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PEOPLE

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# World Looking In: Interview with Yeoh Choo Kuan

BY NAIMA MORELLI



Portrait of YEOH CHOO KUAN. All images courtesy Richard Koh Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur / Singapore / Bangkok.

From spiritual heights to the depths of the flesh, Malaysian artist Yeoh Choo Kuan has filtered the broad spectrum of human emotions and tension through the medium of abstract painting. Standing in the middle of his latest installation consisting of canvases from the Streaming Mountain series (2018– ), which were leaning on each other, I felt once again energized by the potency of vibrant and sharp splashes of color.

This encounter took place in Yeoh's latest solo show at Richard Koh Fine Art in Singapore's Gillman Barracks district during the Singapore Art Week in January. Titled "What Makes a Mountain," the show reminded me of works of the late Italian artist [Emilio Vedova](#) (1919–2006), known for his joyful and violent use of brushstrokes as well as his arrangement of canvases into installations. However, Yeoh's work has nothing of Vedova's darkness, but rather the blithe sensation of 1990s punk rock. While Yeoh's practice has always been based on the enjoyment of the pictorial matter—spilled, dripped, texturized, or even disintegrated—lately he veered into exploring the conceptual side of his practice.

A pivotal moment for him was the previous iteration of his three-part series Streaming Mountain, which is based on his research into shan shui, Chinese landscape painting. He took a collaborative route for that project in 2019, involving designers, dancers, and performers, to create an entire world where the painting genre of Streaming Mountain became the basis for a fictional religion, presented by the artist through different media. In conversing with the artist about his ongoing series, I asked about the several different directions he seemed to be taking with his works.



YEOH CHOO KUAN, Spring Vista, 2020, acrylic on linen, 200 × 250 cm.

**The previous part of your series *Streaming Mountain* was a very ambitious project and of a conceptual nature. I imagined that you might continue to work along these lines for future projects. What compelled you to go back to painting instead?**

When I was creating the third chapter of *Streaming Mountain*, I was in the mood to do something different, though I have always believed that painting is my true nature. The previous chapter was supposed to happen three years ago, but it didn't because of Covid. So I changed my strategy and instead of having a live performance with dancers, I created a video work. I projected it only a few months ago, in an abandoned building in Kuala Lumpur, the Avenue K Shopping Mall, within a very vibrant and authentic context of the local market. People could instantly feel the contrast by getting to this hidden space, since the external surroundings were so lively. The show was called "Human Nature."

**You also recently had a four-month residency in London at Acme Studios through the Khazanah Arts Residency Programme. How did that experience affect your work?**

That was a good experience because I could really get a break from all the hassles created by Covid. It wasn't a production residency, so I didn't do any new work, but I met curators and attended a lot of interesting discussions, so I could focus on research. I knew eventually I wanted to go back to my exploration of Chinese landscapes. Both the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum house huge collections of Chinese art, so I spent a lot of time exploring those. So even though I was far from Asia, it helped me rethink the Chinese landscape from a different perspective—a bit of a colonial one, I guess, but it did revive my interest. So that's how I returned to painting.



Installation view of YEOH CHOO KUAN's "What Makes a Mountain," at Richard Koh Fine Art, Singapore, 2023.

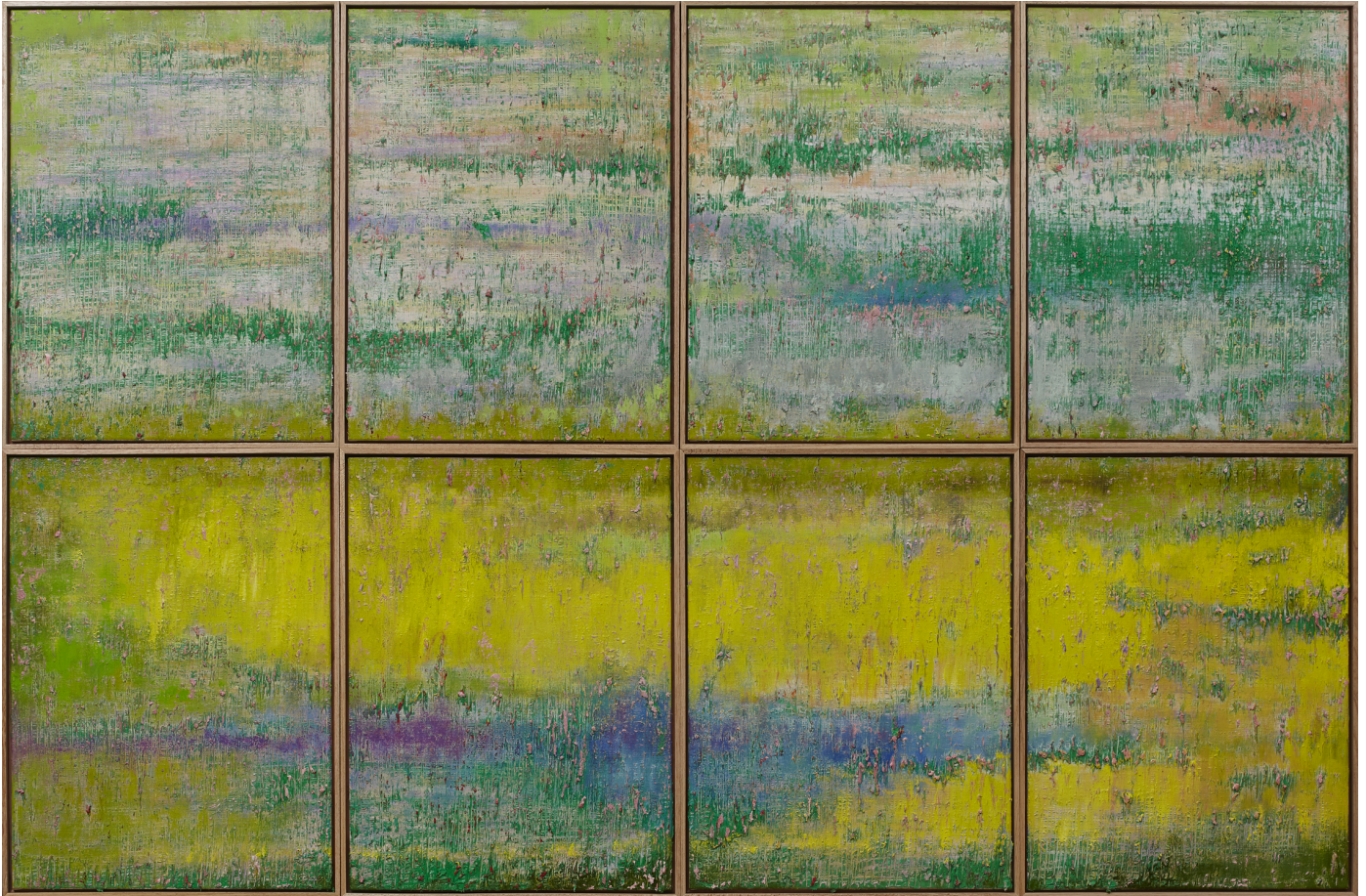
**The installation of your exhibition “What Makes a Mountain” has a strong sense of movement. You have the canvases positioned so that interact with each other, almost like a dance, and each brushstroke that either clashes or is a continuation of the next, in what looks like a sparring of signs. Does this relate to your previous work with dancers and performers?**

Yes, I was greatly inspired by the performance scene in London, which is so vibrant compared to anywhere else. There was something interesting to see every day. My London residency was right after I finished the choreography project for Streaming Mountain, so when I was there, I met all these movement artists, and our conversations popped up in my mind when I first thought of displaying the paintings as an installation. In “What Makes a Mountain,” each canvas has its own personality. It’s like a body performing. I set the show as a stage or a landscape of sorts.

**In what ways was “What Makes a Mountain” an evolution of your reflections on Chinese landscape painting?**

When I first started this new series, I asked myself about the potential of abstract landscape painting. I also wanted to do something more connected to the current climate and post-pandemic atmosphere. This is why I’m using a different color palette compared to my previous works. Many of the colors I started with were earthy and muddy, and I tried to balance them with highly vibrant, saturated, and clean colors. I also rotated the canvases to create color drips in a particular directions. If you look at the installation from afar, it looks like you are walking through the foliage in a forest. Some visitors even said that it looked like the reflections of a disco ball from afar.

However, the initial idea for the installation came almost accidentally. It’s a practical method to dry wet paintings, when you don’t have enough wall space—you need to kind of stack them in a way similar to this installation. It’s quite effortless, that’s why I like it. I tried the different combinations of canvases for the installation in the studio before choosing the arrangement I have in the gallery.



YEOH CHOO KUAN, Window 16, 2017, oil on linen and wooden frames, 160 × 240 cm.

**An earlier series of yours, *Light In* (2018), was based on the observations from the window of your studio, where you captured different lighting from dawn to dusk. Would you say the studio is an incubator for you?**

I'm very comfortable in my studio and get a lot of inspiration from staying inside. So for me, the windows of the studio are my privileged observatory onto the world. In this sense, constructing an installation in my studio is like constructing a point of view on the world. I'd say it's my own perspective on the world looking in. For example, if you look at the installation of "*What Makes a Mountain*," the different paintings are able to support each other physically. One single painting can be fragile if standing alone in the middle of the room, but if they lean on top of each other, they stay together collectively. And this is for me the process of making mountains.

Yeoh Choo Kuan's exhibition "*What Makes a Mountain*" was on view at Richard Koh Fine Art in Singapore from January 7 to 19, 2023.

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