

A photograph of a kitchen scene. In the foreground, a dark-colored book with the number '2032' and Chinese characters is lying on a dark surface. Behind it, a green ceramic bowl sits on a light-colored tiled floor. To the left, a dark metal wire basket is filled with white eggs. In the background, a large, dark ceramic jar with a light-colored floral pattern is visible. The lighting is soft and natural, creating a warm atmosphere. A white hand icon is overlaid on the left side of the image, pointing towards the book.

# Strange Times

Hu Qiren

LIKE

# Best Before

By Euginia Tan

When we think of perishables, we look at their use-by date. In an era priding ourselves on productivity and pragmatism, an expiry is an indicator of prioritizing sustenance and adhering to consumption at its ripest. To ensure we remember, we gather this data of production in the most concise way: Marking a 'best before' statement of numbers and dates in order to serve a timely reminder for the shelf life of our goods. In Hu Qiren's first solo with Richard Koh Fine Art (RKFA), *Strange Times* traces the why's and how's of such self/artistic preservation, what it takes to contain and manufacture a visual image at its freshest, and finally, to whom and when we are proclaiming our intrinsic use-by/ best before dates to.

This essay attempts to explore themes of protocol and procedure in the lead-up to making Hu's images and the larger implication of their influence on the artist and his wider community. It will also offer a translation of the abbreviated imagery and text conveyed in Hu's practice thus far, accompanying the interests and specifications of his current body of work.



Detail of *Can you Imagine* (2022)



## Numerical Annotation

We will first examine the most obvious semblance a best-before date offers upon first contact: A numerical date, sometimes coupled with a month and year. In many of Hu's images, namely, *Life Before*, *No One Really Remembers*, *Love* and *VACC Expiry*, certain significant dates are featured. Hu's determined dates mainly border along the duration of pre and post pandemic. In *Life Before*, the indicated date marks the time of an enforced COVID-19 circuit breaker in Singapore, while in *VACC Expiry*, the artist explicitly states the use-by of his prescribed mandatory vaccination for the same virus.

If the two images remind the viewer and artist of more stifling times, the other two dates on *No One Really Remembers* and *Love* perhaps offer some solace of nostalgia and sentimentality. In *No One Really Remembers*, the artist draws attention to the year 1999, pausing at the end of an old reign, ushering in the early 2000s. Societies progressed towards another momentum of adapting, a plateau of the new millennium persisting ahead with further resilience. In *Love*, the artist suggests the celebratory festivity of

Christmas, alongside a personal dedication to a sentimental anniversary with his spouse.

In critic and writer Jan Verwoert's essay *Exhaustion and Exuberance: Ways to Defy the Pressure to Perform*<sup>1</sup>, he speculates on the imposed rhythm and durational timing in art and performance. One of the ways this has been gripped to spectacular order is via our modern definitions of work and play. Verwoert demonstrates that "we live and work in economies based on the concept of 'just-in-time' production- and 'just-in-time' usually means that things have to be ready in no time at all." By asserting the trump card of a date or numerical annotation, Hu provides the mercy of durational autonomy in his images. The image is informing when it takes precedence, of schedules and milestones meticulously recorded from the receiving artist. Rather than responding to an echo of circumstances, Hu delegates numerical annotation to coerce a harmony of image, numbers and visual composition to an orchestrated time and place that was ready, at all costs.

<sup>1</sup> Jan Verwoert, *Exhaustion and Exuberance: Ways to Defy the Pressure to Perform* (Sternberg Press, Berlin 2017), page 220.

## Labelling Essentials

To amplify the context of his chosen dates and specified times, Hu has also included scenic backdrops corresponding to his interpretation of these various time zones. These backdrops and images allude to a yearning tourist, zooming in to fixtures of places held dear by the artist. As an evocative nod to quelling the need to roam but the obligation to stay, the formations of Hu's images are composed in the shape of food tags, otherwise labelled as essentials/necessities. In the chokehold of each tag lies space for the essential item to be held in place, thus preserving their quality.

The irony of this choice is that in prolonging the shelf life of our essentials, a certain oppression and rigour goes into preservation of self and item. We douse chemicals in our essentials to keep them chemically whole and supple, we maintain a certain decorum in our daily lives to also hinge ourselves to a stately, disciplined existence. If we consider this same theory around our needs for cultural exchange, we can frame it as such: To nudge our instincts of travel and curiosity, we are also first plunged into a period of stagnancy.

In looking at both sides of the coin on essential versus non-essential travelling, Verwoert's essay provides an apt example of a 'nomadic' artist. Citing Slovakian artist Roman Ondák's series of photographs *Antinomads* (2000), Verwoert breaks down the notion of "shared experience... through the use of invitations to participate". *Antinomads* featured friends and family members in Ondák's hometown of Bratislava. They were asked by Ondák if they considered themselves 'nomads or anti-nomads', to

which "those who identified themselves as anti-nomads (were photographed) in a location of their choice, e.g., in front of their bookshelves, at their own desk..." Ondák proceeded to distribute these pictures as postcards as a "symbolic exchange: the anti-nomads give their picture to the nomadic artist and he, in return, sends them on a journey by allowing their pictures to circulate in other places."<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, in Hu's works *Stay Safe, Can You Imagine* and *Strange Times*, a guarantee or warrant of a person's permit to travel is playfully brought to question. In *Stay Safe*, a floral wallpaper complements the amount of \$3.65 to put forth an idea of security (\$3.65 being a double entendre for 365 days a year). In *Can You Imagine*, though we are besotted with the idea of a flexible, original imagination, the work is also underlined with the seal of >PP, PE<, used as a common label to certify a commercial grade of plastics. In *Strange Times*, another value of currency is brought up as \$2.47 for a Strange Time 02 Fly (to fly), another pun on the idea that in twenty four hours, seven days a week, we once contemplated the ease of mobility.

For both Ondák and Hu, irony is a kind of mastery in wielding artistic manipulation. In presenting irony and classifying ourselves as nomadic or essential, what are we obstinately disregarding as anti-nomadic or non-essential? Is a non-traveller really confined to a state of isolation, compared to a frequent flyer? Are essential foods and items as organically labelled by their use-by date, or have they merely been compounded by man-made terms and conditions?

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, page 224.



Detail of *Omg Not Agn* (2022)

## One-Off Use

Our last point looks at the function of the essential food tag and image. Besides mandating an expiration point or keeping our essentials tightly contained, a tag is overlooked and discarded once we have finished our meal preparation. The same thing applies to us when we skim through an image, we give it a cursory once-over and form an immersion based on the heavyweight of a few long minutes.

Have we moved to a point of production wherein functions of use are appointed so *briskly*, we no longer are moved to their possibility of intimacy and horizon? In the last of Hu's works, *Omg Not Agn*, *Fuckem* and *Touch Me Now*, carnal pleasures are reduced to fleeting acts of release. In a time where close proximity and touch are ingloriously dethroned, a certain sanitization is prided on whereby people attempt to thrive on social distance. Deep reflection has become a partial hindrance, further physical contact an unsanitary gesture.

In this atmosphere, many artists have found themselves at a bottleneck in creating. Is this disconcerting time an uninspiring period of much-needed rest and regulation, or is it an opportune moment to create in response to, towards more evolved mediums? Are our artists also on a constant brink of threat, as every new attempt to adapt becomes a one-off, short-term reflex to a volatile viewership and buy-in?

Verwoert divides this school of thought into two regimes: As a state of complete exhaustion, and that of post-exhaustion. We can piece this theory of exhaustive value

unto our concluding investigation in Hu's practice. "Complete exhaustion is a state we both fear and seek to reach. To one day run out of ideas and things to say is what creative people dread more than anything else. Yet, at the same time one of the strongest driving forces behind creative work continues to be the desire to push an idea to its limits, to go to extremes and only stop when all possibilities have been exhausted..."<sup>3</sup> Although exhaustion is a revered pinnacle of creative fervour, it is also a passing, one-off heightened state of being, a wrought climax of thought and presentation finalized for an ordained period. In *Omg Not Agn*, the words 'False Hope' emblazon a carousel, emphasizing the cycle of creative labour rotating amidst the ups and downs of an uncertain economy. In *Fuckem*, a sliver of raw, pink muscle hints at an act of defiance. Whether it is in defying a larger system, or submitting to a primal fix of emotional and physical calling, the works test the maximum breadth of one-off encounters in the realms of a different reality.

What of post-exhaustion, following closely on the heels of exhaustion? From one-off bouts of strong creative impulses, we slip into periods where we hibernate our senses such that we can keenly awaken them again. Verwoert succinctly identifies this as "a state of suspension between exhaustion and activity... In this moment the illusion of potency, interrupted through illness, is not yet restored... but still the sense of appreciation is redeemed... You begin to care about life again, more than ever."<sup>4</sup> On a parting note, Hu's work *Touch Me Now* commands this

post-exhaustive nurture in art and love. A sculpture of two figures coalescing in a passionate embrace captures the tumultuous nature of union.

The featured sculpture in question is *Psyche Revived by Cupid's Kiss* by Antonio Canova. As the myth of Psyche and Cupid goes: A winged young man (Cupid) lands on a rock where a girl (Psyche) lies unconscious. Cupid's mother Venus, the goddess of Beauty, had demanded that Psyche bring back a flask from the Underworld, strictly forbidding her to open it. Psyche's opened the flask out of curiosity and fell into a deep, deathlike sleep. Seeing her lying motionless, Cupid rushed to her and touched her gently with the tip of his arrow, to make sure she was not dead.

In a moving, poignant moment caught by the sculptor- Cupid lifts his beloved Psyche in a tender embrace, his face close to hers.

Psyche lets herself sink slowly backwards, languorously taking her lover's head between her hands. They exchange a lingering, first-off/one-off glance of deep connection and awakening. Whatever happens next is never revealed, for the art is in that moment of reckoning, a sensitive and hushed realm privy only to the artist capturing his myth. To cast the beauty of a shared love, external calamities would have been ignored. In the same spirit, artists struggle with and for their work, in the face of unpredictable reception. It is in such throes of vulnerability, sheer lottery and unbridled senselessness where we discover what we are best for, best before.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, page 234.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, page 244.



*Life Before*

2022  
Diasc-mounted pigment print on composite panel  
60 x 64 cm



**Stay Safe**

2022  
Diasc-mounted pigment print on composite panel  
76 x 60 cm



FALSE  
HOPE

OMG  
NOT  
AGN

e

*Omg Not Agn*

2022  
Diasc-mounted pigment print on composite panel  
60 x 74 cm

*No One Really Remembers*

2022  
Diasc-mounted pigment print on composite panel  
78 x 60 cm





*Fuckem*

2022  
Diasc-mounted pigment print on composite panel  
60 x 60 cm



*Can You Imagine*

2022  
Diasec-mounted pigment print on composite panel  
95 x 60 cm



LOVE.

3

DATED ON 25 DEC

マヌウメイア  
フランス

Love

2022  
Diasc-mounted pigment print on composite panel  
60 x 72 cm



*Strange Times*

2022  
Diasec-mounted pigment print on composite panel  
60 x 71.5 cm

此日期或之前使用

VACC  
EXPIRY

0707.22

*VACC Expiry*

2022  
Diasc-mounted pigment print on composite panel  
78 x 60 cm



*Touch Me Now*

2022  
Diasc-mounted pigment print on composite panel  
60 x 50 cm



## Hu Qiren

(b.1983, Singapore)



Hu Qiren is a visual artist whose practice explores the myriad forms of image making, incorporating a wide range of media, including photography, video, installation and performance. Expressing a vibrant visual vocabulary inspired by his own identity and tradition, Qiren synthesizes cultural binaries, while incessantly challenging notions of authenticity, belief and value systems.

Qiren completed his MFA in Photography and Related Media at Parsons The New School for Design under the Provost scholarship in 2015 and has showcased his works at the One World Trade Center, Queens Museum, Aperture Foundation and Photoville in New York, Louvre Museum in Paris, Singapore International Photography Festival, Pingyao International Photography Festival in China, Auckland Festival of Photography in New Zealand and at the Theory of Clouds Gallery & Community Worldwide in Kobe, Japan.

In 2016, Qiren was the grand winner of the Harper's BAZAAR Art Prize.

## Education

- 2015 MFA in Photography, Parsons The New School for Design, New York City (Provost Scholarship)
- 2012 BFA in Photography and Digital Imaging, School of Art, Design and Media, Nanyang Technological University of Singapore
- 2003 Diploma in Interior Architecture and Design, School of Design, Temasek Polytechnic, Singapore

## Selected Solo Exhibitions

- 2022 *Strange Times*, Richard Koh Fine Art, Gillman Barracks, Singapore
- 2021 *A Grocer's Essentials*, S.E.A. FOCUS Curated: hyper-horizon, with Richard Koh Fine Art, Tanjong Pagar Distripark, Singapore
- 2019 *Dunman Higher*, DECK, Singapore

## Selected Group Exhibitions

- 2022 *InterPrintations*, Straits Gallery, Singapore
- 2021 Julius Baer Next Generation Art Prize, Singapore  
*7th Singapore International Photography Festival*, Art Science Museum, Singapore
- 2020 *In Our Own Frame*, RKFA SG 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Show, Richard Koh Fine Art, Gillman Barracks, Singapore  
*A DECADE APART / TOGETHER*, Richard Koh Fine Art, Gillman Barracks, Singapore
- 2019 *See | me + ChaShaMa*, One World Trade Center, New York
- 2018 *Queens International*, Queens Museum, New York
- 2016 *Nonspace*, Recess Gallery, New York  
*Moscow International Foto Awards*, Moscow  
*Harper's BAZAAR Art Prize*, Robinsons The Heeren, Singapore
- 2015 *PUSH PULL*, Sheila C. Johnson Design Center, Parsons MFA Photography Thesis Exhibition, New York  
*The Body Collection*, Exposure Award, Louvre Museum, Paris  
*Hyphen*, Tyler School of Art, Temple University, Philadelphia

- Future Projections*, Studio One, Auckland Festival of Photography, Silo Park, New Zealand
- 2014 *PHOTOFEAST*, University Center Lobby, Parsons New School of Design, New York  
*The New Academy*, WAH Williamsburg Art & Historical Center, New York  
*Photoville 2014*, Brooklyn Bridge Park, New York  
*First Summer Open*, curated by Chris Boot, Executive Director, Aperture Foundation, New York  
*Made in China*, Brooklyn Fire Proof, New York
- 2013 *Photoville 2013*, Brooklyn Bridge Park, New York  
*13<sup>th</sup> Pingyao International Photography Festival*, Shanxi Province, China  
*Conversations with the Everyday*, Centre for Contemporary Art, Gillman Barracks, Singapore  
*PORTRAITS - ポートレイトの新しい息吹*, Theory of Clouds Gallery & Community Worldwide, Kobe, Japan
- 2012 *3<sup>rd</sup> Singapore International Photography Festival*, Singapore  
*12<sup>th</sup> Pingyao International Photography Festival*, Shanxi Province, China  
*ADM Show 2012 : A Reflective Dialogue*, 2902 Gallery, Singapore
- 2011 *Kuala Lumpur International Photoawards*, MAP KL White Box Gallery, Malaysia  
*Incandescent : Shedding light on the Cultures and Caves of Yunan*, 2902 Gallery, Singapore
- 2010 *Asian Mosaics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Singapore International Photography Festival, City Square Mall, Singapore  
*International Orange Photo Festival*, Changsha City, Orange Island, China  
*The Crowbar Awards*, Shangri-La Hotel, Singapore  
*5<sup>TH</sup> Ngee Ann Photography Exhibition*, Ngee Ann Cultural Centre, Singapore  
*Variiegated Realities*, Alliance Francaise de Singapour SOCIETE GENERALE Private Banking Gallery, Singapore
- 2008 *Singapore Young Photographer Award*, The National Museum of Singapore, Singapore

## Awards

- 2021 Silver, Le Prix de la Photographie de Paris (PX3)
- 2016 Honorable Mention, Moscow International Foto Awards  
Grand Prize Winner, Harper's BAZAAR Art Prize
- 2013 The Provost Scholarship, Parsons The New School For Design
- 2012 2<sup>nd</sup> Prize, Kwek Leng Joo Prize of Excellence in Still Photography
- 2011 Silver, The Crowbar Awards, Still Life, Nature and Landscape Photography Category  
Winer, People's Choice Kuala Lumpur International Photoawards
- 2010 Winner, Project Shutter, United Nations Association of Singapore  
Bronze, The Crowbar Awards, Still Life, Nature and Landscape Photography Category
- 2009 Winner, Scene By Scene, an Asia Pacific Screen Awards production in association with CNN
- 2008 Merit, Singapore Young Photographer Award, Architecture Category

## Activities / Community Involvement

- 2016 Judge panel, 6<sup>th</sup> CDL Singapore Young Photographer Award (SYPA), Singapore
- 2015 PHOTOFEAST, University Center Parsons The New School for Design, New York
- 2014 Parsons the New School for Design (Teaching Assistant for Justine Kurland, Core Studio: Thesis 1.C.Fa14)  
Artist Talk, Anglo-Chinese School (International), Singapore  
Artist Talk, National Library, Singapore
- 2013 Artist Talk, Academy of Arts & Design, Tsinghua University, Beijing, China  
Artist Talk, 13<sup>th</sup> Pingyao International Photography Festival, Shanxi Province, China  
Gallery Assistant for Gallery Koyanagi (Hiroshi Sugimoto), Art Stage 2013, Marina Bay Sands, Singapore

- Artist Assistant for Ishu Patel, STATES OF CHANGE: Works by ADM Faculty, School of Art, Design & Media, Nanyang Technological University of Singapore
- 2012 Photographer for short documentary "*Empowering Lives*", a film by United Nations Association of Singapore (Youth Council) Creative Team  
3<sup>rd</sup> Singapore International Photography Festival (Youth Programme Manager and Instructor for House of Photography)  
Artist Talk, 3<sup>rd</sup> Singapore International Photography Festival, National Museum of Singapore  
Guest Speaker for Student Education Program "*Conversation with the Black Box*", Maris Stella High School, part of the, 3<sup>rd</sup> Singapore International Photography Festival, Singapore  
Artist Talk, China Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA), Beijing, China  
Artist Talk, 12<sup>th</sup> Pingyao International Photography Festival, Shanxi Province, China  
Artist Talk, ADM Graduation show 2012, 2902 Gallery, Singapore  
ADM Graduation show 2012, Major Representative for Photography and Digital Imaging cohort, Singapore  
Artist Assistant for Professor Vibeke Sorensen, Chair of School of Art, Design & Media, NTU, Singapore  
Artist Assistant for Ishu Patel, Unmediated Moments Unchanging Asia, Photography Exhibition, Leica Gallery, Singapore  
Artist Assistant for Shinji Ohmaki, Moment And Eternity, presented by The Fondation d'entreprise Hermès, Singapore  
2011 Artist Assistant for Michael Lee, Singapore Biennale 2011  
Guest Speaker for "*I Am Talented*", as part of Project Inspire organized by United Nations Association of Singapore  
2010 Artist Assistant for Shannon Castleman, Jalan Jati Project, Indonesia  
Photographer for Sustainable Borneo, A United Nations Association of Singapore-Rotary Initiative

Writer

## Euginia Tan

(b. 1991, Singapore)

Euginia Tan is a multi-disciplinary writer with experience in poetry, theatre and creative fiction/ non-fiction. Her curatorial writing for Richard Koh Fine Art includes - solo exhibitions for Faris Nakamura, Melissa Tan, Ben Puah, Odelia Tang and Svay Sareth, as well as group shows (*In Our Own Frame, A Decade Apart/ Together, Bread Crumbs*) for the gallery's commemorative anniversaries and milestones.



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Cover page front: *No One Really Remembers* (Detail), 2022 by Hu Qiren



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