



Euan Heng in his studio with *Maritime Magic*, 2015, coloured pencil on paper, 112 x 76 cm.

In Conversation with Euan Heng

I met Euan Heng at his home in Melbourne's inner north, where he lives with his wife Catherine and their whippet Betty. Recently renovated and still with the faint smell of fresh paint, my impression was of an orderly, elegant household, where everything has its designated place.

Born in Scotland in 1945, Heng immigrated to Australia with his family in 1977. Primarily a painter, but maintaining a strong interest in printmaking spanning back to his art school days, he has exhibited regularly in both solo and group exhibitions in Australia and internationally since 1973. His work is widely represented in public and private collections throughout Australia and Scotland, and has been

the subject of numerous essays, articles and reviews. Throughout his career to date, he has also been a university art teacher. Despite his recent retirement and grave reservations about the future of art education, he spoke of his former students with genuine respect, considering them 'brilliant minds' and 'some of the best people currently practicing'. Similarly, he holds many of his own teachers in high esteem. Viewing the role as privileged and the interaction as an intellectual exchange, he seems a natural and generous teacher, untouched by any institutional bitterness.

Throughout our conversation, which began in the kitchen and migrated across a small courtyard to his compact but immaculate studio, Heng answered

each of my questions thoughtfully, tracing many of his recurring motifs, or 'quotes', to their sources with unflagging energy – his lopped trees and thick shaded outlines to Fernand Léger; the dog in his painting *Exile* (2008) to Taddeo Gaddi's Quattrocento fresco illustrating Joachim's exile; the snail to a detail from the Apse Mosaic at San Clemente. When he showed me to the door three hours later, it was with detours, in the fashion of a friendly art guide, recounting each of the stories behind the artworks on their walls – many prints, some drawings and small paintings; a mix of his own pictures interspersed with those by friends, colleagues, heroes and mentors.

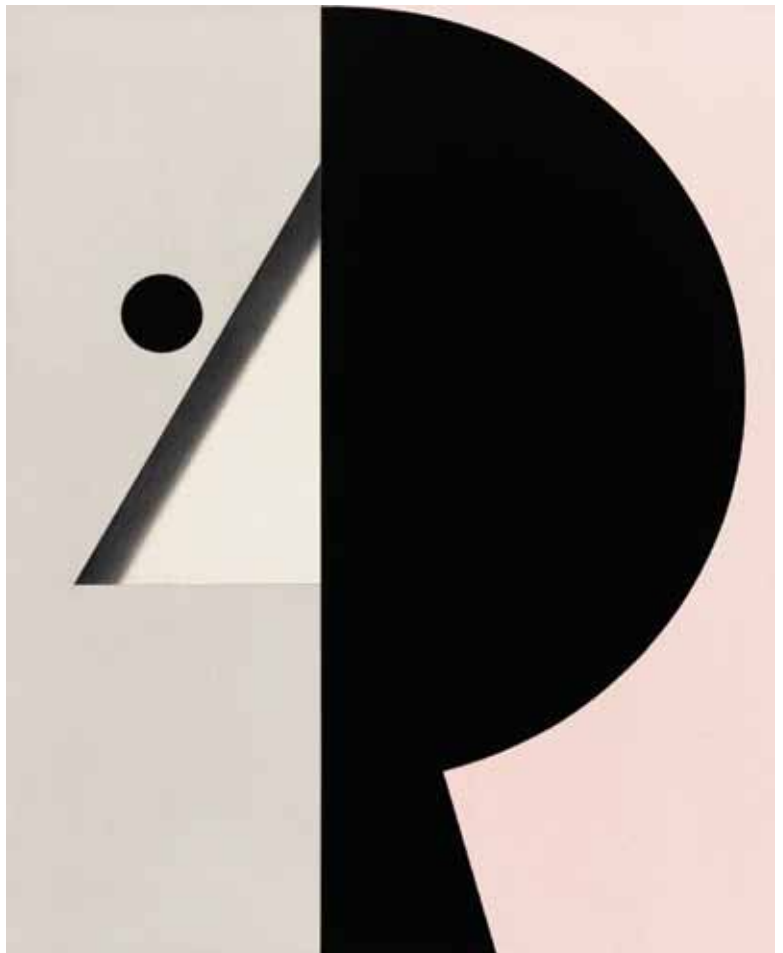
– Emily Kiddell

IMPRINT: As a young man you returned from your job as a merchant seaman and decided to study fine art. What sparked your initial interest?

EUAN HENG: My father, now in his nineties, is a model engineer and during the early 1950s he would occasionally take me with him to the Glasgow Art Galleries and Museum when he needed to make notes and sketches of model ships and locomotives in the collection. I would be set free to amuse myself by drawing the sculptures and other objects on display; in fact, one of my earliest memories was making a watercolour copy of a Matisse still life, *The Pink Tablecloth*. Later at high school I would visit the gallery on a regular basis to draw, particularly from the Rodin sculptures.

The other thing that happened was that my father stopped going to sea. By the early 1950s Britain had built most of the ships to replace those lost during the war and my father, tired of the uncertainty of the Glasgow shipyards, took a job on British Railways as an engineer. The family was given rail passes to travel as part of his wages, so we would be shipped off to London to my paternal grandmother every year for the summer and my father would join us for his fortnight's holiday. This happened right from the early 1950s through until I left school. He would take us around the museums that he loved – the V&A, British Museum, Science Museum, Natural History Museum, National Gallery and the Tate Gallery. Neither my father nor my mother knew anything about art, but at the Tate my father would talk about Stanley Spencer's *The Resurrection, Cookham*, which at that time was permanently on view. Looking back this probably sparked my interest in Spencer's work, which lasted for years.

I also had three remarkable teachers. At Belvidere Primary School Miss MacDonal and Miss Cameron both encouraged my interest in art. In Secondary school, Bellshill Academy, I had a brilliant art teacher, Millie Froid. Millie was a serious abstract painter and had been a member of the Glasgow Group – she was completely eccentric and by the time I was her pupil she would have been in her mid fifties. She used to have her stretcher bars made by the carpenters at the local undertaker and would pay me a shilling to go and collect them for her. During the 1930s Bellshill Academy's Head Art Teacher was the painter James Cowie – I have always considered Cowie Scotland's best figurative painter, particularly the early work painted at Bellshill Academy. Millie was the opposite to Cowie and years later she told me she didn't like him. Anyway, Millie encouraged me. She sat me down and insisted that I become an artist. She was disappointed when I left school at fifteen but kept in touch and found me a place in private drawing and painting classes conducted by a friend of hers – he was quite a famous Scottish portrait painter and I'm ashamed to say I can't remember his name. He was really generous with his time and a fine teacher. He sparked my interest in drawing in the formal sense.



right (both images)

Euan Heng. *Untitled*, 2013, liquid acrylic on paper, 20 x 18 cm.
Courtesy of the artist.



Euan Heng, *Untitled*, 1988, etching, 19 x 20.5 cm, printed by Anne McMaster as part of the Print Council of Australia's 100 x 100 Portfolio.

I: How did your time at sea shape your artistic style?

EH: It didn't really. In the early 1960s, as a working class kid in Britain living on the coast, there were a number of ways you could actually get out. One of the ways was going to sea, and it took you around the world. My father had been at sea – he was an engineering officer. My brother was at sea at that time. My Chinese grandfather had been at sea – that's how he managed to get from Hong Kong to the United Kingdom in the nineteenth century. He ran an agency that crewed ships, so we were connected to shipping, and my paternal great grandfather was a master mariner coming here.

I just went – I was fifteen when I joined the National Sea Training School, sixteen by the time I went to sea six weeks later. But it was never a career option for me. I was a teenage tourist really. Having said that, I was completely immersed in the romance of being at sea, particularly as a boy. All ships were 'working ships' – not a vulgar cruise ship in sight – and the liners I worked on were also mail ships and still carried limited cargo, which included the passengers. The freighters were small, in fact tiny when compared to modern container ships. I loved it, but it was the end. It was the beginnings of air travel in a big way. But being at sea did connect my imagination to notions of time. A number of the older seamen I sailed with were probably in their sixties, which means they were born at the end of the nineteenth century. When they

first went to sea as boys of fourteen or fifteen some of them had sailed on sailing ships – possibly the grain clippers that continued to trade between the UK and Australia up until the Second World War. So I suppose, it fed my imagination and curiosity, plus my interest in narrative – all sailors have stories.

I: Your pictures feel very deliberate in their composition, execution, and use of motifs, suggesting a deep engagement with storytelling and narrative traditions in art. Yet the narratives are allusive. How do you intend for narrative to function within your work, and within your process of making it?

EH: I've been reducing the work – you can see that trajectory where it has become less and less and less. But even in what could be perceived as narrative works, the narrative really only exists within the title. The narrative exists between where the work comes from, its source, and how it's made. So it is a narrative of making, really.

Everything is formal, even if I'm actually setting a single piece of imagery within a white sheet, like that little print [points to *Fall*] – I'll play with the spaces either side, top and bottom. There's always that consciousness of: where will this be arranged and how will I activate the spaces around it and the spaces within it? That is really something I do. It's a habit I'd like to get rid of.

I: Why?

EH: Just to be informal. Just to go, done! But I can't.

I: Along with a number of motifs, faces seem

very important in your pictures. In more recent years – in the *Mirror Mirror* series (2011), for example – their stylised features have been emptied out to the point of blankness. What has informed this shift in your work?

EH: As I wrote in my statement for the catalogue for my last show at Niagara, my motive is not to sacrifice the figure. I advance toward abstraction by geometric simplification but the whole reason is to invite abstraction to play a role in figuration. That's what I'm doing. It's playful. In early interviews, in writings on the work, I would talk about narrative and it's only recently that I've begun to wonder whether there really was a narrative. I suppose what I am trying to do is empty out the narrative, to say there is only the narrative of the making.

I: And you've removed titles from some of the more recent works as well—

EH: Well some of them have titles and some of them haven't. Like, these [points to a series of paintings on the wall in his studio] – they're all singing – so they are all titled from a single song [*Sing a Song of Sixpence*]. I just took a line for each – 'the Queen is in the counting house, counting out her money'. It's not what's in the painting. I add to the painting. It's a kind of punning – but it's for me.

I: What attracts you to printmaking and how do you regard it within the context of your art practice?

EH: What attracts me to printmaking is its modesty – its small scale. I've always been seduced by small wood engravings, small



Euan Heng, *E is for Elephant* (installation), 2001, neon, various dimensions, Project Space RMIT. Courtesy of the artist.

etchings, the artist's book – things that you can handle. And I really like paper – I think paper is just the most beautiful stuff to work on. I'm also taken by how a print can evoke great visual power. I have never seen the print as something lesser than painting or sculpture – even a tiny wood engraving is just another way of exploring or expressing an idea visually. I'm not a big fan of the 'jumbo' print but there are exceptions. This is going to sound nostalgic but I still get a buzz when I peel back the paper from the plate or block – it's magical. The multiple is important but I also consider the print in all its forms – books, posters and textiles, all of these will engage my interest and curiosity.

Many of my prints have been realised in parallel to paintings and drawings – including my neon work – and at times derive from a motif that may appear in a painting or, more importantly, a motif that has led to a painting. They've performed as a good testing ground for new motifs – they're investigative; however, most recently I have made a number of prints that echo a detail, possibly a head or a face derived from an existing painting, but edited to reveal the simplicity of the graphic qualities of line and shape. I suppose what I'm seeking is immediacy and economy.

I: You have printed many of your own works, but you have also worked with collaborating printmakers. How do the experiences compare?

EH: Although master printers, all of the people I've collaborated with are first and foremost

artists, such as Kaye Green, Dianne Fogwell, Antonietta Covino-Beehre, Martin King, Peter Lancaster and Andrew Gunnell. Working with these people I've learned a great deal. They will often bring something new or surprising to the work, particularly in a technical sense, which can shift the 'appearance' of the print in innovative ways. I once invited Dianne Fogwell to the Gippsland School of Art as a visiting artist – Dianne was an ex-student from my Riverina College days before she went off to ANU. Anyway, she came across the proofs of a three-plate colour etching of mine and remarked that the printing was just dreadful. She re-printed new proofs on the same paper with the same colours but switched my French inks for her German inks. Although our plate wiping method was similar, Dianne altered the plate sequence, the press pressure, particularly on the key plate, and the press blankets – it was amazing. Where my proofs were adequate, Dianne's were translucent and glowing.

I still like to print my own work and it's a bit of an indulgence for me as I really enjoy the craft of making. I like the solitude of cutting a block then inking it up, and the independence of being in control, making it and seeing it here. But I keep things really simple when I'm making them on my own.

I: You have written of your interest in contemporary Italian art and 'the notion of Arte Cifra with its borrowings and symbolic encoding of objects, figures and signs'. How does this period, and other moments drawn

from your appreciation of art and experience of life, relate to the development of your very singular iconography?

EH: In 1970, during my first term at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art, the most important exhibition in Scotland was *Strategy: Get Arts*, curated for the Edinburgh festival by Richard Demarco, who at that time was a visiting lecturer at Dundee. This exhibition of contemporary German art from Düsseldorf was installed at the Edinburgh College of Art and included the young Klaus Rinke, Gerhard Richter, Blinky Palermo, Dieter Roth, Sigmar Polke and many others, but the 'star' was Joseph Beuys performing his action *Celtic (Kinloch Rannoch) Scottish Symphony*. In a follow-up lecture I was shocked to hear Demarco telling us all to put away our brushes and chisels – the world had changed. I was now witness to painting's premature 'death' and began to understand the Welsh artist, engraver and poet David Jones's dilemma of 'now-ness'.

My work was figurative, and like most students it was varied. However, during my time at college, and this continues to intrigue me, I was deeply curious and attracted to the work of artists such as Joseph Kosuth and Sol LeWitt (LeWitt remains one of my most admired artists), yet I failed to act on it and I've often wondered why. What seemed to emerge in my work at that time was 'narrative' and with a peculiarly English dimension – think William Roberts, Mark Gertler and, of course, Spencer. But that eventually passed.



above

Euan Heng, *A Pocket Full of Rye*, 2014,
acrylic and oil on wood, 40 x 40 cm.
Courtesy of the artist.

Euan Heng, *Fall*, 2012,
two-colour lithograph, 20 x 18 cm (image size),
printed by Martin King at Australian Print Workshop.
Courtesy of the artist.

I had intended to specialise in painting but at the beginning of my third year I moved from painting to printmaking and this continued during my Postgraduate year, but I did include paintings in my postgraduate examination exhibition. Although my main practice is still painting, even as an undergraduate it struck me as possibly a futile activity. In many ways I still have my doubts.

By the late nineteen seventies into the early eighties, I had become intrigued by painting's first resurrection in the guise of New Figuration and had developed a curiosity and liking for contemporary Italian art, you know, Clemente et al. Looking back I suppose I was seeking a kind of validation or alibi for my own figurative practice; however, continuing at the back of my mind is the ongoing question: how can painting and figurative narrative traditions within painting continue to engage the contemporary world?

But I've always had an interest in Italian art. I was going to Italy in the sixties as a merchant seaman, but going back and really taking a look at that early renaissance work – that's the period that really interests me. Giotto and Uccello and up to Piero Della Francesca – the frescos, the way they are constructed – it seemed parallel to what I was doing.

Today my work may reference reality, but is not of it. It is essentially and obviously artificial. The genesis is not predetermined by concept alone and may derive from something seen, heard, or remembered; or it may originate serendipitously from motif or text,

discovered or uncovered. It is not my intention to express thoughts about what my works depict, but to incite thought by means of what and how they depict.

I: What are you working on now?

EH: Following my last exhibition in late 2013 I immediately embarked upon a new body of work, which progressed slowly over twelve plus months towards a complete disaster and thankfully, apart from a couple of pieces, that work no longer exists. I have decided to return to the proposition of my last show and see if I can build upon that work in new ways. So far that strategy has been much more successful – I think. Also, I've completed a number of simple line drawings that derive from the head in preparation for a suite of relief prints and, if I can stop procrastinating, I may engage the technology of the laser cutter to assist me to create the blocks.

I: You've recently retired from a long career teaching art in tertiary institutions. What changes have you noticed throughout your time as both a student and teacher in art schools?

EH: I should state from the outset that I was a huge supporter and believer in the university art school model, but as I grow older I have begun to develop doubts. My academic career began immediately following the completion of my postgraduate year, so I have been part of the art school culture for forty-five years. During that time I have had fantastic students, prestigious and senior appointments and the many rewards and benefits that accrue

from such positions. It has allowed me to conduct a continuous, serious and parallel studio practice in conjunction with my teaching. Therefore, I am genuinely grateful – however!

For almost all of the twentieth century, art schools were able to provide a positive alternative to conventional tertiary education, especially in the 1960s, 70s and 80s. During that period, and for many years before, university art schools were not uncommon, particularly in the UK. During the late 1980s with the forced amalgamation of all tertiary colleges with universities in the UK and Australia, fine art as a discipline has been changed almost beyond recognition. A great deal of this change is philosophical and mirrors developments within the professional visual arts community both nationally and internationally – for example, the notion of pluralism and the interdisciplinary in contemporary art practice – and that's how it should be. Nevertheless, I still believe that art schools must continue to be alternative centres for learning and create space for those students who never ever follow the 'party line', or for what Robert Nelson fondly called 'ratbaggery'. To do otherwise is educational fascism. The most negative and far-reaching changes have come about as universities begin to behave like businesses, with the need to attract and generate new funds and profits. This, combined with an obsession for 'research', may eventually prove fatal to fine art studio practice and its teaching.



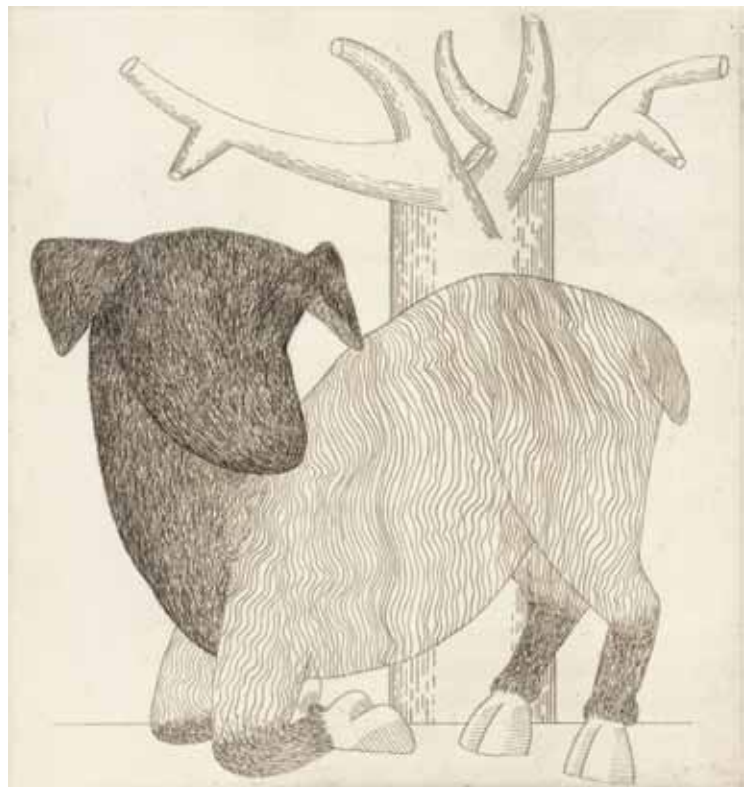
Euan Heng's studio, works in progress, 2015. Courtesy of the artist.

I: If you were founding an art school, what would your vision be?

EH: It wouldn't be Bauhaus, but it would have those kind of principles. That Bauhausian way of investigation, where you're dealing with projects that are puzzles that you are resolving. You might not get an answer but you're engaged in finding the answer. That's the important part: it's not the result, it's the question.

Not so long ago, at the University of Dundee I had the good fortune to meet then hear the Irish poet and Nobel Laureate Seamus Heaney present a paper titled 'Room to Rhyme'. In his address he read from his own work and the work of other poets but he also discussed the creative process of making art, writing poetry and the role of criticism and teaching for the artist. It seems most appropriate to quote from Heaney's *The Redress of Poetry*, which for me provides no better methodology for making art or for teaching it and I would want my art school to reflect this.

*When Douglas Dunn sits down at his desk with its view above the Tay Estuary or Anne Stevenson sees one of her chosen landscapes flash upon her inward eye, neither is immediately haunted by the big questions of poetics. All these accumulated pressures and issues are felt as an abiding anxiety but they do not enter as guiding factors within the writing process itself. The movement is from **delight to wisdom and not vice versa**. The felicity of a cadence, the chain reaction of a rhyme, the pleasuring of an etymology, such things can proceed happily and as it were autistically, in an area of mental operations cordoned off by and from the critical sense. Indeed, if one recalls W. H. Auden's famous trinity of poetic faculties – **making, judging, and knowing** – the making faculty seems in this light to have a kind of **free pass** that enables it to range beyond the jurisdiction of the other two. •*



Euan Heng. *Sheep-dog*, 2002, etching with colour roll up, 37 x 34.5 cm (image size), printed by Martin King at Australian Print Workshop. Courtesy of the artist.