

“Engirth me”: Alvin Ong’s painting of possibility

A walk in the park is a game we play; one where it’s perfectly fine to return a serve with silence. Conversation crests, excitedly, then nests in the languorous shade of trees. Intimacy is sparked and catches onto the kindling of a minor confession. It’s another scorcher in London, and my roving eye is waylaid by vivid daubs of flesh on oily green. I imagine how he would transfigure this scene on canvas, sublimate bristling longing into haunting desire. The coiled spring of noon unwinds into lunch by the lake, where we are baptised intermittently by a fountain. It’s cool again, and the welcome flash of spice in the curry reminds me of home, which feels impossibly distant, in this world away from worlds. My bubble is punctured as I spot someone I once vaguely knew, from what seems like a past life, and I gasp, inwardly. Our ramble ends, incredibly, with a wayward stranger propositioning me by the toilets.

Alvin’s *Victoria Park* encodes, scrambles this episode. Or does it? I would have recognised that unusually vigorous fountain anyway, even if he hadn’t told me. In the painting, it seems to spurt from the brain of the thinker manneredly cradling his cheek, insinuating a scene recollected or imagined. Or does it? In Alvin’s latest paintings background and foreground are promiscuous, and finally, float free unburdened by such scrupulous distinctions. A fringe of hair blends into the crown of a spindly tree. That indelible fountain bypasses the fact of flesh and apparatuses in the glasses of the brooding boy. The park, an old, cunning sprite, could just have easily dreamt its dreamer into being.

Alvin’s oeuvre has continually limned the ways and weight of the flesh, flaunting, unsettling the luscious, lascivious allure of the queer male body. If in his previous show, *Sayang*, his first solo presentation in the United States, some of his works were – quite literally – red-hot with unsheathed desire, then *Another Life* presents both sequel and departure. The palate may now be even more dominated by hues of red, yet that sultriness has simmered to a more introspective – though still recognisably frisky – yearning for connection.

A fresh lightness and luminosity suffuses these new works. Bodies thin into an ethereal translucency and meld restfully into the landscape (as in *Hotel Ginza Sogetsu*); heads – still a favourite subject, now manipulated with skillful elision and omission – become canvases for other figures and scenes that interpolate airily, dissolving the rigid boundaries between uncontainable selves.

In his landmark *Mood* series, individuals seemed set apart from the madding crowd, encased in a portrait of their own particular melancholy or agony or some such funk, sometimes contorted as split and fractured souls. Now they bleed and blend, mirrors and receptacles for each other. These new heads cannot help but connect, associate and infect. In the words of Walt Whitman, *The armies of those I love engirth me and I engirth them*.

Though some of the visual references – such as the ruined figure of Aschenbach from the film *Death in Venice* (1971), the slave of a doomed infatuation with the ephebe Tadzio, who can be read as the looming figure in *Old Masters* and *Adagietto I and II* – seem to hint at queer tragedy and despair, the painter seems to be operating under an entirely different mood.

That mood is, I think, *possibility*.

Let’s take a look at *Intermission*, the most visually extravagant piece in this show, lit with colours from every part of the flame. Every square inch seems to promise a startling new adventure, an unbidden burlesque – is that the pope and some cardinals, engaged in some distant processional? Are those

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two policemen on motorbikes at the left edge of the canvas? Are their searing headlights burning a hole through a screen? Multiple narratives unfurl and graze up greedily against each other; the canvas encompasses, holds spaces. Under the dazzling lights, the teeming carnival beckons, welcomes all creatures of the night.

For the artist, queerness at its most revelatory discloses itself as a state of emancipatory possibility, unmoored from the rote strictures of the straitened world. This awareness is especially acute in the precisely socially engineered state of Singapore, where public policies, such as access to public housing, are premised on the construction of a heterosexual family unit. We suture our own communities and stitch together bodies of belonging – so what if others judge us as Frankenstein freaks? To steer our sometimes rudderless voyages, we light our own defiant flares. To be queer is to exist, brimmingly, in this open-ended sea.

This praxis of possibility manifests as renewed materiality in the *Residues* series, where Alvin executes his paintings on historical artefacts, such as a barbershop sign and old shop blinds. (This reuse is paralleled in Alvin's reconfiguration of his own oeuvre: several pieces in this show have been adapted from previous *Mood* portraits, evident in the renamings seen at the back of the canvas, an archive of his restless reinvention.) Painting becomes palimpsest, as symbols and motifs from the past morph into fabulous emblems of queer life: a Pepsi-Cola bottle metamorphoses into a beached blue merboy, the addition of a plastic bottle gesturing at ecological degradation; a Tiger Balm ointment advertisement transforms into a club rave held at the infamous Haw Par Villa in Singapore, a grotesque theme park (built by the tycoons of Tiger Balm) which plays out scenes from the Chinese afterlife. (After all, how many of us have entered a gay club and immediately thought: this must be hell, or something like it?)

Alvin's dialogue with the shades of history represents an intriguing pivot, most radically explored in his rendition – parody? – of a painting by the Japanese artist Foujita Tsuguharu, found on the obverse side of *Residues 1*. Foujita's best known for his milky white palate and whimsical depiction of cats, with his success as a Parisian artist often presented as a cross-cultural triumph. Yet here Alvin engages with Foujita's chequered role as an enthusiastic official war artist, propagandist – and possible war criminal. The scene referenced is the bombing of Tengah Air Base in Singapore, at the start of the Japanese invasion of Singapore in 1941–42. Alvin recreates Foujita's war painting, then splices in elements of the artist's life: the iconic glasses, crumpling with flame; brushes; and an inkwell from his studio. With this juxtaposition, the separation between the artist's carefully calibrated image and his wartime activities is stunningly punctured. The interrogation is intensified by the decision to affix a small image of the original painting, clearly credited to Foujita.

Questions of an artist's role and responsibility seem entirely apposite for a mid-career artist. *Another Life* unveils an Alvin Ong wrestling captivatingly with transition – and recovery, from a self-confessed burnout. What's emerged are new, beguiling layers of multiplicity and texture, a resplendent and thoughtful staging of the processual and the possible. Queer has become a label too easily, carelessly applied in art. So *what? What else?* I often find myself wondering, looking distractedly at yet another figuration of the male body. I find Alvin's answer compelling.

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