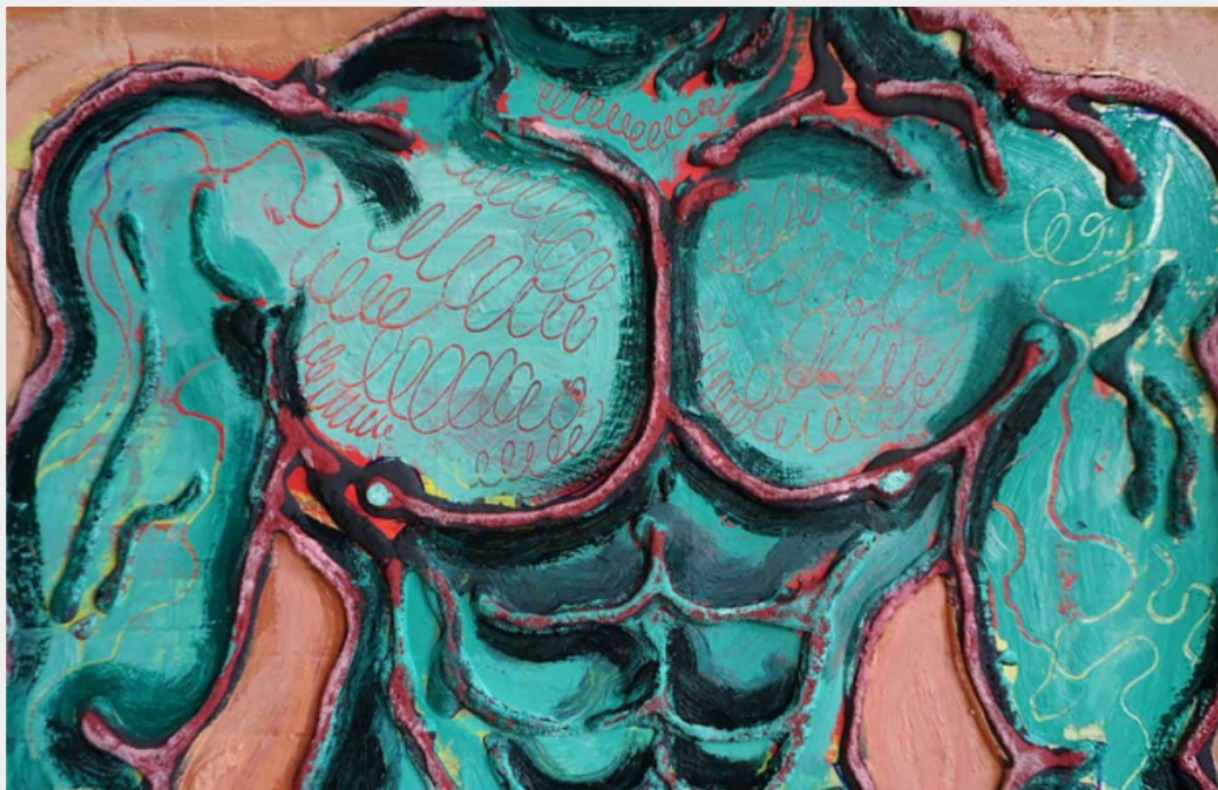
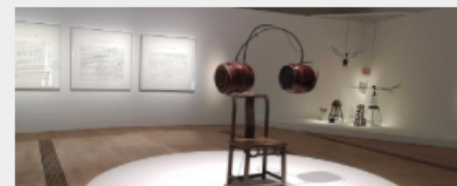


EXHIBITIONS, REGIONAL SHOWS · NAIMA MORELLI · SEPTEMBER 21, 2021

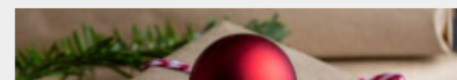
## Sun, Steel, and *Rintangan*: Speaking to Haffendi Anuar



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"I am one who has always been interested only in the edges of the body and the spirit, the outlying regions of the body and the outlying regions of the spirit. The depths hold no interest for me; I leave them to others, for they are shallow, commonplace. What is there, then, at the outer most edge? Nothing, perhaps, save a few ribbons, dangling down into the void."

This passage from the essay *Sun and Steel* by Japanese writer Yukio Mishima, comes to mind when I first approached the new series of works by London-based Malaysian artist Haffendi Anuar for his new virtual show *Rintangan (Resistance)*, on view on the Richard Koh Fine Art website until 24 September.

Prior to *Rintangan*, Haffendi had been known mostly for his abstract fabric and sculptural work. With *Rintangan* the artist takes what seems to be a sharp turn from his previous bodies of work, and instead contributes to the discussion on the male body. We see a consistent line of exploration at Richard Koh Fine Art here, as the gallery had already begun investigating the idea of male beauty this spring with *It's A Male Nude Show*, which featured side-by-side the photographs of Eiffel Chong and sculptures of James Seet.

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Haffendi Anuar, *Resistance (Rintangan) II*, 2021. The artist builds three-dimensionality into his paintings by incorporating materials such as sand. Image courtesy of Richard Koh Fine Art.

However, the aesthetics that Anuar is exploring is far from the sober and timeless visions of *It's a Male Nude Show*. The bodies presented in *Rintangan* are comparatively aggressive and bulbous, muscular and swollen. In one word: excessive. There are no faces to these bodybuilders, no identities, only arousing details subjected to a fixed stare. Whether this is the gaze of the viewer or the obsessive eye of the bodybuilder himself is anyone's guess.

### **The body as a metaphor**

On how this body of work began, Haffendi recounts, "I was finishing my first semester at The Ruskin School of Art in Oxford. When the first lockdown in the UK came about, I was living in the student's dormitory. There was a gym right in front of my studio that I had access to 24/7. In that phase of the pandemic, we were continuously told that we had to keep healthy so that your body could fight the virus. The exercise was not just about physical health, but also about mental health in a constricted environment."

To the artist, the cultivation of the body also came to metaphorically represent the health of the economy: "In bodybuilding, the act of building strength is done by ripping the muscles, pushing its limits," he says. "I see it also as a metaphor of how we, as a global society, are traversing the pandemic. We are ripping our consolidated structures to hopefully emerge stronger on the other side."





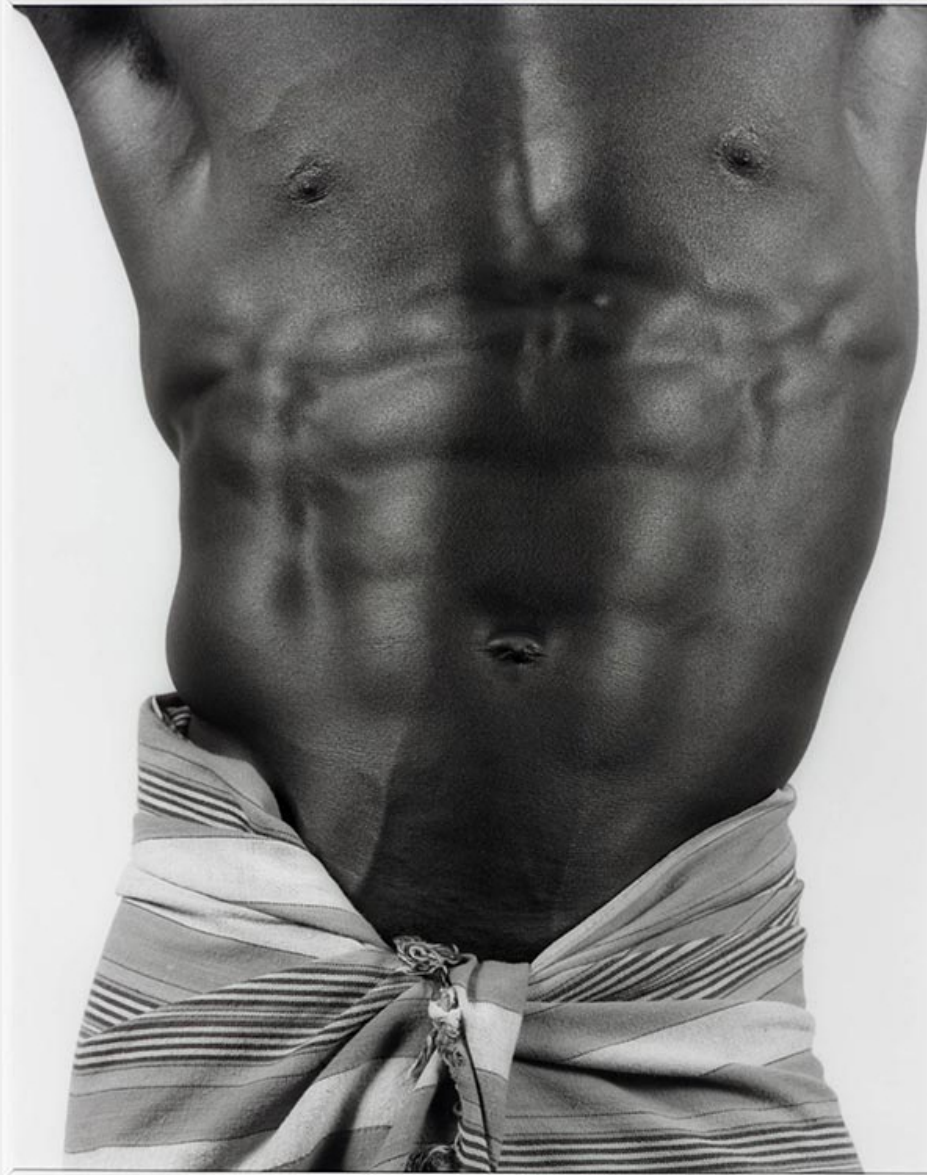
The artist in his studio in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Image courtesy of the artist and A.I. Gallery.

In Haffendi's representation of the fragmented bodies, the headless torsos, the body parts, we hear the echoes of a statement by American photographer Robert Mapplethorpe, "I zero in on the body part that I consider the most perfect part in that particular model."

Robert Mapplethorpe is known to be one of the most prominent poets of bodybuilding and the exploration of the male body. In his research, he spasmodically looked for formal perfection and expression of power in his oeuvre. He immortalised muscular and well-defined bodies that were reminiscent of classical Greek sculpture and governed by rules of symmetry and geometry.

While the most famous bodybuilder photographed by Mapplethorpe is the 1990s superstar, Lee Roy Lee, the

while the most famous bodybuilder photographed by Mapplethorpe in the 80s was a woman – Lisa Lyon, the first World Women's Body Building Champion – he also focused on the athletic male figure. An example is his *Black Book*, from 1986, where figures and body details often fill the entire frame, a modality adopted in *Rintangan* as well.



Robert Mapplethorpe, *Derrick Cross*, 1983. Image credit: [Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation and Tate](#).

"These bodies are strong, aggressive physical presences, but they are tamed by the small format of the canvas," says Haffendi of his own works. "They are very straightforward, direct, in your face. We see bright colours, nipples, curves and muscles almost pushing beyond the limits of the picture. The paint is so thick it makes ripples in the paper," notes Haffendi, who sees these works almost as 3D objects, rather than 2D images. The paintings and drawings from *Rintangan* are primarily shapes, abstract and figurative the same time.



Installation view of *Rintangan (Resistance)*. Image courtesy of Richard Koh Fine Art.

To create them, the artist experimented with filling ketchup tubes with paint. He created the thick outlines of the figures – the edges of the body and the spirit as Mishima would put it – by squeezing the paint right from the tubes. By alluding to fast food, the artist draws attention to a consumerist view of the body. The beautiful body for the mass-media aesthetics is a body artificially constructed, even chemically enhanced.

**"I bodvbuild therefore I am"**



In *Sun and Steel* Mishima describes his evolution from a bookish young man to a bodybuilder, as well as a practitioner of boxing and kendo. Curiously, his transformation happened as a sort of intellectual experiment. He writes of the realisation that his thinking was heavily shaped by inhabiting a fragile physique.

Turning on its head the whole philosophical tenet of “I think therefore I am” by Descartes, he decided to have the learning of his body influence his philosophical reflections. He thus put himself through a rigorous regimen of weightlifting and martial arts. It wasn’t just about health for him – the aesthetic played a heavy role. Mishima was genuinely interested in testing how his grasp on the world, his possibilities as a human being, and his outlook on life might change if he lived in an extremely fit and aesthetically pleasing body.

Not holding back when it came to transforming his ideas into action – after all, this was a novelist who committed *seppuku*, or ritual suicide, in the midst of a coup attempt – he found in the body a way to cope with the uncertainty and existential angst of the human condition; feelings most of us have had to face head-on during the ongoing pandemic. In his day, Mishima fought back “with sun and steel,” symbols of his devotion to the open air and the weights used in bodybuilding. This was his form of resistance.

In a similar way, the show *Rintagan (Resistance)* also presents works that don’t come from the mind, but rather from a physical involvement with painting materials. That said, they were first inspired by the virtual realm: “I took pictures from Instagram, and then cropped some details,” explains Haffendi. “So it’s going from the virtual, to the IRL, then – being this an online show – to the virtual again.”

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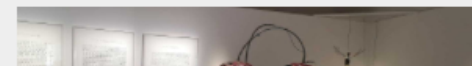
Haffendi Anuar, *Pentas Bina Badan (Bodybuilder's Stage) IV*, 2021. Image courtesy of Richard Koh Fine Art.

### Bodies of work converging in the studio

While *Rintangan (Resistance)* might seem like a big shift from his previous work, the artist sees this series as research that will eventually link up to his previous body of work. After all, the body has always been an invisible presence in his fabric work – in the use of the *kain pelikat* (a type of colourful plaid tubular sarong) which was of course meant to cover the body – or in his sculptures reminiscent of spinal columns.



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An example of Haffendi Anuar's usual body of work – *Site I, II & III (all 2021)* in *A Life Beyond Boundaries (The Geography of Belonging)*. Image courtesy of JWD ART SPACE.

He already sees this convergence happening in his studio in central London. “The work are speaking to each other in the studio. They encounter each other in the space. I consider the bodybuilders as in-between work, never meant to stand by itself. I eventually hope to present it together with the fabric works.”

Indeed, by peering into the studio from my computer screen, I can see the geometric lines caging the bright colours of his abstract compositions and fabric sculptures, slowly morphing into the sinuous organic outlines of his bodybuilders. The viewer is left with the question of what is there, at the outer most edge of those lines, those shapes. Nothing, perhaps, as Mishima said “save a few ribbons, dangling down into the void.”

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Rintangan (Resistance) is on view from 24 August – 24 September 2021 on the RKFA website:

<https://rkfineart.com/exhibition/haffendi-anuar-rintangan/>

Feature image: Pentas Bina Badan (Bodybuilder's Stage) II (2020), Sand, adhesive, acrylic, oil, receipts,



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newspaper on paper. Image courtesy of the artist and Richard Koh Fine Art.

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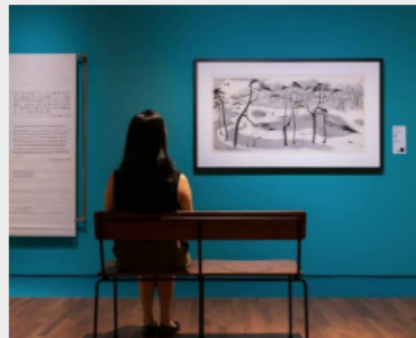
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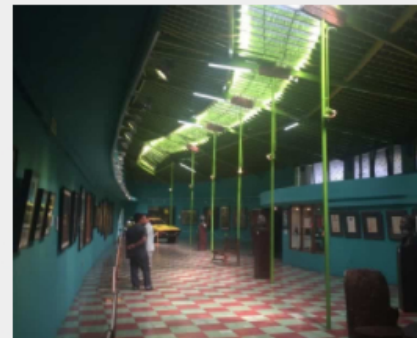
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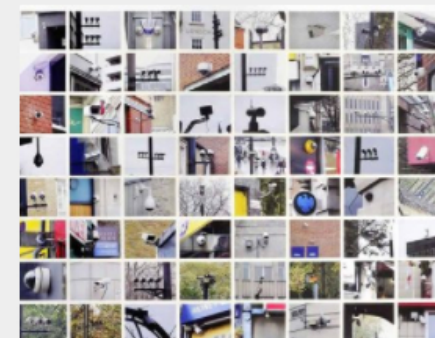
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