

## CURIOUS MUSIC

### The Land of Nod

From breakfast on through all the day  
At home among my friends I stay,  
But every night I go abroad  
Afar into the land of Nod.

All by myself I have to go,  
With none to tell me what to do —  
All alone beside the streams  
And up the mountain-sides of dreams.

The strangest things are there for me,  
Both things to eat and things to see,  
And many frightening sights abroad  
Till morning in the land of Nod.

Try as I like to find the way,  
I never can get back by day,  
Nor can remember plain and clear  
The curious music that I hear.

*Robert Louis Stevenson*

Euan Heng's exhibition borrows its title from the last stanza of Robert Louis Stevenson's childrens' poem *The Land of Nod*. But as with all great children's literature, we should not be deceived into thinking the reference childish. *The Land of Nod* has mysterious, Surrealist undertones. To identify the first of many parallels and dualities that intersect in Heng's work: Stevenson's poem owes much to Coleridge's *Kubla Khan*, in which the exotic climes and fabulous landscapes of Xanadu are described as a vision in a very adult, opium-induced dream. Both are remarkably musical; both are located in a liminal or sub-conscious state; and both associate distant lands with access to a creative 'elsewhere'.<sup>1</sup>

The work in this exhibition was largely produced during a residency in Scotland, which allowed Heng to return to both his and Stevenson's homeland. Both are great travellers — Heng was a merchant seaman before turning to painting — and an infectious, restless desire for other places and images informs both Stevenson's writing and Heng's practice. Work's such as *Castaway* hint at this longing; yet, in his return to familiar locales and domestic forms, this wish to be elsewhere folds into the émigré's constant sense of displacement. In the pencil rendering of the strangely flattened still-life *Amsterdam*, everywhere is equally other. Combining crystalline, emphatic detail with dramatic tonal shifts and an abstracted, dislocated outline, Heng's work locates us on both sides of the telescope at once.

Stevenson was one of the great novelists and travel writers of the nineteenth century and was admired by authors as diverse as Nabokov, Borges and Hemingway. His writing ranges from the rip-roaring sea adventures of *Treasure Island*, to the haunting and remarkably contemporary *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. The success of this latter novella has permeated the English language — 'Jekyll and Hyde' has become a figure of speech — and here, we find another reading of the exotic. Post-colonial theorists such as Edward Said are quick to point out that the deviant, bestial other is a highly problematic cliché of Western Colonialism; yet in another sense, Jekyll and Hyde represents the unfixed, shape-shifting and libidinal condition of all identities. Similarly, the hood of the figure in *Castaway* suggests

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<sup>1</sup> Stevenson — like Heng — was also a musician. He produced several amateur compositions and a number of his songs were later arranged for chamber orchestra by the Scottish-Australian composer Robert Hughes.

a second head; while the quasi-Futurist rendering of the faceless youth in *Catch* suggests an unthinking body, aware only of gravity and its own physicality, seeking to grasp a ball.

The two-faced figure of Janus (as well as Jekyll/Hyde) can be understood as a negation of any definitive portrait. The human face has been a long-running concern of Heng's work and here, we find it addressed through both the infinitely subtle modulation of colour and tone in the figuration of *Retriever* and *Cycle of cutting*; and, the minimal graphic abstraction of *Looking ahead*, *Eye-spy*, *Glance* or *Stare*. In these latter titles, we perhaps find a clue to the fundamental critique Heng is engaged with: vision and representation, the operations of the gaze.<sup>2</sup> His work makes us acutely aware that sight can be understood to be both passive and active: we receive visual impressions, yet also give out 'looks'.<sup>3</sup> The game of looking at one another perhaps precedes language as our primary means of communication; and for an artist such as Heng, this duality of sight as both source-finder and signifier feeds directly into the visual realm that he constructs. His images manifest the formal poetry found by a trained eye, at the same time as they emit the radiance of emotive, corporeal looking.

As Heng comments:

*The work evolves by echoing the observed world - reality referenced – however, the work is obviously and intentionally artificial - it is not predetermined by concept but will have as a starting point something seen, possibly heard or even remembered and, images may derive serendipitously from a motif or text, discovered or uncovered...*

Heng observes the world but it is also the glance he receives back — half seen, charged but uncertain — that is described in his work. Like all poets, he performs an act of synesthesia, transmuting 'many frightening sights abroad' into 'the curious music that I hear'. Sound into image, sensation into form, dream into reality and the unknown into harmony are but some of the transformations at play. Or rather: Heng suspends us midway between each pair — like our day-to-day grappling with each of our Jekyll & Hyde's — both within and without the Land of Nod.

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<sup>2</sup> In this, we understand Heng as continuing a line of enquiry initiated by synthetic cubism through the work of artists such as Juan Gris. However Heng's practice extends the rigorous analysis of perception into a simultaneously psychological investigation.

<sup>3</sup> In terms of Lacan's model of the gaze: Heng locates his canvas just beyond the limit of the screen, close to the source of the image/illumination, such that he both records but is exposed to the 'mortifying' gaze of the world. His images tumble beyond the recognisable, slip beyond language, at the same time as finding their edges solarised upon the page. See: Jacques Lacan and Jacques-Alain Miller, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* (London: Penguin Books, 1994).