

Bibliography

Champion, Jennifer Anne. "Intravenous Picture Show." Switzerland: Primae Noctis Art Gallery, September 2014. Web. 2 January 2015.

Kipling, Rudyard. "If." Rewards and Fairies. 1910. USA: The Poetry Foundation. Web. 7 January 2015.

Pang, Ruben. Personal interview. 7 January 2015.

Pazzini-Paracciani, Loredana. "Solve Et Coagula: Charting New Possibilities." Singapore: Chan Hampe Galleries, October 2013. Web. 2 January 2015.

Tarrant, Harrold. "Epicurus." The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy. 2nd ed. 2005. Print.

RUBEN PANG

b. 1990, Singapore

Ruben Pang's vibrant and ethereal work combines fluid technique with a kaleidoscopic palette. Without a preconceived image of the final composition, Pang's artistic process evolves throughout the painting's genesis, removing the boundary between abstraction and representation. This approach allows the motif to surface spontaneously, which Pang describes as "visual syncopation, like searching for a melody in white noise". Using oil paint and alkyd resin, the artist paints, scratches and erases his paintings using brushes, hands, palette knives and sandpaper, revealing layers of colour that reflect the projections of his psyche. Pang works on aluminium panels, which allow him greater freedom to transform the image as it develops. His work explores medium and method, creating a feeling of dynamism while testing the boundaries of colour, form and transparency.

His recent international shows include a solo exhibition, Intravenous Picture Show in Lugano, Switzerland and a group exhibition, Bright Spores with Primo Marella Gallery in Milan, Italy. Locally, he has exhibited and performed in the Singapore Art Museum, Lasalle College of the Art's Praxis and Project Space, The Substation, and Chan Hampe Galleries. After graduating from the Lasalle College of the Arts in 2010 with a Diploma in Fine Art he received the Winston Oh Travelogue Award (2010), the Georgette Chen Arts Scholarship (2009-2010), the Lasalle Award for Academic Excellence, and was a finalist in the Sovereign Asian Art Prize in 2010 and 2011.

Chan Hampe Galleries

Raffles Hotel Arcade

#01-21, 328 North Bridge Road

Singapore 188719

+65 6338 1962

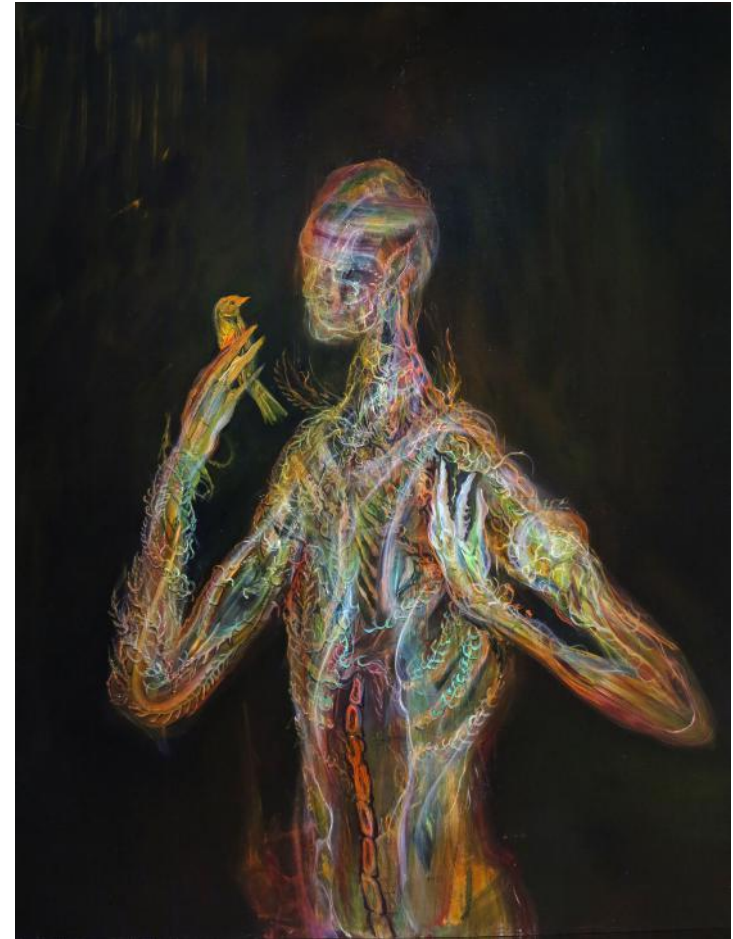
www.chanhampegalleries.com

Open Hours:

Tuesday - Sunday 11:00 AM to 7:00 PM

Closed Mondays and Public Holidays

Cover Image:
Birdwatcher (2014)
Acrylic, alkyd, oil and retouching varnish
on aluminum composite panel
77 x 99 cm



ATARAXY

Solo exhibition by Ruben Pang

16 January – 8 February 2015

CHANHAMPE
GALLERIES

No Longer Playing With Ghosts: Ataraxy

by Jennifer Anne Champion

Ataraxy: The state of maintaining tranquility, characterised by freedom from distress and anxiety.

In other words, the struggle to keep calm and make do.

Ataraxy derives from the Greek word ἀταραξία, meaning “not disturbed”. It is a concept from Epicurus – an often misunderstood hedonist in the pantheon of philosophers – who purchased a large home with a garden view on the outskirts of Athens for his followers to enjoy and ruminate in on what it meant to lead a happy life.

Epicurus’s grounds give meaning to the axoim ‘to treat one’s home as a hotel’. Yet far from the luxurious connotations of a “Do Not Disturb” sign, Epicurus’s key truths were underpinned by a spare simplicity. The maintenance of conscience and serenity by being detached – from fear, death, politics, marriage, having children, and the gods and their enviable blissful state, to name a few. This condition would be epitomised by some Hellenists with the motto *lathe biōsas*, meaning ‘get through life, unnoticed’ (Tarrant, 192).

In his fifth solo exhibition, Ruben Pang contemplates a paradox: What we must notice to live unnoticed, undisturbed lives. Arguably his most narrative collection yet, Pang’s works offer themselves as vignettes. Each work tells a vivid story; a self-contained rumination on the lengths his characters will go to attain (or maintain) their pleasure. However unlike the Epicurean view of happiness – arrived at through the avoidance or absence of pain (Tarrant, 191) – Pang’s work challenges this view of avoidance and detachment as a strategy of getting by.

Holding It Together (2014)
Oil, alkyd, acrylic and retouching
varnish on aluminum composite panel
77 x 99 cm



But in *Holding It Together*, the new configuration of these elements develops the narrative further. The masks over the figures in *Faith Healer* are removed, revealing nerves and tissue. This reveal of the visceral, yet vulnerable character of the figures is complemented by their composition. Although the dominant 'doctor' figure retains his height and authority, he is now also an occupant of the patient's chair. Self-detachment is thus likened here to self-medicating.

It is perhaps with some irony that this series of works by Pang is called Ataraxy. Epicurus’s philosophy of happiness called for safe-guarding the mind from the affects of discontent. However, Pang seems to suggest that although it is crucial to protect the mind, it is all the more difficult – nearly impossible – to do so in our modern condition. Pang’s previous works have focussed on – even delighted in – the over-stimulation of the mind (Champion, 2014) and have been playful in both technique and metaphor produced. But now, it would seem that Pang is maturing. He is no longer playing with his ghosts. He is coming to terms with them.

The sense of co-dependency established in *Partners* is developed further in the Ataraxy series, particularly in the works *Building The Triad*, *Binary Stars* and *End Of The Road*. *End Of The Road* has the most figures in any single painting of Pang's works thus far and is a complex visual critique on the poem "If" by Rudyard Kipling published in 1910.



End of The Road (After Rudyard Kipling, If: A Father's Advice to His Son) (2014)
Oil, alkyd, acrylic and retouching varnish on aluminum composite panel
122 x 150 cm

Kipling's poem is a piece of paternal advice to a son, composed as a series of anaphora. The repetition of "If" clauses in the poem (eg. "If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster / And treat those two imposters just the same." 11-12) are permutations of the same guidance – to maintain a calm forbearance – in order to achieve ideal manhood. Pang's response suggests that prescriptive ideals of this nature can be restrictive and damaging on the psyche. The resultant mood of *End Of The Road* is restless and pessimistic, reflecting the complete failure to access tranquility in trying to achieve the ideal life.

Pang explains: "The first figure, the brightest figure is the man on fire – [a] fire of emotion, passion, inspiration, aspiration and dreams – [b]ut also a very hollowed out cavity where the heart should be. He's been shaped by ghosts of his past... [B]ecause memories are not stored... [but] constantly regenerated,... his ghosts are still his own projections. He constantly regenerates problems. The vicious cycle is that it consumes him, it lurks behind him, leaves him with a deep [emptiness]. He also projects a persona forward that comes over his right shoulder... [This tall figure is] what he relies on for strength... It's a chameleon. It's a taller, stronger, flexible, adaptable, high-functioning person who can fulfill all the ifs... The main figure in white is trying to keep up with this standard... He is hard on himself and sometimes confused... He thinks he could be all the ifs, if only he could slow down time. In the foreground is another bright young thing, a red child, awaiting his turn to become a man." (Pang, 2014)

This last child figure Pang alludes to is perhaps the key to this painting. Its proportions are nearly the same size as the 'father' figure (in suit and tie). Pang's 'son' is birthed full-grown but it is unclear if he is fully emerged or crouching. This ambiguity in form is a testament to Pang's technical ability in layering and facility with brush strokes – adding dimensions to his storytelling. The fate of this 'son' is unknown and it remains to be seen if he will be tied to ghosts of his own or adopt those of the 'father' figure.

However, when asked about how he feels about Kipling's poem, Pang suggests a revision. "If I were to complete the poem, my last "if" would be "even if you fuck up all this, I'll still love you, my son." (Pang, 2014)

Pang further continues his fascination with the anatomical body and the surgeon's work from previous exhibitions (Intravenous Picture Show, Lugano, 2014 and Bright Spores, Milan, 2014) in works like *Aneurysm* and *Holding It Together*.

Among his research materials were the memoirs of brain surgeon, Henry Marsh (*Do No Harm: Stories of Life, Death and Brain Surgery*, 2014) and various medical texts on anatomy. *Holding It Together* is informed by Pang's understanding of Marsh's thought process. In this work, the dominant figure is impassive as he holds a secondary figure in a gentle chokehold. The slight smile on the dominant figure is not ominous enough to be a smirk and so lends greater ambiguity to the overall tone of the work.

Holding It Together also has resonances with *Faith Healer* an earlier work from Pang's Intravenous Picture Show series inspired by his research on the first recorded use of ether as an anesthetic in dentistry by William T. G. Morton in 1842.

Both *Faith Healer* and *Holding It Together* contain similar elements: A dominant figure in a doctor's blazer, a secondary submissive figure and a block-like chair. The earlier configuration of these elements in *Faith Healer*, along with their primary colour scheme, suggest a straight-forward relationship and identity. The doctor stands, establishing authority, assisting a compliant patient.



Faith Healer (2014)
Oil on aluminum composite panel
115 x 90 cm

Birdwatcher is perhaps the most romantic work in the series. In *Birdwatcher*, a figure examines a bird captive in its hand, while its other hand rest on a cavity in its chest. The symbiotic relationship between the bird and figure is established through the work's composition. Pang explains that the bird has always nested in the figure. (Pang, 2014) In this sense, the bird is a body part and the painting draws attention to the body as a host or vessel. The figure is not unlike a child scrapping its knees for the first time, surprised and then curious at its own bleeding. The trajectory of this narrative is completed in its depiction of an epiphany. It is a moment of awareness as well as dependency for the figure – the clasped hand laying claim (or even reclaiming) a part of what is usually hidden.

Symbiosis and its more sinister iteration, co-dependency, are increasingly apparent themes in Pang's works, following his foray into multiple figuration. While there are still echoes of ethereal line work in this series – a signature style from Pang's previous work circa 2013 – Pang's figures have grown in solidity.

Pang's prior work has been described as alchemistic, concentrated on the self-portrait, and "not so much figurative as they are unfolding in form" (Pazzini-Paracciani, 2013), but here the ghostly, ectoplasmic beings are more defined with muscle tissue and creeping flora and fauna.

This new development in Pang's practice can be attributed to his recent residency in Italy and Switzerland (July - September 2014), although it should be noted that the earliest explorations in figuration and relationship can be traced to the work *Partners* presented at Art Stage in January 2014.



Partners (2013)
Acrylic and retouching varnish on
aluminum composite panel, 90 x 115 cm