



Melissa Tan
Under the Arched Sky



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Under the Arched Sky

A Solo Exhibition by
Melissa Tan

22 November - 7 December 2019

Suspensions

by Euginia Tan

A state of suspension is something that can be considered in several facets. While it suggests a withholding or removal, it can also be the means by which something is supported. There is also suspense in narration, a hook before an inevitable ending. Melissa Tan's *Under the Arched Sky* focuses on the motif of the keystone in architecture, namely, a stone wedged at the very top and centre of an arch. It is usually the piece that completes a structure and locks all other stones in position, therein allowing the arch to bear weight. Instead of considering the keystone to be the final touch instrumental to an arch, Tan re-examines the keystone as an apex suspended as the foremost blueprint crucial to construction. Her narration's suspense is gathered in the detail of her work, a tribute to science fiction and its possibilities to alternate realms and universes.

In a conversation with Samantha Yap for her previous exhibition *Back to Where We've Never Been*¹, Tan presents a paradoxical inquiry of "returning to a place that is unknowable or that has *become* unknowable". Tan stirs the concept that situations or states can exist semi-autonomously, expanding on the theme of liminality. This essay is an attempt to elaborate on the different types of suspension contributing to her current solo exhibition and ongoing practice.



Opposite:
Detail of *Isis*

¹ Melissa Tan and Samantha Yap, *To Dream in the Right Shape: A Conversation Between Melissa Tan and Samantha Yap* (Singapore, Richard Koh Fine Art, 2018).



Suspension: Withholding and Removal

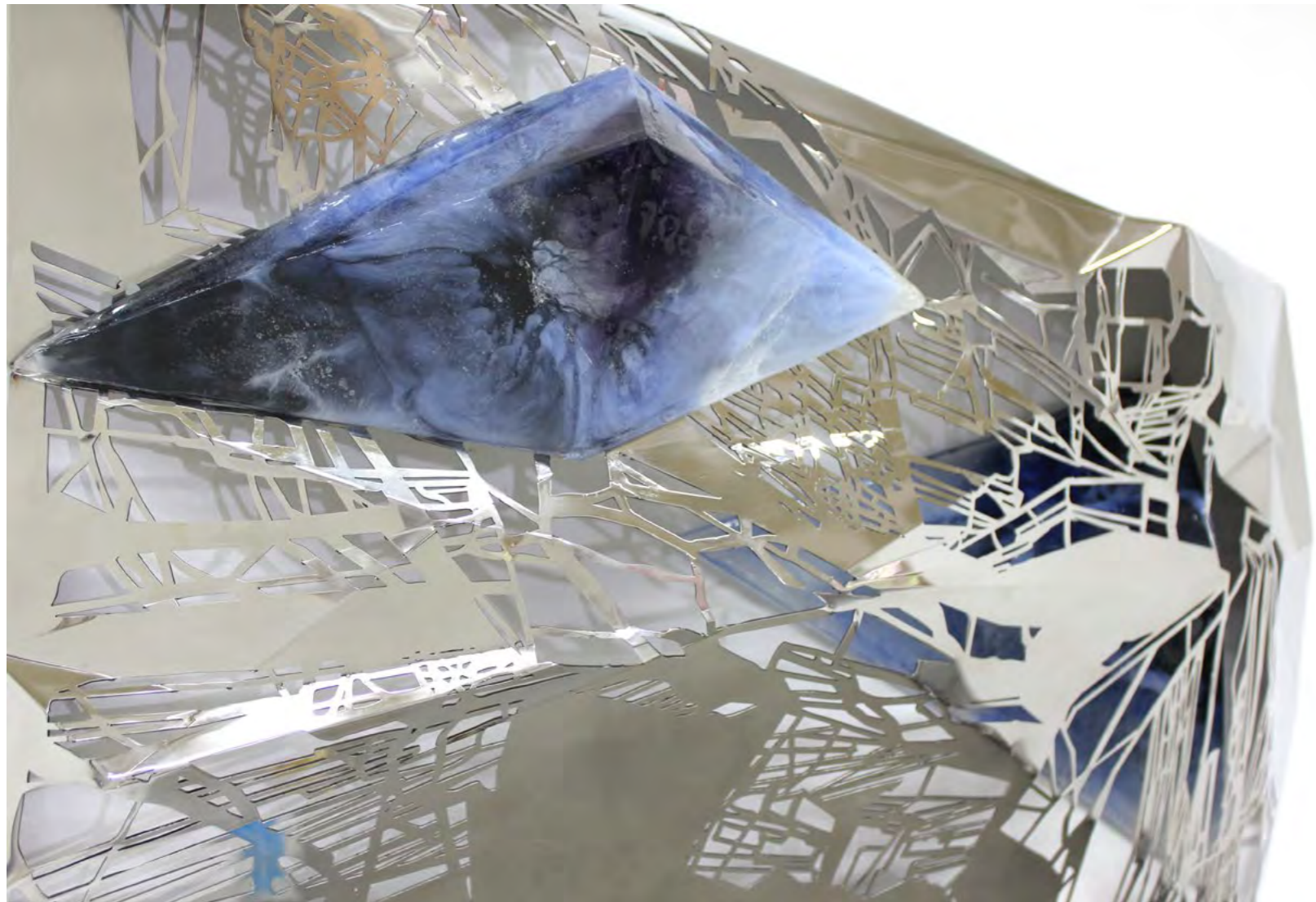
The identity of womanhood and mythology influences this series of works, with each piece named after a female goddess. Though the goddesses are associated with attractive attributes in mythology, tribulations and crossroads often accompany them before or even during reverence. The title of goddess wields a certain power and control, yet is fraught with knowing how to tolerate a miasma of pressure. In the nature of the artist's work, in particular the medium of metal, the inferred patience of the way the material ebbs and flows calls to mind a goddess's conquering. There is a sense of withholding the consent for the material to possess a masculine dominion, the resulting work exudes an integrity honed to the artist's vision.

In Carol Ann Duffy's fifth poetry collection *The World's Wife*, the poet focuses on unheard perspectives of female counterparts of famously known male figures. Blatantly relying on the protagonist of each poem to proclaim their identities via missus so-and-so to the misters of the world, Duffy flips the tables and turns their neglect into an exposé and uprising to a certain oppression of each woman's role in society. An excerpt from *Mrs. Tiresias*² provides an insight to Tiresias's spouse, a clairvoyant prophet in mythology "punished" to be a woman for seven years:

Opposite:
Detail of *Diana*

² Carol Ann Duffy, *Mrs. Tiresias from Selected Poems from The World's Wife* (England, The Penguin Group, 2006).

Opposite:
Detail of *Nuwa*



Life has to go on.
I put it about that he was a twin
and this was his sister
come down to live
while he himself
was working abroad.

And at first I tried to be kind;
blow-drying his hair till he learnt to do it himself,
lending him clothes till he started to shop for his own,
sisterly, holding his soft new shape in my arms all night.

Then he started his period.

One week in bed.
Two doctors in.
Three painkillers four times a day.
And later
a letter
to the powers that be
demanding full-paid menstrual leave twelve weeks per year.
I see him still,
his selfish pale face peering at the moon
through the bathroom window.
The curse, he said, the curse.

The layers in this poem suggest a strong sense of withholding – a woman withholding her anger to remain faithful and kind to a man, a woman being able to withhold the brunt of pain to survive, rather than demand. Going back to the analogy of the keystone in Tan’s current

exhibition, as the keystone gracefully slides into its rightful place to take a supposed throne in an arch, it anchors the other stones into place. The strength in its power is an exclusion of its assertion. Just as how Mrs Tiresias tends to an unforeseen circumstance her prophet husband could not seem to do, a goddess takes a befalling as a measure of grit. Tan’s fidelity to retaining the properties of metal coupled with her careful probing of a delicate transition into a work’s potential statement demonstrates her will to bend to her choices in order to ascend.

Suspension: Supporting The Apex

An apex is referred to as a peak, a coveted notion or placement. There are countless paths to an apex, people tend to look skyward for it, be it literally or metaphorically. The apex is dangled as a fabled prize on a pedestal, measured by distance and extent of viewing impact. Through methods of empathic story-telling, we are often able to reduce the lionization of the apex's legend. As circulation and accessibility increase, we have managed to humble our temperaments, contemplate the pain of history and appreciate the mundane present. In one way or another, the apex comes to be supported through channels of creation, endowment and hope to counter the babel of past and modern horror. Tan's work reinforces this support, there is a painstaking and consistent dissection of her knowledge of technology to get her to a new stage in her practice. The permutation of software is a necessary chapter to forge the apex of hardware onward. In a quote from the essay *Outside the World Interior or the Light on the Writing Desk*, artist-writer Ho Rui An ruminates on the necessity and struggle of writing for oneself:

"But there is yet another window, one more immediately before me, to which I must address myself and in which I await my essay to miraculously complete itself. The light from one window lands upon the other, adding its sheen to the flat, unsparring whiteness of the barely written page.... The light has a certain airiness, the air, a certain brightness. Contrary to all appearances, this is not an exercise in "inspiration". The air here that is light –or *ether*, after *aether*, the world of light the Greeks imagined to be above the clouds –is not so much that absolute exteriority which is taken in as that which takes us out. In taking to the air, we are taken out of ourselves, yet at the same time returned to ourselves –not quite inspired, but *ventilated*."³

The aforementioned world of light imagined by the Greeks implies a restful utopia, perhaps a sensation artists and writers crave for in their rigour. But the ventilation of this rigour, be it through journaling about why one writes, or in Tan's case, learning a scope of computer programmes from scratch, is crucial as support to the apex of one's practice. Going back to Yap's conversation with Tan for *Back to Where We've Never Been*, Tan affirms that she "was attempting to construct a system of objects that did not privilege human mastery... the process of repetition, in translating the various shapes and patterns across different processes like photographing, casting, as well as drawing using AutoCAD, have transmuted (the works) so much". An artist's instincts require perpetual rendering just as stories and myths continue to be retold before the brink of ailing memory, for erasure from the mind in an instant erodes as swiftly and cruelly as the relentless passing of time.



Above:
Detail of *Izanami*

3 Ho Rui An, *Outside the World Interior or the Light on the Writing Desk* from *Stationery I* (Hong Kong, Spring Workshop, 2015)

Suspension: Penultimate Questions

Although Tan delves into mythology, her fascination and inclination towards science fiction remain steadfast. The details in her work seem to orbit independently, even though they are contained within. The work can also loom prominently as a majestic overview. These focal points pique a curiosity in the viewer, akin to a reader excited by the unfolding of a plot. The common strand in her purveying of science fiction and Grecian literature envelops the essence of suspension –the almos, what-ifs, and-then-whats.

M.P. Shiel's *The Purple Cloud* and Shelly Bryant's *Unnatural Selection* belong to different authors from vastly disparate eras. They possess a clear distinction in style, i.e. *The Purple Cloud* is a garrulous account of a man in the midst of an apocalypse, *Unnatural Selection* is a poetry collection with minimal digression. Yet both portray science fiction's terse suspension vividly, an indication that we remain excitable with the power of suggestion regardless of our allotted span in existence. Below are the two respective excerpts, each corresponding to the chosen devices of their authors but congruent to adhering suspense:

"The first thing which my mind opened to perceive was that, while the tempest was less strong, the ice was now in extraordinary agitation. I looked abroad upon a vast plain, stretched out to a circular, but waving horizon, and varied by many hillocks, boulders, and sparkling meteor-stones that everywhere tinselled the blinding white, some big as houses, most small as limbs. And this great plain was now rearranging itself in a widespread drama of havoc... here and there I saw the meteor-stones leap spasmodically, in dusts and heaps, like geysers or spurting froths in a steamer's wake, a tremendous uproar, meantime, filling the air."⁴

"an empty metal bowl held in the hollow of his palm
showcased for a brooding, contemplative gaze
"I'll call you Yorrick," the android softly whispers"⁵

⁴ M.P. Shiel, *The Purple Cloud* (England, The Penguin Group, 2012).

⁵ Shelly Bryant, *Our Universe Expands from Unnatural Selection* (Singapore, Math Paper Press, 2015).



Above:
Detail of *Under the Arched Sky*

The coaxed imagery is pliant and arresting, what happens next is secondary in the grip of the moment. These selected suspenseful verses conjured by the composition of text is applicable to Tan's anomalous metal structures. Are they boulders and rocks propagated in nature or space? Are they hybrids of man-made elements? Can they be converted to have robotic properties? Before the works take on lives of their own, they are questioned and re-imagined. Therein lies the hatch of suspense in Tan's work.

The points mentioned are but assumed algorithms to Tan's practice. There is assurance in predictability and awareness, a heightened advantage to understanding a work. In all the variants of suspension, we can mete out reactions and plausibility, account for certain dimensions and decisions from the artist. However, the anticipation that presents itself spontaneously at first blush might be the pebble that really stokes the surface of our emotions –be it from an artist's homage, a viewer's inquisitive absorption or the monumental task of preserving a goddess's legacy. We recognize imagination physiologically. We react with whatever means we can.



Isis

2019
Mirror Finish Stainless Steel, Epoxy Resin & Pigment
30 x 65.5 x 9 cm

Isis has strong links with Egyptian kingship, and is most often represented as a beautiful woman wearing the hieroglyphic sign of the throne or a solar disk and cow's horns on her head. She was a principal deity in rites connected with the dead. As a magical healer, she cured the sick and brought the deceased to life. As a mother, she was a role model for all women. Images of *Isis* nursing the baby Horus may have influenced the early Christian artists who depicted the Virgin Mary with the baby Jesus.



Diana

2019

Mirror Finish Stainless Steel, Epoxy Resin & Pigment
95 x 56.3 x 16.5 cm

Diana was born on the island of Delos with her twin brother, Apollo, the god of light. Although primarily associated with hunting, Diana was also revered as the goddess of the woods, chastity and the moon. Interestingly, while *Diana* was a symbol of purity, she was also prayed to by women who wanted to conceive and by mothers who wanted an easy childbirth. Sometimes referred to as Lucina, *Diana's* reputation of protecting mothers and children earned her a place of honour among women.



Nuwa

2019

Mirror Finish Stainless Steel, Epoxy Resin & Pigment
85 x 43.3 x 12.5 cm

Some scholars suggest that the female *Nuwa* was the first creative Chinese deity, appropriate for ancient Chinese matriarchal society, in which childbirth was seen to be a miraculous occurrence, not requiring the participation of the male. According to myth, *Nuwa* shaped the first human beings out of yellow clay, then grew tired, dipped a rope into the mud and swung it around. The blobs of mud that fell from the rope became common people, while the handcrafted ones became the nobility.



Izanami

2019

Mirror Finish Stainless Steel, Epoxy Resin & Pigment
60 x 89 x 14 cm

In Japanese mythology, *Izanami no mikoto* ("she who invites") is a goddess of both creation and death. *Izanami* and *Izanagi* ("he who invites") are the primordial gods of the Shinto religion who are believed to have created the islands of Japan and given birth to many of the other Shinto gods or kami. The two gods used a jewel encrusted spear to stir the ocean. Withdrawing the spear, salt crystallised into drops on the tip and these fell back into the ocean as islands. The first island to be created was known as Onogoro-shima and the gods used this island to build a house and host their wedding ceremony.

Under the Arched Sky

2019
Epoxy Resin, Industrial Foam and Chrome
Aluminium Spray Enamel
720 x 290 x 18 cm



Proserpina

2019

Mirror Finish Stainless Steel, Epoxy Resin & Pigment
90 x 73 x 10.3 cm

Proserpina is the Latin name for the Greek goddess Persephone. Pluto, king of the Underworld, was seeking a wife. Jupiter promised him *Proserpina*, his daughter by Ceres, the goddess of harvests. *Proserpina* was abducted by Pluto while Ceres, inconsolable in her grief, neglected her sacred tasks of giving grains to the world. Ceres appealed to Jupiter, and *Proserpina* was restored to her mother. However, Jupiter decreed that she would spend half the year in Earth and the other half in the Underworld. *Proserpina* is revered as the goddess of fertility, wine and agriculture.



Hekate

2019
Mirror Finish Stainless Steel, Epoxy Resin & Pigment
81 x 57 x 10.5 cm

Hekate (or *Hecate*) is a goddess capable of both good and evil. She was especially associated with witchcraft, magic, the Moon, doorways, and creatures of the night such as hell-hounds and ghosts. She is often depicted with three faces and carrying a torch, due to her connection with the night. She is represented as the guardian of crossroads.

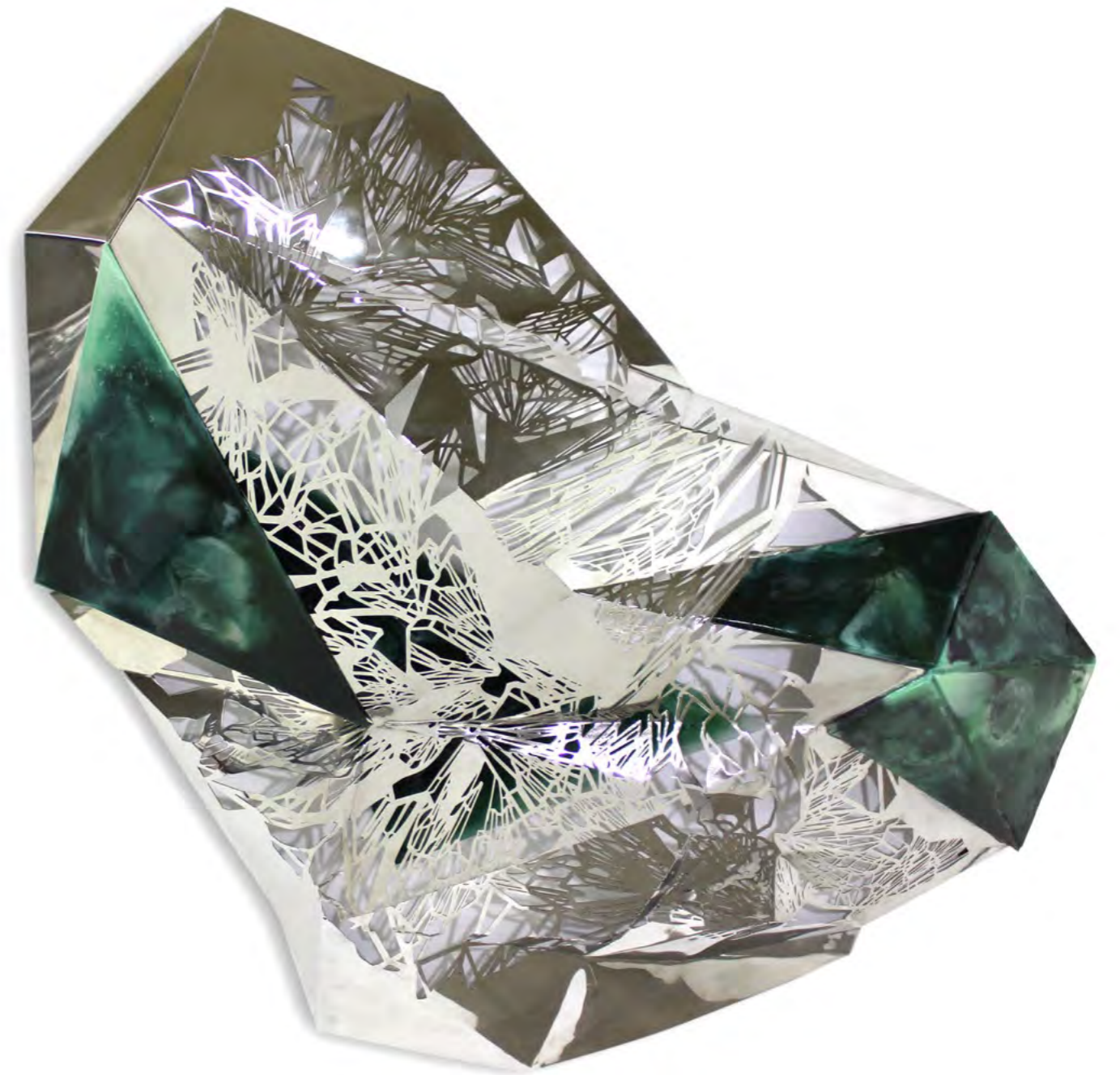


Tara

2019

Mirror Finish Stainless Steel, Epoxy Resin & Pigment
117 x 130 x 18 cm

Tara is the feminine counterpart of the bodhisattva ("buddha-to-be") Avalokiteshvara. According to popular belief, she came into existence from a tear of Avalokiteshvara, which fell to the ground and formed a lake. Out of its waters rose up a lotus, which bloomed to reveal *Tara*. She is a compassionate, succouring deity who helps men "cross to the other shore." She is the protector of navigation and earthly travel, as well as of spiritual travel along the path to enlightenment.





Opposite:
Detail of *Proserpina*



Melissa Tan (b. 1989, Singapore) is a visual artist based in Singapore and received her BA (Fine Arts) from Lasalle College of the Arts in 2011. Her works are based on nature, themes of transience and beauty of the ephemeral. Her recent projects revolve around landscapes and the process of formation. Interested in geography and textures of rocks, she explores to translate the visual language through different mediums. Employing processes such as paper cutting, painting and silk-screen techniques, she is interested in materiality and how the medium supports the work. Though trained as a painter, she also works with video, sound and objects. She was included in *The Singapore Show: Future Proof*, Singapore Art Museum at 8Q in 2012 and *An Atlas of Mirrors*, Singapore Biennale 2016, Singapore in 2016. She also participated in the National Art Council and Dena Foundation Artist Residency program (Paris, France) in 2013.

Education

- 2011 Lasalle BA Degree With Second Class Honours (1st Division) Fine Arts, Singapore

Solo Exhibitions

- 2019 *Under the Arched Sky*, Richard Koh Fine Art, Singapore
- 2018 *Back to where we've never been*, Richard Koh Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur
- 2016 *Arc of Uncertainties*, Richard Koh Fine Art, Singapore
- 2014 *and the Darkest Hour is Just Before Dawn*, Richard Koh Fine Art, Singapore

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 2019 H.E.R, Presentation by ISA Art Advisory, Art Jakarta (Booth C7), Jakarta Convention Center, Jakarta, Indonesia
- Reinventing Eve*, 1Park Avenue, Jakarta, Indonesia
- Adaptations*, Supernormal, Singapore
- 2017 *Super / Natural*, Gajah Gallery, Yogyakarta, Indonesia
- Art Stage Singapore, Richard Koh Fine Art, Singapore
- 2016 *An Atlas of Mirrors*, Singapore Biennale 2016, Singapore Art Museum, Singapore
- Petrichor*, SHOPHOUSE 5, Singapore
- 2015 *Synthesis*, The Art Center, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand
- Night of Desirable Objects*, Grey Projects, Singapore
- Art Stage 2015, Singapore
- 2014 *Modern Love*, Lasalle College of the Arts, Singapore
- 2013 *Primavera 2*, CNEAI, Chatou, Ile des impressionnistes, Paris, France
- Strarta Art Fair, Saatchi Gallery, London, UK
- Looking for Time*, The Private Museum, Singapore
- Discovering New Endeavors*, Richard Koh Fine Art, Singapore
- 2012 *Looking for Space*, 71 Sultan Gate, Singapore

Expression, Dahlia Gallery, Singapore

Okto Channel: Watch This Space Season 2, Singapore

The Singapore Show: Future Proof, Singapore Art Museum at 8Q, Singapore Art Museum, Singapore

- 2011 SPORE, Art Salon 8, Singapore

Human Activities By Roshni Rao, Melissa Tan and Jodi Tan Kartestudio, at Orchard Central, Singapore

National Geographic, at VivoCity "Chaos.Peace.love."

This is Harmony By i-AM 2011,

Project Xingmu, Valerie Yang, Melissa Tan and Peenut Lee, Singapore

- 2010 *Edgeworthia Gardneri*, Lasalle College of the Arts, Singapore

Artist assistant (Andreas Schlegel), Interactive mural, Youth Olympic Village, NTU, Singapore

Kariyaworks, Lasalle College of the Arts, Singapore

Artist assistant (Alfred Patrick Storey), Singapore, "Untitled film", Film festival

- 2009 *Tape it up*, Lasalle College of the Arts, Singapore

Almost Accidental, Lasalle College of the Arts, Singapore

Artist assistant (Betty Susiarjo), "Someday we will know", Lasalle College of the Arts, Singapore

- 2008 Fujitstu "New Year New Hopes", Singapore

Man-made This, Lasalle College of the Arts, Singapore

Residencies

- 2018 Facebook AIR Program, Facebook, Singapore
- 2013 National Art Council and Dena Foundation Artist Residency program (Paris, France)

Public Collections

Singapore Art Museum, Singapore

Marina Bay Sands, Singapore

Government of Singapore Investment Corporation (GIC), New York

Facebook, Singapore

CapitaLand, Singapore

Opposite:
Detail of *Hekate*





Euginia Tan is a Singaporean writer who writes poetry, creative non-fiction and plays. She enjoys cross-pollinating art into multidisciplinary platforms and reviving stories. Contact her at eugtan@hotmail.com



Opposite:
Detail of *Tara*



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