

In Review | Artist Talk: Genevieve Chua with Melanie Pocock

On Saturday, 22 February, artist Genevieve Chua and Melanie Pocock (Curator, Ikon Gallery, UK), guest curator of *Twofold*, discussed how Chua's notion of painting as a medium which occupies 'two-and-a-half dimensions' unfolds in her latest exhibition.

Twofold is the artist's exploration of fundamental questions of painting, particularly its perception and constituent materials. It arises not only from ideas of human vision and simulation, but experiences of interpretation which unfold over time. Her largest solo exhibition to date, it features new print-based works from Chua's residency, which began in November 2019, and paintings from two ongoing series in her practice, *Edge Control* (2016 -) and *After the Flood* (2010 -).

[3,300 words, 30-minute read]



Image courtesy of STPI – Creative Workshop & Gallery, Singapore

Melanie Pocock: Genevieve, I'm wondering if you could share what it is about painting in the simplest way that appealed to you, and why is it that you feel so attached to describing yourself as a painter rather than an artist in a more open sense.

Genevieve Chua: I really only emphasised my position as a painter three years ago, because I realised that whatever I do always has a relationship to the wall. Even if the objects that I create come away from the wall and into the center of the space, the wall sets the scene. I have always majored in painting in art school at NAFA, LASALLE, and later on at Royal College of Art, where the language of painting really took my focus.

I found that the vocabulary of painting can be so expansive, especially between painters when you can skip the first instance of viewing and saying, “Oh, these are not graphic images.” They're paintings that viewers can skip the formalities of asking, “Why does it have to be a painting? Why can't it be a print?” and then go straight into other conversations, like materiality, for example.

I'm very interested in the idea of touch. The way touch has developed in the technological age would mean swiping left and right, or getting haptic feedback. It's so subtle, but through your fingers it vibrates throughout your whole body. It's a signal to your body that says, yes, the payment has been made, your phone has unlocked. It's almost instant. I like the idea of touch, texture, or tactility. It doesn't have to be thick paint on canvas anymore, it doesn't have to be impasto, gestural, or modernist. Painting can be about so many other things. I can speak about painting through other languages, like the language of the digital, both obsolete and new, or through natural science. I like the looseness of the dialogue that comes with painting.

Melanie Pocock: This idea of speaking about painting, it's not necessarily an explicit verbal conversation, but it's something that is communicated implicitly in the work – whether you're harnessing certain references from art history or other artists, or whether it's the way that you apply the paint. Certainly, gestural painting and impasto aren't the only ways to communicate a painting's materiality. Interestingly, even with these paintings in *Edge Control*, although they look very clean and graphic from afar, you can really see the glistening black paint that's reflecting the light and how the brush strokes are not trying to be perfect.

Image courtesy of STPI – Creative Workshop & Gallery, Singapore

Genevieve Chua: *Edge Control* has two very basic parameters. One was originally for it to be only in black and white, and the second one was that the image within the painting should touch the canvas from edge to edge, in order to bring out certain tensions of the painting. Through looking at other paintings, I found that there was an invisible safety margin, especially with figurative painting, so that the painting doesn't fall over the edge when it's being re-stretched or if there is too much emphasis on the centrality of image, in order to treat painting as a window to another dimension. I didn't want that; I just wanted the whole object of the canvas and stretcher to be seen.

In digital terms, I've been told by people who aren't painters that the image looks really cropped, really tight, and zoomed in. I've started to incubate that kind of language within myself and developed the *Edge Control* series further to describe

certain digital language. It plays with other objects and texts really well. For the exhibition I did at the ICA which Melanie has curated, I forefronted the Haldane's text, which is a 1930's essay written about being the ideal size to be if you are an insect, an animal, a person, or a nation. He talks about a small insect that has to be really careful when it's trying to drink from a puddle of water, because of its mass and surface area. I like how that plays with the idea of being on the brink of something, of that very thin line as the boundary between life or death.

When paintings are paired with texts, some of them can be paired really well without being overwhelmed. I treat all these *Edge Control* paintings as a glossary of shapes being permuted. You can see a gradual progression in the ones on my left, and the ones on the other wall is a progression of shape – from the serrated to the curvaceous.



Image courtesy of STPI – Creative Workshop & Gallery, Singapore

Melanie Pocock: What you have also highlighted is the serial nature of the work – not just with *Edge Control*, because this series started in 2016. There are also 15 new paintings in this show?

Genevieve Chua: I'm at 44 paintings now.

Melanie Pocock: Wow. It's also for what feels like a simple idea and framework, and you're taking it really far every time. There's like a new form whilst restricted to a white palette and even the size, although I know in this show you have two smaller *Edge Control* paintings. Would you like to talk about those new directions or departures from the classic format here, with the other works that have been made for this show?



Image courtesy of STPI – Creative Workshop & Gallery, Singapore

Genevieve Chua: Well, in the middle Gallery, there are two works that have a tinge of pale umber. I didn't think that it would be so stark, but I like that it pairs really well with the colour of the linen, so when you view it from a profile, it makes sense that it's still quite whole. In other cases, it went through a process of concealing, and I am starting to figure out why I do that.

I had a tutor during my Masters, and she used to work as a British spy. She says that I'm really into concealing my tracks and she got me to look into sanding down the pattern on my shoe to see what would happen. You would see one world with a cyan colour that pops out of the linen. I made an attempt to semi-conceal it as I thought it was too much. It's something that I'm trying out — the 'colour' situation only happened this year, so I'll see what happens.

Melanie Pocock: And you were also saying yesterday about how in watercolour painting, white and black are no-go's. It goes against the protocol to use them, and you feel maybe on hindsight, they were something that was there when you were adding the layers.

Genevieve Chua: When I was 16, I took watercolour painting classes with the third and fourth generation of Nanyang painters, and the colours black and white were

kind of banned from the palette. Black had to be a mix of burnt sienna and prussian blue or other variations of brown and blue, and white had to be the colour of watercolour paper. So you need to have enough foresight to identify where the whites of the eyes are, or the highlights of the nose and of the chin, because once you get it wrong, you have to start again. But I found it really ironic because they would say that watercolour is a poor man's medium. So why don't they just buy black paint, instead of buying more burnt sienna or prussian blue? But it also makes sense, when you see paintings of the Singapore River, all of them had a muddy feel. Or maybe because the water is also really polluted.

With the Nanyang painters, sometimes the teacher would come around and mix the colours for me. The mixing area on the watercolour palette is quite small, so I can see why you don't want to use black, because when you use a tiny amount of black, it would get everywhere.

With black, you have to behave with caution; and with white, you have to have enough foresight.

And when I left NAFA, there was an act of rebellion from me. I felt enormous satisfaction squeezing white paint from the bottle. But I also found out that white also has its complexities — there are 3 or 4 different kinds of white, and so many different kinds of black.

Melanie Pocock: Perhaps we can start thinking beyond and into the space. As I mentioned earlier, one of the approaches with the show was to consider the whole gallery as an extension of the work, and how to move people around it through the placing of the works. You'll notice in different areas that these wall paintings, which we are formally not considering as works, are absorbed into the surface. Would you like to talk more about this element of the wall painting in particular?

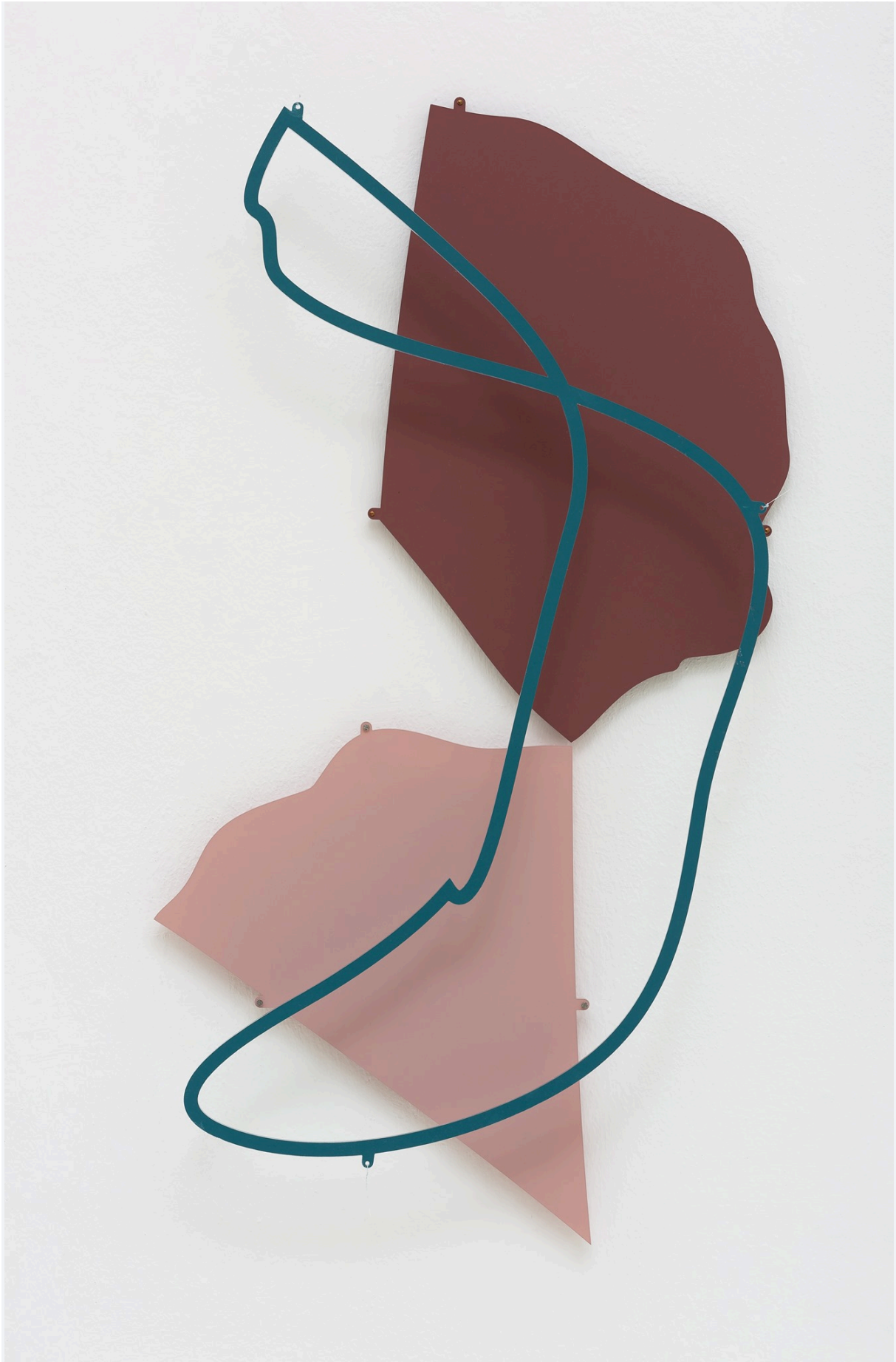
Genevieve Chua: When I did the wall paintings, I said that I finally figured out the dramaturgy, and you said it was interesting that I used the word dramaturgy as devices to help with movement around the space. And it takes into consideration the context and the time; perhaps the culture and the history of this space.



Image courtesy of STPI – Creative Workshop & Gallery, Singapore

With the STPI Gallery, I've seen a lot of shows and walked around this space in a multitude of ways. For me, it was about merging spaces and playing with the duration of time that people would cluster around a certain wall. It's kind of a test because I wouldn't say that I know this would work. I think the idea of the time taken to view a work helps in making decisions with what to do with certain walls or activate certain spaces. There are some spaces that I couldn't activate.

Melanie Pocock: Shall we go into those? They are probably evident once you go around and you feel a space that feels vacant of lacking something, but certainly, compared to other exhibitions that I've seen here, there are spaces that have been activated, and otherwise feel inert. And one of them in particular is this corridor (left wing). We were talking about this yesterday that it feels like you want to walk through it from one end to the other. In fact, we've placed works at the end of each corridor as a way of beckoning people, but by doing that without engaging with the side walls, people often storm across without taking time to slow down. Whereas this wall in particular, it's really slowing you down. This is important with the works that you made during your residency here, the screenprint works on transparent acrylic with different layers, with some suspended. Would you like to share more about that?



Pivot Pivot, 2020, Screenprint and rolled ink on acrylic. Image courtesy of STPI – Creative Workshop & Gallery, Singapore

Genevieve Chua: The work called *Pivot Point*, of burgundy brick red with stark turquoise, requires a lot of points of balance in order to levitate. I find it delightful when installers take time to figure out what is happening, and then tilting the painting a few millimetres to the left and right, especially when working with professional art installers. It's so satisfying. Wouldn't you agree? Having installed so many exhibitions.

Melanie Pocock: Definitely. It's amazing how much difference that millimetre or two can make. I always try to reimagine what it's like to see all of this afresh without prior knowledge. And the irony is, I suppose, that we are striving for that but it becomes impossible at some point. The learning occurs once the exhibition is out there and in public.



Edge Control #31, Seated Nudes, 2020, Acrylic on linen. Image courtesy of STPI – Creative Workshop & Gallery, Singapore

Genevieve Chua: The conversations that happened during installation are so nourishing for my soul, for my studio practice. For example, that painted line across the wall behind, I've heard so many people call it different things like 'pedestal', 'horizon', 'altitude', 'ledge', 'shelf', and you put all of those things together and you know exactly where to place the *Edge Control #31, Seated Nudes*, you want it to rest against the ledge, you want a certain painting to float across the shelf, you want it to be submerged in the water, when there is no water at all.

Melanie Pocock: We've been using so many verbs, like 'actions', 'submerged', 'dipped', 'sit', 'float', for something that is essentially inanimate. This ties into the titles of the paintings in *Edge Control*, as you were saying how they all allude to some kind of happening or event.

Genevieve Chua: It's a kind of dialogue about abstraction and painting that I try to push outside of the exhibition space, talking about making first, and then planning an exhibition. You then veer away from using nouns which are calling something a name of a thing. If you say, "This reminds me of your grandma's socks", everyone would go, yeah it does. It's more about verbs or action words, or just hints of what's to come.

Melanie Pocock: A lot of them are action words like *Edge Control #22, Brace, Brace* — when I look at it, I do imagine that bracing position, and it does start to turn into something figurative, and I know this is always a threshold that you're bouncing across. As humans, we carry so many associations visually or culturally that it becomes impossible to look at pure abstraction. It's honestly something that I really struggle and grapple with. As an artist dealing in that field, how do you interpret that human projection? Is it something you're seeking and playing with?



Edge Control #22, Brace, Brace, 2018, Acrylic on linen. Image courtesy of STPI – Creative Workshop & Gallery, Singapore

Genevieve Chua: I guess that's why the title helps to give you another direction, but I also do think it's a cultural thing. Especially with abstraction in this part of the region, I've always heard artists refer to abstract paintings in quite an anecdotal manner. They will refer to an experience and then say this is what they're trying to express. So it comes from an emotional space. I'm not saying that my feelings aren't emotional in themselves, but they perhaps don't have an obvious expression of a gesture or signature. There is no visible handwriting to say I'm nervous, I'm angry - they are quite determinant in themselves.

Even in some Chinese paintings, you can tell that the landscape is almost abstract, a mountainous landscape, you look closer and you realise there's a human figure. So there is always an expression of man being in the midst of something larger. It's part of cultural history. It's really quite impossible to omit the human presence in anything we see. And there are of course also other phenomena, for example, pareidolia, which is the phenomenon when people look at clouds and say it looks like a cow.

Melanie Pocock: It feels important that you only title these paintings after you've become aware of the work.



Edge Control #25, Hard Diplomacy, 2019, Acrylic on linen. Image courtesy of STPI – Creative Workshop & Gallery, Singapore

Genevieve Chua: Actually, it depends. For some of the shaped canvases, like *Edge Control #25, Hard Diplomacy*, I had to decide the title before I started it. Otherwise, I'd be carving and not knowing where I was going.

Melanie Pocock: Do you feel like carving a sculptural gesture requires more figurative thinking beforehand, as opposed to when you have the canvas in a ready shape?

Genevieve Chua: They're more or less the same. Actually, the rectangles are a bit harder to do, especially at this point where I've hit 44 paintings. There are some shapes that I think I've pushed to the end. It's like when you're playing with a computer game at the Boss level. You are done with that shape.

Melanie Pocock: I want to jump back to the STPI works again, because I'm conscious there's an important aspect about them that we haven't talked about. When we're thinking about optics and how we see things in signs and interpretations, the patterns in these works are derived from the moiré effect. It's an effect that painters like Bridget Riley use where you have perpendicular parallel lines, often very tightly packed, and when they intersect with another set of lines, they can start to create a veering illusion, as if they are moving and vibrating.

It's such strong and large painted lines that make you want to look at them because you want to be in on this experience, you want to be immersed in it, but at the same time it's so strong that you just can't look at it anymore. It's an assault to your vision. And so there's this paradox of looking at something that doesn't really want to help you look at it. It's so ironic. With these works, however, they are a lot more intimate and subtle – on transparent acrylic with different layers, while still generating that vibrational effect. What was it about the moiré effect that interested you? How did you come across it? Was it more to perceptual phenomena which is something that you think about and read about a lot?

Genevieve Chua: I'm interested in the idea of the expansion of an image. When you look at a work and you think that the work has a lot of expansion, it's almost like vibrating within itself. It sounds so esoteric. It's the same with the moiré effect. With Bridget Riley, there's the optical illusion element but there's also a desire to say, "Hey, look, I can give you an illusion of three-dimensional balls". I wanted to eliminate that

parlour of trick and make it slightly pleasant for people of all heights to enjoy. You see different things from different angles as it spins.



Image courtesy of STPI – Creative Workshop & Gallery, Singapore

I've always wanted to make a kinetic work without batteries. I found that during the residency I had a lot of time to stare at it, and I was waiting for it to stop spinning. Sometimes it spins and sometimes it doesn't. When someone opens the door it starts spinning again. And I thought, this could activate a space. The work acknowledges the presence of the viewer.

Melanie Pocock: How do you see these suspended forms functioning, in terms of the whole show?

Genevieve Chua: I think the wonderful and delightful bit is that I am still discovering it as well. Sometimes it's the shadow. I'm not gonna tell you the answers; it's always moving in unexpected ways, clockwise, anti-clockwise, and the ever-changing ombre effect. It's always fun. I think STPI has a culture of having an investigation of what the artist explored during the residency, and I felt like I could incorporate it into the show without saying that this is a test print.



After the Flood #28, 2011 - 2019, Digital Pigment Ink Print on Canson Photo Lustre Premium PC, Hand-colored with ink. Image courtesy of STPI – Creative Workshop & Gallery, Singapore

Melanie Pocock: I'm conscious there's one series that we haven't talked about yet, which is the *After the Flood* series. These are the black-and-white prints that you see on Singapore's secondary forests that have some sections coloured. And coming here, it just made perfect sense, because they are figurative. We see trees. You seem to be happy that we're seeing trees.

I'm wondering what the moment was when you thought that these two works were gonna fit within this exhibition, and to return to them as well, because they're slightly older works compared to the others that we see here today.

Genevieve Chua: I think because I started the series in 2010, it's developed so much for me; it changed my impression on what the forest means. In the past couple of years when I read more about the boundary between the city and the forest, the perimeter and the thin line between the wilderness and the urban, I found that it was so suitable. The lush forest that we see is really by the side of the main road, so I don't

need go all the way in to take a picture of what looks like a dense forest. I like that kind of irony.

Melanie Pocock: I definitely wouldn't think that you're standing on a road, with the perspective that you're seeing. I would believe that you're in the forest. (laughs)

Perhaps this is a good time for us to open up the talk to some questions.

This text has been edited for readability and comprehension, with content that stayed true to the event. To listen to the full panel discussion, please click [here](#).