

Below the Surface

A new exhibition at H Gallery explores the well of creativity beyond the superficial

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Scratching beneath the surface is something all artists strive to achieve, attempting to suffuse the pores of their canvas or photographic paper by boring into the world around them or deep into their own interior in an attempt to tap one of the scarce wellsprings from which acute meaning and originality are derived.



Simrin Mehra-Agarwal's 'Metamorphosis of the Grand Chandelier of the Transept Crossing', 2009, acrylic on linen, 105 x 76 inches.

Oliver Pin-Fat's 'Coming out of Trance', 2005, silver bromide fibre base print, 20 x 24 inches.

"Surface Depth", now display at H Gallery, brings together 12 muses from countries across the globe and provinces around Thailand on such a quest. While some of the artworks fall short in their appeal either on an aesthetic, emotional or intellectual level, there are pieces that are spellbinding in their ability to plumb the depths and rise to the surface.

Upon entering the gallery the first work one encounters is by Oliver Pin-Fat, a series of seven smaller format photographs. These images create a positive first impression of the show.



Simon Larbalestier's 'Cuban' (Minotaur series), 2009, Chromira paper in sealed frame, 105 x 138cm.

Pin-Fat's process includes exposing his rolls of film to light and treading on them, presenting whatever residual array of over-exposed images fate decrees should survive. Through this operation of chance – the greatest natural selector of all – the abstract and semi-abstract residue sidesteps the artist's own state of mind and foveal acuity.

By escaping the observable, Pin-Fat delves into the realm of the unobservable, or the pure nature of the unconscious, returning with distilled simplifications transforming their subject matter into symbols of Thailand's – and the world's – multitude of disenfranchised.

Next encountered is Simon Larbalestier, who is particularly well-known for his album artwork for US alternative rock band The Pixies, who presents four larger photographs in sealed frames. The most impressive of the tetrad is Cuban, which is part of the artist's Minotaur series.

The viewer would be forgiven for initially suspecting the subject is a woman with her back turned towards the camera, twisting at the hips and cut off below the knees and above the torso. A second glance reveals the buttocks to be the heel of a female foot, with the seam of a stocking creating the impression of a rump and lower limbs.

Deliberately staged, the composition does not lack in movement which flows fluently throughout with a dynamic pattern radiating from the central sensuous shape, locomotion reinforced by the capillaries of nylon weaved around the curved contours whose proportions are further exaggerated by skilful use of lighting.

Simrin Mehra-Agarwal's Metamorphosis of the Grand Chandelier of the Transept Crossing is an imposing 2 by 2 metres (approximately). As the title indicates, the

subject is a chandelier, a pyramidal configuration creating two hierarchical dimensions, with the horizontal diminishing as the height increases to the one point at the top, a structure which tends to glorify the power of centralisation.

As the hierarchical undertones suggest, this Indian-born, Italy-based artist's impressive creation would be suited to a large space, such as a commercial building's foyer or company boardroom, where viewers could observe it unobstructed from a distance.

The artist, however, manages to introduce an equal element of disorder into the homologous structure by painting whirling impastos of red acrylic in the spacious background, waves of blood that crash against each other in a roiling storm.



Dutton and Swindells' 'Death to Fascist Insect', 2009, pen and ink on paper, 59 x 84cm.

These decentralised lines represent equality and modernity, balancing against the subordination and old traditions represented by the battered chandelier. Together, they symbolise the metamorphosis from the past power structures and dying belief systems to the present situation.

This crimson sea, however, needs to be seen up close, as well as from a distance to be fully appreciated. In order to compensate for this potential shortcoming, the artist has incorporated another symbol of disorder in the form of a trickster figure in the chandelier's shadow; he can be seen wearing a fool's cap and bells, pointing out the foibles of the mighty.

On the second floor is Steve Dutton and Steve Swindells' pen and ink on paper titled Death to the Fascist Insect. This deceptively simple and childlike drawing manages to create a most surreal depth of field.

From the distance of a metre the larger elements of the composition are in focus and the detail is lost but, moving closer, the many eyes of the seething swarm of insects open up and peer at you frighteningly whereas the overall picture becomes blurred. Unfortunately, this piece has been placed rather precariously in the hallway at the very top of the stairs, making fully appreciating it rather awkward.

The other artists are: Heman Chong, Adam James, Nigel Power, Arin Rungjang, Sutthirat Supaparinya, Noraset Vaisayakul and Pornpraseart Yamazaki.

Curated by Brian Curtin, "Surface Depth" encourages artists to take the journey along the razor's edge separating the surface from the depth, the superficial from the deep. While some artists in the show manage to traverse this fine line more successfully than others, taking risks is a necessary part of being a practicing artist, and the gallery-going public should not miss the opportunity to catch an exhibition featuring such output.

'Surface Depth' runs until September 30 at H Gallery, 201 Sathon Soi 12, next to the Bangkok Bible College and Seminary (near Surasak BTS). Open daily 10am to 6pm (except Tuesday). Call 08-1310-4428 or visit www.hgallerybkk.com.

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