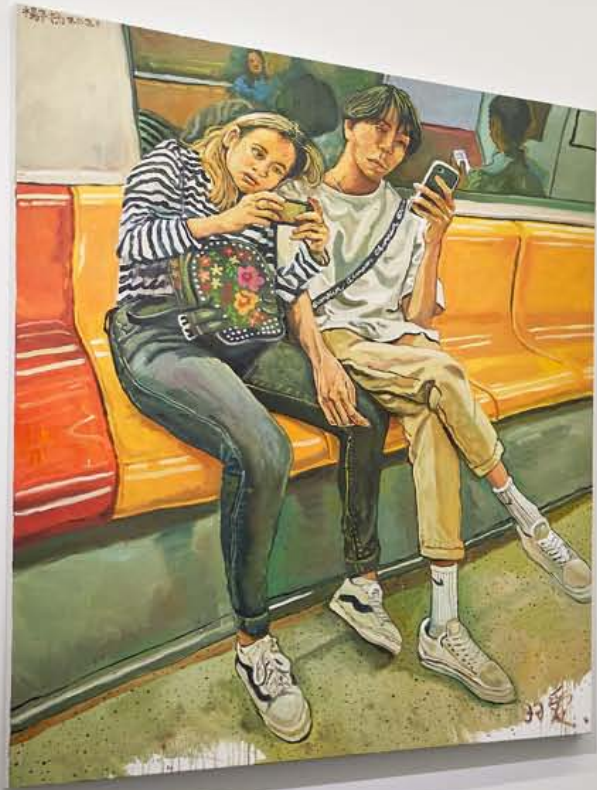


YEO TZE YANG

**TRUTH BE TOLD:
Recent thotz abt painting ppl**

21 May - 23 July 2022

FOST Gallery



For those who are looking
for a place to sit on a bus
the second half of the day.



OUT OF THE BLUE, TEN YEARS OF THIS...

YEO TZE YANG



Fig. 1: Lucian Freud,
Sleeping by the Lion Carpet, 1996.
The Lewis Collection.



Fig. 2: Francis Bacon,
Study of Red Pope, 1962. 2nd version 1971, 1971
Private collection.

FIRST STROKES

One day, when I was maybe sixteen, Sis brought home two books she had borrowed from her school library, one about Francis Bacon, the other about Lucian Freud. These two artists were part of the GCE 'A' Level art syllabus she was studying. Back then, I didn't know anything about either artist. But I found the pictures I saw in the books very intriguing: one of painful-looking distorted bodies on blood-red backgrounds, the other of very realistically depicted people who looked equally in pain, lying naked on grubby sofas and wooden floors.

However, I soon realised my teenage aspirations to paint like Freud fell short given my circumstances. Unlike Freud who belonged to a culture where one could easily ask people he knew to sit for a painting for hours, I knew that it would be difficult to ask people around me to do the same – much less butt-naked! But I wanted to paint people nonetheless. By the time I was in junior college, I had gotten into photography as well, and was in the school's photography society, which gave me access to DSLR cameras and lenses. That meant I could go about with a telephoto lens and snap photos of strangers, which I could then use as references for my paintings. Often, I would also edit the pictures on Photoshop, given my own experience with the software having used it since I was six, growing up with parents who were in the advertising industry. This was what I did in my two years in junior college. I experimented with different styles and techniques in painting with these photographic references. This process emerged out of circumstance, context and compromise rather than of pure artistic desire and choice. Despite being told through my GCE 'A' Level art history class that realistic depictions were dated, (i.e. painting is dead!) and that it was cooler and more tastefully contemporary to put dead sharks and dirty beds in an art gallery, or simply gyrate in the museum to a very serious-looking audience, I had already fallen in love with figurative painting by then.



Fig. 3: Jim Lee, *Batman: Hush*, 2002.
DC Comics.

What peers from my secondary school art class and I determined as “good art” was how one successfully copied a photograph of Obama or other celebrities in a photorealist manner. At that time, Dad was a home-based illustrator. Observing him draw figures with pen and markers on paper, and later, on the computer screen, was part and parcel of my growing up years. These came alongside a teenage love for comics: Batman, Wolverine, Green Lantern, etc. These experiences and natural interests placed figuration pre-eminently on my mind, and probably pushed me towards the Freud book over the Bacon one. It was a major turning point, as I found myself obsessed with Freud's work after that, and tried to mimic and emulate the way he painted in years to come.



Figs. 4 and 5: Paintings I made in junior college. Artist's collection.



Fig. 6: Liu Xiaodong, *Xuzi At Home*, 2010.
Faurischou Foundation collection,
Nordhavn, Beijing, Venice.

DOING WHAT I WANNA DO

As the years went by, this process of art making had become something that came to me naturally: snap pictures on my phone camera, compile the pictures on my laptop, sieve out the best, edit the pictures' colours and lighting on Photoshop, maybe even cut and paste things in, maybe paint the pictures immediately, maybe mull on them for a few weeks, months, years before painting them. The process of painting is quick. I am a fast painter. The long and tedious process tends to be everything before the painting begins. What do I wanna paint? Is this image worthy of paint on canvas? What am I trying to say? The process of art making hardly only takes place in the studio. Ideas, instincts and doubts come and go when I am eating lunch, taking a shit, talking to friends, taking the bus home and lying in bed.

While Freud tended to paint people he was close to, like friends and family; another idol of mine, Liu Xiaodong, tended to paint scenes *en plein air*, getting to know his subjects while he painted them, I found myself unable or unwilling to follow their paths despite my admiration for them. As much as I also enjoyed painting people from life, I found a different kind of joy and freedom in painting strangers from photos in the privacy and solitude of my studio. Strangers that I had never known and would probably never know, and who were none the wiser about being subjects in my paintings. There was a liberty in knowing likeness didn't matter, and knowing I didn't have to answer to reactions like "Huh, am I that old?" after I had made a portrait of someone I knew. When painting strangers, distortions, additions, eliminations and wrinkles are all up to my own artistic discretion.



Fig. 7: Yeo Tze Yang, *Serious Business*, 2018.
Private collection, Singapore.



Fig. 8: Yeo Tze Yang, *01-06*, 2018.
Private collection, Singapore.



Fig. 9: Yeo Tze Yang, *Last Night at the Coffee Shop*, 2021.
Private collection, Switzerland.

CARI PASAL¹

The process of painting *TRUTH BE TOLD* opened up a bag of questions: What does it mean to paint someone you know nothing about and who doesn't know that they are being painted? If the purpose of a portrait is to display the likeness and personality of the person, then what does it mean when even the artist has no information about the person depicted? Can I categorise these paintings as portraits, even if they do not fulfil that aforementioned goal? Does it matter? (Maybe not. 😊)

It also happened that this urge to focus on painting people for this exhibition came with the Covid-19 pandemic. This meant that wherever I went, people were masked up. As someone who wanted to paint people from his own street photographs, I found myself bothered by the mask. Not only was half the face obscured (half of what could be such an interesting and complex amalgamation of shapes and colours that would tell so much about a lived life!), I was also annoyed that the mask became the focus in all these images. It took away the attention I wanted of the human subject, and instead emphasised the mask that inevitably had come to symbolise Covid. I was not interested in making yet another painting about Covid. Problems present themselves to be solved. Fed up with this obstacle, I painted the obscured half of the face with references from photos I found on Google, which is something I had not done before. Gaps were filled, reality was reimagined. Again, this artistic process was birthed out of circumstance, not concept.



Fig. 10: Yeo Tze Yang, *Woman Carrying Groceries*, 2020.

¹ Colloquial Malay: To seek trouble

This approach of filling up gaps with multiple sources added yet another conundrum to these paintings. Not only were they not really portraits, neither were they even paintings of people who exist; and yet, the people in the paintings looked real. Many of these characters in these paintings are Frankenstein's monsters based on photographed reality, Google image searches, and my own artistic liberties. These factors add up to a sum total in what many, who have not read this essay, would label as "Realism" upon first glance. As an artist who not only identifies strongly with Realism but whose works are also often associated with the movement, both visually ("Wahhhhh, I thought it's a photo at first!") and philosophically, a contradiction arises. How should one be a Realist artist in the age of high-quality handphone photography, advertisement-infested Instagram, instant photo filters, Google image searches, digital painting and Photoshop? Can one abstain from these influences and tools that are so pervasive in our daily lives? If the purpose of Realism is to represent subject matter truthfully, without artificiality and avoid speculative fiction and supernatural elements, do these paintings, created with the aforementioned approaches, fit those criteria?

Beneath the surface of these paintings, are paintings created based on a web of circumstances, compromises and simply me doing what I wanna do, unable any longer to echo the works I had seen in art books, Google and social media. In the early years of my practice, I felt an anxiety when the way I painted seemed to depart from the strong influences of my artistic idols. I am learning to let go of that nagging desire to be like someone else. A slowly maturing mind and hand, a stubbornness to not get absorbed into the latest trends in contemporary painting, and an economy of confidence moulded an alternative way of approaching figurative painting – working it out *my own way*.



Fig. 11: Chua Mia Tee, *Workers in a Canteen*, 1974. National Gallery Singapore collection.

But what does it mean when all these issues get fused together with the historical legacy of Social Realism, an art movement that strives to depict the socio-political conditions of the working class as a way to critique oppressive power structures? It is a movement that I admire and find my work often alludes to. My favourite sections of the National Gallery Singapore (NGS) are where many of the Social Realist paintings of the 1950s-1970s hang. After the opening of the esteemed Social Realist Singaporean painter Chua Mia Tee's retrospective *Directing the Real* at NGS in November 2021, many friends messaged me to say they saw a connection between our works.

Indeed, Social Realism looms large over my artistic practice. Since the beginning of my painting journey, my comfort zone as an artist has been to depict the side of my life in Singapore that's closest to me: my neighbourhood, the *kopitiams*² that I frequent, the grocery store where Mum buys vegetables, the paths I take, the people that walk past me on the street, the random things I see on the ground or on a pillar on the way home, etc. Yet, as the years went by, a part of me felt perturbed when some of my viewers and collectors were able to comfortably distance themselves from *that kind of people* depicted in my paintings. ("I like it when those people who live in HDBs decorate *their* corridors, but not too much, y'know?") Thus, with these recent works, I purposefully chose to diversify my subject matter in terms of social economic status. The resultant paintings bear the question: Did they still count as "Social Realism", when not only the "working class" was depicted?

² The word "kopi" is an Indonesian and Malay term for "coffee" and "tiam" is the Hokkien/Hakka term for "shop". It refers to traditional coffee shops mostly found in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei and Southern Thailand patronised for meals and beverages.



Fig. 12: Edward Yang, *Yi Yi*, 2000.
Kuzui Enterprises.

As I painted the white-collar professionals and the latte-sipping expatriate alongside the oh-so-predictable-Tze-Yang *kopitiam*-uncle, and placed the two side by side, I felt that this move was a good move; a necessary move. One of my favourite films, *Yi Yi* (2000), by the late Taiwanese filmmaker Edward Yang, depicts members of a middle-class Taipei family, whose lives are steeped in the trappings of urban modernity. Each character is going through their own individual struggles, from unresolved teenage romance, to greed and insecurity that comes with ascending the class ladder. The messy, tragic, comic and helplessly hopeful humanity of these characters precedes their class. I bring this up because some make it seem like to depict “real people” in art is limited to only people who belong to the lower rungs of society. I couldn’t disagree more: our common humanity is oblivious to the brand of the underwear you’re wearing or the price of the food you’re consuming.

OK THEN, NOW WHAT?

As the saying goes, “The audience completes the work.” While I made these paintings and shared images of the work-in-progress with people close to me, their responses had been interesting to say the least: “That looks like my uncle.”, “They are bored but in love.”, “She looks like a goddess.” In this exhibition, the viewers will naturally project onto these paintings their own emotions and experiences.

Alongside these paintings of people, I’ve also made works that are not ‘portraits’: A pair of baboons, a love message scrawled in cement, a mynah, just to list a few. They serve as momentary breaks and suggestive contrasts from the images of people. For instance, why the painting of a water meter tangled in rusty barb wire? Because I couldn’t help but to feel the human touch behind such a strange amalgamation of things, that compelled me to photograph and paint it. I could pretend I have a dozen other logical and conceptual reasons for why I made certain decisions, but truth be told: I don’t. My paintings have always emerged from that strong visceral urge that something will make a good painting and fit into a larger narrative, and I simply go along with that instinct.

In 2012, an 18-year-old me sat in my bedroom, painting faces of the people I’ve photographed on the street with the DSLR camera I had borrowed from school. Every stroke pulled me deeper into the love for painting. Further back, there’s also a 16-year-old me, flipping through that small wrinkly library book about Freud in my lap, and an even younger me, sitting beside Dad and quietly watching him draw his storyboards as Aerosmith plays on the radio. All these small winding paths had led me to this journey of painting the human figure and the world surrounding the figure.

TRUTH BE TOLD: Recent thotz abt painting ppl is about both my certainties and uncertainties of this journey as a figurative artist. “But, Tze Yang, why do u wanna *cari pasal* n ask so many questions? Just paint the *kopitiam* lah! 🤔🤔🤔 Why make ur life so difficult?” you may be wondering. I think there’s an inevitable part of my personality that obstinately leans away from the easy, formulaic and predictable in art-making. I feel the need to constantly challenge my own assumptions and decisions, in pursuit of making better work. Thus, this exhibition is about me taking down notes on this artistic path I’ve taken in the past decade, the practises I’ve inherited, the things I’m questioning, and the other stuff I’m pushing against and inventing for time to come...

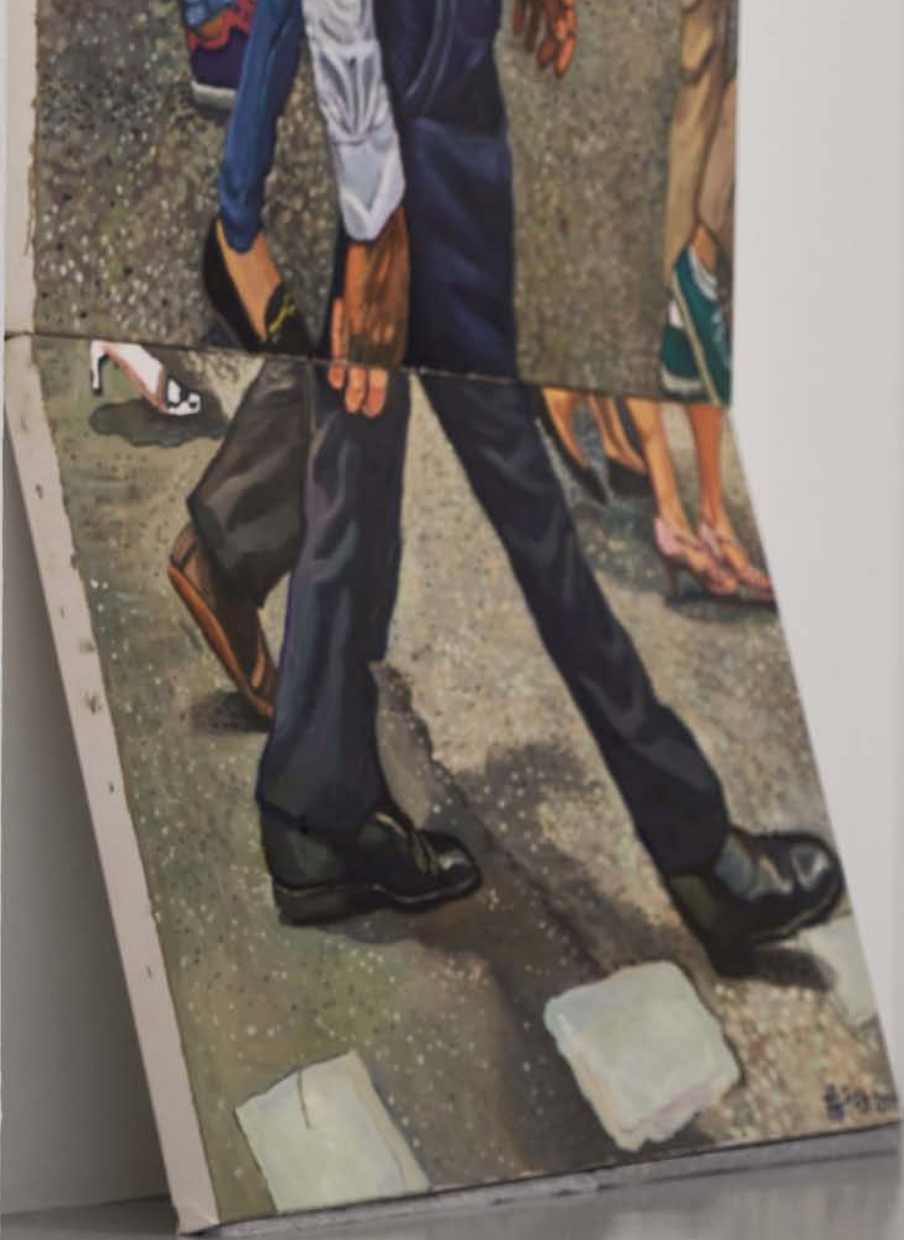
... all the while sitting here by the roadside, watching a man with shiny leather shoes, chucking into the bin the remains of his teriyaki chicken salad lunch from the vending machine. The afternoon sun blazes down on all of us.

A small breeze passes; a yellow plastic bag floats by nonchalantly.

I’ll be going back to work later too.

ts & canvases, and I got to work, mimicking the ppl I saw on the

internet in-art books.





A Very Sunny Day
2021
Oil on canvas
H60.5 x W76 cm



First Sip Of Beer Before Dinner

2021

Oil on canvas

H76 x W60.5 cm



Lovers On The Train
2021
Oil on canvas
H152 x W122 cm



Man In A Shirt With Patterns
2021
Oil on canvas
H152 x W122 cm



Walking Back To Office After Lunch
2021
Oil on canvas
H183 x W92 cm (diptych)



A Boy On The Street
2022
Oil on canvas
H122 x W61 cm



A Hand
2022
Oil on canvas
H20 x W20 cm



A Man Looks To The Side
2022
Oil on canvas
H20 x W15 cm

Our common humanity is oblivious to the brand of underwear

you're wearing.





An Investment Banker
2022
Oil on canvas
H226.8 x W122 cm (triptych)



Caffè Latte
2022
Oil on canvas
H60 x W46 cm



Maggi Mee
2022
Oil on canvas
H76 x W76 cm

Mynah
2022
Oil on canvas
H25.4 x W35.6 cm

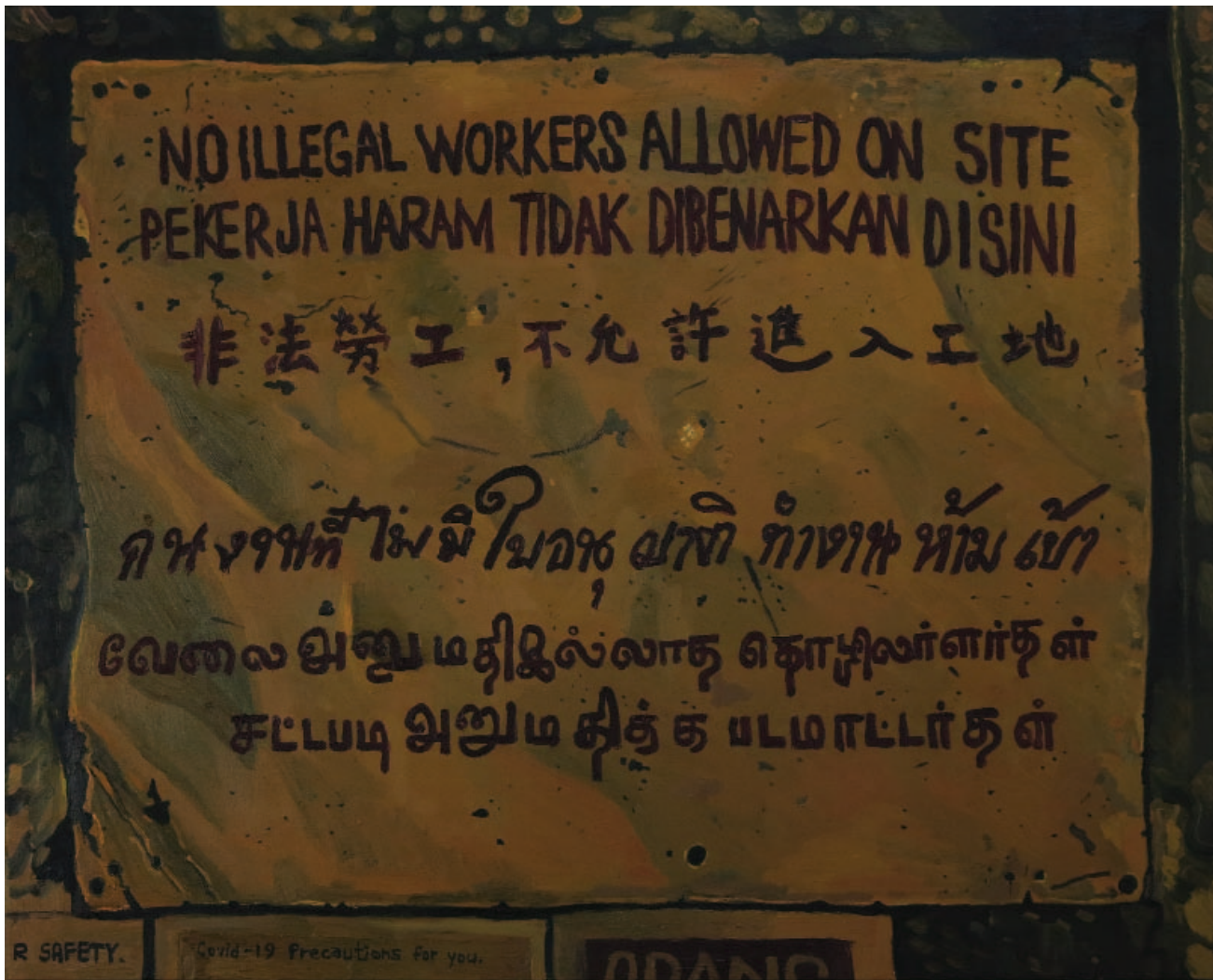




“你画的这些不三不四的东西”



Running By The Longkang
2022
Oil on canvas
H35.6 x W25.4 cm



Signboard
2022
Oil on canvas
H60.5 x W76 cm

Sitting On A Rock
2022
Oil on canvas
H122 x W92 cm



Sleeping Dog
2022
Oil on canvas
H122 x W92 cm



楊子楠
2022



Study Of A Face And A Hand
2022
Oil on canvas
H20 x W15 cm



Study Of A Face On The Bus
2022
Oil on canvas
H35.6 x W25.4 cm

The Writing On The Ground (CS, I ♥ Xinhui)
2022
Oil on canvas
H46 x W92 cm





"The 'Gallery' kind of artist"

Total Eclipse Of The Heart
2022
Oil on canvas
H152 x W86 cm





1 draft/eman



Man Having Dinner
2020
Pen on paper
H29.7 x W21 cm



Woman Carrying Groceries
2020
Pen on paper
H29.7 x W21 cm



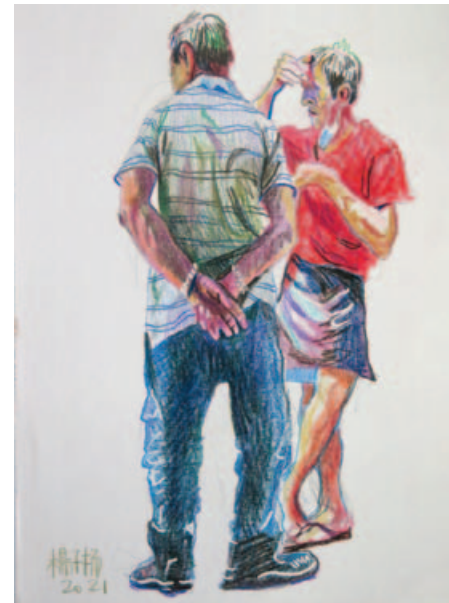
Relaxing Afternoon
2021
Pencil on paper
H29.7 x W21 cm



Dinner After Work
2021
Colour pencil on paper
H29.7 x W21 cm



Roast
2020
Watercolour, marker, pen, ink
and highlighter on paper
H21 x W29.7 cm



Standing In The Sun
2021
Colour pencil on paper
H29.7 x W21 cm



The Jogger
2021
Ink on paper
H29.7 x W21 cm



The Slouching Man
2021
Ink on paper
H29.7 x W21 cm



The Scowling Man
2021
Ink on paper
H29.7 x W21 cm



Woman On A Bicycle
2021
Ink on paper
H29.7 x W21 cm



Cloudy Lunch

2022

Marker, acrylic and pen on paper
H29.7 x W21 cm



Walking Across The Carpark

2022

Marker, acrylic and pen on paper
H29.7 x W21 cm



Mr Fitness

2022

Marker, acrylic and pen on paper
H29.7 x W21 cm

The Sunglasses People
2022
Pen on paper
H29.7 x W21 cm



Study Of Baboons
2022
Colour pencil on paper
H29.7 x W21 cm



Study Of A Man's Face
2022
Pencil on paper
H29.7 x W21 cm

Resting Before It's Back To Work
2022
Colour pencil and pen on paper
H29.7 x W21 cm



MAYBE THEY SAY WHAT
THEY SAY BECAUSE
THEY DON'T HAVE ANY
OTHER WAY OF SAYING
WHAT'S ON THEIR HEARTS
AND MINDS.



ABOUT THE ARTIST

Yeo Tze Yang

YEO Tze Yang (b. 1994; Singapore) is a visual artist with a primary focus on representational painting. He was conferred the Silver Award, UOB Painting of the Year in 2016. He graduated from the National University of Singapore in Southeast Asian Studies in 2019.

Tze Yang makes art about the human experience through depictions of the unnoticed; observing people, places and objects in his immediate surroundings. A self-taught painter, he allows his ideas to emerge self-reflexively with the focus on “getting the work done” first.

As a painter of daily life, Tze Yang takes his cues from art movements like Realism in painting, film, photography and literature. The artist sees his practice as an opportunity to explore, question and toy with the orthodoxies and expectations of him as a figurative painter.

Painting is the trunk of the tree that is Tze Yang’s artistic practice, from which he branches into non-painting mediums such as electronic media and writing. The result of such a process is an accumulation of images, thoughts, emotions, stories and memories that in turn become allegories of both the artist’s life and the stories that his audiences weave into his works.

Tze Yang’s works have been exhibited extensively in Singapore, including The Substation, the National University of Singapore, Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, and has shown regionally. His works are part of the National University of Singapore collection and the UOB collection as well as private collections in Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, Australia, Switzerland, Denmark, Italy, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

the ppl I saw on the internet in art books.



YEO TZE YANG

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Recent thotz abt painting ppl**

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Oil on canvas, H122 x W92 cm

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但够透明，够真心