

Teardrops,  
dingbats and  
chasing the  
unknowable: a  
conversation  
with Liyen  
Chong

In the exhibition *Practicing Colour*, held at Melanie Roger Gallery in Auckland, New Zealand from 21 October to 14 November, Chong presents works made during her time as an Asia New Zealand artist-in-residence at Cemeti Art House in Yogyakarta, Indonesia earlier this year, alongside recent works developed since the residency. A video containing footage of an interview with a Javanese movement artist discussing the word “practice” and a neon sign made in Indonesia, that isn’t titled according to what it says, establish the perimeters of this inquiry into the nature of practice both in art and beyond. Appropriating the craft (or practice?) of paper marbling with its rich historical connections with language and writing in the shape of a font dingbat, Chong presents us with further notes for thought on the relationship between making and being.

The following conversation with Li-Ming Hu, fellow artist and collaborator, took place in the week preceding the exhibition.

Throughout your career, you’ve employed a wide range of media and techniques, ranging from hair embroidery to ceramics to photography and screen printing, and now we see a new suite of works using marbling. What was it about this process that appealed to you?

I seem to pick up media and techniques like a dog picks up fleas—haha! And then these materials and processes nestle in my consciousness and body memory and won’t go away until I’ve figured out why they might be interesting in the context of art. Paper marbling, which can be traced to its origins in Western Asia, South Asia and East Asia as far back as the 12th Century, may seem to some to be a simple process. In actual fact the practitioner is very much at the mercy of unpredictable conditions, chance chemical reactions, and physical interactions at the nanometer level of water molecules. Very miniscule changes in temperature and humidity, things that we usually take for granted, can mean that the same colour can behave differently in different situations. Throw in several other colour pigments, paint formulations and manufacturer brands and you have a fickle chemical soup. The actual process from throwing paints on a viscous bath to taking an imprint, while short, requires a high level of focus, concentration and a good measure of flexibility in responding to what’s happening in real time. The act of wending this chaotic tumble of pigments to one’s will within a particular timeframe I think demonstrates something meaningful about the nature of making-into-being, craft and its relationship to art.

How did your decision to structure your droplet works around Newton’s sevenfold colour system come about? How does this system of classification link to your interest in the concept of practice?

I stumbled across the droplet shape from a dingbat font which I used to have on my computer years ago. It seemed to me to be both numinous and humorous. I began working with this shape in my ceramic works as far back as 2010 and I decided to try it with

paper marbling just recently. The decision to use the Newton's rainbow colours was a relatively neat foregone conclusion: teardrops → droplets → raindrops → rainbows → prisms → illusory colour → Newton's seven colours.

I generally stay away from neat conclusions, but the medium of marbling is intractable enough to warrant being contained in this way. I like the fact that Isaac Newton named seven colours to correspond to the seven musical notes of a western major scale. As a child, I was constantly reminded to "go practice the piano", so for me the link between the word "practice" and music has been interminably linked. I also like how the tapering off of the teardrop to a point mirrors the sound wave pattern of a piano note when it is struck.

**While you talk about 'illusory colour', the colour in the marbling works also has a strong material presence. Are the material constituents of colour important to you?**

I had been wanting to work with colour—actual pigments—in addition to what colour connotes, though that comes into its own with the other works in the show. Michael Taussig, an anthropologist whose books I'm reading at the moment, writes in the chapter, "As Colors Pour from Tar" (a line borrowed from William S. Burroughs) in *What Color is the Sacred?* about how 19th Century chemical experiments with aniline, an extract from coal tar, really began the synthetic colour revolution that created colours our ancestors could only have dreamed of (or perhaps hallucinated!)<sup>1</sup>. Most of the fine art colours that we take for granted today, are actually gleaned from industrial manufacturers mass producing colours for commercial purposes. So you could say commercial industries drive colour production, not art.

I was trying to find a humorous way of using coloured pigments to highlight this strange relationship between industry and art, and the seven colours of the rainbow provided the necessary rigidity to bounce the different pigments of colour off from.



11 October 2015: *Rainbow Red*,  
Marbled pigment on 600gsm paper  
525 × 375mm



**You recently spent 3 months on residency at Cemeti Art House in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, initially with the aim of exploring local meditation practices. How did your interest in this area develop?**

I'd been piqued by how Eastern mysticism has been presented in European dominated contexts, both as practice and theory since for as long as there has been contact between these cultures. The particular regard to the embodied nature of the self in Eastern philosophies and other mystical traditions has fascinated me since the beginning of my art practice, so it was logical that I would be interested in meditation, both intellectually and practically. I've also been following the discussions and critiques around mindfulness. It was serendipitous timing when the opportunity came from Asia New Zealand to apply for this residency in Yogyakarta. I was ready to go, having spent some time looking into enthusiastic meditation and mindfulness groups in Berlin as somewhat of a participant-observer. The island of Java, where Yogyakarta is located, is an incredible region informed by the confluence of the world's major religions. For over twenty centuries, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity have been overlaid on top of local pantheistic traditions, creating uniquely syncretic beliefs and practices which colonization and globalisation seem to have done little to sweep away.

**You have found a really strong example of this with Prapto (the Javanese movement artist who features in the video work), and the way his Amerta movement combines elements of Vipassanā, Javanese Sumarah meditation and Javanese Theravada Buddhism<sup>2</sup>. Was it difficult to establish contact with local practitioners? Have Prapto's ideas on practice and art making influenced your work?**

I went to Indonesia with the express interest of seeking out local meditation practices and practitioners both as a sceptic and a seeker. It was very tricky, since my endeavour could very well end up falling into the well-worn cliché of the western spiritual seeker seeking enlightenment in the East, or a hard nosed cynic, critical of airy-fairy



Installation view:  
*The Strangeness of Words* 2015  
 Single channel video. 16'35"  
 Dimensions variable to screen



Installation view:  
Various works from the droplet series 2015  
Marbled pigments on 600 gsm paper





I want to know what it is I can't know!

Installation view:

*The Inside and Outside of Things (I want to know what it is I can't know)* 2015

Neon sign 100 x 2300 x 25 mm (dimensions variable to site)

I want to know what it is I can't know

Detail:  
*The Inside and Outside of Things (I want to know what it is I can't know)* 2015  
Neon sign 100 x 2300 x 25 mm (dimensions variable to site)





3 October 2015: *Black and Silver*  
Marbled pigment on 600gsm paper  
525 × 375mm

concepts irrelevant to our post-industrial, cerebrally-focused way of life. There were many spiritual centres in Yogyakarta, many of which seemed to espouse a kind of spirituality that was comfortable making money from its constituents<sup>3</sup>, or in one case where I interviewed a member of a spiritual movement, they were in the process of utilising meditation to find long-lost archaeological monuments. I was making inquiries into who I should contact prior to arriving in Indonesia and my fiancé's mother, the Sydney-based artist and researcher Patricia Morgan, who had attended one of Prapto's workshops in Sydney and told me about him. He ended up being one of the people I contacted along with a several other meditation practitioners recommended by my hosts at Cemeti Art House.

Prapto is a well-known figure in movement therapy circles in the UK, Germany and Australia. I underwent a one-on-one workshop with him, trying to get a handle of the kind of movement practice that he espoused. The sceptic in me can't say for sure if I gained some form of enlightenment from him (maybe I need more practice!) but he had a very unique presence and agreed to let me film him.

Given that the conversation in the moving image work was conducted in English, (although this is not immediately apparent due to the lack of sound), I was struck by the use of subtitles and how these shifted between a seemingly verbatim transcription of what was being said and a paraphrasing of Prapto's words. This somewhat uneasy transition got me thinking about our assumptions around transcription, veracity, and the mediation of the author artist. Is this something you could comment further on?

English is not Prapto's first language but one could say he spoke in grammatically broken sentences that still indicated a very cohesive viewpoint. While I am fluent enough in Bahasa, having learnt it at school until I was fifteen, it was Prapto's decision to translate himself into English as he knew it was the language I was most comfortable speaking. I was looking at the literature written by English-speaking researchers on his work just the other day and wondered how





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Installation view:  
*The Strangeness of Words* 2015  
Single channel video. 16'35"  
Dimensions variable to screen

much of what they quoted from him had been paraphrased from his speech. However, I wasn't subtitling to clarify what he was saying for the audience in this work, it would be presumptuous of me to think that he needed that. It was a deliberate move to nudge the viewer to be aware of the spaces between the languages Prapto and I spoke in. And for me this also opens up the space between language and knowledge, language and experience and between language and reality.

There is also an interesting relationship between colour and the exotic/Other that I hope is highlighted in the achromatic tone of the video. But I would like to leave it up to the viewer to make these connections for themselves.

Lastly, there is a rich tradition of artists using neon. Did you find it this a challenge in terms of formulating your own approach?

Yes I did, but somehow being in Indonesia made it a lot easier to conceive of using this medium. And I'm not necessarily talking about the cost or ease of production in Indonesia – it was difficult finding a neon maker who could take the job on within the vicinity of Yogyakarta. The idea came about while reading a book written by Laura Romano, an Italian woman living in Java, on her forty-year long journey with the practice of Sumarah, a spiritual movement formed in the early twentieth century on both Islamic principles and pantheistic traditions<sup>4</sup>. I met with her on a number of occasions and attended a local Sumarah group meeting. The mystical aspects of Sumarah meditation that were reported in Romano's book prompted me to reconsider Bruce Nauman's neon work *The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths*. In it there is the tension for him, of what is true and not true at the same time. The work, *The Inside and Outside of Things (I want to know what it is I can't know)* refers, among other things, to the practice and project (with its connotations of Western commercial industrialisation) of attaining individual enlightenment in an exotic culture. Maybe tantalising but futile?

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#### Notes

1. Taussig, Michael. *What Color is the Sacred?* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009. (pp 154)
2. Bloom, Katya., Galanter, Margit., & Reeve, Sandra. (Eds.). *Embodied Lives*. Triarchy Press, 2014. (pp 2) Web. 14 Oct. 2015
3. Muttaqin, Ahmad. "Hybrid Spirituality and Religious Efficacy of Yogyakarta Spiritual Centres" Diss. University of Western Sydney, 2012. (pp 14) WSU Research Direct Library, Web. 12 Feb. 2015
4. Romano, Laura. *Sumarah: Spiritual Wisdom from Java*. Raleigh: Lulu.com, 2013.

Li-Ming Hu has an MA in History from the University of Auckland, and has acted in theatre and television. She worked at the NZ Human Rights Commission for a number of years before returning to full-time study, and is about to complete a BVA at Auckland University of Technology, working at the intersection of sculpture, installation and performance.

Liyen Chong (1979, Malaysia) has an MFA from the University of Canterbury and has been exhibiting regularly since 2005. Her works can be found in public and private collections in both New Zealand and Australia. She has been the recipient of several prestigious artist residencies including the McCahon House Artists' Residency (2011) and two Asia New Zealand artist-in-residence programmes in Seoul, South Korea (2012), and Yogyakarta, Indonesia (2015), of which this exhibition refers to.

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ISBN: 978-0-473-34080-3

Versions available in print and online (expanded with images), October 2015.

Online copies may be accessed from [melanierogergallery.com](http://melanierogergallery.com) or [lienchong.com](http://lienchong.com)

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Publication typeset by the artist.

Right: *Untitled (Test piece)* 2015. Marbled pigments on Chinese rice paper. Actual size.

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