

“PASSAGE OF TIME” – A Poetic Meditation by Ha Manh Thang

Affinity Art is proud to present *“Passage of Time – A poetic meditation by Ha Manh Thang”*, the artist’s first solo exhibition in Hong Kong. Two series will be showcased - *“Circle of Time”* – a new body of work set to investigate the spiritual and emotional significance of symbols found on antiques and *“The Lakes”*, a series which the artist reflects on of the effects of modernisation on culture, tradition and questions existentialism.

“The Circle of Time” is a natural extension of Ha Manh Thang’s deep fascination for antiques. When not painting, Ha may be found in antique shops around town or further afield, browsing and searching for rare pieces. Objects and furniture pieces of a few hundred years old are casually displayed in his French-style colonial home studio. The benches and chairs at the dining table are almost three hundred years old. Ancient statues of monks with their cracked lacquer and gold, mythical animals carved in rare stone and hardwood figures from past dynasties sit side by side on equally old altars. Paintbrushes and palette knives are stored in ceramics jars with beautifully glazes and aged patina. The exquisitely decorated wood tray on which coffee is served is a relatively recent piece, estimated to be about seventy years old. These historical objects are integral part of the artist’s daily life, becoming his immediate and constant source of inspiration. The artist lives and breathes in the stories they carry as much as in the unknown past of the physical pieces themselves.

Dark lacquered panels, standing in random corners, are engraved with couplets and motifs. Intricately inlaid with precious mother-of-pearl, some inlays are missing - leaving empty gaps and negative spaces on the panel which the artist finds particularly intriguing, as if pointing to lost glory and a hidden past. By carving the visual iconography onto a thick and freshly applied background, the artist recreates the void left by the missing parts onto canvas. As if suspended in a spatial dimension of a restricted palette, horizontal stripes and deliberate blur - the traditional symbols and characters adopt a metaphorical form against a contemporary setting.

Other than antiques, Ha finds amply inspiration from classical poems and songs from the Tang Dynasty.

*“Who took the golden heron into flight
Leaving this empty Hoang Hac temple in solitude
The golden heron flew far away long ago
Clouds return still after these thousand years...”*

Excerpt from “Yellow Crane Pagoda”, by Cui Hao 崔顥

In *“The Lakes”* series, Ha Manh Thang continues his exploration on the phenomenon of disappearing cultural values in the context of a modernizing Vietnam.

His latest paintings use special canvases, the top portion is silk fabric and lower half is canvas. The silk portion is positioned at the top, alluding to an ethereal sky and impalpable heavens. When light shines through the paint on the thin silk, a mottled shadow effect is created on the supporting wall.

According to Feng-Shui beliefs, water or a body of water is an integral part of any important architectural or cultural building design. A small pond, a lake, a stream or a river in front of a pagoda, temple or a communal house, the latter silhouetting on and rooting its existence in the former, is considered a common and auspicious sight.

Superimposing base layers of colours and gold with a rich impasto surface, Ha carefully etches on the semi-dry paint the architectural drawings of traditional buildings thoroughly referenced from archival construction plans. Reducing the structure to its core minimum, the thin lines capture the essence and spirituality of the building. These drawings are virtually invisible from a distance but are distinctly present upon close inspection. Their elusiveness points to the disappearing symbolic values they represent: culture and tradition.

Whilst observing changing seasonal, weather and daily conditions and the effects they have on the water, Ha captures the lake in a constantly fluctuating state and creates a poetic visual metaphor alluding to the passing of time, the changing of states and ultimately questions non-existentialism.

In *"Passage Of Time – A Poetic Meditation by Ha Manh Thang"*, the artist uses the juxtaposition of the traditional with contemporary elements to embody the perpetual dialogue between the symbolic representation of the past and the reality of the present, the passing of time and the poetic and spiritual search into one's soul.

"Art, for me, is a way to redefine life in a different way..."

I am interested in dialogues and how meanings are ascribed to images that come from tradition and culture. My work is inspired by images from history, popular culture and changes in contemporary society.

...It is like a closed circle of time, memory and history."

Ha Manh Thang, 2017