Introduction

In delving into the theme of representation and the figurative, it is essential to first define the vast territories of both terms. This exhibition uses a more open definition of representational or figurative: to be referential to any phenomena, substance, or experience within the physical world. The degree to which it is identifiable with its reference could be as minimal as the artist wants it to be. The term figurative in this exhibition does not limit itself to just the human figure, although there is an inclination and focus on the human body amongst the artists featured. Focusing on embodied experiences, this exhibition highlights the representational not necessarily to present an accurate recording of the natural world, but rather to express how phenomena pass through the lens of reflective and interpretative bodies. Using this definition of representational, there is a place for abstract and metaphysical experiences to be expressed.

The process of creating this exhibition includes in-depth conversations with the artists about what they think “representational or figurative” means, and why it has become their visual language of choice. These conversations also describe how these artists use representational elements in their artworks, combining naturalism, abstraction, realism, and idealism, each imagined as four polar points forming an axis. There seems to be a consensus between these artists that the strength of representation and figuration lies in its associative, empathic, and allegorical qualities. These qualities are why elements of representation and figuration reappear again and again through art history, lasting to this post-contemporary era.

Everyone exists and experiences life through this human body. So naturally, the human body becomes a common denominator between different individuals coming from diverse backgrounds. If one were to allegorise the human experience as a language, then the body is the material and lexicon through which human beings express themselves. To live in a physical body is to experience its desires and limitations. The tension between desires and limitations pushes humankind into representation and figuration as a means to understand the unknown, create alternative realities, express hope, and explore possibilities.
Spiritual Bodies

To realise that the human experience is embodied in the physical is not to deny that the experiences could be spiritual. There should be no antagonistic dichotomy between the physical and the spiritual. The spiritual phenomenon can be experienced by the body, and inversely, some physical sensation could feel highly spiritual. Spiritual experiences, including emotions, thoughts, and feelings that come with them, are often intangible and undefinable. Hence, exact replication of physical experiences might not be the best way to express spiritual sensations. However, since spiritual experiences are passed through and experienced by the physical body, abstracting parts of the physical representation in art might create a visual language, referencing the physical world that can be interpreted spiritually.

Three artists in this exhibition, Junyi Lu, Nurify, and Koh Kai Ting, manage to create figurative and representational artworks that express complex spiritual ideas.

At first glance, Junyi Lu’s work looks highly stylised and abstracted. While the human figures are still referential to the actual human anatomy, it has been stripped of any identifiable features, making it only barely anthropomorphic. It is within the artist’s intention to create figures without gender, race, and class, as she wants the figure to represent mankind in its entirety. These figures also do not exclusively tell humankind’s physical experience. It also represents the spiritual form, the soul. They are akin to ‘gases’, as described in one of her artworks titled “Bloom”. Her artworks have a layered aesthetic with a flattened perspective. The figures are often translucent, as if they are light, ever-present, yet simultaneously passing. The simplified and abstracted human figures are then contrasted with relatively more naturalistic renditions of flora and fauna. The round or oblong shapes present in her artworks refer to the ‘womb’, cell patterns, and the origin of life.

Lu uses these abstract corporealities to convey reincarnation, an idea where spirits are transformable and pliable. The mixture between organic shapes, animals, plant, landscape, and spirit-bodies expresses her belief that all lives are physically and spiritually interconnected; affecting one causes an endless chain reaction that affects the others.

Besides creating a representation of the spirit, through the transparency of her figures and her layering style, she constructed a heterotopic space where everything is everywhere, so much so that nothing becomes nowhere. It is an imagination of a place beyond the physical life, before or afterlife. She explores these meta-spaces, referencing Buddhist literature and Lao Sheng’s Mountain Whisperers, or plays with the lore of genesis through depictions of Eden as a primordial garden, as shown in her work “Garden at the Back of Our Minds”.

Her exciting use of both abstraction and figuration manages to convey the complex spiritual ideas, existential questions, and spirit-transformation concepts that feel actual, relatable, and experienceable; not overly detached yet still highly spiritual. Lu thinks that particular objects or symbols are inevitably associated with one’s memory and emotions. Therefore, using it could spark a personal and immediate reaction within the viewer, not to recount a complete narrative but give partial signs that can be personally interpreted.
Koh Kai Ting further breaks down the border between the physical and the spiritual by finding parallelism between the two. Koh Kai Ting is inspired by the dancing Shiva Statue in CERN (The European Organization for Nuclear Research). One of the most significant projects in CERN is the “Large Hadron Collider”. They are also studying the “Higgs Boson”, also known as the god’s particle, which is supposedly the origin of the Big Bang. Koh sees Shiva’s dance of destruction as allegorical to the ‘cosmic dance’ of subatomic particles, including the Higgs Boson ‘god particle’. By drawing these parallels, the physical and scientific also become a spiritual concept.

The figurative depictions of crustaceans and chickens in the “Cosmic Dance” series serve a different purpose from the animals in Lu or Nurify’s artwork. Koh does not suggest that one will transform or reincarnate into those animals or that these animals are spiritual or sacred in any way. Instead, these animals serve a metaphorical and symbolic function. The “Large Hadron Collider”, the most powerful particle-booster accelerator, is symbolised as the snake-skin pattern that surrounds the three canvases. The snake’s cycle of moulting from its skin also becomes a metaphor for reincarnation. The crustaceans become a metaphor for immortality because of their relative biological immortality, while the pair of plucked chickens becomes the symbol of greed, placed sarcastically in the centre, between the two immortal crustaceans.

Nurify also talks about transformation from one phase of life to another through Moksha. However, unlike Lu’s depiction of animal life as spirits that coexist with human souls, the two tigers and ficus trees refer to specific characters taken from the local lore. The artist tells the story of Brawijaya V, his escape to Mount Lawu, and his experience of Moksha, moving from the physical realm into the metaphysical realm. For those who are familiar with the folklore, there is a chance that they will recognise the tigers as Dipa Menggala and Wangsa Menggala. Tigers in Indonesia are often believed as mythical beings, with many accounts of spiritual tiger encounters.

In this case, the local convention believes that the physical body already has a close link with the spiritual. Naturally, by recounting this tale, Nurify’s human and tiger figures become a depiction of spiritual bodies. However, Nurify did not take the folklore and depict it as it is on canvas. She alters it according to her interpretation and artistic liberty. Firstly, tigers are not the traditional Dipa Menggala and Wangsa Menggala’s transformation. The human figure has also become slightly anonymous through her simplified, naive style.
Symmetry and Duplication

In Koh Kai Ting’s work, the animals are created with meticulous rendering. However, the artwork as a whole does not depict a naturalistic scene. The crabs and chickens are positioned against an empty, sheer medium, while the snake serves an ornamental purpose. The plain background, symmetry, and unnatural positioning make the depictions nonspatial.

Through the duplication, the animals are elevated into an iconographic depiction. The triptych arrangement further forces symmetrical composition and suggests the form of traditional altarpiece art, fittingly playing into the reference of Higgs Boson as the “god” particle.

One could see how symmetry and duplication might affect how a figurative artwork is perceived through Koh’s work. Many living organisms are symmetrical in nature. In return, symmetry naturally reminds one of typical living organisms. Duplication, repetition, and symmetry may also suggest the time passing, routine, permanence, or forcing a particular composition to happen.

Similar to Koh, Adam de Boer’s artwork depicts a scene featuring naturalistic depictions of various animals. However, in de Boer’s work, the species, on their own, do not necessarily have a metaphorical association or quality that could be tied to a specific narrative. Thus, as opposed to Koh’s animals that could exist against an empty background, the scene depicted in de Boer’s work needs to be read as a whole; the subject (birds) with the environment (raging sea).

“Twin Tempests” was created after de Boer, an avid surfer, encountered a winter storm on the beach in Southern California. The day it happened, the sky had been dark at the beach all day, but then there was a break in the clouds on the horizon, and the wind came up. As the weather changed, the black crows and white seagulls circled all around the artist. All the while, the calm and collected pelicans flew in a clean, crisp line at the horizon, hunting for fish. While those birds do not typically belong together, California’s ecological composition makes the coexistence of the three species possible.

Witnessing such raw natural coincidence feels almost mystical to the artist. It is voyeuristic in a sense, eerily seducing, almost as if it is something that you are not supposed to see, a warning, a bad omen, doom waiting to unfold. This interpretation of the oncoming storm is inspired by Giorgione’s “The Tempest,” where a looming storm in the background serves as a metaphor for warning. The birds, while appearing graceful, add to the “warning” element, reminding the viewers slightly of Hitchcock’s film “The Birds.”

The depiction of the scene teeters the balance between idealism and reality, not completely fantastical yet not wholly realistic. Unlike “Jendela Pagi” and “Jendela Malam” paintings that are painted in Plein Air, this landscape was an essentialisation of the experience, created by the artist in retrospect. The tension between idealistic and realistic depiction is further emphasised by the mirroring composition. By mirroring the landscape, de Boer forces the chaos to fall into order. Akin to Koh’s work that gains a religious aesthetic through duplication, the symmetrical composition in this painting was inspired by a religious piece, “The Coronation of the Virgin” by Quarton. Mirroring and creating in diptych have been recurring visual themes in de Boer’s artworks. Having a twin of his own, the artist feels that his background influences his affinity towards diptychs and duplication because having a twin feels like there is another version of himself living another possible alternate reality, while carrying his likeness.
Even without a human figure, this figurative painting provides a cathartic experience to its audience—a testament to the human brain’s ability to connect and derive meaning from partial symbols and visual cues. When initially shown to the American audience, most of them made sense of this painting—wherein different species black and white birds coexist in a situation of chaos—as a reflection of the current racial injustice situation in America.

The three birds do not seem to belong within the same scene, but the ethnic landscape of the United States, with its history of immigration, displacement, and slavery, makes the encounter possible. This commentary on immigration and displacement is also apparent in de Boer’s previous artwork titled “Red-Crowned Amazons No. 2” where a flock of tropical birds, originating from Northeastern Mexico, is seen flying above a grey urban landscape of Los Angeles. This peculiar and unlikely scene is also a realistic phenomenon in Adam’s locale, because of the artificial displacement of the birds, originally brought to America as exotic pets. While de Boer says that this painting was not exclusively created as a reaction towards the racial tension and conflict currently happening, it is also not non-reactive to it. As the artist is an individual existing within and experiencing the tension, as well as a multiracial person whose family experienced displacement and alienation, it is natural for his painting to be an outlet and reflection of the ongoing issue. This is similar to the response of this painting’s American audience, who assigned a cathartic function into this painting by having it represent and externalise complicated sentiments that would otherwise be difficult to communicate.

The theme of duplication also appears in Loi Cai Xiang’s artwork. “Crippled Days” and “Broken Nights” depict two scenes set in the same space but at different times of the day. Both Loi’s and de Boer’s work play with a voyeuristic perspective. The pair of paintings, set in the bedroom, the most intimate part of the house, forces the audience to be a voyuer of two highly vulnerable, carnal, mortal, and surreal scenes. The horror is amplified by the highly naturalistic rendering of the surrealistic image. Rendered in a blurred way, like a damaged celluloid film, the duplication in Loi’s work presents a sense of suffocating stillness of time as if the air itself is heavy. Rather than order, what the replication brings is a sense of inescapable routine.

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Emphatic Bodies

In Loi’s paintings, there is one repeating unknown figure whose back is faced against us. Neither the head nor the extremities are clearly visible to the audience. Instead, the figure is curled up in a fetal position, exposing the sharp contour of their spine. Its shapes are seductively defined to establish a psychological bridge to one’s mortality—a potent visual symbolism for strength and vulnerability. Yet, in contrast to the background, the figure appears detached and strangely light.

This painting expresses the loneliness many experience during these isolated times. In Asian culture, expressions and representations of male vulnerability are rare and often taboo. The portrayal of a male figure in a fetal position explores the tender moment of male fragility, frozen in time.

Loi expresses psychological and spiritual tribulation through corporeal vulnerability. The artist’s highly naturalistic manner in rendering the torso and having experienced similar pains makes it easier for one to situate themselves within the scene painted by the artist. The misery that is psychological in nature archived an outlet through corporeal depiction. Thus, this series serves a cathartic purpose for the artist and the audience, highlighting the sensitive issue of mental health.

In this exhibition, several other artists also feature an anonymous figure whose identity is somewhat blurry or whose features are indiscernible. These figures become unnamed “everymen,” an appointed vessel for emphatic connection and self-projection for the artist and the audience. By having this emphatic proxy body within the artwork, the artist creates a way for the often abstract experience to be communicated and contextualised.

In his works, Casey Tan juxtaposes relatively naturalistic human figures with a flattened and dream-like surrounding scene to express the tension between hope and reality. As previously mentioned, existing within a body means understanding its limitations and desires. The current hurdle for humankind is this long-drawn pandemic, and what better vessel to communicate this issue than through human form? Unlike Loi’s approach to surrealism, Tan chooses to express the pandemic situation through a combination of social realism and caricature aesthetics.

“Back to Life” features a man chain-smoking and drinking, counting the days of being isolated. The artist portrays this character not as a realistic depiction of the suffering brought about by the situation but as a caricature of the suffering itself. It is over-exaggerated at one part and minimised at another aspect. The figure engages in a kitschy depiction of being stressed and isolated and fittingly features bright and tropically plastic colours. There is a considerable American illustrated style influence in this painting. While it might be strange to incorporate American visual signs into a local issue, America has become a commonly accepted visual language through its hegemony of the pop culture and entertainment industry. However, the simplification and kitsch delivery are not to deceive that the suffering is lighter than it is, but rather to create a mutually recognisable picture through which each audience can fill their own nuanced details.

The man himself is not of any particular character or significance in the local Singaporean context. If observed closely, the face is painted in a blurry manner, especially in contrast to the crisp graphic detail of the background. He has unclear social class markers and an ambiguous racial identity. It is only clear that he is biologically male. In this case, the figure, aside from being the caricature of contemporary suffering, also plays the aforementioned emphatic tool of the anonymous “everyman.”

Syam Terrajana’s work also features an anonymous female character in the foreground of both “Musim Buru” and “Kupu - Kupu Sepanjang Pantai”. This unknown female figure is different from anonymous figures in other paintings because she carries a cultural and historical context. Her wardrobe and likeness suggest a specific time and place in the nation’s history. The reference of the female figure comes from the TropenMuseum’s photograph collection of an anonymous Gorontalo woman. Therefore rather than just being an emphatic vessel for the audience to project themselves in, she becomes the essentialisation and embodiment of the Gorontalo land, sea, and beaches.

By empathising with this memory and identity, the audience hopefully no longer experiences the sombre landscape as only themselves, but as someone with the gnosis of historical baggage.
Borrowing a Likeness

For the museum people, that portrait of Gorontalo woman is just an image reproduction of an anonymous other, but for Terrajana and other people in that region, she is a kin, mother, ancestor.

In his art practice, Terrajana deals with reproducing and appropriating historical archives. This is an interesting aspect to talk about, especially in regards to the theme of representation. The reference in the painting is not something in the natural world but a digital reproduction of it. The process becomes comparable to image collaging. However, there is a reason why he employs this technique of borrowing and reproducing the archive. He believes that humankind is a being that reflects and interprets. They want to reflect on their surroundings and at the same time also interpret the representation through a being that reflects and interprets. They want to reflect on their and reproducing the archive. He believes that humankind is there is a reason why he employs this technique of borrowing process becomes comparable to image collaging. However, representation. The reference in the painting is not something aspect to talk about, especially in regards to the theme of and appropriating historical archives. This is an interesting drive to create an archive. This practice could be dated back to the prehistoric era, with cave paintings and carvings of deity. Just like history, the perspective through which one perceives these visual archives is influenced by power dynamics. This issue is also present in Adam de Boer’s Jendela Pagi and Jendela Malam. Both works feature Yogyakarta’s rural landscape painted in Mooi Indie style, painted Plein air, in contrast with the wax resist painting and bamboo craft surrounding it. Mooi Indie exemplifies the hegemony of representation, where the ones that hold higher power enforce a set definition and value onto their subject.

As a journalist, Terrajana thinks that one of the drives that push people towards representation is actually the drive to create an archive. This practice could be dated back to the prehistoric era, with cave paintings and carvings of deity. Just like history, the perspective through which one perceives these visual archives is influenced by power dynamics. This issue is also present in Adam de Boer’s Jendela Pagi and Jendela Malam. Both works feature Yogyakarta’s rural landscape painted in Mooi Indie style, painted Plein air, in contrast with the wax resist painting and bamboo craft surrounding it. Mooi Indie exemplifies the hegemony of representation, where the ones that hold higher power enforce a set definition and value onto their subject.

In the conversations leading up to this exhibition, Rosit Mulyadi has similar sentiments as Terrajana and de Boer towards the relation between power and representation. The utilisation of figurative painting is political in nature. It has the direct influence and ability to transform a figure into an icon of veneration through idealistic representations. One exact figure could be painted as evil or good, regardless of who and how the subject actually is. Furthermore, meaning could be added on and assigned upon representation. This leads to the question: who owns our likeness?

Rosit Mulyadi’s work also occupies a unique niche within the representational art category, as his primary art-making process includes appropriating and reproducing other artists’ artworks. As a result, what Mulyadi emulates in his artworks is not what an object or a person looks like or what a particular scene looks like, but the visual style, brushstrokes, and aesthetic signature of other artists.

In this sense, his work is not only just a representation of reality but an emulation of someone else’s representation of reality.

In his previous series, Mulyadi appropriated paintings of European royalties and military companies, subverting the original messages to depict everyday Indonesian struggles. While Mulyadi appropriates paintings from the Baroque, Neoclassical primarily, and early Post-Impressionist era in the prior body of work, this current series borrows heavily from famous American Illustrated and Pop Art artworks, which have a profound urban-capitalist background. To emulate the Ben-Day dots aesthetic, Mulyadi basically silk-screened a silkscreen pattern into the canvas.
As previously mentioned, because of the cultural hegemony of the entertainment industry, America's visual language and cultural signifiers become a commonly understandable theme. But in the same way, Mulyadi detours the meaning of western royal portrait paintings and uses them to convey local issues; these visual portrayals of American cynicism and lethargy towards the capitalist structure are then redirected by Mulyadi to express the local's boredom and frustration facing this pandemic.

Akin to the subversion of state-symbolic structures (barricades, walls, barb wires, etc.) through vandalism and graffiti, Mulyadi further appropriates the western images by adding scribbles and stencilled words of local slang, profanities, and cliche phrases. Furthermore, what Mulyadi represents in his canvas is how the work would look if seen through the interface of an Instagram feed instead of how it would look like in real life. This representational choice alludes to our increased human-screen interaction and decreased human-human interaction.

Enggar Rhomadioni paints a scene from a dream that contains many elements of corporeal honor and suffering. While both Lai Cai Xiang and Rhomadioni view their art as inspired by surrealism, both show different versions and understandings of the style. Almost the opposite of Lai’s work, where the psychological turmoil is expressed physically, Rhomadioni’s dream scene is an entirely psychological experience; however, it presents itself as distorted corporeal-horror images. While Lai exposes the corporeal horror through the visibility of bones and fragility of the torso, focusing on the main structure of the spine, Rhomadioni expresses it through formless and wimpy folds of skin, absent of any skeletal structure. The body appears boneless, just like a field of beige colour, but rendered in sufficient detail and naturalism for people to recognise the fleshy nature of the material.

Looking closely at the artwork, one will notice how the fabric, ropes, floral matters, and skin are rendered meticulously and relatively naturalistically. Rhomadioni also uses picture references to study bruises and stitches before representing them in his artwork. However, amongst the other artworks in this exhibition, his painting at first glance appears the most abstracted and non-figurative. In appreciating Rhomadioni’s artwork, one is invited to reconsider their way of seeing and categorising representational artwork and how realistic rendering may coexist with elements of distortion and abstraction.

In its entirety, this exhibition works as a platform for conversation between artists coming from different backgrounds that share a shared affinity for representational and figurative artwork. The works serve as both support and antithesis to one another, sharing similar and opposing elements. These artists respect the body’s subjectivity as a medium that reflects and interprets issues, the body that is spiritual, allegorical, cathartic, and empathic at the same time. This exhibition also proves that different elements that seem contradictory, i.e. naturalism and abstraction, realism and idealism, could interplay and create a unique visual language. Lastly, “In Our Image, After Our Likeness” presents the different reasons why the language of representation becomes their best choice of expression, without settling down with one definite answer.