Adrift between Thresholds

From the Dictionary of the Indonesian Language:

Taksa tak.sa (a) mempunyai makna lebih dr satu; kabur atau meragukan (ttg makna); ambigu

(Equivocal (a) allowing the possibility of several different meanings; vague or dubious (about meaning); ambiguous)

Considering the meaning of the word, it is only fitting that Taksa becomes the title for the current exhibition: if we could agree on one experience provided by Tara Kasenda’s works, it is one of ambiguity. There are no strict conclusions here, whether we are talking about her approach and treatment towards media, technique, images, or conceptual notions. A seeming conclusion is soon canceled out by another idea: upon deciding on the delicate femininity of the pastel hues, the industrial associations to silicone sealant contradict it. As soon as talk about silicone sealant as a contemporary media, we are harked back to the historical domain of painting by the composition of colour and forms on a 2-dimensional surface.

In these works, Tara creates sheets of silicone sealant as a surface upon which digitally manipulated images are transferred. Hung from various heights to create a labyrinth in the main gallery, these works beckon visitors to walk around them, inviting them to touch the artificially elastic but also organically uneven textures. The physical properties of silicone sealant lend itself well to ideas of ambiguity and paradox that Tara explores: filmy and translucent, it hovers between presence and absence.

The use of silicone sealant problematizes her position in the area where she received formal training on: painting. While silicone is widely employed in contemporary art, their characteristics usually lead to uses in creating 3-dimensional objects or of it as an adhesive. Tara’s decision to create 2-dimensional silicone sheets to transfer abstract forms in a palette of largely pastel hues on, is based on her investigation into the paradoxical nature of beauty, itself a classic philosophical problem in the wider history of art.

Painting, Problematized

The history of painting, considered to be one of the most traditional art forms, is filled with bursts of radical changes, one of which was the discarding of the easel and the brush altogether in New York in the mid 1950s. Without these tools, what was considered to constitute painting became open to a new questioning: what is painting, when the brush is no longer needed? If we extend the question, then its scope exceeds the tools that are associated with painting, to include its media: what is painting, without the canvas and the paint?

Now, with the loss of essential truths about painting, no single definition about it remains. When the media that are used no longer restrict the definition
of painting, a way to identify it is through the actions implicated by it. Among the many definitions as to what painting is, painting becomes – as Tara approached it – an act of composing forms and colours upon a chosen surface.

A revolution broke in the 20th century, when subject matter disappeared altogether from the surfaces of paintings. Replacing them were unidentifiable shapes, large blocks of colour that fill up the canvas, as well as geometric vertical and horizontal lines. Turning sharply towards abstraction, art shed former expectations of creating mirror-images of nature and no longer seek to represent outside reality, but to express the mysterious world of innermost emotions. The lasting influence of this novel idea is evident in the 21st century, as artists continue to rely on abstract forms to explore the most elusive and ambiguous of experiences, such as beauty.

The philosophical problem of beauty is as old as the history of mankind itself. What do we mean, when we say something is beautiful? When I say a thing is an object of beauty, does this necessitate the agreement of others? In an experience of beauty, are we referring to the psychological states implied by it, or the actual, physical object that arouses it? It is rare that any two answers will be alike, and settling on the idea that judgments about beauty is thoroughly subjective, Tara turns to abstract forms to think through the fascinating paradoxes of beauty.

It is also her exploration of the paradoxical nature of beauty that led Tara to the use of silicone sealant and digital image transfer – media and technique that are rarely associated with painting. Since experiences of beauty are thoroughly personal and intimate, she sought material qualities that would provoke such experience for her. Like the easel and the brush, a common choice in painting would be canvas. Conventionally, this is a favoured surface for painters who usually work with oil paint, as it provides suitable support for the paint. However, as they lack qualities that Tara was probing for, these traditional media only brought the search to a deadlock.

If our experience of Tara's works puts us in the thresholds of strict definitions, here, Tara’s practice negotiates another threshold: the one that exists between painting and non-painting. As she began experimenting with silicone sealant and digital manipulation, her current practice enters a problematic relation with the tradition that built it.

**Technology and Contemporaneity**

This problematic relation signals an artistic practice that is as much rooted in the now, as it is in the past. Despite its tendency towards linking itself to past traditions of painting, the media that are used reflects the socio-cultural conditions of its era. At a time when chemical substances such as silicone is readily available to the public, as well as the wide use of digital processes in image-making, then these conditions will no doubt shape new artistic approaches.
Prior to silicone sealant, Tara came to work on glass, drawn by its transparent quality. However, the need for lightness and elasticity soon became pressing. She arrived at the use of silicone sealant, which gave her the qualities that she was after: the lightness, translucence, and elasticity of these sheets allow light to pass through and make them appear suspended mid-air when hung, carrying with them the potential to create an ethereal atmosphere.

This is, of course, contrary to common associations with the medium of silicone itself. Silicone – or silicone-based materials – is a chemical substance that forms an integral part of our everyday life. Each day, we come into contact with it from putting it in our hair in the form of conditioners and gels, as we type on our computer keyboard, as we pick up various cookwares and toys, to medical uses from bandages to contact lenses. Silicone’s ability to stand extreme heat, adhesive quality and unique surface properties make us depend upon it as lubricants, sealants, emulsifiers, gloss enhancers and anti-decomposing aids. Outside our homes, silicone is used for different construction purposes, from cars to skyscrapers.

Despite its chemical and commercial usage silicone is also frequently used in contemporary art, mostly as an adhesive to bond or glue things together, or to create three-dimensional objects. Silicone’s flexibility allows for the creation of molds with a fairly high degree of precision. Its elastic quality that resembles human skin makes experimental practices possible. In spite of its seemingly limitless potential, Tara decided to use it as a two-dimensional surface upon which to create forms and colours. Even with the most non-conventional media, the lineage that Tara’s current practice has to painting cannot be so easily severed: here, the surface of the silicone sheets replaces the surface of canvas.

Due to their size, the silicone sheets she created cannot be printed over; hence the use of digital image transfer. The images she used are microscopic photographs of various kinds of rocks, influenced by Jennifer McMahon’s categorization of nature as an “absolute beauty”.¹ By this, McMahon implies objects of beauty that do not necessarily serve any utilitarian purpose. Microscopic photographs are chosen as they no longer resemble identifiable objects of nature, but become organic abstractions. To further assert her subjectivity, she manipulates the colours of these photographs through the process of digital retouching.

As underlining Tara’s work is the urge to understand the subjective nature of beauty, colour becomes a visual element that must be explored, relying on digital techniques to do so. The use of silicone sealant as well as the employment of digital techniques reflects technologies that are widely available for mass consumption at a specific point in history: the now. Thus, despite impetuses that are rooted strongly in art’s history, in especially the history of painting, the media and technique used display a break from that history, and makes it contemporaneous.

¹ Tara Kasenda, undergraduate dissertation for the degree of Bachelor of Fine Art, Faculty of Art and Design, Bandung Institute of Technology, unpublished (2013).
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Revolving strongly around the long-standing notion of art as an expression of the artist’s emotions, Tara’s practice, on one hand, leans towards the traditional. Yet on the other, by exploiting current technologies that have become integral parts of contemporary everyday life, this practice remains entrenched in the present. Whereas abstract forms and conceptual reflections about beauty is a glance at the past, the media and technique used display a firm footing in the now.

The works in this exhibition departed from the initial aim of investigating a peculiar paradox about “beauty”: beauty is an immaterial, psychic emotion, but simultaneously, this abstract sensation cannot be separated from concrete, physical objects. Observing Tara’s practice further, subtle conflicts that are implied within it become prominent; it is a practice where boundaries – between painting and nonpainting, between traditions of past times and contemporary approaches – are continuously being redefined. As such, these works are positioned in a problematic position, and infinitely more intriguing because of it: resisting strict, totalized conclusions as they drift between thresholds.

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