

What lies beneath

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Bruegel depicted many things that cannot be depicted ... In all his works more is always implied than is depicted.

– Abraham Ortelius¹

Swirling Dream-Wreck is the second exhibition to bring together paintings by Fu-On Chung and Sam Thomas. The first, *Nets*, was held towards the end of last year at GLOVEBOX, an artist-run space founded by Chung and several others in 2015 (and sadly now defunct). In the chaos of preparing for an overseas trip, I missed the show. However, the idea of the pairing intrigued me. I was aware that Chung and Thomas were close, having shared a studio space in the suburb of Parnell in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, but I was unsure how their works would play off one another. Indeed, I wondered if the artists were more interested in underscoring the diversity of painting than in teasing out affinities between their practices.

As painters, Chung and Thomas appear immediately and strongly different. Chung favours abstraction and uses relatively typical media: acrylic and oil on stretched canvas. Thomas, by contrast, works in a broadly figurative mode – something of a rarity in the present day – and employs a most unusual method, painting with oil on brass embossed by hand and supported by weighty panels of wood (I can think of no other contemporary practitioner in Aotearoa who uses a remotely similar technique). And yet this ostensible incongruity conceals significant points of commonality between the artists and their works.

In the proposal for *Swirling Dream-Wreck* sent to Blue Oyster, the two identify the fantastical as a common field of investigation. They make reference to Sigmund Freud's iceberg analogy, which likens the small amount of ice sticking out of the sea to the apprehensible portion of the mind, the conscious. They explain that they are united by a fascination with the vast bulk beneath, the unconscious. They further suggest that – in a period in which the physical world and our everyday activities within it are exhaustively recorded and broadcast by a profusion of digital media – they are preoccupied with using the sensuous art form of painting to explore more metaphysical phenomena, such as emotions, motivations, fantasies.

It strikes me as especially appropriate that the artists have seized on Freud as a reference point for their practices, since both can be understood to participate in artistic traditions strongly influenced by Freudian thought. Thomas's work, with its eclectic range of images, seems to me to echo the surrealist project of recreating the weird combinations of motifs and scenes found in dreams. Executed *alla prima*, without prior planning, Chung's paintings owe much to surrealism's successor, abstract expressionism, with its emphasis on spontaneity – its desire to capture the impulses of the maker and to activate visceral responses in the viewer.

¹ See Wolfgang Stechow, *Northern Renaissance Art 1400–1600: Sources and Documents* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1999), 37.

Both artists speak of the effects on their work of their relocation from the Parnell studio to separate working environments. Initially delighted by the presence in his new studio of a large window, affording an increased supply of natural light, Chung soon became influenced by what he could see outside: an imposing wall of cinder blocks painted a grey at once plasticky and drab. He indicates that this non-view enhanced a growing interest in exploring sensations of detachment, frustration, and what he refers to as 'looming calamity', stimulating the production of works that are noticeably less ebullient and whimsical than his earlier paintings.

At the same time, the wall prompted the introduction of new visual elements. To the net-like structures that ghost previous works, Chung has added blocks and dashes of colour that subtly evoke bricks and layers thereof. Where the nets invite us to peer into the depths of his paintings, the new forms pull us up short. The focus on the foreground is reinforced by swirling strokes of bright or glossy paint that play across the surface of the canvases. There is still a sense that something lies beyond, but whether it is a space of freedom and calm or danger and further confusion remains unclear. Are we protected or confined by the wall? What do we do if something wants in?

Thomas now works from his apartment. Although he was at first pleased not to feel the pressure constantly to be making use of a dedicated studio, he gradually became frustrated by the diminished presence of his 'hobby'. Like Chung, he began to dwell on more sombre matters. His works have long included serious elements. For instance, *Venus by Gillette* (2016), with its embossed pattern of women's razors, raises questions about our standards of beauty and the lengths to which we go in order to meet them. But the introduction of more pointed symbols, such as a diagram of the greenhouse effect, suggests a more charged exploration of human folly.

In their respective turns towards the ominous, both Chung and Thomas have been influenced by novels. Chung notes that André Aciman's *Call Me by Your Name* (2007), recently made into a film, has been playing on his mind a great deal. The book tells of a reciprocated attraction between two young men that does not translate into an enduring relationship. The artist notes that he initially read the book as a closeted teenager. While Chung and I have not discussed his personal experiences in any detail, I have strong memories of reading a similar story as an adolescent and finding in the narrative of thwarted love both a challenge to and vindication of my decision to block out my homosexual desires.

In Chung's paintings, the feelings of the artist naturally remain at a remove from individual viewers, whose responses will be coloured by the same sort of fancies I have brought to bear on his references to the wall and to Aciman's novel. Thomas's work, however, provides more concrete signs, which warrant further scrutiny. Chief among these is a painting by the Netherlandish artist Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Hunters in the Snow* (1565). Sampled by Thomas in various works, it is one of five extant paintings from a series known as the *Months* commissioned by a wealthy Antwerp merchant named Niclaes Jongelinck.²

Thomas initially read about *Hunters in the Snow* in Michael Frayn's *Headlong* (1999), which describes the discovery of a lost painting from the *Months*. Much of the novel is taken up with discussions of the context in which the series was produced and of the iconographic content of the

² Iain Buchanan, 'The Collection of Niclaes Jongelinck: II: The 'Months' by Pieter Bruegel the Elder', *Burlington Magazine* 132 (1990), 541.

paintings – what lies beneath the charming depictions of Northern European rural life. Of great interest to Thomas is the relationship between aspects of Bruegel's era and our own. *Hunters in the Snow*, for instance, likely depicts a climate changed as a consequence of the so-called Little Ice Age, which began about the time the work was painted.³ The use of the aforementioned global warming diagram is thus especially appropriate.

Furthermore, Bruegel's life was marked by political and religious turmoil as the Protestant Reformation that swept Europe in the 16th century clashed with the Catholic Spanish powers that controlled the Low Countries. In the present day, of course, governing bodies continue to wage wars on the basis of religious or ideological differences, often with a complete disregard for the sentiments and wellbeing of the general population. Such situations invariably produce high levels of fear. Following Frayn, Thomas suggests that Bruegel's paintings conceal attitudes of dissent that he was afraid to express overtly. The artist then was no more capable of open protest than are individuals living now in, say, parts of the Middle East.

Thomas's works also make reference to the xenophobic sentiments currently sweeping much of the world. As a quintessentially white European painting, beloved by gallerygoers and Christmas card producers alike, *Hunters in the Snow* stands in opposition to the multicultural, globalised present, functioning as a symbol of the parochial intolerance that finds considerable favour even here in New Zealand. Peeled from Bruegel backdrops, the head of an alien (taken from the film series of the same name) and a castle ready to raise its drawbridge make clear Thomas's fascination with, and concern at, the fear of 'invading outsiders' that simmers beneath the surface of many of us – with or without our awareness.

The 'space blankets' lining the walls of the exhibition relate strongly to Thomas's paintings. Thinking of them as tools to combat hypothermia, I find myself imagining not only figures stranded in a snowy landscape, but also asylum seekers swept overboard. Treating them as emblematic of crises in general, one might draw a connection not only with the global catastrophes hinted at by Thomas, but also with Chung's stated interest in 'looming calamity'. Moreover, the metallic material chimes visually with the work of both painters. It picks up on the brass in Thomas's works and heightens the jewel-like properties and overall flamboyance of Chung's, binding the diverse pieces together more directly.

Reflecting on *Swirling Dream-Wreck* as a whole, it occurs to me that there is something else that unites Chung and Thomas. In preparation for writing this piece, I met with them twice. On both occasions I was struck by their warm interaction. They mentioned techniques they'd learned from one another; each spoke enthusiastically about the other's painting, picking up on small shifts in process and style. At the risk of sounding sentimental, I venture that the show is underpinned by their friendship, their mutual generosity. Certainly, this sustained the artists as they produced the work we see here – work that is itself offered up generously, to aid us in some small way as we navigate waters littered every day with more polar fragments.

³ Alastair Fowler, 'Brueghel's *Hunters in the Snow*', *Source* 34 (2014), 14.