

Title

Dialogic Painting and Mythology: Cross-cultural collaboration amidst COVID restrictions

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Abstract

This paper discusses early findings from cross-cultural collaborative research that initially proposed travel to South-East Asia prior to COVID. A discussion that focusses on a specific collaborative encounter within this research between contemporary painters Harrison See and Desmond Mah, resulting in a video titled 'Intermission' that captured the creation of a large collaborative painting of the same name. This project was financially supported by a creative grant that contractually bound its recipients to adhere to COVID restrictions.

Restrictions that offered creative opportunities for these two artists as they reciprocated each other's painterly utterances within a dialogic exchange between two divergent cultural positions. This dialogic and collaborative approach to myth-making brought to the surface the misinterpretation, misalignment, and at times, the general untranslatability between their cultural positions. As Mah and See drew on their respective socio-cultural iconographies they applied inks, gesso and soy sauce, reworking their own, and each other's imagery. A space that facilitated the improvisation of a tension-filled fable of hybrid Australian cultural identities. This non-aligned space invited currents of difference, consensus and an avenue for exchange during the sometimes racially dividing COVID crisis.

Biography

Harrison See, is a contemporary artist interested in symbolism and allegory that transcends cultural difference. His practice-led research explores dialogic collaborative painting across cultures. See is a PhD candidate in the School of Arts and Humanities (SAH), Edith Cowan University, as well as a New Colombo Plan Alumni and the recipient of a Research Training Program Scholarship.

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Introduction

Restrictions imposed by COVID has created both challenges and opportunities during this research period, with travel restrictions, material shortages and social distancing reframing how this Practice-led research (PLR) had to approach cross-cultural collaboration. Prior to the advent of COVID this PLR proposed overseas travel where pre-arranged collaborations would occur between See and South-East Asian artists. Collaborations that aimed to facilitate exchanges between See (an Australian of North-West European descent) and Asian artists within the geographical and cultural contexts of those collaborators' localities. The difficulties of collaborating online or via congested postal services notwithstanding, ultimately it was COVID's travel restrictions that grounded this PLR within a Western-Australian context. PLR that still sought collaboration with artists of South-east Asian heritage, however, now through a lens of contemporary Australian identity. Rather than the originally proposed collaboration, this shift in location now contextualised exchanges between See and his collaborators within a contemporary Australian context. An opportunity for See to reflect on his cultural position within his own locality, addressing misalignment between diverse Australian communities; specifically concerning European and Asian migration.

This paper focusses on of one such collaborative encounter between contemporary painters, Harrison See and Desmond Mah. An exchange between two divergent hybrid Australian positions during a time of international crisis; a time when cross-cultural tensions have the potential to increase. The resulting video titled 'Intermission' (2020) that depicts the creation of a large-scale painting of the same name was screened periodically during July at Perth city's Yagan Square Digital Tower part of a Screenwest creative grant titled 'Today in My Life'. Although it is important to acknowledge that Western Australia has not had the same extent of restrictions as other parts of the country, at the time of filming this collaboration was still contractually bound by this grant to adhere to COVID-19 restrictions. These restrictions limited participant numbers, film location and social distancing that resulted in both obstacles and creative opportunities for these two painters to navigate.

This paper discusses early findings from 'Intermission' (2020a), one of many concurrent cross-cultural collaborations that make up See's ongoing PLR project. Research aims to identify and explore emergent creativity between diverse arts practices, specifically through practices of collaborative painting. This PLR is dialogic in its approach to collaboration, informed by Bakhtin's (1981) *The Dialogic Imagination: Four essays*, and supplemented by secondary Bakhtinian scholars (Emerson, 1996, Hamilton & Carson, 2015, Hirschkop, 1999, Muller, 2016, Pearce, 1994, Roberts, 2012). This approach that frames collaboration within a social space where meaning is made collectively through mutually reciprocated utterances; utterances that in this research take on verbal, written and material exchanges. Modes of exchange that facilitate the transference, translation and transformation of cultural and artistic understandings within an interstitial space. An interstitial space that in this case housed an exchange of improvised and misaligned iconography during a time of international crisis.

Contextualising this Collaboration

This five minute long video titled 'Intermission' (2020) seen playing in Yagan Square in Figure 1 was a time-lapse of the two artists painting together, at first taking turns and then working simultaneously. The painting itself (Figure 2) was a piece of unprimed canvas large enough to allow for social distancing. The video was filmed in an isolated space at Edith Cowan University provided with special permission under strict conditions during the university's brief lock-down period. The title was chosen to reflect the (at the time) unknown period of social restrictions between a pre and post COVID. The content of the painting was a continuation of an ongoing and still active material and verbal dialogue between the two painters that began late-2019. Although See and Mah already had an established collaborative practice, this grant afforded the pair the opportunity to scale up their approach.



Figure 1: Intermission video screened at Perth's Yagan Square Tower (2020)
[photograph: Harrison See]



Figure 2: Harrison See & Desmond Mah (2020), *Intermission*, gesso, ink and soy sauce on loose canvas, 210cm x 410cm [photograph: Harrison See]

Prior to collaborating, See and Mah shared an interest in amalgamating traditional cultural iconography with contemporary signifiers—often in the form of video game and/or pop-culture icons—as a way of navigating cultural hybridity and cultural authenticity within a multicultural Australia. An example seen in Mah’s baseball cap come Song Dynasty futou (Figure 3); a hat ironically speculated to be an early form of social distancing (Voon, 2020). Having both lived between Asia and Australia, See and Mah also share a pre-existing interest in the overarching East-vs-West meta-narrative; both acknowledging and challenging the extensive heritage of this problematic binary while also living in a colonised nation with a tension-filled past. Drawing on these mutual interests into cultural spaces See and Mah engaged in painting-focused discourse reflecting on their experiences of growing up in Perth at different times. Mah immigrating to Australia in the 1980’s during a time of anti-Asian sentiment, while See (born 1990) grew up in the overly-mindful multiculturalist decades that ensued; a period referred to as the ‘the age of apology’ by post-colonial theorist Tom Bentley (2019, p. 388). A period that saw “a mushrooming of public institutions apologising for past wrongs” that reshaped how my generation saw their historical narratives (Bentley, 2019, p. 388). Mah an outsider and See an occupant of stolen land. Mah (Singapore-born Chinese) and See (Australian-born European) maintained a material dialogue from divergent cultural positions as they explored their unaligned experiences of the same city separated by a generation.



Figure 3: Screenshot 1 [detail] from *Intermission* video of Mah’s makeshift futou hat (2020)

Discussion

In exploring the space between their divergent cultural positions See and Mah reciprocated both verbal and painterly utterances, to form and transform meaning. Scholar of dialogics, Lynne Pearce (1994), asserts that within a dialogic exchange 'all meaning depends on the presence of a reciprocating other' (p. 7); that is to say that any utterance only holds meaning due to its proximate relation to other utterances (Bakhtin, 1981, Emerson, 1996, Hamilton & Carson, 2015, Hirschkop, 1999, Muller, 2016, Pearce, 1994, Roberts, 2012). A single utterance might appear to hold meaning on its own, however, all meaning originates relationally between subjects as varying degrees of affirmation and/or conflict form through interactions with adjacent utterances (Bakhtin, 1981, Emerson, 1996, Hamilton & Carson, 2015, Hirschkop, 1999, Muller, 2016, Pearce, 1994). Importantly, this intersubjective framing of meaning-making acknowledges that the significance of an utterance is never fixed, all meaning has the potential to shift and subsequently transform meaning that sits in relation to it (Bakhtin, 1981). Therefore, any utterance has the potential for a multitude of simultaneous, and possibly contradictory readings—an inherent multiplicity that frees an utterance from any requirements of consensus or resolution (Bakhtin, 1981). See and Mah's collaboration was also inherently free from consensus or resolution, nor did the artists have any intentions of such, it was purely a collaborative encounter that embraced a multiplicity of meaning. An open dialogic space for discourse between two positions of enunciation. A space that facilitated the improvisation of a whimsical yet tension-filled fable examining their hybrid Australian cultural identities.

This painting saw See and Mah draw on their respective lexicons of cultural iconography as they applied inks, gesso and soy sauce, reworking their own, and each other's imagery (Figure 4 & 5). An expression of how they felt they were perceived by the *Other*, creating whimsical but monstrous representations of their respective cultural positions; a play on occidentalist and orientalist archetypes within one mythological scene. The term *Other* in this context refers to notions of cultural Othering as discussed by seminal theorist Edward Said (1978, 1985)—where one community internally constructs false and often harmful representations of another—notions highly relevant to See and Mah's interest in the problematic East-vs-West meta-narrative. This dialogic approach to myth-making brought to the surface the misinterpretation, misalignment, and at times, the general untranslatability between their cultural positions. As a dialogic space does not require a precise alignment of meaning, reciprocations within this painterly dialogue were often unexpected resulting in creative potential while the exchange unfolded. One painter's proud bird of prey becoming another's pest.



Figure 4: Screenshot 2 [detail] from *Intermission* video (2020)



Figure 5: Screenshot 2 [detail] from *Intermission* video (2020)

As See and Mah co-authored their own contemporary mythological saga this painting soon fell to a story between two antagonists, Mah's monkey and See's bird; the two monstrous representations of their respective cultural positions. Although the aim of this collaboration was not to assign a cultural trope (or monster) to either artists' position—nor have aspects of this painting identifiably pertaining to either artist—it must be acknowledged that the cultural identity of the artists positions still manifested into two overtly pertain-able monstrous

identities. Identities that did indeed originate from the painterly utterances of either See or Mah and endured the inherent transformation as they were dialogically reworked by both painters. Through this reciprocal painting the monkey (Figure 6) transformed into a hairy three-eyed skeleton, a morbid ode to Sun Wukong (AKA the Monkey King) from classical Chinese mythology. To spite his vast abilities Sun Wukong was ridiculed, struggling for acceptance amongst the gods, a metaphor used by Mah in his solo practice to explore his own struggle for acceptance during his immigration to Australia. While the bird transformed into an imperial bird of prey with soldiers riding its back (Figure 7), a reference to invading Viking longships that dawned animals (often dragons) atop their prow. This being a symbol used in See's solo practice as he unpacks his inherited post-colonial guilt combined with a severance from his relatively lost North-West European heritage. The result, an unfinished parable with two mythological beasts and no hero to slay them, cultural tensions with no solution, a pandemic without a resolution. A painting only concluded because of the self-imposed time limit of two hours decided by the artists.



Figure 6: Harrison See & Desmond Mah (2020), *Intermission* [detail of monkey monster], gesso, ink and soy sauce on loose canvas, 210cm x 410cm



Figure 7: Harrison See & Desmond Mah (2020), *Intermission* [detail of soldiers on top of bird], gesso, ink and soy sauce on loose canvas, 210cm x 410cm

While See and Mah reworked and reciprocated each other's painterly contributions there were no aspirations to sugar-coat how offensive they may have been, as again these monsters had originated from the very cultural position they were representing. In fact, even as these forms shifted throughout the exchange their monstrous qualities were maintained by the artists who introduced them. Therefore, the only intention was to explore these representations together, to express one cultural position to another offering an understanding without the need for alignment. An approach which led to unexpected and often unrelated reciprocations, a source for much of the creative potential of this experience. As reciprocations did not need to contribute towards any sense of consensus, binaries of good-vs-bad or right-vs-wrong became less important, leaving more room for emergent discovery. One such exchange began as See painted roses in reaction to Mah's large skeletal figure (Figure 8). See's painterly reply elicited a verbal response from Mah, 'why did you paint roses, what does that have to do with anything?' See replied, 'I don't really have a reason right now, it was all just a little sad and I like the shape of roses, they make me think of knights in shining armour'. A change neither towards nor away from consensus, but a new juxtaposition with a multiplicity of emergent relations to explore.



Figure 8: Harrison See & Desmond Mah (2020), *Intermission* [detail of rose], gesso, ink and soy sauce on loose canvas, 210cm x 410cm

This dialogic presence of multiple voices—or in this case multiple painters—reciprocating material and verbal utterances became the dominant collaborative painting methodology within this PLR. Two voices speaking through a single artwork. A dialogic unpacking of cross-cultural tensions reflected by the irritable unprimed canvas that contorted as painters applied paints and watery stains. A process where one mark is determined from the next as each artist speaks through their selections of cultural iconography. However, even when sharing the same materials these utterances are further distinguishable because of See and Mah's different application of these mediums; painterly utterances loaded with both pictorial and material significance. See, an oil painter who is accustomed to building up layers over time, predominantly applied thinner watered-down washes—while Mah, who's practice involves the application of thick mixtures of pigment, binder medium and other experimental ingredients with pallet knives, mostly contributed thick (at times almost sculptural) marks. Mah's more experimental ingredients are also often aromatically loaded with cultural meaning, such as eucalyptus extant, incense sticks, or in this case soy sauce. However, by the end of the painting both artist began incorporating to some degree the painterly approaches of the other, something that made the authorship of particular areas of this painting indistinguishable.

The loudest and most enduring of these pictorial selections were the previously mentioned Monkey and Viking/bird figures. Although there is no voices recorded in the video, the

reciprocation of such cultural iconography was often accompanied by verbal exchanges that expressed any significance and meaning pertaining to its creator, as well as contextualised its application within the contemporary. Artists would then discuss what they both saw, and more importantly how their understandings either aligned or misaligned to how the creator of that pictorial selection felt. A process that facilitated a dialogic unpacking of any pictorial utterance's role within this painting. A collaborative approach to mythmaking where both artists could simultaneously express and receive a multiplicity of views about their own and each other's pictorial utterances. During this contemporary mythmaking references to pop-culture were introduced during the early stage of this painting, for example figures derived from the *Star Wars* character Yoda (Figure 9 & 10), or the rendition of a flat side-on scene reminiscent of retro platformer videogames (Figure 11); both representing shared experiences of See and Mah. In their solo painting practices See and Mah both employ references to pop-culture as a means of linking communities within a contemporary globalised space; specifically elements of pop-culture, such as videogames and movies, prominent enough to cross cultural borders. Pop-culture references that have been translated and transformed for consumption across multiple countries and languages creating a series of diverse (but still shared) experiences across divergent cultures. However, despite both artists reworking so much of this painting much of the pop-culture iconography either diminished or was completely painted over as the Monkey and Viking/bird figures persisted.



Figure 9: Harrison See & Desmond Mah (2020), *Intermission* [detail of Yoda-derived figure 1], gesso, ink and soy sauce on loose canvas, 210cm x 410cm



Figure 10: Harrison See & Desmond Mah (2020), *Intermission* [detail of Yoda-derived figure 2], gesso, ink and soy sauce on loose canvas, 210cm x 410cm



Figure 11: Harrison See & Desmond Mah (2020), *Intermission* [detail of platformer videogame reference with ladder], gesso, ink and soy sauce on loose canvas, 210cm x 410cm

Reflections

Although this collaboration might seem like an antagonistic exchange, both artists in good will, and in the spirit of resilience, used these representations to facilitate an unpacking of both perceived and experienced tensions between their cultural positions. The inevitable divergence between cultural positions is not to be disregarded, especially in a country with a past of problematic cross-cultural relations. Pearce (1994) asserts that within a dialogic understanding, difference is inevitable, 'both a condition and a consequence' of dialogue (p. 202); without difference any type of exchange would be needless (Pearce, 1994). Divergent cultural positions and their inherent difference is unavoidable, necessary and to be valued

(Emerson, 1996, Xu, 2010); 'each of us is incomplete alone, but we should rejoice in that incompleteness. It make others more necessary to us, and it makes our tolerance of them more attractive' (Emerson, 1996, p. 111). In the spirit of this that See and Mah embraced opportunities to express their cultural positions without the need for compromise or harmony. Sometimes a tension-filled position for Mah as COVID re-sparked anti-Asian sentiment reminiscent of his immigration to Australia in the 1980's. Through humour, albeit at times dark humour, these artists were able to express their thoughts, feelings and experiences, although at times brining up trauma, the overall exchange was one of hope and empathy. A hope that highlights the value in pursing collaboration during times of crises when cross-cultural tensions are often heightened.

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