



Kégresse and Altimeter, 2024



A Thin Membrane, A Transmutation

by Leo Cocar

Justin Rui Han's objects—whether painting or sculpture—are marked by a curiously open quality, as if every medium is alchemized into a porous skin, variously held in a state of becoming or transition. Within these osmotic objects a variety of concerns flit in and out of perception; histories of technology (and their development), capital's flow between the metropolis and the colony, and the impossibility of extricating any "pure" culture from the geo-temporal space of empire. Formed as a painter, his residency at The Here and There Co. has provided a pause to experiment with sculpture in a way that allows his concerns with space and experience to infiltrate both mediums—a transmutation into a hybrid methodology. In this sense, the shift is a logical one. His paintings are often marked by a concern with architectural space and its composition; the sculptures extend these concerns, by both continuing to

mobilize architectural forms and references while extending his work into real space.

It is this marked in-between state in his work that makes two of Han's unfinished sculptures an appropriate vantage point from which to peer into the concerns embedded in his practice. These wood and rattan armatures seem on the one hand exceedingly fragile and on the other hand demand a sort of activation. This quality that calls for the object's use is materialized through their form, which connotes a potential for kinetic movement through their references to tools and mechanical devices. This kineticism is drawn from Han's use of archival and historical material and their subsequent translation into new and provisional forms. In Untitled [Fig. 1] a parasol-like shape is mounted to two vertical wood supports. The "canopy" bends downwards, denying any reprieve from rain. This form is derived from vernacular architecture Han encountered during travels in Ho Chi Minh City, specifically public faux-concrete "umbrellas" (made out of molded plastic) that shelter police and traffic officers from rain [Fig. 2]. The planned bottom section is derived from a 1926 image of a massive boiler used in a colonial dam-building project in Palembang, South Sumatra [Fig. 3]. A Dutch engineering firm involved in coffee, rubber, and sugar plantations executed and documented this undertaking. The object's appearance here points towards a particular ideological dynamic within the formation of empire—the construction of public works under the guise of "aiding" the subaltern subject. In reality, these acts of "public good" merely obfuscate theft and primitive accumulation. This is to say, what appears as public infrastructure becomes another means to funnel wealth into the colonial center. In



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

this case, the dam may contribute to the local electrical grid but is inextricable from private enterprise and the brutality of the plantation. Here, the artist has mobilized two forms of public infrastructure in Southeast Asia, engaging with the manipulation of water into a singular new object, knotting together their histories.

Another preliminary work, *Delivery Subsystem*, takes the form of a wooden chair-ladder-slide combine. The work will function as a sort of water instrument, where performers will use pistons to produce sounds amplified via contact mics. The work mechanically references the extraction of water from mines, which are present in its formal inspiration: prints from the 19th century *Kodo Zoroku*, a book on Japanese techniques for smelting copper. Specifically, an edition co-edited by Cyril Stanley Smith, a metallurgist who contributed to the Manhattan Project. Again, Han amalgamates varying histories of technology into a singular work—but this combinatorial approach is not one of pure fantasy but one grounded in the reality of technology's genesis, in which all technological objects are the product of the tangle rather than the linear.

However subtle, there is a dialogue between the artist's sculptures and paintings. Although trained in the former medium, Han has extended his practice into the latter during his time as a resident with The Here and There Co. The relationship between the two is inextricable. At the level of material, the final versions of his sculptures will fold in pictorial devices, color, and decorative concerns, thus emphasizing the often under-examined element of aesthetics within technological design. The overlap is also present at the level of concept. His paintings are often marked by a concern with architectural space and its composition; in this way, the sculptures become a



Preliminary work for Delivery Subsystem

vessel with which to extend these concerns, by both continuing to mobilize architectural forms and references while extending his work into real space. Specifically, within Han's paintings, tension comes to the fore in regards to the articulation of space and architecture within the painted image vis-à-vis the entangled web of history. These works evoke M. C. Escher's drawings of impossible interiors, in which passageways seem to endlessly loop together, floors become ceilings, and entrances become dead ends. These spaces exist as a zone of historical-cultural confluence.

Here, a cabinet of curiosities (*wunderkammer*) logic takes hold in which objects and materials from seemingly unrelated cultures, eras, and geographies exist as one composition. This is to say, within naturalistic depictions of the world, the dynamics of labor, cultural circulation, and thought that inform the image must be rendered invisible (as it is within the so-called real world). In the *wunderkammer*—an early form of museum originating in Europe—“curiosities” both anthropological and natural are displayed in the same setting with little context or categorical differentiation. Although historically problematic as a mode of display, as a model for thinking-history, it is potentially productive. The *wunderkammer* rejects “naturalistic” displays in which immediately linked objects are set into conversation—rather, through juxtaposition, invisible (but nonetheless real) relations come to the fore. In a similar manner, Han's paintings reject the obfuscating qualities of the so-called naturalistic, trading it for a dream-like logic that unveils far more than it conceals.

Throughout his paintings, the rational perspectival devices used by much of Western painting since the 15th century for the composition of seemingly “enterable” spaces is rejected, as if the

crush of history has come to deny the viewer the possibility of any singular view of Han's interior worlds. When considering the multiple histories embedded into each of his images, a linear view onto history's vista is indeed an impossibility. Han is thus engaged with the infinite number of possible permutations when looking at a given historical “scene,” which can potentially radically shift in form when considering the often undersung dynamics of labor and economics.

Take for example *Risk and Sanctuary*, a work in which Han's mobilization of the breakdown of architectural space is particularly clear, insofar as the space “breaks down” as we move from the naturalism on the left towards the intrusion of a surreal screen-like structure on the right. On the left, the viewer apprehends the interior of a traditional Japanese home, with signs of domestic life indexed by a fire pit (*irori*), around which a circle of skewered sweet fish (*ayu*) roast gently by the coals. This painting is an engagement with Satsuo Yamamoto's film *Oh! The Nomugi Pass* (1979), which is a narrative centered around silk production. In this sense, this domestic space (a silk worker's lodging) is inextricable from labor. A door opening to the exterior gestures towards both the porosity of the home and the inhabitants' possible departure or future return. To the right, a silk screen acts as a transition zone through which the winter landscape outside begins to infiltrate the home. Acting as a dream-like channel, figures from woodblock prints materialize into the home. Offsetting this surreal quality is the presence of a rusted industrial vehicle, underscoring this image's anachronistic qualities. The vehicle's presence in the snowy landscape references a promotional trans-Himalayan expedition by French auto manufacturer Citroën—another iteration of a project by Western industry posing as a public



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good when it functions as a guise for a profit motive.

This temporally and culturally destabilized quality in Han's work acts as the crux or anchor from which his compositions emerge. Seemingly "traditional" spaces are warped by a cinematic quality—often formally inspired by postcolonial films—and shifted further by the presence of extractive technologies or architecture. Although his images bear a dream-like logic, they are in a sense, realist, in the ways in which they excavate or visualize interconnected histories that have been obfuscated over time but are nonetheless present. I think what is at stake in Han's work is the rejection of any given scene or object "as such". His work takes into account the intangible, often unseen flows of labor and capital in the formation of technologies and culture. Although the histories Han addresses are always already in a state of hybridity, this "unveiling" approach feels particularly important in a moment in which historical revisionism and technological fetishism has come to the fore. The shifting quality of his works, their porosity, and their combinatory logic indicates a self-critical poeticism—that his work (like all work) is merely a link in history's continuum.



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