

EXHIBITIONS, INTERNATIONAL SHOWS · NAIMA MORELLI · APRIL 6, 2021

# Your work will protect you, teach you and give: Ruben Pang's True Solarisation



"Before you start painting, you're a person in flux, multi-dimensional and colourful. You decide what characteristics you want to embody as a painter prior to entering the studio each day," says Ruben Pang from his studio in Sardinia, Italy. "Perhaps you see yourself as a hunter (where the ideas are trapped or captured) and other days you're a gardener (you plant seeds and allow them to grow). The tone of the narrative you tell yourself influences the techniques and approaches you employ in the painting process."

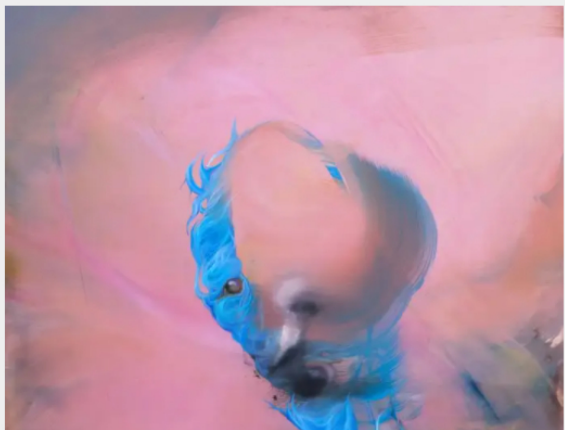
The last time I spoke with the artist, a few years ago, he was sharing a warehouse in the outskirts of Singapore with other local artists, realising huge Rubens-inspired canvases populated by ectoplasmic figures. Now he is operating out of a small village on a beautiful Italian island. Attuned with the wild nature and the mistral winds, his latest virtual show "True Solarization" (ongoing until 20 May 2021) recently opened at Primo Marella Gallery in Milan. This is his third solo exhibition at the gallery.

We spoke with him about the new show, as well as his new life under the pandemic.

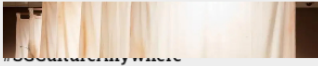
**Can you tell us about the genesis of the new body of works?**

Each painting was developed in counterpoint to one another; it is a way to create more dynamic range in terms of subject matter, technique and composition. I think of painting as a *place* as much as it is a physical practice, so I set up scenarios in painting where I feel as though I could get lost in its world.

In the painting *Night Vision*, I felt very much that I had "captured" a motif in the form of a halved face, and my approach to finalising that work was deliberate and minimal – no meddling, no touch-ups, no second thoughts. *Pulsar* was formed with the attitude of setting up a fire, where I imagine myself fanning cinders and radiating a sort of cosmic heat, so the elements were spread across the painting in a consistent and progressive manner.



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Ruben Pang, *Night Vision*, 2020-2021.

**What are the new techniques and possibilities of the painting medium and surfaces that you explored for this new series?**

I work on aluminium composite panels for its rigidity and non-absorbent surface. When applying paint with my fingers you can literally feel how everything is bonding with the surface. I also work with a variety of brush sizes, scrapers, knives, sponges, brooms and rags for various effects. When I deal with multiple coats of paint, I still pay attention to how each layer dries and bonds; successive layers of paint need to be more flexible. These are the basic considerations for the physical structure of the painting.

Apart from that, there is plenty of room for play. My current approach towards technique is simply not to think about it too much. Technique is a natural development in the search for an image that moves us, and as we evolve, our tastes change, and different approaches come in and out of relevance.

Recently, I've found a new opening in composition: I treat a background as if it were a sonic envelope, asserting a tone, atmosphere, sometimes antagonising the subject, superseding and becoming the motif itself as in *Choleric*. I also approached *Wingspan* and *Ionosphere* with a similar sensibility. Other new developments include a monochromatic composition, *Heart*. It was special, I felt as though I *received* a painting.



Ruben Pang, *Heart*, 2020.

**And how was it different for you and the gallery to approach a virtual show, compared to a physical show?**

Primarily, it is significantly more work. A lot of effort goes into documentation in the form of videos, macro-shots, "drag and drop" options to simulate an imaginary space. We were finding ways to fill in the information that is missing from the actual in-the-flesh experience. Hence the need for videos; we've shot and panned paintings in a way that simulates the eyes moving over a painting surface.

Currently, short of creating your own separate website, there aren't any platforms that support multiple formats like video, 3D rendering and audio within a contained experience. You can't enter a high-res immersive environment like a PC game just yet. Our current solution is to disperse bite-sized information across various platforms, and if anyone wants something significantly more substantial (the whole package), there is a link to the gallery website which has the exhibition in high resolution, critical text and videos. Otherwise, we send a personalised email.

I imagine that these things we are doing now, will be the norm, *in addition* to a physical show, but will never replace it entirely.

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How has the pandemic affected your way of working?

Apart from travel administration and logistics, it does not affect the actual act of painting. On a psychological level, this situation has made it clear how important your headspace is for your well-being. It takes an imaginative, sensitive, and active mind to ensure that the chaos and indifference of the external world isn't perpetuated internally.

It is profoundly destabilising to confront how much we're not in control of. When you confront an endless list of preoccupations and fear, it is not out of indulgence but necessity that one turns inwards, to the few things within one's locus of control; where do you let your mind wander as you do what is necessary for your survival?



Ruben Pang, *Choleric*, 2020.

**You have developed a relationship with Italy and Switzerland through Primo Marella Gallery's representation. From your observation, how was your work initially perceived by a European public in your first shows, versus now?**

I feel like I am taken seriously, and I appreciate that people take the time to consider their connection with my artworks slowly. I greatly appreciate this sense of suspended judgement and breathing space before forming an opinion. There is a sense that people take time to get to know you. And a sensitivity to creative nuances and receptiveness to evolution of artworks over time. And once people have formed their opinion, they will not hesitate to tell you what they think to your face.

**In your opinion, how has the perception of Singaporean contemporary art changed over the last few years?**

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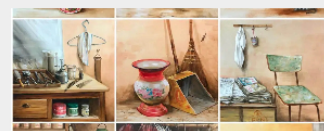
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When artists receive recognition, they tend to be recognised as individuals more so than a representative of the national identity. Singaporean contemporary art is not perceived as a collective unit.



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Ruben Pang, Wingspan, 2020-2021.

**Tell me about your new studio in Olbia. What's the best part of living and working there?**

I love the pink evening skies before the *maestrale* (mistral wind) arrives. I love that you can drive out and be in an archaeological site dating back 4000 years. I love that the land gently coaxes you to reflect on solace and individuality. I love taking walks in the forests with my wife. I love that people are kind.

**In Singapore you are very connected and appreciated by the local art community. Coming to Italy were you looking to bond with the local community at all? Or are you appreciating the perks of quasi-anonymity in Sardinia?**

The people I've met have been generous. There's a lot of heart in Italy. People share their culture, food, history, introduce you to their friends etc. I'm game to learn something new and reciprocate in some way. When it is safe to do so, I look forward to meeting people in person again.

**Did you develop new working routines?**

The Italian government has set a curfew of 10pm, so though I used to work best from 9pm to 6am, for now I paint during normal office hours. I've settled in and got a good rhythm going.

**Is there anything else you would like to share with fellow artists?**

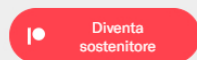
If you're an artist right now facing difficulties, know that it is enough to simply be present. It is enough that you've shown up at the studio, even if it seems like things accumulate to nothing. Your work will protect you, teach you and give, even if you think little of it.

Ruben Pang's solo exhibition, True Solarization is on from now until May 20, 2021 at Primo Marella Gallery in Milan and online.

Feature image: Ruben Pang, History of Defensive Gardens (detail), 2021.

All images courtesy of the artist and Primo Marella Gallery.

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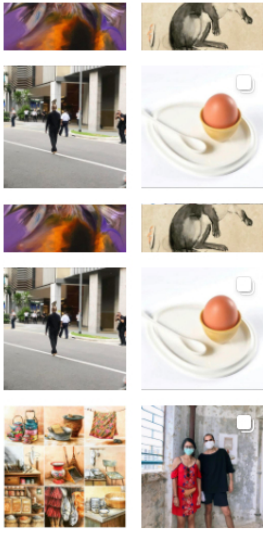


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