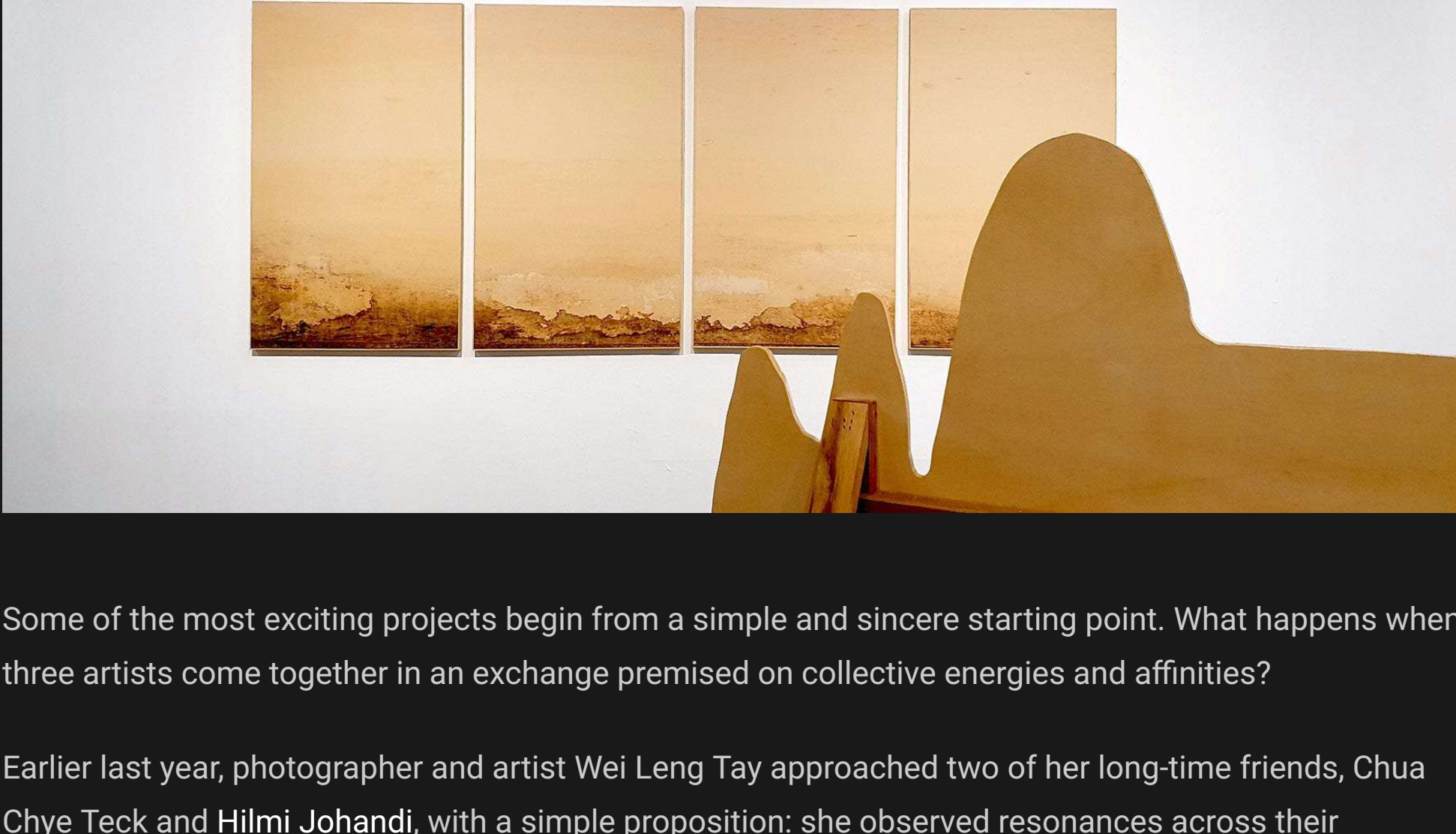


EXHIBITIONS, SINGAPORE SHOWS • YUN TENG • JANUARY 26, 2021

Progressive Disintegrations, Collective Accumulations



Some of the most exciting projects begin from a simple and sincere starting point. What happens when three artists come together in an exchange premised on collective energies and affinities?

Earlier last year, photographer and artist Wei Leng Tay approached two of her long-time friends, Chua Chye Teck and Hilmi Johandi, with a simple proposition: she observed resonances across their practices (each distinctly developed and unique) and wanted to explore the possibility of working together. The processes of art-making often rely heavily on individual intuition, conceptual direction and a personal rhythm and method of working. What is to be gained from working together? At its core, it's perhaps an extension of generosity and intimacy that one offers to work in tandem and be responsive to each other; an organic practice that extends out of an artist's normally self-centred practice, to see what might collectively accumulate.

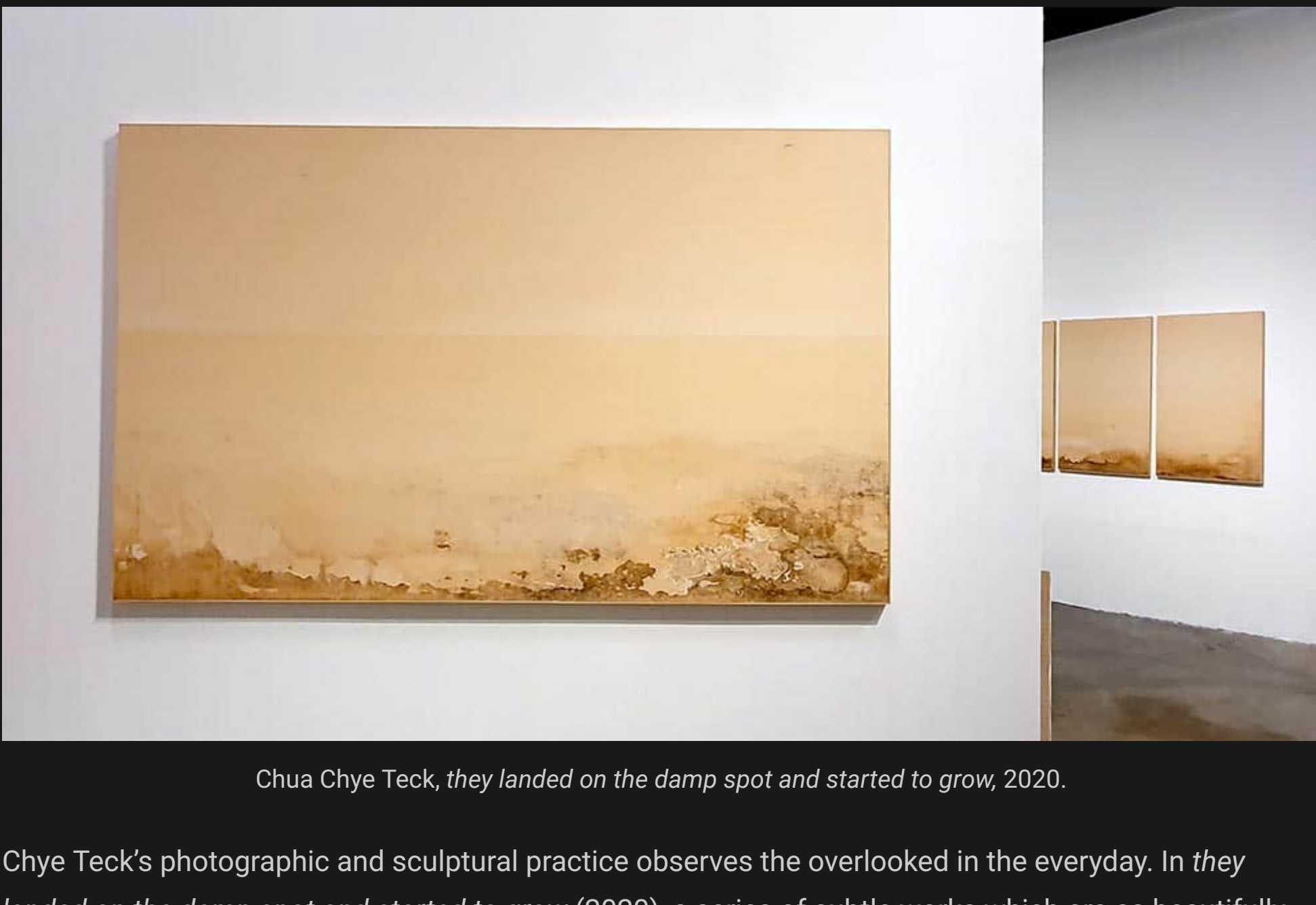
HOME IS WHERE THE HEART IS OUR HEARTLANDS

Initially without a specific outcome in mind, the artists held months of regular meetings in their studios, intertwined in an exchange that relied on their collective energies and making artworks concurrently which allowed them to affect one another. At a later stage in their exchange, they invited curator Marc Gledes as a curatorial interlocutor – the outcome of which is a thoughtful and resonant exhibition, *Progressive Disintegrations*, at Objectifs Centre for Photography and Film. Even without knowledge of the collaborative grounds on which the exhibition was instigated, *Progressive Disintegrations* is cohesive in its visual and conceptual presentation. I particularly appreciated the sensitivity in thinking about how different elements in the exhibition space were put in conversation through their proximity and the sightlines of the viewer, speaking to each other in soft, underlying tones.



Installation view of *Progressive Disintegrations*.

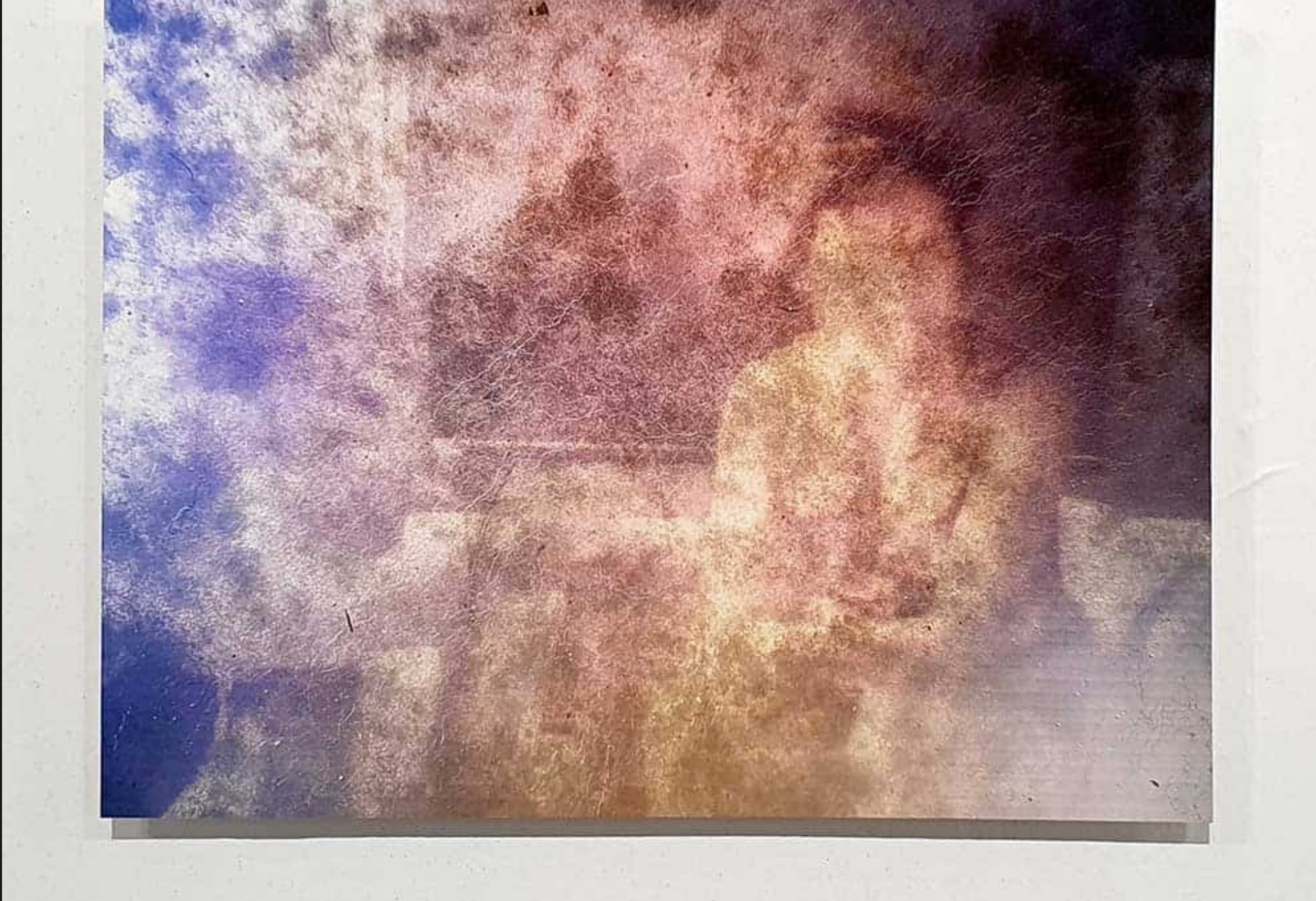
At the core of the show is a common investment in questions of image-making and representation – how images operate in the individual artistic practices of Hilmi, Chye Teck and Wei Leng, and how they think about space, surfaces and layers in images. In particular, a thread that runs through their works is one that probes: how can we re-evaluate the familiar?



Chua Chye Teck, *they landed on the damp spot and started to grow*, 2020.

Chye Teck's photographic and sculptural practice observes the overlooked in the everyday. In *they landed on the damp spot and started to grow* (2020), a series of subtle works which are as beautifully produced as they are elusive to inspection, you wouldn't be mistaken to think that you were looking at a solid piece of wood. Yet, are those wisps of crashing waves and a horizon separating earth and sky?

Chye Teck speaks of his role of a photographer as a copier – however, he isn't one that purely reproduces the subject to the highest degree of veracity. Through the act of photographing, he attempts to grasp at a poetics that lies within the object itself; in copying he subverts expectations of what a photographic image should be. In this series, Chye Teck photographed blocks of soft wood on which an inflorescent mould has seeped into the grain. A particular type of wood commonly used for woodblock printing, he came across a stack which had undergone water damage, resulting in a blooming, sprawling mould that evokes ink brushstrokes of Chinese *shanshui* landscape paintings. Despite the high level of precision and finish of the final works which are cleanly framed and mounted on wood, in Chye Teck's act of photographing the organic and unpredictable grain of the mouldy wood is a clear decision to remove the sharpness of the photographic image. To do so, he intentionally flattened the photograph's shadows and highlights, evoking a spatiality in the ambiguous texture that conjures abstract forms and landscapes. The mundane transforms into the sublime, and I'm left wondering: how can a piece of wood make me feel so much?



Wei Leng Tay, *One full frame 135mm E-6-processed Ektachrome colour reversal film slide*, 'Ruby colour service'-branded made in Germany plastic slide mount, in Colour Transparencies processed by Kodak-branded yellow plastic slide box with typed labels: 'FULL FRAME' and 'POSTCARD PAID PERFORMA JUST 2000' // 200 magnification. Partial circular episcopic illumination. Cropped // 27.5x59cm archival pigment print on Ilford Galerie Smooth Cotton Rag paper, 2020. Yes, the title is deliberately long and all-encompassing to reveal the technical processes and parameters that lie behind the image, which extends the artist's preoccupations with representation and depiction.

Contrarily, Wei Leng focuses a different eye to the photograph. Her practice has consistently addressed personal relationships, family histories and patterns of migration by probing modes of perception and representation. In this series of works, she unearths analogue film slides of family photographs taken by her parents in the 1970s, during a time of transition and upheaval. In order to move away from a nostalgic impulse, Wei Leng places these slides, quite literally, under the microscope in order to examine the physical layers of time that have equally literally accumulated. The materiality of the film photograph, itself a dated medium that is intensely textural and relies on the physicality of interactions between light, chemical processes, and the film surface, is layered with traces of organic material, hair, dust, debris, chemical degradation... surfaces upon surfaces.

How does one look at and through an image? To re-photograph the photograph, Wei Leng uses a microscope camera. Compared to a traditional camera, the microscope camera doesn't utilise focal length. Instead, it captures multiple images at different proximities and compresses them into a single image to achieve depth. I'm particularly taken by how different each photograph looks – despite the uniformity of the technical processes involved, elements of unpredictability arise and the artist holds back from having full control over the making of each image. The source material, the archival film slides, have themselves gone through multiple levels of sedimentation, decay and disintegration. They resist objective capture even under the microscopic eye. In particular, the crystallisation of silver halide in the gelatin emulsion of the film forms a dramatic spread that obscures the original image, a physical product of time's toll on the film slide; at the same time, it evokes the mould in Chye Teck's photographs.

Rather than looking at the subjects in the photograph, Wei Leng asks us to focus on the unstable surfaces which it sits on instead. It reads the image as embedded with traces of historical accumulation, and negotiates the experience of nostalgia in relation to memory and promise, or the lack thereof.



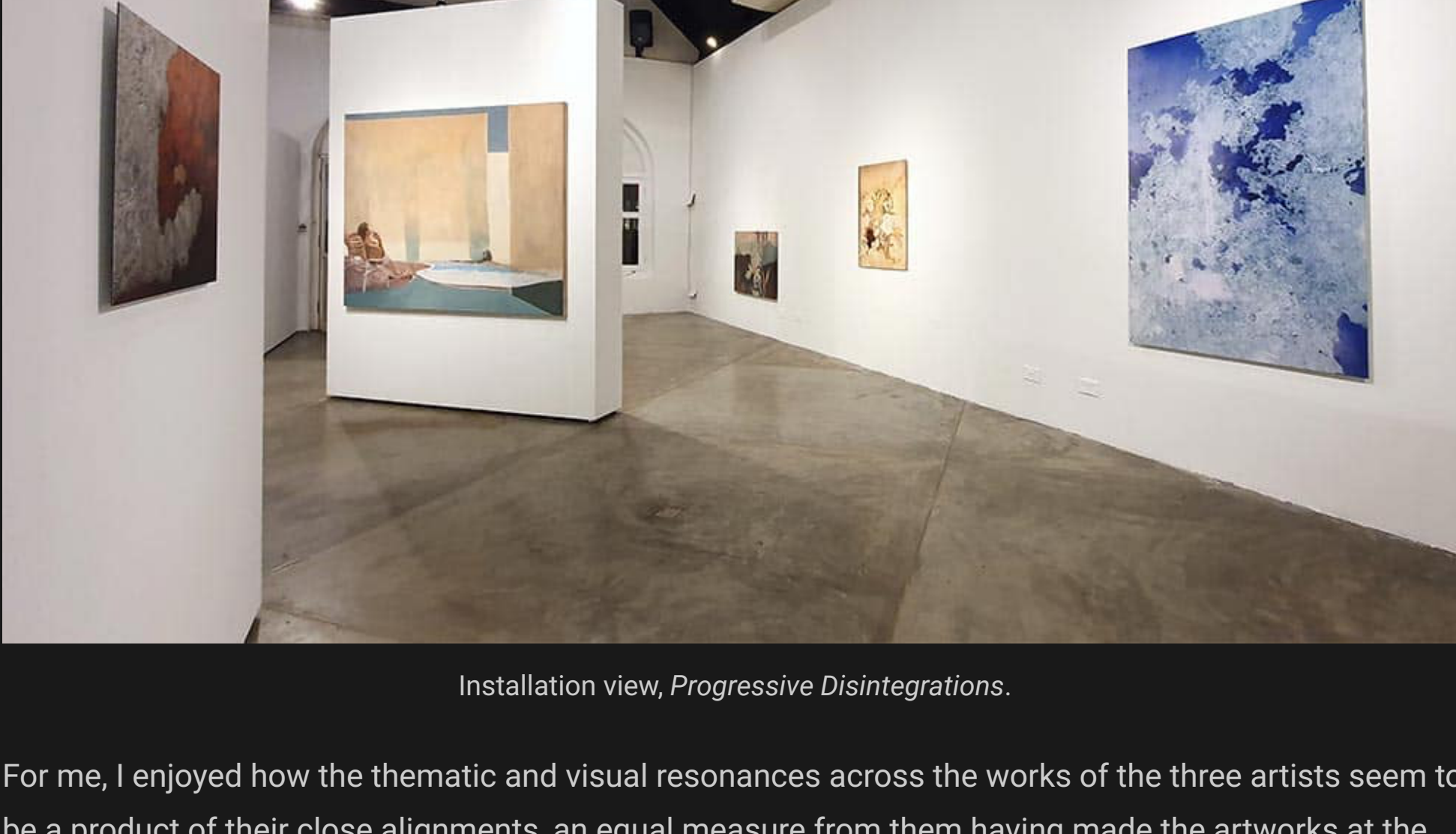
Adjacent to one another, Hilmi Johandi's *Landscapes & Paradise: Attractions and Sceneries (Fountain Gardens)* (left) and *Landscapes & Paradise: Attractions and Sceneries (Poolscape)* (right).

Looking towards archival photographs to mine and disentangle memory is an approach also shared by Hilmi in his paintings, which expand beyond the painterly surface to take physical form. Hilmi's series for *Progressive Disintegrations* titled *Landscapes & Paradise: Attractions and Sceneries* takes as its starting point historical photographs and postcards of Singapore. These historical objects portray a certain ideal time and space, and are staged to market a touristic image of Singapore (tropical garden city, idyllic paradise, unfettered pleasures and so on), often for an external audience looking in. Through painting, itself a practice of re-imagining and re-imagining, Hilmi crops, extracts and reinterprets visual elements from the postcards to be recombined into ambiguous and surreal tableaux. The process of oil painting as a slow-drying medium inherently involves layering of multiple elements and, under the brush of the artist, can undergo change, alteration and erasure.

Just like the other works in the exhibition, I find myself asking: in what way can these be seen as photographs, or are they, in their own way, other strategies of image-making? In particular, Hilmi's works have also consistently incorporated the notion of the staged set and its supports, subtly setting up the painted scene to composite and depict the closed structures within which they are staged. In doing so, they reveal the usually unseen scaffolding and questioning the illusory nature of these scenes.

In *Progressive Disintegrations*, these set elements extend out of the painting and materialise physically into the exhibition, unabashedly revealing their bare wooden backs and held upright by heavy sandbags. Interestingly, in the exhibition, their backs confront the viewer first, and demand that you walk around them to see their front sides. Thus, all angles are equally valid in their viewing, the standees becoming more than just flat panels but sculpturally significant in the gallery. They also unfold the imaginary spaces within Hilmi's paintings into the exhibition space, and implicate the viewer into their scenes.

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Installation view, *Progressive Disintegrations*.

For me, I enjoyed how the thematic and visual resonances across the works of the three artists seem to be a product of their close alignments, an equal measure from them having made the artworks at the same time and in close conversation as it was an organic emergence from their friendship. Beyond the visual textures, colours and landscapes at various levels of abstraction that reoccur, across the three artists there also seems to be a shared process of spontaneity in making – in relinquishing control over the production of the artwork and allowing other processes to enter. In this manner, this exhibition illustrates how artists at these stages in their artistic careers could possibly open their practices to potential confluences that allow their artworks to stretch, expand, and breathe. In having Marc as a curatorial interlocutor, the artists were free to stay within their close-up perspectives and focus on their individual works whilst the interlocutor steps back and is able to hold the wide-angle view of all moving parts. He takes on a mediating role, without undermining the artists' authorship of the exhibition.

To return to the question at the beginning of this piece, how can three distinct practices come together? In fact, despite the affinities that are present, it's not to say that the process needs to be fully smooth and seamless – how can frictions and tensions also be productive? Perhaps this is why their process of working together has been of particular interesting, where their exchanges have manifested in concrete artistic decisions made – accepting the removal of certain elements to help the show, spatially placing works in juxtaposition, adding other elements one might not have considered, and even cutting a painting into two (in the case of Hilmi). In fact, it's perhaps the very contrary forces that each body of work exerts on one another that allows them to generate exciting interactions and entangles them ever more tightly together.

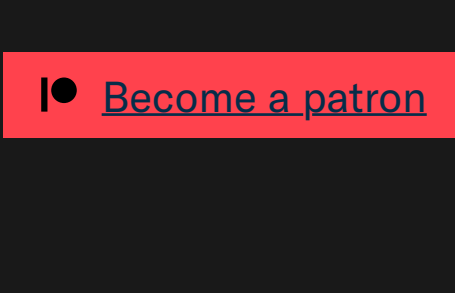


In an intimate pairing, Hilmi Johandi's *Landscapes & Paradise: Attractions and Sceneries (The Hyatt Regency Hotel at Scotts Road)*, 2020 splits one scene into two portals, generating a space in between to be filled imaginatively by the viewer.

Progressive Disintegrations runs until 21 February 2021 at Objectifs Centre for Photography and Film.

Header image: Chua Chye Teck, *they landed on the damp spot and started to grow*, 2020 (background) and rear view (detail) of Hilmi Johandi's *Landscapes & Paradise: Attractions and Sceneries (Fountain Gardens)*, 2020 (foreground).

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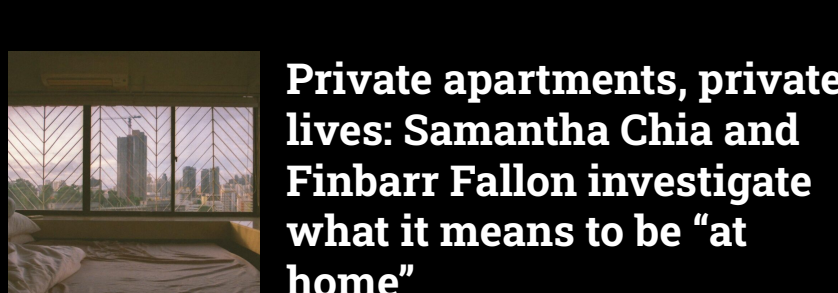
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