
TENSION / CREATION

NICOLE SORIANO



In the painting *Paradiso #5* by Luh Gede Gita Sangita Yasa, also known as Luh'De, a figure dressed in a crumpled orange shirt and loose denim pants stands at the rightmost side of the canvas. The piece captures the subject only from her chest down to the bottom of her jeans, and thus her head escapes the composition—rendering her identity anonymous, elusive.

Yet, particular details reveal important clues into the subject's inner and present world. Her arms are crossed, with her hands firmly gripping her arms—indicating self-protection, or deep, fraught contemplation. She appears to be standing inside a polished white room, akin to the interiors of an art gallery. On the walls, skewed, fragmented pictures of vacationers enjoying an idyllic beach or poolside view juxtapose the clinical, claustrophobic indoors, offering a dreamlike escape.

Entering from the left side of the painting, an assemblage of disjointed parts—broken and rusted junk; a heart-eyed caricature; slivers of thin leaves—intrude the scene like the unhinged, gestural strokes of an abstract painter. Contrasting anxiety and ease, the real and surreal, the clean and chaotic, the painting invites viewers to confront the tension radiating from its subject. Amid this scene, she now appears caught in a disorienting state—as if struggling to make sense of the jarring visual noise flooding her mind, memories and moment.

When we are confronted with a work of art that discomforts—whether the work outright repulses with its grotesque subject matter, or unsettles with its strange, incoherent parts—we can choose to end our response in fixed resistance to the piece, or heed its hidden call to draw us in, and reflect.¹ Every time we face a work of art, we bring to the moment, whether consciously or unconsciously, our own experiences, and our formed thoughts and beliefs. In encountering what is pleasing, familiar, and easily understood to us, we need not do much work on our part to consume the art. But in encountering the brutally raw and uncertain, tension arises. Oftentimes, the tension is rooted not in the art object itself, but our relationship to it²—moving us to not only reflect on the art, but wrestle with *why* we have these responses.³ While requiring more work, it is in these disquieting works of art that we can find the most fulfilling, and ultimately expanding, aesthetic experiences.

Previous page: *Paradiso #3 - Girl Who Leaps Through Time and Space*, 2020 by **Luh Gede Gita Sangita Yasa**

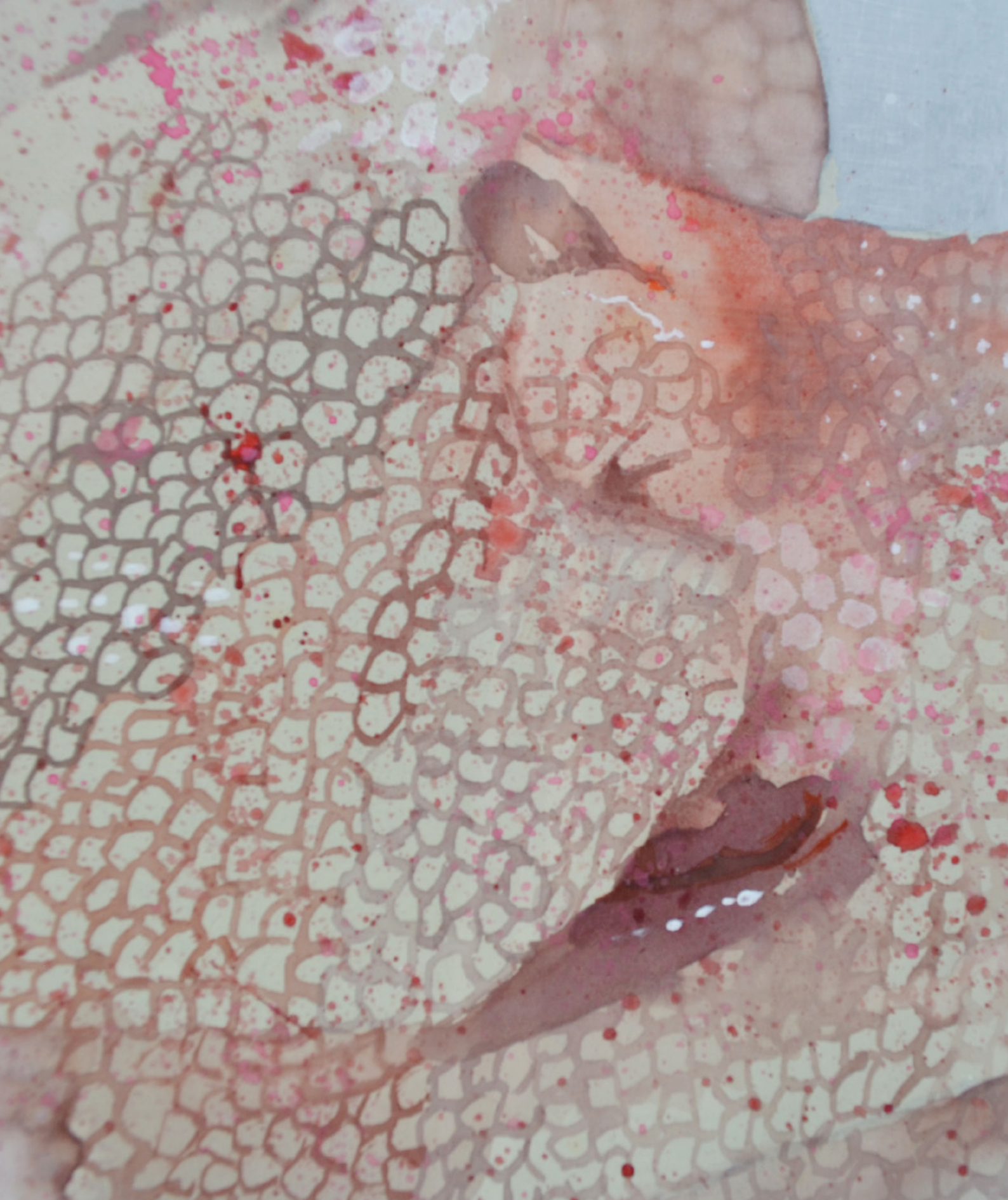
For the fourth round of Gajah Gallery's annual exhibition *The New Now*, featuring carefully selected, promising young artists based in Singapore, *Tension / Creation* investigates the different and complex forms of tension found in the burgeoning artistic practices of the four participating artists. Locating how each artist navigates various forms of discomfort in their art, contexts and lived experiences as emerging artists, the exhibit illuminates a central,⁴ yet often unspoken, aspect of the artistic experience. Just as the exhibit explores these multiple points of discomfort, it ultimately strives to arrive at the varying transformations, whether in the artist, artwork or audience, that such discomforts generate—wrestling to find, or perhaps blur, that line between tension and creation.

In framing the exhibition through this lens, it is crucial to note that scholars who have studied the 'aesthetics' of discomfort have underscored its intrinsic ephemerality.⁵ What unsettles today may not unsettle tomorrow—especially when the very aspects that initially shocked are copied and repeated, to the point that the artist or audience develops a sense of ease, or worse, indifference, toward the style, subject or concept. One prime example would be the case of modernism in Western art history, radicalized through the cubist forms of Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque in the early 20th century. Distorting anatomy and breaking the rules of perspective, they created a distinct geometric, fragmented aesthetic that shocked their time, which had been accustomed to the traditional linear perspectives that stemmed from the Renaissance period. Yet, after decades of the style being adopted and appropriated across the world, artists that employ cubism today, without incorporating anything significantly new, will rarely trigger a sense of shock to anyone even marginally exposed to art history.

This historic specificity is thus crucial to the show, which must put weight to the word 'now' that reoccurs in the overarching title and theme of the annual exhibition. The show opens in 2020, the year history will remember as the watershed moment a pandemic shook the lives of millions and put travel, economy and everyday life to a deeply uncertain—and for those who have lost their jobs or loved ones, devastating—halt. Discomfort has arguably been heightened in many individuals and communities across the globe during this time, as we are forced to jaggedly, uncomfortably readjust much of our personal and professional lives to the virtual realm. While only a third of the works were created this year (majority were made between 2015 to 2018), all the pieces are being presented

Next page: Detail of *Ambivalence of a Unicorn*, 2016 by **Kass**



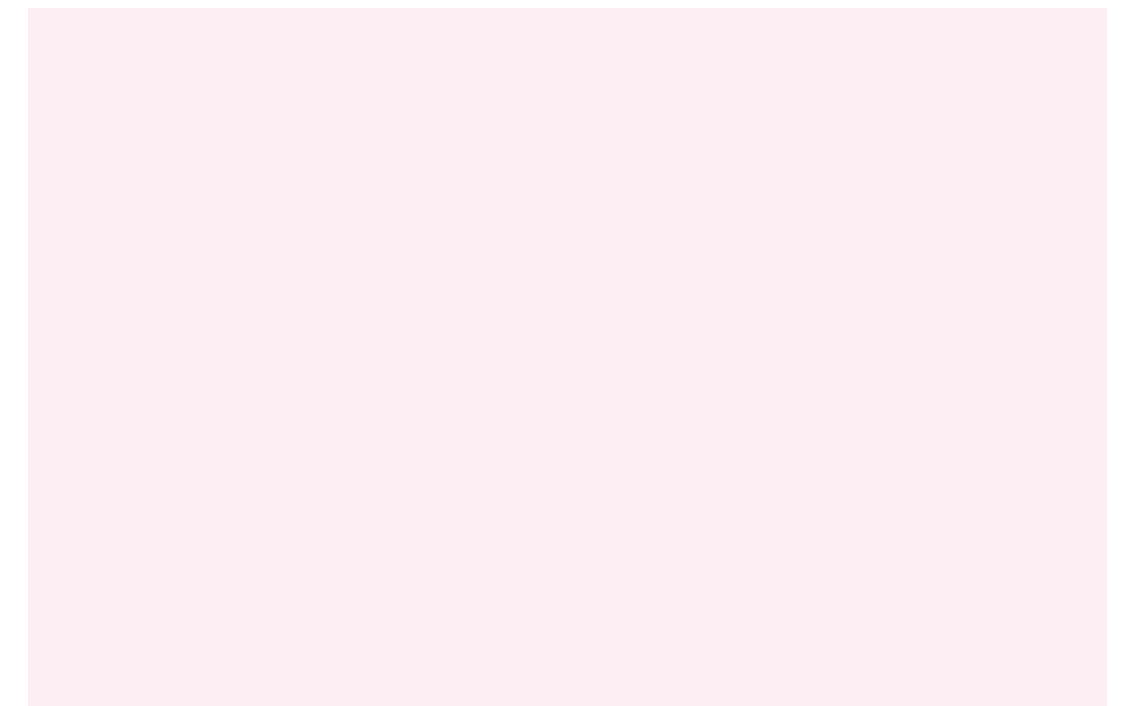


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and engaged with at this critical moment, adding a vital layer to the works' evolving meaning. The show thus provokes audiences to question: what does it mean to embrace unease at this time? How can we visually articulate the dissonances we feel today? Why were these works selected to capture, however explicitly or subliminally, the tensions of our now? Stressing the particularities of our present, the exhibit engages these urgent, unique discomforts that may one day fade in our near or distant future.

Nonetheless, just as the exhibit situates itself within the more glaring, collective conflict of our time, it simultaneously emphasizes the distinct subjectivity of each artist, and some of the more hidden, unspoken roots of their tensions: whether it be forming their self-identities as young artists facing the rocky beginnings of their artistic careers; or struggling to situate themselves within fraught, complex histories and current cultural contexts. Inviting the participating artists to reflect on these subtler realities, the exhibit engages and broadens what it means for 'emerging' artists working in Singapore today to express the difficult and unspeakable—ultimately showing how these nuanced tensions serve as dynamic entry points into understanding their art.

Previous page: Detail of *Golden Rain*, 2018 by **Koh Kai Ting**



KASS

For Singapore-born painter Kass, the tension most vivid to her today lies in an inner conflict: grappling with what she perceives as a fluid self-identity. While the youth often struggle to solidify their self-perceptions, Kass believes that the ‘self’ is ultimately ungraspable—eternally evolving as one’s contexts, circumstances and viewpoints change over time. To her, this ‘self’ is a culmination of her past and present deeds, and the events of her previous life: and thus, a continuous rebirth.⁶ She is acutely aware of not attaching herself too deeply with her ‘self’, striving to constantly free herself from whom she may once have been, but no longer is. Kass seems to apply a similar view in her art—believing that in confronting tensions, no matter how unpleasant the artistic process, she will arrive at a sense of liberation.⁷ Holding on to the fixed and the certain seems to bear little to no weight both in her personal philosophy and art—in which she navigates the complicated, ever-evolving identity of present-day Singapore and the culture of its youth.

In her largest piece, “Maturation”, a complex, otherworldly scene packed with a plethora of intricate, dizzying details both perplex the viewer, and stimulate a feeling of wonder. Coloured in sweet and pleasing pastel tones and filled with whimsical figures akin to the fantastical, amorphous creatures in children’s books, the work creates a world in which ancient tales and contemporary virtual kingdoms marry into one. Yet, in this ambiguous world, there are no simplistic heroes or villains in sight—only a sublime, highly ornate utopia brimming with infinite little stories waiting to be told, in which each corner pulsates with a life of its own. The title “Maturation” both frames and complicates the meaning of the work: indicating a state of transition into growth, a deepening of layers and an expansion of worlds. In the alternative realms she imagines, Kass incorporates a mix of influences rife in one’s childhood and adolescence: from science fiction, comic books, to video games. As she converges these worlds, the tension Kass admits to feeling mentioned earlier subtly underpins her work: how does one reconcile identity amidst the myriad myths and constructed memories both she and society create? Yet, one detects that Kass is not interested in feeding us with clear-cut answers, but simply inviting us to join her as she sits with her confusion—and hopefully, evolve into maturation.

Next page: Detail of *Survival of the Fittest*, 2018 by Kass



In a later piece entitled “Survival of the Fittest”, a more compact scene focuses our attention: at the centre of the piece is a boxing match, but instead of humans fighting in a ring, alien-like creatures occupy the space—sparring senselessly rather than strategically. And instead of being cheered on by an audience, the characters are surrounded by a cold and aloof blue environment filled with the same alien creatures, seemingly indifferent to the spectacle before them. Behind the scene, a bright pink explosion creeps in the background, rendered in a style straight from a comic book or cartoon. Here, “Survival” takes on a unique form: in which disruptions are masked in bright, pop colours; and competitions are not pomp celebrations, but mundane, essential acts of survival amid the chaos. While Kass is conscious of her ever-changing self, one can sense a strong, albeit maturing, identity in her art—wherein she evocatively captures the distinct struggles of today’s youth navigating daily life amid the tumultuous hyperstimulation, and a ‘survival of the fittest’ mentality prompted by a deeply individualistic culture. Yet, she softens the blow through fantastic, almost consoling forms and figures, showing us that even in confronting real, overwhelming tensions, we can still retrieve to the make-believe.

LUH GEDE GITA SANGITA YASA



To the Indonesia-based artist Luh'de, tension lies in navigating the noise and endless simulation of her exterior life. The artist identifies herself as quiet person, and thus finds socializing and other mundane things that may come natural to others exhausting.⁸ She sees her art as both an escape, and a way to understand these daunting conflicts as she creates visual scenes within her control. Yet, she is aware that even as she is creating, these strains never truly go away. She credits the things that cause her 'paralysis' as crucial starting points to her artistic process—drawing from the concrete, and often random, images in her memories, everyday surroundings and explorations in the virtual world, then juxtaposing them together in Photoshop into compositions where she attempts to achieve a sense of cohesion amid the disjointed fragments.⁹ To her, the process is instinctive: she is often unaware of the reasons why she retrieves certain places from her past, or projects particular visions of her future in virtual games—but in attempting to understand why she connects all these different parts together, she achieves a crucial level of self-awareness.

In her series *Paradiso*, she further engages this idea of playing 'God' as an artist, grappling with what it means to create her own 'ideal'. Her process begins by drawing from her memories and choosing which to retrieve and vividly recall, and in effect, which to forget. Then, with these 'ideal memories', she creates these projected, manipulated visions of parallel worlds inhabited by fictional Sims characters. In navigating tensions and vestiges of her past, she emphasises her agency in creating her own simulated paradise. *Paradiso #2 - Boys in Canggu* features two Western men clad in swimwear as they sit leisurely on the soft sand of a Balinese beach, with their backs against a graffiti-covered wall. Offering a quirky, comic relief in this mundane scene, a caricature of a white ghost suddenly pops out and peers at the two foreigners, as if surprised by their presence. In *Paradiso #3 - Girl Who Leaps Through Time and Space*, one will find traces of the same serene island view, complete with the soothing waves of the ocean; soft and comfortable resort couches; and tourists walking on the warm sand, ready to swim or surf. The beach scenes are then cut through with slices of other places and objects: inside an art gallery, or slivers of plants and fresh brush-strokes. Like the ghost in *Paradiso #2*, the fragments intrude and complexify the peace.

It is now fitting to mention another major source of tension in Luh'de's artistic practice: incorporating her identity as a Balinese. She admits that while the ubiquitous exoticising of Bali triggers in her a sense of unease, she simultaneously does not want to detach herself completely from her home—choosing instead to borrow ideas of the 'paradise' it provides, and make it her own. Though she is not certain if she wants to eventually break free from this 'stereotype' as a Balinese, she credits this constant struggle in reconciling her cultural identity for fuelling her curiosity and creativity.¹⁰ Indeed, in these seemingly arbitrary insertions of personal memories slicing through the otherwise vacant and impersonal depictions of paradise, Luh'de powerfully centres her subjectivity and ongoing, complicated search for identity.

Previous page: Detail of *Paradiso #2 - Boys in Canggu*, 2020 by **Luh Gede Gita Sangita Yasa**

KOH KAI TING

Koh Kai Ting finds discomfort in the tug and pull between the internal and external, in finding what gives her personal pleasure amid societal pressures and the hidden weight of moral expectations.¹¹ She questions how to bridge her interior and exterior self, embracing the conflicts that come along with it head-on. Turning to philosophers and psychologists like Baruch Spinoza and Sigmund Freud for answers, she has come to find solace in the belief that discomfort, and the quiet pains often linked to it, is tied to survival. Thus, while the process of struggling to fulfill societal expectations may be unpleasant, she has accepted the fact that she will need to do so in order to live; to ensure she has a comfortable place in society. The fruits of embracing this particular discomfort will eventually, to her, bring an unconscious sense of pleasure. She believes that looking past the pains of discomfort leads to a kind of liberation, in which one will no longer be “tied down by the chains he set for himself”.¹²

This idea of breaking free from metaphorical ‘chains’ is provocatively captured in her haunting depictions of animals, seamlessly blurring the line between hyperrealism and surrealism. In *Tangled*, a goat is stripped from its natural environment and rendered as if it were suspended in air, against a hazy, abstract grey background. Its four legs are wrapped in a thin white cloth, suggesting that the goat had been tied down, restricted from roaming free. Yet, the cloth’s loose ends indicate a sense of fresh release—placing the goat in that ambiguous, limbo state of grappling with newfound liberation after a long period of suppression. Standing out amid the pale and muted colours of the painting, a strange, satirical detail sparkles: the goat’s two front feet are wearing bedazzled high heels, subtly opening a discussion on the glossy, banal facades we wear to navigate society, and mask darker realities. Nonetheless, the heels offer only a brief respite, as a deep psychological tension is detected in the goat’s eyes: communicating a fraught sense of freedom, wherein the internal wound of being chained down, though not visible, persists to exist.

Golden Rain captures the same anxiety innate in these images of tied up animals—this time, in the form of four plucked hens, ready to be cooked and devoured. Grotesque yet poignant, the work evokes the same urgent, visceral feeling found in British painter Francis Bacon’s depictions of raw



meat, breathing with life, character and drama. Like in *Tangled*, a disarming detail adds surreal satire to an otherwise haunted scene: at the upper portion of the painting, a piece of silver ornamentation dangles from the beak of one chicken. The other three hens appear hypnotized by the sight, all turning their gaze towards this silver charm—as if desperately holding on to any trace of banal beauty as they await their doomed fate. Understood against the artist’s incisive reflections on discomfort and pleasure, *Golden Rain* articulates a tense truth about the human condition, and the questionable ways we try to survive in the face of our inevitable mortality. Whereas Kass borrows pastel-painted imagery from video games and comic books to navigate the more hidden tensions of her generation and culture, Kai Ting paints lifelike, bizarre animals to similarly communicate profound yet invisible human pains and longing—but which in her case, transcend time and space.

Detail of *Golden Rain*, 2018 by Koh Kai Ting

NOREEN LOH

For the Malaysia-born Noreen Loh, the main tension that has loomed her life thus far lies in how she found—and continues to find—her identity as an artist. After leaving her small town in Ipoh, Malaysia, to find work in Singapore, she found herself in quite a jagged career path: she entered the workforce first as a receptionist at a shipping company; then later applied to a jewelry course in LA SALLE College, only to be told the course had been cancelled one week before classes were scheduled to begin. She then moved on to run a flower shop with no prior background as a florist, only to eventually discover that at her core, she was an artist. When she finally decided to forge her path as an artist after leaving her stable job at the flower shop, she traversed a similarly unpredictable journey: starting out first as an illustrator, then delving into photography, and eventually making her way to sculpture. Her entire career path was thus tainted with an uncertainty rooted in never knowing or predicting where she would find herself next. Yet, Loh credits all these years of organic experimentation for leading her to become the artist she is today—wholly embracing all the struggles and turns that came along the way.¹³

In her series *The Marriage*, she pays homage to flowers and her years as a florist, where she believes her artistic training began.¹⁴ The floral industry opened her up to a whole world of exquisite flowers and foliage that she never knew existed. Drawn to more avant-garde forms, she would disassemble and reassemble parts of different flowers together—juxtaposing textures of bitter melon and tanacetum, replacing petals of sunflowers with petals of ginger, for instance—to create her own unique, eccentric species. At one point, these experimentations gained her the recognition of an international floral publication, which published images of her recreated flowers arranged and photographed in an unlikely place: a bathroom, where her delicate creations would be sprouting out of a urinal. Capturing the sublime tension in marrying incongruous qualities—whether sweet and sordid, natural and artificial, or real and imaginary—eventually became quintessential to her art, and thus serves as the central theme in her pieces for this show.



Through an exquisite series of fantastic flora, Noreen contrasts the firm and rigid synthetic laminate material with the soft, fragile forms of flowers and plants. *Plantae I*, *Plantae II* and *Plantae VII* in particular reveal the artist's painstaking mastery of her medium and craft, in which finely cut laminate transform into intricate scales on these oddly shaped creatures of nature. *Mini Plantae IV* and *Mini Plantae IX* more closely resemble flowers, made up of simpler shapes and the wider, geometric planes of petals. *Mini Plantae IX*'s perfectly zigzag branch and *Mini Plantae IV*'s silver-coated, metallic-like leaf and petals radiate a playful charm, as if straight out of a whimsical storybook. Though visibly composed of artificial and inorganic objects, the plants trigger a conversation on the wider—and wilder—world of nature; the creatures left undiscovered and unappreciated. While the marrying of natural forms and manmade materials provide captivating frictions, a deeper tension lies in the way each plant or flower is enclosed in these glass bell jars: emphasising their uniqueness, as if demanding to be cherished and protected. Detached from their environment and confined in these cases, the plants and flowers provoke a conversation on what it means to value and live with nature in a highly urbanised society like Singapore, where it becomes tempting to view nature as a separate, clinical and controlled entity rather than something innately wild, enigmatic and beyond our grasp. Through her eccentric flora, Loh invites us, like she has consistently done in her journey, to embrace and welcome the unknown—allowing the alien and avant-garde not to make us afraid, but rather, leave us in awe.

Plantae VII, 2015 by **Noreen Loh**

Evidently, the participating artists enjoy a wide range of ways to navigate the diverse sources of their discomforts: from debunking dubious self-identities and myths; struggling for a sense of control amid the infinite disconnected fragments flooding one’s mind and everyday life; reconciling the external pressure to conform to societal expectations, and the pains and pleasures that come with the process; to traversing the inherently uncertain journey of being an artist, learning to welcome every surprise. Yet, despite their radical differences, the artists are bonded by one distinctive quality: an unshakable self-awareness achieved only through a sustained and profound acceptance of conflict—and a fierce determination to deepen and expand that awareness through their art. While most of them admitted to never truly ‘overcoming’ their conflicts, consistent among the artists’ reflections was a sense of agency and freedom they experienced in working through these tensions in their practice—indicating that they gained something critical not only to young artists, but all artists at every stage of their careers: growth.

Ultimately, it is this healthy openness to tension and friction that has allowed individual artists—and consequently, broader art communities and histories—not to remain static, but be in a constant state of mutating and maturing. Through their works in this exhibit, the participating artists have revealed how when they surrender to uncomfortable change, they hold the power to transform tensions into creations that astonish.

NICOLE SORIANO

END NOTES

- 1. Frederick Luis Aldama and Herbert Lindenberger, “Prologue,” in *Aesthetics of Discomfort: Conversations on Disquieting Art*. (University of Michigan Press, 2016), p. 3.
- 2. Aldama and Lindenberger, “Prologue,” p. 9.
- 3. Aldama and Lindenberger, “Prologue,” p. 7.
- 4. Aldama and Lindenberger, “Prologue,” p. 1.
- 5. Aldama and Lindenberger, “Prologue,” p. 10.
- 6. Email interview with Kass.
- 7. Ibid.
- 8. Email interview with Luh Gede Gita Sangita Yasa.
- 9. Ibid.
- 10. Ibid.
- 11. Email interview with Koh Kai Ting.
- 12. Ibid.
- 13. Phone interview with Noreen Loh.
- 14. Phone interview with Noreen Loh.

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- 1. Aldama, Frederick Luis, and Herbert Lindenberger. *Aesthetics of Discomfort: Conversations on Disquieting Art*. University of Michigan Press, 2016. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/10.3998/mpub.8284947.
- 2. Kass. Email interview. Conducted by Nicole Soriano, 31 July 2020.
- 3. Koh, Kai Ting. Email interview. Conducted by Nicole Soriano, 29 July 2020.
- 4. Loh, Noreen. Phone interview. Conducted by Nicole Soriano, 28 July 2020.
- 5. Sangita, Luh Gede Gita. Email interview. Conducted by Nicole Soriano, 31 July 2020.