

ART

Special Edition
Special Edition

H A B E N S

CONTEMPORARY ART REVIEW

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Contemporary Art Press

Breathing Space, Installation, a work by Jennifer Ng

Jennifer Ng

Jennifer Ng

ART Habens

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One of the first things I would say when introducing myself to others is that, I am an artist and I feel so fortunate being one. I am a staunch believer that art can transform the way we live our lives. Art has been a great companion to me ever since that day I was given my first drawing pad. I cannot really remember how long ago that was. It was a long long time ago. Needless to say, I went on to pursue art at the very first chance. I received my first formal art education at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (Singapore), where I was trained in the mediums of traditional Chinese painting, calligraphy and seal-carving. I have not turned back since.

Over the years, I adopted a multidisciplinary, process-centric approach, working with other mediums. I believe in the narrative potentiality of materials, and that every material speaks in ways that others cannot. In my works, I use diverse materials to articulate conditions of formation /growth /regeneration, as well as disintegration/ decay. Through different art forms /materials /techniques, I seek to explore the diversity and complexities of the cultural and natural phenomena around us, with the hope of transforming them into new understandings.

Jennifer Ng



Terra Fermata



Breathing Space

An interview with

Jennifer Ng

An interview by **Josh Ryder**, curator
and **Katherine Williams**, curator
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Hello Jennifer and welcome to ART Habens. Before starting to elaborate about your artistic production and we would like to invite our readers to visit <https://www.jennifersy.com> in order to get a wide idea about your multifaceted artistic production, and we would start this interview with a couple of questions about your multifaceted background. You have a solid formal training: after having earned your Master Degree from the National Institute of Education, Singapore, you moved to the United Kingdom to pursue your PHD Practice-Led Art & Design at the prestigious Birmingham City University. How do your formative years influence your evolution as an artist? In particular, how does your cultural substratum direct the trajectory of your current artistic research?

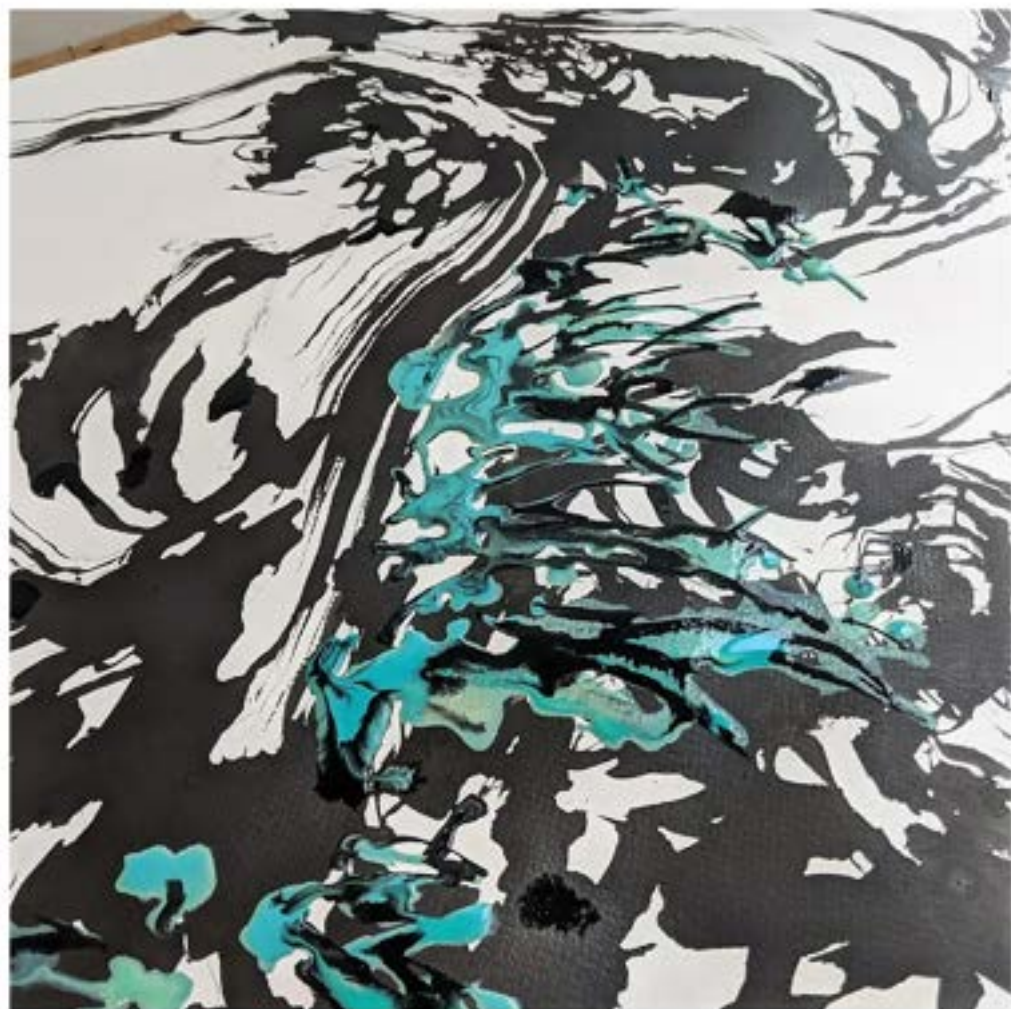
Jennifer Ng: Hello, and thank you for this interview.

I was originally trained in Chinese ink painting and calligraphy from the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts in Singapore, where I also received formal drawing, painting, and sculpting lessons in my foundational training. Although I have always been intrigued by different materials and technical approaches, I gradually became aware of unconventional materials around me that also possess expressive and communicative potentialities. I later went on to create sculptures, installation works and performances where I could use different kinds of materials in my art. I started to see possible exchanges between them. I



Jennifer Ng

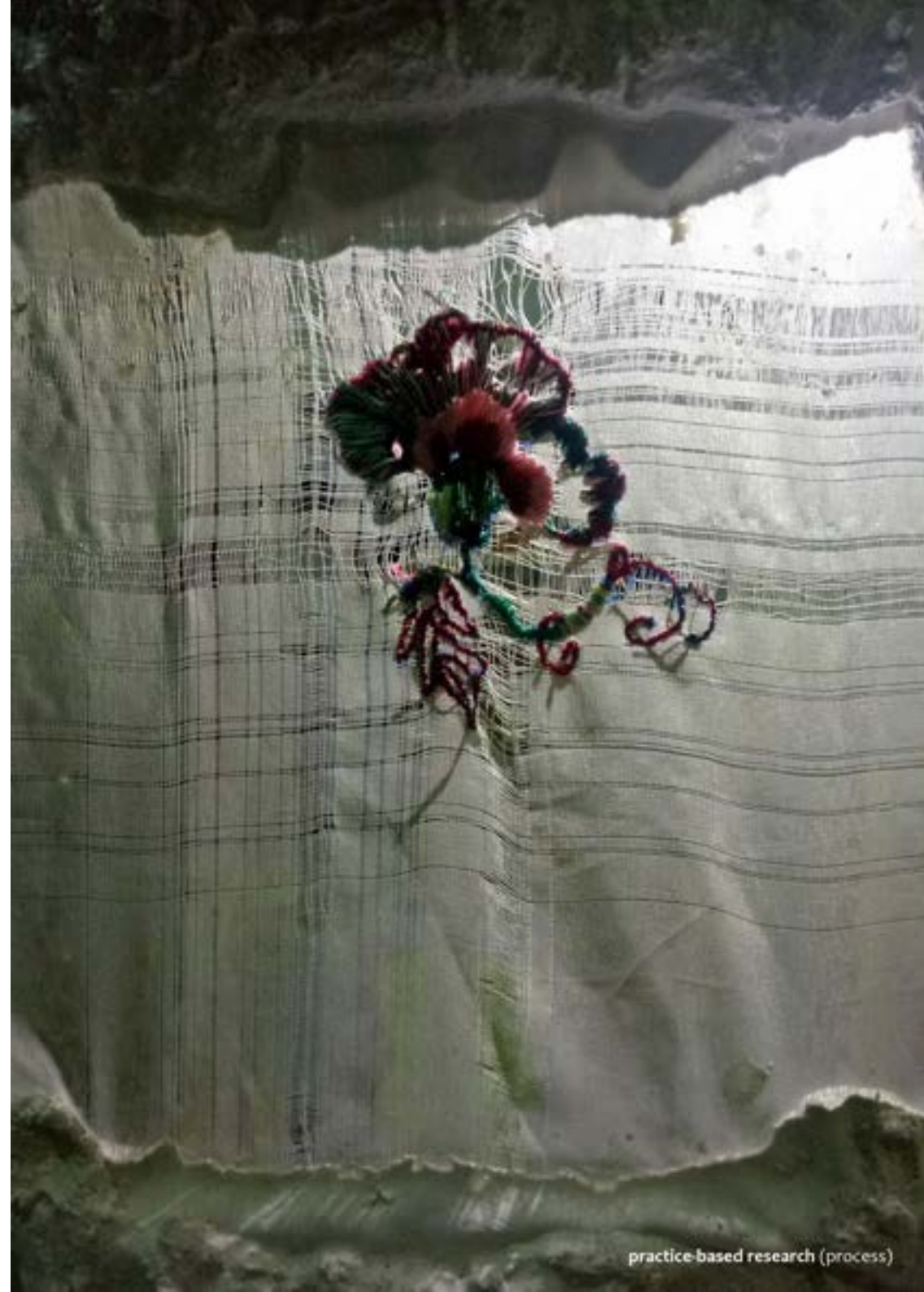
was intrigued by the ways different art forms can move us so differently, and how they interact to create unexpected dynamism. I guess my interest in materiality grew from there, which led me to further explore the intrinsic and imaginative tendencies of materials/objects in my current practice research (on lost objects in my Peranakan-Chinese culture).



Wild Grace Inhabitants (close-up)

The body of works that we have selected for this special edition of ART Habens we have selected — and our readers have already started to get to know in the introductory

pages of this article — has at once impressed us for the way it challenges the viewers' parameters, inviting them to question the idea of beauty in such unconventional way.



practice-based research (process)



Thing-ing (series)



Thing 10g (series)



Transparent Voices (close-up)

More specifically *Terra FErмата* achieves the difficult task of inviting the viewers to inquiry into the hidden properties of soil. When walking our readers through the genesis of *Terra FErмата* would you tell us something about your usual setup and process? In

particular, how important is intuition in your creative process?

Jennifer Ng: I would consider the materiality and visuality of my works to be inseparable. Every material speaks differently. One

material may be less adept at achieving a specific effect than another. This is especially so when expressing the subtleties and complexities of ideas or concepts. As a result, knowing what a material can and cannot do, and testing their limits to find what else can be done to change it, how to change it, and with what - all of these become a huge part of my artistic inquiry.

Responsivity, and most strikingly, failures, they are probably the two things that come to mind as I now recall the processes of creating *Terra Fermata*. Many things did not go to plan, that is, if there was any to begin with. Intuition does play an important role here, in fact, not even the materials used for this work were pre-planned. Instead, the iron rods, cement and soil were found at different sites, and considered separately with myriads of possibilities, but not always in relation to each another. It was more about dealing/playing with the materials, observing/discovering their materiality, and moving on from there.

In hindsight, I feel that awareness and attention to things are vital qualities to have. Reaction towards this awareness is needed to transcend a normal vision/object to an artistic one.

We dare say that symbols play a considerable role in your practice: more especially *Terra Fermata* provides the viewers with such a multilayered visual experience: how do you consider the role of metaphors playing in your artistic practice? And how important is for you to create artworks rich of allegorical qualities?

Jennifer Ng: It is not always important, but sometimes it is necessary. It largely depends



Terra Fermata (process)



Terra Fermata

on the subject matter I am dealing with, and the kind of interaction I would like the viewers to have when they encounter the work. For some of my works, I seek to achieve a more visceral effect. I have always admired works that hold our attention and keep us there long enough for us to feel something about it. These works connect to us immediately and sensorially, where we don't have to think of anything else but to just contemplate on its sheer physicality. I feel that *Terra Fermata* works on both levels, where the metaphors/narratives and materiality are inextricably linked, where the markings and imprints left on surfaces also function as entry points into the work.

As you have remarked once, the different finishes on the balls highlight some of the hidden properties of soil. Austrian Art historian Ernst Gombrich once remarked the importance of providing a space for the viewers to project onto, so that they can actively participate in the creation of the illusion: how important is for you to trigger your audience's perception in order to address them to elaborate personal interpretations? In particular, how open would you like your works to be understood?

Jennifer Ng: Indeed, materials seek to engage, or as mentioned, provide a space for viewers' active participation in the work. This dwelling, as I would normally call it, can be deliberate or subconscious. The comprehension and interpretation of the work may well be rooted in the physical form of the work, but it is also fair to say that it is seldom confined within it. As we attempt to harness specific materials or objects to convey artistic ideas, it may not always be possible to keep interpretations within those ideas. With personal associations such as

private memories or life experiences in the mix, interpretations would almost certainly be organic, and so it should be. For example, in this instance, the use of soil, a substance which is often considered a base material, in its rawest form, can be worked on and transformed at will. Different levels of physical involvement and treatments resulted in different finishes on the soil balls. The visual outcomes may also engage the viewers in less direct ways. This base material is also a substrate or foundation for life/growth, deposits/sediment/erosion, and may carry the connotations of accumulation/ concealment/ embeddedness/ elimination, and so on. Likewise, there are other aspects that are less obvious, such as the viscosity of lost – invisible labour, hidden marks, and needless to say, time. In other words, interpretation is an inherently private affair. By being that, it is also inherently open in the grand scheme, if that makes sense.

We really appreciate such stunning materic, organic quality of your artworks, and We have been particularly fascinated with the way it challenges the viewers' perception and parameter, inviting them to question and rediscover the concept of materially on the intuitive level: how important is for you to highlight the physical aspect of your artworks?

Jennifer Ng: The physical aspect would always be the first point of contact or encounter with my works. I believe the physicality of my works to be necessary. As the process of creation is not always visible, the physical markings left on the surface of the work may be the closest clue to its inner workings. In my works, I enjoy creating and seeing this relationship between physical/tangible and the non-physical/illusory. The physical aspect





The Quietest Big Bang

of a work of art is like the basic condition that draws the viewer in. It is also an attribute that lures the viewer into a liminal space where what cannot be seen has to be imagined. Incidentally, on a more literal note, we could look at the white spaces on Chinese ink paintings, where the void/emptiness can be expanded upon by the viewers. It is a non-descript space that engages the imagination, and a breathing space that could be activated.

Terra Fermata is the result of a proficient collaboration with artist Wilson GOH and it's no doubt that collaborations as the one that you have together are today ever growing forces in Contemporary Art and that the most exciting things happen when creative minds from different fields of practice meet and collaborate on a project: could you tell us something about this proficient collaboration?

Jennifer Ng: My collaborator, Wilson Goh, is an established, classically trained musician and vocalist, as well as a performance artist from Singapore. It was indeed an exciting experience for me to work with someone who is not only proficient in sound, but also with visuals. There were moments where our ideas flow seamlessly, also times where they collided, and we had to work separately to sort out our processes. For me, it was interesting to observe how we have understood materials differently. We lived in the same neighbourhood when *Terra Fermata* was conceptualised and made, and the soil we had collected for the work was mainly from that area, a small town in central Singapore. The soil quality was different with each batch of soil we collected. Sometimes, we could get dry and hard soil, while sometimes we could only find wet and soggy soil that needed a long time to dry out. We worked with what

we could get hold of. The process of harvesting and waiting, and finding, digging, and handling of something so organic, was quite unusual for city dwellers like us. The process of making the soil balls was quite a laborious one. It required many hours of sifting through soil, rolling and shaping, before drying, waxing, and polishing them to achieve the desired effects. The stands were also carefully designed such that they were flat and levelled enough for the balls to stay atop them. The entire process was rather organic, from having to work with nature, and around each other's schedules.

You often draw inspiration from Nature and *Terra Fermata* unveils the myriad treasures the earth offers that most do not stop to consider or even begin to see when we keep to ourselves within our urban landscape. How do you consider the role of everyday's life experience playing within your artistic process?

Jennifer Ng: I consider my artistic process to be critically rooted in my everyday life's experience. I feel that a huge part of my practice is influenced by place, which then becomes the framework where the work materialises. *Terra Fermata* was conceptualised from a patch of nature in an urban environment. The aesthetics reflects that quite evidently. As the materials were collected over time, from different sites, the iron rods were salvaged from building sites and the moulds were commonly available cardboard boxes, I would imagine them to be very different had it been worked on at a different place. It would be interesting to explore a possible extension of *Terra Fermata* in the UK. In fact, the space here has a very direct impact on my current practice. My close proximity with nature here has changed the



The Importance of Bee-ing (Process)



way I work. I am interested in how the expansiveness of nature is also contrasted with circumscribing situations in our changing world. I remember having conversations with some natives here, and they commented that being so used to the nature surrounding them, they no longer see it. I found that really powerful. 'Indifferent-interdependency' is a response to this inattention. I worked on the idea of symbiotic relationships in the natural world, and how we are connected and disconnected from it. Boundaries between flora and fauna merge and collapse as they appear to have morphed into a single unit. They probably have no concept of the larger picture, and increasingly we don't either. There is much to be done to highlight this predicament.

Your artistic production also reflects your unique exploration of our relationship with our surroundings. Scottish artist Peter Doig once remarked that even the most realistic works of art are derived more from within the head than from what's out there in front of us, how do you consider the relationship between reality and imagination, playing within your artistic production?

Jennifer Ng: I am not sure if I would be able to imagine without the basis of reality. I am not sure if that is even possible. However, I am aware that although imagination involves conscious thinking, there can also be a great deal happening in the background, such as snippets, fragmented or incomplete ideas/concepts that do not necessarily mean anything at all. They can come from anywhere, like textures on random surfaces, an indiscernible sound, an elusive form or shape. They can be rather helpful when visualising something. The translation/oscillation between reality and



The Importance of Bee-ing (Process)



The Colossal (series)

imagination is a process not to be underestimated. Artists deal with things yet to be materialised/created, and this process essentially puts the artist at the threshold of knowing. This process also does not end here,

instead, it continues with the viewers.

You are an established artist, and over the years your works have been internationally exhibited in many occasions: how do you



The Colossal (series)

consider the nature of your relationship with your audience? By the way, as the move of Art from traditional gallery spaces, to street and especially to online platforms — as Instagram

<https://www.instagram.com/jenniferngart>— increases, how would in your opinion change the relationship with a globalised audience?

Jennifer Ng: Now with social media, we



The Listener

obviously get to see so much of art everyday.

We could be instantly transported to galleries/studios, and read about artists and their ideas on their webpages, instagrams, facebook etc, often even before you see the actual artworks. To a large extent, interactions with art and artists have become more versatile with online platforms, and can be very engaging in terms of idea exchanges and collaborations. The extensive and almost boundless reach to almost anyone in the world is definitely



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amazing, and unprecedented with regard to disseminating artistic productions and achievements, as well as the speed in which they are done. I see technology aiding and expanding the ways we encounter art.

The whole social media experience definitely changed the way I encounter and experience physical works of art, especially if I first see the works on instagram or facebook before seeing the actual thing. Seeing a work in pixels and reading online comments about it before forming our own opinions about, can be seen as a form of



The Listener (series)



The Listener (series)



interference, when direct viewing is presumably the intended mode of engagement. I feel that when visitors come into my studio, and commented on my art in the flesh, the conversations are certainly more dynamic and immediate, with plenty of room for expansion and clarifications. This allows me to interpret their comments in a different way compared to online comments.

Comments/advice can have an impact on what artists choose to produce and post on their social media. Artists could be charting their artistic journeys based on likes and follows as a result, rather than focusing on their own creativity and ingenuity. I guess there will always be challenges as we move away from what we have been used to. The challenges here lies in that we are now harnessing alternative communication platforms for something that are meant to communicate in very specific ways (excluding art that is designed for digital consumption). I feel that the tactile quality of physical artworks is something unique, and non-replaceable, at least not by today's technology, not by a long shot. This is different from saying that traditional and online/digital experiencing of artworks cannot overlap. To me, the intertwining between the two can be a very exciting venture. It is not always possible that one can lead to the other, but at the very least, I believe that they can be mutually supportive of each other.

We have really appreciated the multifaceted nature of your artistic research and before leaving this stimulating conversation we would like to thank you for chatting with us and for sharing your thoughts, Jennifer. What projects are you currently working on,

and what are some of the ideas that you hope to explore in the future?

Jennifer Ng: It is my pleasure. I would also like to thank you for inviting me to share my art on such an amazing platform.

At the moment, I am working on a few things. I am putting together a body of works that are produced from my research, on lost cultural materials/objects, which include performance documentations, sculptures and paintings. They are process-oriented experimentations, what I would consider, the 'workings from inside-out'. I am also excited to see how far I could push myself to explore the visuality and materiality in my paintings. I am focusing much of my attention in developing painting series inspired by nature. Made with Chinese ink and water-based mediums on paper, I aim to re-create/mimic indexical imprints of germination, growth, decay and regeneration through gestural marks and natural traces, particularly, lifeforms that have accumulated and thrived over time. I might take it a little further, to explore semi three-dimensional formats, or incorporate video or sound works. Finally, something I have yet to mention, is that *Terra Fermata #1, 2, 3* has gone back to nature, as part of the plan to illustrate the continual change to the environment. The balls were broken down and scattered back to where they came from. My collaborator Wilson and I may be working together again soon, to develop this project further. Something exciting to look forward to!

*An interview by Josh Ryder, curator
and Katherine Williams, curator
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