Between Light and Memory

André Hemer's Images Cast by the Sun

by Sharmini Aphrodite

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Continuing to expand its geographical coverage, Contemporary HUM is pleased to bring you the first essay covering New Zealand's art activity in Asia. Working with local sub-editors in the region, we have commissioned a first series of new publications about projects in Singapore, Hong Kong and Bangladesh. The first one is an essay by Singapore-based writer Sharmini Aphrodite on the recent work of André Hemer, and is produced in collaboration with our Tokyo-based guest editor Catherine Dale.

You could nearly feel the canvases in André Hemer's *Images Cast by the Sun* exhibition just by looking at them. Covered with globs and coils of acrylic paint, they were tactile, sensuous. There was intimacy in being able to see how the artist had drawn the brush across the canvas, in being able to experience the echo of his movements in the blotches and clumps of paint, blooming and peeling like flower petals, like a chrysalis. It put to mind something moulting, something in the midst of becoming, either growing into itself or falling apart.

Images Cast by the Sun was New Zealand artist André Hemer's third exhibition at Singapore's Yavuz Gallery. Held from 22 November to 22 December 2019, it comprised video installations, sculptures and canvas-based works. To make these works, Hemer

spent his evenings scanning three-dimensional paint forms outdoors, catching them with a flat-bed scanner as the light began to shift and fade. The digital scans were then recomposed, printed onto canvas, and layered again with paint. The result unfurled around the gallery, leaving the viewer with the sense they'd been hurled headlong into a fistfight of colour and light.

The works have, at their heart, the sky and the light that it casts. These are things that cannot be grasped but which are ever-present. Shifting between the intangible and the corporeal, between actual paint and scans of it, the works fit neatly within Hemer's wider practice, which interrogates "the materiality and ontology of paint."[01] The paint forms that lay beneath the sunlight become markers of time, the elements chipping away at them so that they now bear the world's physical touch. It is not only paint and technology that are mixed here, but also sunlight, which has functioned throughout history as a natural clock. To look at any one of the canvases in the exhibition is to stand in the presence of the past *and* the present, to be aware of the passing of time. The blurred-edges of the scans beneath the paint gesture to the semblance of memory and how it softens with time, yet tends to lurk behind the physical present.



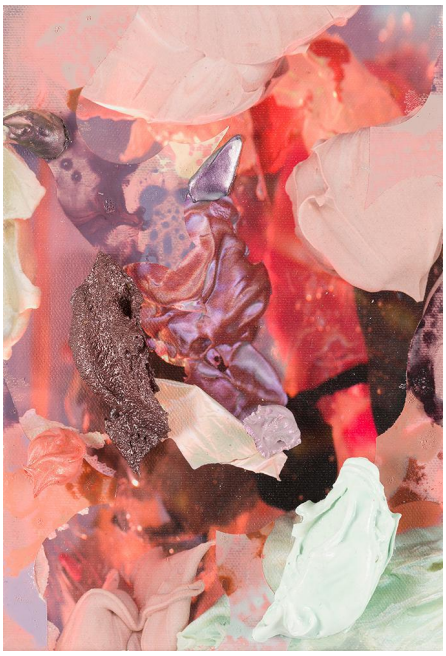
André Hemer, *An Image Cast by the Sun #13*, 2019. Acrylic and pigment on canvas, 38 x 27 cm. Image courtesy of the artist and Yavuz Gallery



André Hemer, *An Image Cast by the Sun #18*, 2019. Acrylic and pigment on canvas, 23 x 16 cm. Image courtesy of the artist and Yavuz Gallery



André Hemer, *Images Cast by the Sun*, installation view, 2019. Image courtesy of the artist and Yavuz Gallery

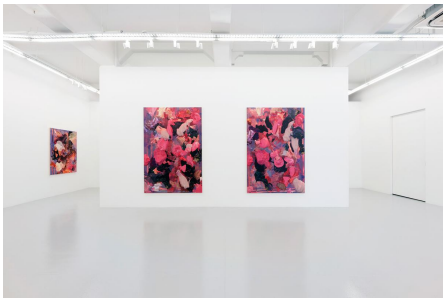


André Hemer, *An Image Cast by the Sun #19*, 2019. Acrylic and pigment on canvas, 23 x 16 cm. Image courtesy of the artist and Yavuz Gallery

This sense of history seeped into the work from its beginnings in Vienna, where the artist lives and where *Images Cast by the Sun* was created. Vienna started out as a Roman military camp in the first century, developed into a trading settlement and eventually became one of Europe's largest cities. In a century closer to us, its fall to Nazi Germany would be one of the first echoes of the drums

heralding a world war. The city has always been a matrix of change and history, a place where the river running through, carries into it stories of far-flung places. Today a UNESCO world heritage site, Vienna continues to be a reminder of how the world has moved through time. Its former position as a trading settlement also mirrors the history of Singapore, where the exhibition is held. Both cities have been, and are, sites of confluence, familiar with the constancy of change.

In Singapore, another global city and Southeast Asia's financial hub, this sense of transience is even more potent. 2019 was the year of the country's bicentennial and the city was awash with nostalgia.[02] In a country where even your neighbourhood mall is renovated so as to be unrecognisable every few years, this nostalgia was churned at a rapid, gimmicky, pace. As iconic public housing blocks and parks were torn down to make way for swanky new condominiums and shopping centres, advertisements were put up across the city harkening to the colonial era, a time long before the glamour of the city's riverside skyline. In Yavuz Gallery, however, one doesn't think of modern cityscapes. Set in an arts colony called Gilman Barracks, the gallery is located amid lush tropical greenery. The jungle is continuously becoming something else: in the sweltering climate, history cannot keep. The day I visited the exhibition, it was raining. There was a storm so heavy it blew in through the exposed corridors outside the gallery. Hovering outside the glass doors, I could barely see anything through the steamy condensation except large blurs of pink-and-gold. Yet once I stepped through, the chirp of the nearby jungle and the howl of the rain fell away. A snatch of light, of colour, and I was transported, caught in a middling space between cities and histories, neither here nor there. I was just *present*, watching the world unravel around me, watching it peel apart in layers of colour and light, geography and history.



André Hemer, *Images Cast by the Sun* installation view, 2019. Image courtesy of the artist and Yavuz Gallery



André Hemer, *Sky sculpture #8*, 2019. Acrylic and polyamide, 14.8 × 15.4 × 20 cm. Image courtesy of the artist and Yavuz Gallery



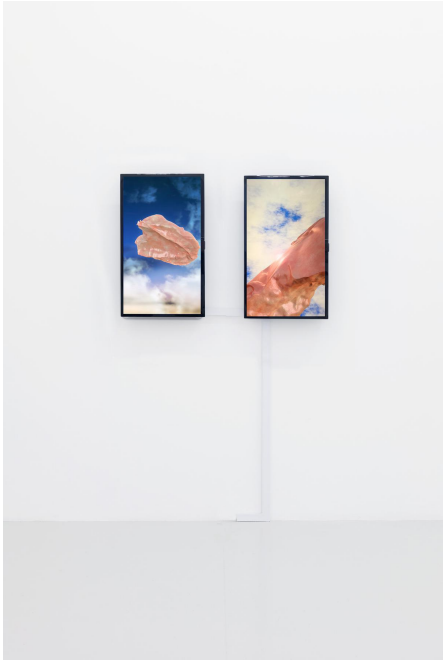
André Hemer, *Sky sculpture #6*, 2019. Acrylic and polyamide, 19.5 x 18 x 12 cm. Image courtesy of the artist and Yavuz Gallery

As Hemer was scanning the sky, "Vienna's stones […] were still warm from the day," wrote the art critic Rose Vickers in the exhibition catalogue.[03] The light was disappearing even as the artist attempted to preserve its memory and to contain ephemeral processes. The warmth, the fading light – all of it had passed by the time the sun had passed over Hemer's paint forms, by the time Vickers was writing the essay. We've all felt that desire to hold onto something, even as it is already fleeting, because it is already fleeting. The exhibition's works were steeped in nostalgia. Its canvases were huge, encompassing, yet with something gauzy and haunting about them because of the blurring in the scans, something evanescent. It was like being pulled along in the wake of a net. I forgot about the rain and was instead shrouded in the shadow of the last light of a faraway city.

As well as the canvases, there were also video works that I encountered towards the back of the gallery. In the videos, something that looks like an asteroid is revolving through the sky. These asteroids are actually sculptures crafted from acrylic, the same material in the canvas' paintwork, and polyamide. They were also placed in the gallery, looking as if they'd been torn straight from one of the paintings. In the videos, they look as if someone had broken chunks off the canvases and thrown them into space. In one video playing on loop, an asteroid spins through a bright blue, cloudy sky, forever. Sunset spinning through the afternoon, an endless sense of timelessness. The digital rendering added a layer of sur-reality to everything, underlining the exhibition's sense of suspension, a sense of being caught mid-moment. No matter the medium of the works in the exhibition, each captured a moment of

transition, whether it was the blooming of the paint and the changing light of the canvases, the never-ending revolution in the videos, or the sculptures that looked like creatures mid-moult.

While the videos also highlighted the technological side of the process, what really caught me, again and again, was the paintwork that ran through each piece. It is paint that forms the topmost layer of Hemer's canvases, and paint that twists through the fabric of the digital sky. This continual reappearance of paint emphasises the insistent quality of memory. For a long time it can be dampened, but now and again it slices through time, and the remembered moment becomes something visceral, touchable.



André Hemer, *Images Cast by the Sun* installation view, 2019. Image courtesy of the artist and Yavuz Gallery



André Hemer, *Sky sculpture #7*, 2019. HD video (H.264), 1980 x 1080, vertical format, 58 sec loop. Image courtesy of the artist and Yavuz Gallery



André Hemer, *Sky sculpture #8*, 2019. HD video (H.264), 1980 x 1080, vertical format, 58 sec loop. Image courtesy of the artist and Yavuz Gallery

In Joan Didion's *Blue Nights* (2011), there is a paragraph on twilight as active, as a time when things become things. She explains that the word "gloaming" carries "the images of houses shuttering, gardens darkening, grass-lined rivers slipping into the shadows." [04] Looking at Hemer's scans one could feel this activity, this dynamism in the scans' blurred aesthetic. Sunsets, for Didion,

"reverberate", which brings to mind an echo, a quality that throbs through twilights and dusks and all spaces of transition. At the cusp of day, nothing feels quite real. The play between light and shadow turns the world into just that: *a play*. Everything that happens during this time feels less concrete, more like an imprint. It was a curious task, then, that Hemer had set himself: to hold light in his hands, to catch a ghost.

Despite the vivacity of colour, as I strolled through the gallery I felt I was in the presence of ghosts, as if I were standing beyond a veil. This was Vienna, but not in its most recognisable form. This was Vienna beyond its landmarks and cultural touchstones. This was the Viennese sky that had for centuries stretched across the city, had existed long before the city's streets, fountains and buildings, a sky that had stood in the background, backdrop to a grand, dusty play. The longer I stayed, the more canvases I walked past, the more intensely I felt this sense of suspension, of floating, of being carried away.

I stayed in the gallery for a long time. Outside, the rain was still vicious. The presence of the jungle has always reminded me of a line of song – *everything dies, baby, that's a fact/ maybe everything that dies, someday comes back*.[05] Despite the stark differences in climate and colour between where I was and the settings of the work, these *Images Cast by the Sun* felt like they belonged. The Viennese sky, which transcended the linearity of history, was echoed by the jungle, ever remaking itself, outside. I imagined the artist poised on a street in Vienna, watching the light pass over him. He is holding on to it but already it is gone. Already it is memory, but memory, like history, is not dead – only dormant. Only sleeping. I looked back at the imprint of a Viennese sky one last time, at a sunset that no longer existed, and understood that memory is a country of its own.

Footnotes

01. *Images Cast by the Sun*, www.yavuzgallery.com/exhibitions/images-cast-by-the-sun/ accessed 15 November 2019.

02. About the Singapore Bicentennial, www.sg/sgbicentennial/about/ accessed 12 December 2019. The Bicentennial marked the 200th anniversary of the arrival of Stamford Raffles in Singapore.

03. Vickers, Rose. “If 10,000 Fish Were to Swim in the Sky Would We Then Have to Call It a Sea?” in *Day Painting & Images Cast by the Sun*, Yavuz Gallery and Gow Langsford Gallery, 2019

04. Joan Didion *Blue Nights*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011.

05. Bruce Springsteen, *On Nebraska*. New Jersey: Columbia Records.

Biographies



André Hemer (b. 1981) is a New Zealand/German artist who is currently based in Vienna, Austria. He holds a Master of Fine Arts (Distinction) from the University of Canterbury (2006) and a PhD (Painting) from the University of Sydney (2015). Hemer is the recipient of several awards including The National Contemporary Art Award, Waikato Museum (2011) and the Bold Horizons Contemporary Art Award (2011). In 2016 he was the Paramount Award Winner at The Wallace Art Awards, and recipient of the Arts Foundation New Generation award. His work has appeared at international art fairs such as the Melbourne Art Fair; Sydney Contemporary; Code Art Fair, Copenhagen; and Art Basel in Hong Kong, and features in public and private collections including the National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts, Seoul Art Space Geumcheon, Wallace Arts Trust Collection, Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū and Beth Rudin DeWoody Collection, Florida.



Sharmini Aphrodite was born in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, and raised between the cities of Singapore and Johor Bahru, where she still lives. Her short fiction has been shortlisted for the Commonwealth Short Story Prize, placed on the Australian Book Review Jolley Prize and Golden Point Awards, and published online and in print. Her art writing appears online and has been a runner-up for *Frieze Magazine’s* Art Writing Prize. She is a submissions editor at *Smokelong Quarterly* and a fiction reader for Singapore Unbound’s SP Blog.

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