SURROUNDINGS

Yong Wei Lim

INTRODUCTION

The stories that inspire me have long contributed to my artwork. I have used this method since undertaking my diploma studies. I particularly enjoy stories that contain elements of the mysterious, alienation and unforeseeable circumstances. They reveal a twisted world that I enjoy 'digging into.'

As an international student, adjusting to a completely new environment is not as simple as making new arrangements for eating and sleeping. Things may seem fresh and new at first glance, but when I looked around again, I found there was nothing I could totally depend on except myself – or perhaps my bed. Although I am not basically an outgoing person, I do feel the need to make contact with new people. One may say that you can't try too hard to connect with other people, but when I do make the effort, I have no idea how much I will receive in return – this can be very tiring. While I enjoy being alone, having too much time for myself led me to think that I might be wasting my opportunity to study in New Zealand. As a result, I have started to reach out to the people around me.

The process of establishing an identity has led me to think of my friends who have moved with their families from Malaysia to New Zealand and have had to adapt to a very different culture. Their progress can be compared to laying transparency film over an object as they adopt new interests, while aspects of their original cultural identity are retained.

These tensions are one reason that the works of the Japanese writer Haruki Murakami are so appealing to me. Furthermore, the feeling of connectedness I experience when reading his stories has certainly given me the urge to create something based on them. As a result, I am hoping to represent them in ways that reveal my own identity in my relationship with my surroundings.

In my project, I explore a range of possible approaches to presenting my work. Painting is a practice that engages with material and surface in various ways, and I am excited to see how my subject matter elicits different ways of looking at things. As I proceeded, I researched the practices of three artists whose approaches are related to my own studio practice: Belgian artist Luc Tuymans, who works on representation and historical subjects; American artist Elizabeth Peyton, who paints portraits of friends and celebrities; and Edouard Manet, a nineteenth-century Impressionist who painted scenes of people and everyday life.

The major connection between these artists and my work is their use of photographs in the creation of artworks. Furthermore, the factor linking my choice of these artists and the novels of Murakami is the focus on mundaneness, the texture of everyday life. In addition, I draw on studio theorists like Carole Gray and Julian Malins, whose book *Visualizing Research* focuses on studio methodologies; Richard Wollheim's essay "What the Spectator Sees," that explores how the mind works when viewing an artwork; and Graeme Sullivan's writings on the role of theory in studio work.

HARUKI MURAKAMI AND HIS WORKS

Haruki Murakami is a well-known Japanese writer, born in Kyoto in 1949, shortly after World War II. Although growing up with parents who were immersed in Japanese literature, he developed a strong interest in Western writers that began when, as a boy, he purchased a cheap English paperback from some sailors. This happened after the family had moved to Kobe; as a port city and trading hub, it was one of the few Japanese cities open to the West. This development brought a huge international influence to bear on Murakami's work; in an interview, he recalls how he used to idolise Scott Fitzgerald, Truman Capote and Fyodor Dostoyevsky.[1]

As a result of these influences, critics like Kenzaburo Oe accuse Murakami of not being an authentically "Japanese" writer.[2] Indeed, his novels are full of references to Western music of his own era – one of the hallmarks of his work. He frequently uses songs either as titles or to describe an emotion or location.[3] For instance, in the novel *Dance Dance Dance* (1988), he writes: "The next thing you know, they'll be playing Gregorian Chants in bathhouses, Ryuichi Sakamoto in tax office waiting rooms."[4] In an interview, Murakami disclosed that he has to listen to music while he writes. He says that he has learned so much from music – harmony, rhythm and improvisation – and by bringing these elements into his writing, they aid him in creating what he calls a "rhythmic novel."[5] Although Murakami's musical era was before my time, I am familiar with 1970s musicians such as The Carpenters, due to my father's influence. At the same time, the songs mentioned in Murakami's stories make me want to listen to them in the hope that they will bring me closer to the stories themselves.

Before Murakami became a professional writer, he owned a jazz club. He was also a "huge bookworm" and would put aside money to buy books no matter how hard life was. He was first inspired to write a novel by the impact that a single sound made on him. One day, while attending a baseball game, the unique sound of the bat striking the ball bumped his brain circuitry onto new pathways. Following this experience, he gradually began writing in his spare time and sent some of his efforts off to literary competitions.[6] He debuted as an author in 1979 with his first novel *Hear the Wind Song*, winning the Gunzo Award, which he took as motivation to continue writing. It was after Pinball was released in 1980 that he decided to become a full-time writer.

As Murakami is a postmodernist writer, one would not expect the traditional lifestyle of Japan to be a focus of his work. The author Yoshinobu Hakutani says that "His characters eat pasta, McDonald's hamburgers, sometimes vichyssoise."[7] His work gives the feeling that "one listens to reggae, watches a western, eats McD for lunch and local cuisine for dinner, wears Paris perfume in Tokyo and 'retro' clothes in Hong Kong"[8]. This is relevant to my life in Malaysia where Western culture is often favoured as a 'high-class' experience. For instance, steaks, pasta and drinking wine or soda in fancy glasses are now the choices made for special occasions. Seeking and establishing a sense of place in a new country has made me curious about how some of my friends have also adapted to life in New Zealand.

Murakami's work emerged during the post-war period in Japan, when changes in society brought hard times for many and led to people questioning the status quo. At the individual level, many people shied away from creating human relationships as this takes effort, and the gain is not always equal to the energy invested. In his works, Murakami foregrounds the communication of individuals with a world involved in the complexities of rebuilding a shattered society, often to the extent that a person's emotional and psychological capacities reach their limit. He is convinced that changes to one's surrounding do not automatically turn a person into a whole new being. In the novel *Norwegian Wood* (1987),[9] Toru, the male protagonist and first-person narrator and his high-school friend Naoko move to another city in an attempt to escape their past. However, the earlier suicide of their best friend continues to affect their new life. After years of struggling, Naoko also decided to commit suicide, leaving Toru alone in search of a new identity.[10]

The key novels that I focused on for my project were *Norwegian Wood, Dance Dance Dance*[11] (1988) and *Hard-boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* (1985). Murakami's novels often come equipped with a distinctive

narrative voice, along with a puzzling plot. Many of his stories leave the final fate of his characters vague, leaving his readers to imagine the outcome. This has left me thinking, how important actually is a conclusion? Are they really so indispensable? The subject matter that I chose for my project came mainly from my surroundings – for example, my friends. The fleeting relationships that float about between me and them is a sort of uncertainty. We cannot see the future. There is nothing to predict what will happen as time passes by.

The complexity of Murakami's work is augmented by the fact that some of his novels are set in surreal worlds. For example, *Hard-boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*[12] is set in two separate worlds in the mind of the protagonist. The treatment of conscious and subconscious, reality and dream, is handled in a very unusual way in this story. This can be very confusing at first, but once you connect the dots you find yourself in a totally new world. Murakami's work is characterised by the motifs of exit and entrance, inside and outside, themes that mark the characters as they seek to remedy their sense of loss.

One of the recurring backdrops in his writing is the forest, which acts as an important metaphor in many of his novels. For example, in *Hard-boiled Wonderland and the End of the World,* the whirlpool on the "other side" of the town is located in a forest; the town guard discourages the protagonist from going there as the woods are full of darkness. In *Norwegian Wood*, the woods are where Toru and Naoko took refreshing walks together, and also the place where Naoko hung herself, while in *Kafka by the Shore* (2002)[13], Kafka lives alone in a small hut in the woods for a few days, trying to settle his uncomfortable thoughts about predictions made about events to come.

The exploration of human emotion plays a major part in Murakami's works, whether one considers the stories told, the characters or the many other things that are talked about in his novels. The stories frequently carry a sense of melancholy and nostalgia, as well as a wealth of mixed feelings that are hard to put into words. It is these elusive feelings and ideas that I have sought to use my paintings to express.

In addition, Murakami's stories are full of mundane details that have mysteriously captured my attention. Strange as they seem, these things make sense of a kind, even though they might not sound 'useful' in any obvious way. His writing is also marked by a sense of humour that helps make his books page-turners. One of my goals while working on this project was to read as many of his works and other people's writing about him as possible, so that I could have a better idea of how I might translate his work into my own visual vocabulary.

Reflecting on this process, I thought about how I approach his work as a reader, the process of digesting his words. In *Visualizing Research,* Gray and Malins point to the value of the knowledge accrued by explorers who have visited similar terrain.[14] In other words, in order to gain a full picture of Murakami's work, it is important to read how he is perceived in the world of literature. For instance, the 2012 thesis by Midori Tanaka Atkins deals with the literary landscape of Murakami's work, which she divides into two sections: The World of Murakami and Murakami in the World.[15]

Although I am inspired by Haruki Murakami's work, this does not imply that I am working directly from insights gleaned from his novels. Rather, I am using his work as a guide for my project concept: having transferred to new environments, his characters are experiencing similar events to myself.

ART INFLUENCES

In my work I am influenced by artists who have connections to my own work and to Murakami's writing. The key element that links Murakami and these artists is their ability to capture both the mundane and mysterious elements of everyday life. For example, Elizabeth Peyton's notion of "capturing humanness" is also a strength of Murakami's writing. An interest in politics and historical questions is common to Murakami and artist Luc Tuymans. In addition, human figures are portrayed with delicacy and clarity in both Manet's paintings and Murakami's texts – where words turn into images and portraits into stories. The art practice of these artists is related to postmodernism, where

their role as artists and the act of creating artworks is constantly being questioned. For Manet's generation, artists could legitimately present their subjects using images and objects drawn from everyday life. In their turn, Peyton and Tuymans have inherited the approach pioneered by Manet.

Elizabeth Peyton made her mark in the art world with her arresting portraits. She takes for her subjects both the people around her and iconic figures. She uses both photographs and live models for her paintings. She seeks to express the humanness of her subjects by uncovering it in the process of painting. As she said in an interview with the *New Yorker*, "I really love the people I paint. I believe in them, I'm happy they are in the world."[16] According to the artist, when doing celebrity portraits, she does not see her subjects in the way that the media presents them; rather, she seeks to portray them in a state of serenity and living an everyday life in the same way as other people do.[17]

In my own work, I am also exploring ways to configure my paintings through gaining an understanding of my models, who are friends that I spend time with. Peyton comments that she is drawn to her subjects through a focus on particular moments – this fleeting feeling becomes a motive for preserving them. The concept of 'presenting a moment' is something that I want to develop in my own work.[18]

In Peyton's painting, *Ken and Nick*, two young men are shown resting on a couch. Staring into the distance, their expressions are tired. The man in the dark green shirt has a book on his lap, suggesting that he has been captured by the artist during a moment of leisure. The postures of both subjects are very relaxed. The simplicity of their clothing and the detailed patterns on the couch show that the artist has put some thought into the patterns and textures used in the painting.

Figure 1. Yong Wei Lim, *Adrian and Ian*, 2017, oil on canvas, 23 × 27 cm. Photograph: The artist.

My painting *Adrian and Ian* (Figure 1) shares some similarities with *Ken and Nick*. It shows an intimate space where two young men are sitting next to each other; composition is built up with simple blocks of colour covering a large area of the canvas. In both works, details float like whispers around the figures – the decoration on the wall, a random leaflet on the sofa; and, in *Ken and Nick*, the book that rests under one figure's hand and the polka dot pillow underneath the other's resting head. Also, in both paintings the composition is cropped, with the edges of objects cut off. Nevertheless, it is obvious that a shared space is being presented in both works.

Despite these two paintings being quite similar in mood, my work is enclosed in a darker setting. Its surface is duller and less glossy than Peyton's as a result of the materials used, reflecting the difference between using canvas or board as the base medium.

Although Peyton's colours are crisp and bold, the works have a sense of fragility. With the intention of showing how people really are, Peyton focuses on facial expressions and their connections with her subjects' environment. Thoughts and decisions are constantly passing through our minds; these changing variables show the extent to which people project themselves out into the world. As time passes, holding a single facial expression can be nerve-wracking. Furthermore, techniques such as the use of broad-brush strokes in thin glazes and keeping details loose and simple make her figures visually attractive. And her use of vibrant colours and watery effects allow her subjects' emotions to unfold. Peyton's minimal use of structural elements in her paintings further enables her to impress viewers with her soulful portraiture.

In her *Flower Liam,* swift brushstrokes are evident in the background and parts of the figure's clothing. Highly saturated colours in different tones wash over the surface. Personally, I appreciate the way in which the subject's gaze makes him look as though he is telling a story. An unconscious melancholy merges with the various formal elements of the painting, especially the blues which are present in over half of the composition.

Figure 2. Yong Wei, Lim, *Watercolour Portrait of Jia Hui,* 2017, watercolour on paper, 18 × 14 cm. Photograph: The artist.

In producing my *Watercolour Portrait of Jia Hui* (Figure 2), I discovered how learning about Peyton's work has given me new insights into working with watercolour. In particular, I learned how to apply sheer washes of colour over the figure. Subsequently, dark brown was used to create a contrast with the opacity of the other colours and to contour the subject's facial features. I followed this with swift lines and loose curves to represent the folds in his clothing. Jia Hui is a stranger I met in 2017. Although I did not develop a deep understanding of him, conversation and the use of photographs have helped me to realise his emotions in the painting. His unphotogenic expression reveals his 'true self.'

Edouard Manet is one of the most widely discussed artists in Western art history. His failures and attempts to participate in the Salon while determining his own path have been well documented. The message of 'living in the moment' is evident throughout his work. Manet declared, "You must be of your time and paint what you see."[19] As I explored Manet's paintings, I found that a handful of subjects, such as Berthe Morisot, were portrayed again and again.

Manet's painting style developed throughout his career, from realism to the abstraction of lines, colours and tones. In *Interior at Arcachon* (Figure 3), a sense of depth is created by a rather intuitive method. The application of a cool, deep, thick grey gives depth to the background; paint is applied and then scraped off; thin washes and strokes are used to render details in an abstract manner and create a sense of flatness within the scene. The intimate size of the painting helps capture the atmosphere created by the two figures resting by an open door, with the sea beyond.

In the same manner, in my oil painting *N.G. Chilling* (Figure 4), objects are painted in a simplified way, with a sort of flatness – a technique I regard as a development of my handling of the painting surface in my previous project. To enable viewers to gain a better appreciation of the living space depicted here, simple lines and tones are used. Dark, thick navy browns and greys cover sections of the painting opaquely, in contrast to the pastel-like purples and pinks; the two techniques complement each other, making the setting ideally lit. Our gaze ranges across a cluttered corner, comfortable furniture and items neatly arranged in the cupboard. Some objects have been deliberately cropped in order to enhance the harmony of the interior as a whole.

While both Manet's work and mine takes people with whom we have close relationships as subject matter, our work is set in very different surroundings. While Manet uses formal settings, mine are on the casual side. In contrast with Manet's work, I apply dabs of bright colour amid the darker hues (of the sofa and carpet, in the case of *N.G. Chilling*), a feature I hold in common with Peyton's paintings. The mix of different colour saturations constitutes an invasion of the painting surface. In place of Manet's imprecisely rendered but well-arranged elitist aesthetic objects, the objects in my paintings retain much more detail and are used to bring out the identity of the figures portrayed.

Figure 3. Edouard Manet, *Interior at Arcachon,* 1871, oil on canvas, 39.2 × 54 cm. Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, MA. Source: Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, MA, http://www.clarkart.edu/ Collection/3953.

Figure 4. Yong Wei Lim, *N.G. Chilling,* 2017, oil on canvas, 41 × 35 cm. Photograph: The artist.

At the same time, our painting styles share some similarities. The intimate size of my painting focuses on a moment in life, as does Manet's. In addition, the way that the brushstrokes are loosely applied contributes to the calming ambience displayed by each of these works. Correspondingly, the use of low-saturation colours creates a sense of depth that allows the audience to feel the calmness in the work. At the same time, the figures in both paintings are grouped near the centre of each work.

My observations on these artworks resemble the way in which a story gives the reader information about a person's characteristics, actions and emotions; while these elements may be explained in a literal-minded way, focusing on the ways in which these minor features take on important roles brings us back to Murakami's writing.

Another artist whose work I've been exploring is Luc Tuymans, a painter who is concerned with preserving and representing the sense of presence and memory. These memories are derived from objects in his surroundings, whether images from magazines or natural scenery that has been imprinted on his mind. Generally, they are drawn from the banalities of daily life, which are approached by Tuymans directly, albeit with an uneven tone.[20] From the Holocaust ("the banality of evil") to still life, his subjects of interest are beyond predicting.

Apparently, Tuymans has acquired the habit of completing a painting within a single day.[21] Hence, his paintings do not appear to be visually complex insofar as they lack detailing and are marked by the placement of random objects in the scene. *Gas Chamber* is a good example of this approach. The painting shows a large empty space in a rather simplified structure, resulting in a visually quirky quality. The combination of blurred forms with desaturated tones creates a suggestion of suffocating violence. The painting's visual language slowly takes shape as one observes the relationship between the lines, colours and space. In a review in the *Guardian,* Adrian Searle praises Tuymans for his ability to find the best techniques to embody his concepts – for example, turning the whiteness of the wall into a somnolent, dramatic silence.[22]

Like Tuymans, the objects around me serve as an inspiration for my paintings. The mundaneness of my subjects' lives tells its own story. By making these paintings, I aim to capture everyday moments as if stopping time. Through the act of painting I aim to present moments and feelings, rather than a precise narrative.

On the other hand, our representational techniques differ significantly: his stripped-down visual repertoire is less complicated than mine. In my paintings, spaces are filled with objects. These details are the elements I use to tell a story, while Tuymans' focus is on space and colour.[23] While *Gas Chamber* is a small painting of a large space, my works show intimate domestic spaces. Above all, whereas his paintings are imbued with a sense of horror – they can be very disturbing if one explores the stories behind them – my works chronicle cosy moments of daily life. In order to invite the viewer to construct their own narrative, the repeated appearance of certain objects can be crucial. For instance, in my paintings lounge rooms, food, knick-knacks and people are found again and again. Finally, giving a painting a suitable title is the key to unlocking the meaning of both Tuymans's and my paintings.

Figure 5. Yong Wei Lim, *Jia Hui,* 2017, oil on canvas, 18 × 22 cm. Photograph: The artist.

While Manet, Peyton and Tuymans all embrace the concepts of preservation and representation in their portrayal of everyday life, their objectives differ. And although they obtain their subject matter from their surroundings, the inspiration they derive from their surroundings is unique to each artist. For example, while Tuymans focuses on controversial issues of politics and history, Manet and Peyton are concerned to record a moment in time.

Each of these artists can be identified through their distinctive mark-making, from colours to brushstrokes to the details they choose to reveal. In terms of detail, there is no doubt that both Manet and Peyton surpass Tuymans. While the latter's paintings are minimalist in this respect because of his ways of working, the emotions expressed in his work are the most powerful of the three. Even though his and Manet's paintings are characterised by the use of low-saturated colours, the tones they use illustrate different visual languages. The deep, opaque colours used by Manet create a sense of security and calm, while Tuymans portrays his subject through hazy colour composition. On the other hand, the bright, lively colours used by Peyton convey her feelings toward her subject matter – a feature of her work that makes her stand out for me.

Finally, these three artists share a fundamental technical similarity insofar as they all work from photographs, abeit each bringing a different perspective to photography. Whereas Manet sought inspiration from the blurry photographic images of his day,[24] Peyton approaches photography as a form of representation while incorporating her feelings for her subject into her art, and Tuymans translates his photographic references into abstract forms that lack an obvious narrative context.

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The tools I used to perform my practice are sketching, painting and photography. When I make a painting, a brief outline is sketched after an image has formed in my mind. I then follow up with photographs, which are used as references for my paintings. These photos are initially taken in formal modelling sessions. However, following a session with the painting critique group at art school, I found that among all my preliminary paintings, the one that was worked up from a photo taken randomly received the most positive feedback. As a result, I begin taking more candid photographs. When my subjects forget about the camera, they behave naturally as they go about their daily activities. As consent was not given for particular photos, I planned to conduct an ethical review before making a final decision about their use in my project.

In his essay "What the Spectator Sees,"[25] Richard Wollheim discusses how paintings are perceived by different kinds of viewers with different perspectives on the same work.[26] I have drawn on his work in this area to explore how my own paintings are received.

Wollheim divides his discussion of this topic into two parts, which he calls "seeing-in" and "representation." He describes seeing-in as a distinctive perception triggered by looking at the surface of the artwork; this experience could be complex or simple, according to the individual viewer. Importantly, seeing-in precedes representation.[27] Thus, in seeking to perceive the intention behind an artist's work, aspects that involve personal experience are combined with what we are 'told' to see. The relation of seeing-in to representation produces a phenomenology[28] of twofoldness. The two activities resonate with each other, allowing viewers to perceive the painting by discovering it through reading the surface.

The viewer's role in the interpretation of an artwork and the validity of personal judgement has elicited considerable debate. Commenting on Wollheim's essay, Flint Schier has expressed some scepticism about Wollheim's idea that "the artist is a spectator of her own work."[29] Schier interprets this as meaning that the artist wants to know if her works evokes the experience that she desires in her audience. He argues that when viewing an artwork, one does not fully take in what the artist is wanting to propose. As the viewer's imagination is a subtle agent, it is inevitable that one's own subjectivity will have a part to play in the appreciation of art. As John Berger puts it in his book *Ways of Seeing* (1972), "The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe."[30]

While I appreciate that my works are personal, and that spectators might not see them in the way that I view them, I hope there is one key element that viewers *can* see in my work: a passing moment in the lives of the people in my paintings, whether or not such moments are considered meaningful.

A number of visual theories have been proposed to interpret finished artworks. In *Art as Research* (2010), Graeme Sullivan argues that such theories can be based on knowledge or on experience.[31] After discussing knowledge, he remarks: "In other situations, theories are based on experience, which helps us understand more complex things. This kind of theorizing involves understanding, which is an adaptive process of human thinking and acting that is informed by our experiences and encounters. It is also a cognitive process whereby what we know shapes our interactions and transforms our awareness."[32]

I consider that my project is based on experience. As I read Murakami's novels and observe my surroundings with a view to creating artworks in the studio, the process itself generates work that can be evaluated in this way. According to Sullivan, art practice can be considered as a form of "transformative research"[33] – a type of research that can change existing concepts and practices, and create new paradigms.[34] As the making of art is subject to a variety of approaches, creative insights are revealed. The process results in visual forms that produce meanings for interpretation. As Sullivan puts it, "In studio settings, visual forms are used as data to investigate meanings, and as sources of data."[35]

Sullivan proposes that art research is a field in its own right, and does not require the support of theories imported from other fields. This concept relates to my studio methodology, as the encounters and experiences that happen during the making of my work are the sources that create the ideas for my project. Thus, while theory informs practice, practice also informs theory; they have a trans-cognitive relationship.[36] The methodologies used to create artworks can be supported by visual theories.

However, there are arguments for theorising art practice based on human subjectivity – for instance, that imagination is a transparent image that appears in one's head, that life experiences differ from person to person, and are also interpreted differently. Nevertheless, today the art-going public is quite sophisticated when it comes to the interpretation of art, as long as the questions involved can be answered using knowledge gained from studio research. As we are seeking to use our art to communicate with the viewer, the context of the work produced in the studio benefits from practices such as documentation. In the process of visualising the work, theoretical issues are brought up for discussion and critique, enabling them to be analysed and rendered into words that may help inform potential viewers.[37]

The experience that I have focused on is the rendering of my paintings through my feelings for Murakami and his work, and the way that these elements are captured in my own life in the moment. Painting is a physical activity that I use to explore my materials and subjects. Embodied experience as it relates to my works is the feeling of my hand grasping my paintbrush and the feeling that my eyes are seeing real things. The feelings presented are ephemeral, unlocatable, indistinct, floating and unknown. The real and tangible environments presented in my work are domestic; the objects in the paintings are rendered and remain in place as they initially were in reality, and people's actions are reproduced as they were perceived. In John Berger's documentary video *Ways of Seeing,* he says of an object: "Its uniqueness is part of the uniqueness of the single place where it is. Everything around it confirms and consolidates its meaning."[38] A painting can capture a momentary experience with greater subtlety than a photograph – because the surface of a painting is built up with feelings that take time to form.

Seeing plays the pre-eminent role in the appreciation and understanding of art. With painting as the focus in his discussion of phenomenology in art, Merleau-Ponty confesses that painting is the art form which he has considered most deeply.[39] In painting, the artist attempts "to render the process by which perception constructs meanings from objects or other people from experience."[40]

Furthermore, the act of seeing is different from looking. In seeing, we analyse the information we perceive with

our eyes and link it to our experiences. This can be applied to the idea that painting portraits is also a form of self-examination – hence the idea of the self-portrait. In my painting process, I project my own thoughts onto the people I am close to. In the few cases where I was not very close to my model – for example, *Arthur* (Figure 6) – the result felt like something I could only observe, but not inhabit. Metaphorically speaking, these subjects are like a beautiful vase with a narrow neck – having grasped the neck, my hands cannot reach the base, no matter how hard I try.
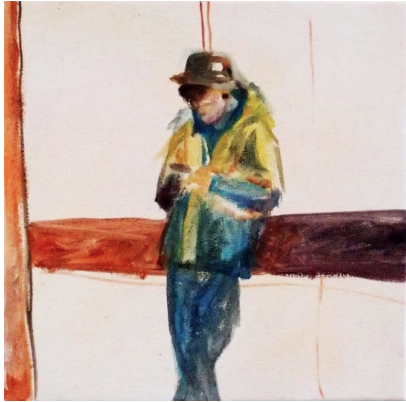

Figure 6. Yong Wei Lim, *Arthur* (unfinished), 2017, oil on canvas, 25.5 × 25.2 cm. Photograph: The artist.

Figure 7. Yong Wei Lim, *Lik De in Kitchen*, 2017, oil on canvas, 38 × 53 cm. Photograph: The artist.

CONCLUSION

Returning to my interest in Murakami's novels, together with the research I have completed in the course of my project, the personal growth I have experienced is exciting for me. The relatable stories and characters I found in Murakami's work have brought me this far by making me more open to conversations and sharpening my observation of the people around me.

The evolution of my paintings can be expressed as an unconscious vision of people's circumstances. Although I take photographs as a starting point, I can never predict how the final painting will evolve. As the Existentialist philosopher Heidegger proposed, "We are both subjects apart from the observed world, and objects to observe ourselves."[41] By observing, I came up with the idea of painting the people around me and, as for being observed, the painting process is a reflection of myself.

Since completing *Adrian and Ian*, I have enjoyed the intricate, intimate momentary feelings that such paintings elicit, inspiring me to create more smaller paintings. However, I still create larger works that portray the lives lived however by my subjects in greater detail.

In human experience, the elements that construct a person's lifeworld are carried through the time–space continuum. In a study of learning strategies in higher education,[42] Vic Caruana argues that the hardships a person experiences when immersed in a new environment give them a resilience and mental toughness that enables them to study effectively in their new surroundings. As time passes, newcomers begin to change their consciousness, helping them integrate into the host society. Murakami's characters may not be the toughest beings, but they are real. The struggles and process involved in forming relationships between oneself and one's social environment are worth the effort of artistic endeavour, whether in paintings or novels.

As John Berger expressed it: "We never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves."[43]

Yong Wei Lim is a recent Master in Visual Arts graduate, from the Dunedin School of Art. Her areas of interest are human relationships and identity. She is currently residing in Dunedin and is planning to continue working on her subject of interest when she returns to her home country, Malaysia, in 2019.

Figure 9. Yong Wei Lim, *Adrian, Ian and Anson* (from left to right), 2017, oil on canvas, 36 × 55 in. Photograph: The artist.

Figure 10. Yong Wei Lim, *Dining in Fiona's Room,* 2018, oil on canvas, 35 × 55 in. Photograph: The artist.

1   Steven Poole, "Haruki Murakami: 'I'm an Outcast of the Japanese Literary World'," *The Guardian,* 13 September 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/sep/13/haruki-murakami-interview-colorless-tsukur-tazaki-and-his-years-of-pilgrimage.

2   Dreux Richard, "Why Haruki Murakami Should not Receive the Nobel Prize for Literature," *Japan Today,* 10 October 2012, https://japantoday.com/category/features/opinions/why-haruki-murakami-should-not-receive-the-nobel-prize-for-literature.

3   Scott Meslow, "Your Literary Playlist: A Guide to the Music of Haruki Murakami," *The Week,* 6 August 2015, http://theweek.com/articles/444246/literary-playlist-guide-music-haruki-murakami.

4   Ibid.

5   Jennie Nash, "The Making of a Novel: Finding the Rhythm," *Huffington Post,* 16 July 2010, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/jennie-nash/the-making-of-a-novel-fin_b_649672.html.

6   Haruki Murakami, "Haruki Murakami: The Moment I Became a Novelist," *Literary Hub,* 25 June 2015, http://lithub.com/haruki-murakami-the-moment-i-became-a-novelist.

7   Yoshinobu Hakutani, *Postmodernity and Cross-culturalism* (New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2002), 19.

8   Midori Tanaka Akins, "Time and Space Reconsidered: The Literary Landscape of Murakami Haruki," unpub. PhD diss. (SOAS, University of London, 2012), 231.

9   Haruki Murakami, *Norwegian Wood,* trans. Jay Rubin (New York: Vintage Books, 2000).

10   Ibid.

11   Haruki Murakami, *Dance Dance Dance,* trans. Alfred Birnbaum (New York: Vintage Books, 2002).

12   Haruki Murakami, *Hard-boiled Wonderland and the End of the World,* trans. Alfred Birnbaum (New York: Vintage Books, 1993).

13   Haruki Murakami, *Kafka by the Shore,* trans. Philip Gabriel (New York: Vintage Books, 2006).

14   *Visualizing Research: A Guide to the Research Process* in *Art and Design,* eds Carole Gray and Julian Malins (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2014), 14.

15   Atkins, "Time and Space Reconsidered."

16   Calvin Tomkins, "The Artist of the Portrait: The Deliverance of Elizabeth Peyton," *The New Yorker,* 6 October 2008, http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/10/06/the-artist-of-the-portrait.

17   David Lock, "Live Forever," *A&M,* 6 (Summer 2009), 30. See http://www.david-lock.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Lock_EPeyton-article.pdf.

18   Ibid., 28.

19   Kathryn Hughes, "Manet's Forgotten Muse: Victorine Meurent," *The Telegraph,* 25 January 2013, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-news/9802721/Manets-forgotten-muse-Victorine-Meurent.html.

20   Ulrich Loock, *Luc Tuymans* (London: Phaidon Press, 2003), 204.

21   Gary Wiseman, "Luc Tuymans: Loosening Up," *Portland Art,* 4 October 2012, http://www.portlandart.net/archives/2012/10/luc_tuymans_loo.html.

22   Adrian Searle, "Luc Tuymans," *The Guardian,* 7 September 2001, https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2001/sep/07/artsfeatures5.

23   Loock, *Luc Tuymans,* 126.

24   Philip Hensher, "Manet's Portraits: The Artist on the Knife-edge of Photography," *The Guardian,* 12 January 2013, https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2013/jan/12/manet-portraits-artist-photography-royal-academy.

25   Richard Wollheim, "What the Spectator Sees," in *Visual Theory: Painting and Interpretation,* eds Norman Bryson, Michael Ann Holly and Keith Moxey (Cambridge: Polity, 1991), 101-50.

26   Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault also developed this concept in their essays "The Death of the Author" (1967) and "What is an Author?" (1969) respectively.

27   Wollheim, "What the Spectator Sees," 106-7.

28   Olga Belova, "The Event of Seeing: A Phenomenological Perspective on Visual Sense-making," *Culture and Organization,* 12:2 (2006), 93-107.

29   Flint Schier, "Painting after Art? Comments on Wollheim," in Bryson et al., *Visual Theory,* 151.

30   John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Classics, 1972).

31   Graeme Sullivan, *Art Practice as Research: Inquiry in the Visual Arts* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publishing, 2010), 96.

32   Ibid.

33   Ibid., 110-119.

34   JT Trevors, Gerald H Pollack, Milton H Saier Jr and Luke Masson, "Transformative Research: Definitions, Approaches and Consequences," *Theory Biosci,* 131:2 (June 2012), 117-123.

35   Sullivan, *Art Practice as Research,* 107.

36   Ibid., 99.

37   Not all artists work in this way – many eschew supporting documentation.

38   John Berger, *Ways of Seeing, Episode 1 (1972),* 8 October 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0pDE4VX_9Kk.

39   Belova, "The Event of Seeing," 100-102.

40   Carolyne Quinn, "Perception and Painting in Merleau-Ponty's Thought," *Perspectives: International Postgraduate Journal of Philosophy,* 2:1 (2009), 38-59. See https://zdoc.site/perception-and-painting-in-merleau-pontys-thought-carolyne-q.html.

41   *Horizons of Authenticity in Phenomenology, Existentialism, and Moral Psychology,* eds Hans Pedersen and Megan Altman (London: Springer, 2015), 41.

42   Vic Caruana et al., *Promoting Students' 'Resilient Thinking' in Diverse Higher Education Learning Environments: Twelve Voices of Diversity, Challenge and Resilience,* Leeds Metropolitan University, 2014, https://resiliencetoolkit.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/hea-promoting-students-resilient-thinking-in-diverse-higher-education-learning-environments.pdf.

43   Berger, *Ways of Seeing,* 9.