

Joel Seow: Tenderly Obscured From View

Curatorial Essay

Liminal Solitudes

By

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Intimacy and isolation are common motifs in the works of Joel Seow (b. 1997, Singapore), whose paintings deploy the visual vocabulary of realist figurations with occasional flourishes of romantic abstraction to explore the latency of spirituality, decay, and renewal in the contemporary urban environment. Firmly located within objective reality yet suffuse with a hazy, almost-dreamlike, atmosphere, Seow's paintings—broadly split between candid portraitures of loved ones and studies of construction sites as well as other spatial processes—evoke a visceral sense of loneliness and incompleteness that transmutes ordinary spaces into emotionally charged sites of intense longing—for companionship, progress, or something else in-between that is as inarticulate in words as it is perceivable as a deep, guttural desire.

Ambiguities, both material and immaterial, populate many of the paintings and serve to highlight the interstitial and overlooked nature of everyday moments. In *The Window* (oil on panels, 2023) for example, a diptych presents two perspectives contained within a single scene. A young woman glancing aside is accompanied by a lone skylight set into the ceiling of an unnamed space. Matching the sightline from both subjects, the mirroring composition produces a dialogue through the act of mutual gazing that portends multiple potential meanings such as the desire for freedom, the inescapability of the gaze, or even the persistent presence of hope. This framing finds a parallel in *What are you looking for?* (egg tempera on panel, 2022-2023), another diptych where the same subjects are represented from a different angle and with different lighting. Whilst still maintaining the same glance aside in how the young woman is positioned, the warm tones of the environment now invite a softer, more tender reading compared to the harsher drama of *The Window*, where more existential themes emerge relative to *What are you looking for?*'s domestic ruminations.

Seow's portraits are marked by the continual presence of certain subjects and poses: just as how the same young woman looking to the side and skylight appear in *The Window* and *What are you looking for?*, so does the same young man appear in the paintings *In Theory* (oil on canvas, 2022) and *Laws of Physics* (egg tempera on panel, 2022), posed similarly off-centre. Deftly avoiding the repetition of clichés by varying environmental conditions within his final image, Seow is astute in exploring how the same set of people and/in spaces can convey vastly different meanings and narratives.

For *In Theory*, Seow uses chiaroscuro that originated from what is ostensibly the ambient light of an impending dusk to create a sense of drama and depth within the painting, and forces the viewer to focus between the young man and the slim window behind him in the distance. With much of the mid-ground shrouded in shadows, the figure of the young man emerges much more strikingly, with

his pose conveying a sense of casual defiance that suggests an unvarnished vitality of youth. This is in direct contrast with *Laws of Physics* where the midground and background are rendered much more clearly and vibrantly, with brighter colours compared to the more muted and shaded tones Seow uses to paint the backlit view of the young man. Lit through what appears to be the softer lights of dawn, the painting portrays the young man with a vulnerability and tiredness that somewhat paradoxically also highlights his juvenescence, but also shows a sense of hope and aspiration through the association of a bright, promising morning with youth.

While Seow's character studies appear to be mellow and even somewhat subdued in terms of flair and narrativity, his compositions in spatial studies are united by a greater emphasis on mood and stylised abstraction. In *Into the desert* (oil on panel, 2023), a pair of clog-clad feet stand within the lighted field of a torch or a headlight with the rest of the body absent and the arid badlands behind visible but kept in a twilight gloom. Generating a sense of tension between the bright bottom section and the darker, shaded middle and top sections, the general visual harmony of the painting unsettles with a greater efficacy than if the differences had been more jarring because of how inconspicuous, and consequently more uncanny, it is. With this disembodiment, *Into the desert* proposes a form of existence that is made possible, or rendered material, only through the mechanism of light—a spiritual notion that Seow had more subtly explored through his portraits. This podal motif is also present in *Put out into the deep* (oil and egg tempera on panel, 2022-2023), where a pair of similarly disembodied feet are depicted standing submerged in a shallow, ankle-height streambed. Signifying a sort of groundedness, Seow's representation of feet also proposes the appendages as points of connection between the earthly, physical world and the imaginative, psychic interiors of the human figure.

Another recurring figure in Seow's spaces and landscapes is the construction tarp. Manifesting within the milieus of construction, sanitation, and other banal forms of industrial processes, Seow imagines the tarps within the urban landscape as being imbued with a peculiar weight and agency, and whose presences imply an obscuration of certain elements of reality—and with it, the latency for a particular mundane magic that comes with tabula rasa development. Across works such as *Nothing hidden* (acrylic on paper, 2023), *Untitled (Diagram)* (mixed media and acrylic on canvas, 2023), and *Untitled (Abyss)* (acrylic on canvas, 2023), the tarp is both an opaque screen and an object whose diaphanous property makes it a gateway to a slightly off-kilter version of the present, becoming, in a way, a character that informs the larger narrative of death and rebirth at an urban scale. Expanding—and sporadically expansive—but always in a single sheet, Seow's tarps achieve a liminal solitude that transforms the common industrial tool into something a little more transcendental, a little more out-of-this-world. In his allusions to the cyclical nature of existence, be they human or city, Seow makes the case for the need to consider the spiritual nature inherent to every object, every being, with a deep, personal love.

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