

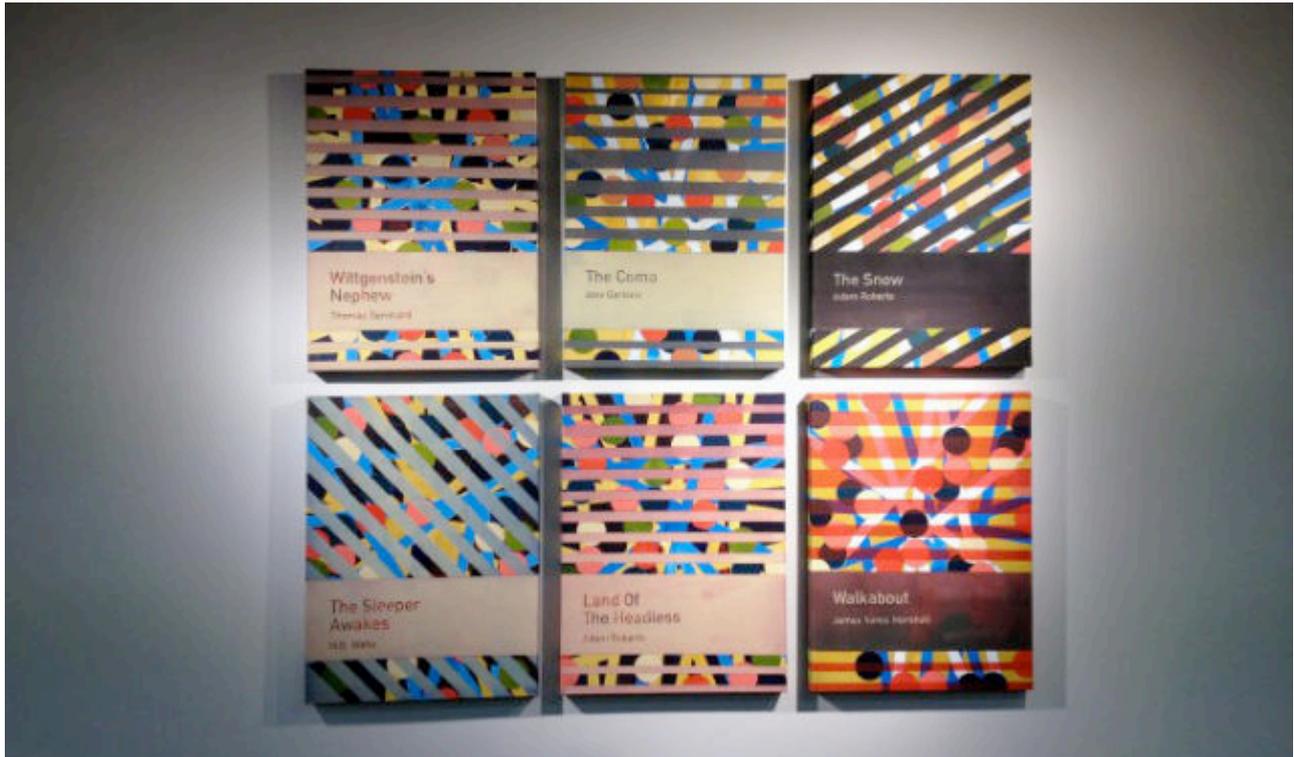
BLOUIN ARTINFO

Published on *BLOUIN ARTINFO* (<http://hk.blouinartinfo.com>)

Interview: Heman Chong's Bookish Pursuits

Language

English, Hong Kong

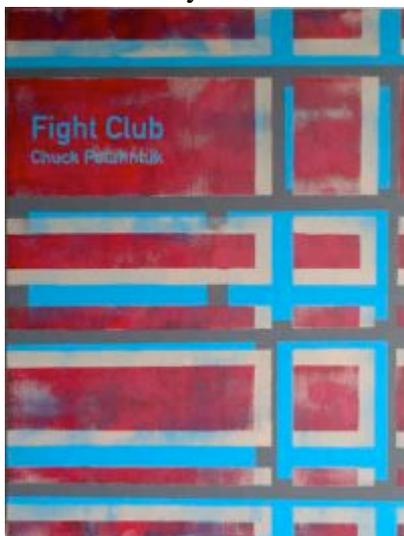


Courtesy Rossi & Rossi

Installation view of "The Part in the Story Where We Lost Count of the Days" at Rossi & Rossie Hong Kong gallery.

by Zoe Li

Published: July 16, 2013



Heman Chong "Fight Club/ Chuck Palahniuk (2)" (2013), painting on

canvas, 61 x 46 x 4 cm

HONG KONG — [Rossi & Rossi](#)'s Hong Kong gallery has been transformed into a fantastical bookstore. The "books" are a series of paintings titled "Cover (Versions)" by Singaporean artist, curator, and author **Heman Chong**. Each two-foot-tall, the canvases depict book covers for a wide range of literary titles.

There's a Rothko-esque black square on the cover for "The Langoliers" a novella by **Stephen King**. The cover of "Everything I Possess With Me" by **Herta Mueller** is a mirror image of the one for **Jose Saramago**'s "Death With Interruptions." Each cover seems to play with another, depending on our impression of each story.

"I am interested in environments which are formed through the accumulation of many things and having people make up their own minds on how to associate one thing with another. I'm not going to spoon-feed you a set of meanings. You have to make your own. Don't be lazy," says the artist.

The cumulative nature of Chong's work can also be seen in the second-half of the exhibition: "God Bless Diana" (200-2004). The pop-up-shop-as-artwork is a collection of 550 photographs culled from 6,000. Each image is printed as a postcard and sold from the "boutique."

The exhibition in Hong Kong is the first of three that opens across Asia this year as part of Chong's solo tour titled "The Part In The Story Where We Lost Count Of The Days." The second part will open on July 26 at **Future Perfect** in Singapore, while a year-long participatory performance will take place at **The Reading Room** in Bangkok starting September 7.

An accompanying monograph has also been published. The book of essays by several writers and curators is a summary of Chong's concerns, written in such a manner that the artist and his work are never directly referenced.

BLOUIN ARTINFO chats with Chong about this three-city project and his different ways of creating and transmitting narratives.

Tell us about the exhibitions in Bangkok and Singapore.

All three exhibitions will be radically different from each other. What ties all three together as a series are the methods that I use in constructing narratives.

In the first edition at Rossi & Rossi, the focus is on the idea of the archival aspects of my work. The second edition at Future Perfect will exhibit three projects that deal with the medium of photography, including "A Short Story About Singapore (Volume 1)" which offers itself as a non-linear story to be "read" by the viewer, played out over 100 images of Singapore, as well as "Telok Blangah Hill Park: A Survey," a work that circulates as both an art object and an artist book, reducing the form of an exhibition into a portable, mobile state. Then there's "Monument For A Mystical Reality," where I will revisit three works that were destroyed and discarded after a seminal collaborative exhibition by **Redza Piyadasa** and **Suleiman Esa** titled "Towards a Mystical Reality" (1974) by way of photographic documentation.

Finally, in the Reading Room in Bangkok is a performance that will continue for a year, where I am inviting participants to come and memorize "A Short Story About Saturdays." You can sign up for a session on any given Saturday between September 7, 2013 to September 7, 2014, and you have to invest time in memorizing (in Thai or English) a 500-word short story that I wrote. The performance

will only end when you can manage to retell the story, word for word back to the instructor.

What does the title of the exhibition refer to?

“The Part In The Story Where We Lost Count Of The Days” references the presence of a narrative in relation to the passing of time and the failure of someone's memory. When placed in this one sentence, it becomes a sculpture of sorts, in this form of a short story, where you can extrapolate all sorts of different kinds of narratives from it.

How do you select the titles of books to paint?

The novels come from an extensive reading list that I started and have continued to add to over the years since 2006. I have since gathered the help of friends via [a Facebook Note](#) to continue this list. The list, entitled “Bibliography (1) : The Lonely Ones,” touches on the subject of the representation of solitude that has been imposed on certain individuals or communities.

I have three over-arching notions that I am focusing on: the Hide-away, the Cast-away and the Prisoner. One can somehow define all three situations as being the consequences of politics.

Is there a part of you that encourages a fetishisation of books?

I'm interested in each painting becoming a book recommendation to the person who is looking at it. Beyond that, I don't really think about what it actually is, beyond the fact that it can serve this very simple function. It's not very different from posting something on Facebook.

You once told us in an interview the most indispensable item in your studio is the Internet. Yet your artistic concerns center around the "old" media of printed books.

“Old” media, “new” media — for me, these are just mere vehicles, vessels that carry the actual core of what we are attempting to access: narratives. Sure, there are obvious structural differences in how we access these stories, but I don't think I'm so concerned about the differences when I am sitting somewhere, dying to read a certain story.

We are standing here in 2013 and are still haunted by the old rules. Things have a way of conserving themselves; their own life-spans. We shouldn't fear change, or the past. Let's learn to improvise.

You've done 255 paintings of book covers since 2009 -- what an obsession. Tell us more about how obsession informs your work.

I am interested in environments which are formed through the accumulation of many things, and having people make up their own minds on how to associate one thing with another. I'm not going to spoon-feed you a set of meanings. You have to make your own. Don't be lazy.

On top of these paintings, I have photographed 1,001 interior public spaces in Singapore between 2004 to 2010 which I've used for pages of wall calendars for the years 2020-2096 for a work entitled “[Calendars \(2020-2096\)](#),” which I have shown at the **NUS Museum** in Singapore and the **Asian Art Museum in San Francisco**. Then, in another work, “[Monument to the people we've conveniently forgotten \(I hate you\)](#),” I flooded **Parasite art space** with one million black business cards.

Do you have any anecdotes about specific covers to share with us?

I am currently engaged in a process that started last year with **William Lim**, a collector based in Hong Kong, who has accepted my proposal of a ten-year long project, where I will paint one single painting every year of the same novel and in the year 2021, he will have ten different covers of “One

Hundred Years of Solitude” by **Gabriel García Márquez**. Isn't it wonderful to have an object such as a book cover to mark each year with?

When will you stop painting book covers?

I plan to end the series the minute the novel I'm working on is published. I started working on it in 2006, began writing around the end of 2007 and at the moment, I'm in my sixth rewrite. I don't think I'll ever finish. Perhaps I'll take another ten years or so. I don't know. It's a grueling journey, one that I sadistically enjoy every minute of. In the first draft, I had 16 characters, and now, I'm left with one. In comparison to my art projects, which often function on obsessive acts and gestures of repetitive accumulation of images and objects, writing for me is a lot about stripping away characters, drama and plots; focusing on a certain mood or lingering thought.

One might assume you are a bookworm after seeing your exhibition. Can you share with us some recent books that impressed you?

Actually, to be really honest, I do read a lot, but I'm also a very slow reader. I tend to devour about eight to 10 novels at the same time, because on top of being slow at reading, I also have a very severe case of attention deficit disorder. At the moment, I am reading “The Sound of the Mountain” by **Yasunari Kawabata**, **Clarice Lispector**'s books including “The Passion According to G.H.,” “Near to the Wild Heart,” “A Breath of Life,” “The Hour of the Star,” Issue 1 of a new journal called “Corridors” which touches on solitude and is edited by the Singaporean artist **Michael Lee**, “The Prisoner” by **Thomas M. Disch** and “The Collected Stories of Mavis Gallant.”

Follow *BLOUIN ARTINFO Hong Kong* [@ARTINFOHongKong](#)

[Contemporary Arts](#), [Zoe Li](#), [interview](#), [Heman Chong](#), [Rossi & Rossi](#), [The Reading Room](#), [Future Perfect](#)

GO