

EMPTY GALLERY



**Henry Shum**

Selected press

# Henry Shum

## The problems and pleasures of oil on canvas

By HG Master

WHERE I WORK



What does it mean to paint from your imagination? And what exactly are you painting then? I put these questions to Henry Shum when I visited his working space in Hong Kong before realizing that these are almost unanswerable questions for the person who is doing the imagining, and the painting. Also, Shum wasn't exactly prepared for an interview. I had only told the elusive artist when I met him briefly at an Empty Gallery opening in August that I wanted to see his new paintings before they were crated off to New York for a November solo show at Andrew Kreps Gallery. And then, there I was, asking prying questions to the unwitting artist and scribbling notes while my colleague Peter was snapping pictures of works-in-progress, and Kaitlin from Empty Gallery was tidying up his worktables. *Hey, look, no cigarettes here!*

The perils of inviting people over to your studio while you're still working on a new series, not to mention the travails of being a professional artist, still seemed new to Shum. He's just a couple years out of art school at Chelsea College of Arts in London, which makes him much younger than his facility and fascination with paint might suggest. You can tell he is a painting fanatic, because his canvases grab and hold your attention in ways that are surprisingly material. Among the new works he was working on, there are patches of paint (from tubes of high-quality Old Holland "aquamarine blue deep") that vibrate with the intensity of raw pigment—because he had denuded the linseed-oil binding by dousing them in paint thinner—and other areas that he had dressed in shiny ribbons of varnish. Nobody varnishes only part of a painting—also, who uses varnish in the 21st century? Fast-drying, glossy acrylic coatings were invented 60 years ago.

I vowed before the artist I wouldn't write that his paintings are "dream-like," not only because that is a lazy trope but because our brains are not capable of devising the color combinations Shum uses. Have you ever accidentally inverted the colors on a photograph and been shocked by the results? There are many moments like that in Shum's paintings. But most of the time his paintings are subtle, in an atmospheric manner, like the afterimages that appear and quickly fade when you shut your eyes. Everything in these one-point perspective compositions is "something-like."

A view of HENRY SHUM's temporary studio in Tin Wan, Hong Kong 2022. Detailed photos of the color tubes, brushes, and paint palette used by the artist.



There are figure-like forms, architectural-like structures, branch-like tangles, or a creature with a horse-like head. The motifs are emerging or receding, coming or passing out of being: vague, allusive, and partial. You find your eyes grasping at them, hoping for that satisfaction of semiotic certainty before they slip away: *Oh, that is definitely a horse! Right . . . ?* Looking at them is more like the feeling of trying to remember the images in your dreams rather than dreaming itself. Okay, so they are dream-like.

"It's like my midnight right now," Shum casually mentioned with a laugh, almost an hour into our studio visit, "So, I'm sorry, I'm a little —." He waved his hand in front of his eyes before pushing back his hair. He's not a nocturnal artist, but he said he sleeps one to two hours later each day, effectively putting himself on a continuous chronological treadmill. I had made the mistake of asking about his daily routine in a way that sounded banal. I should have known that he's not systematic but intuitive, exactly the way he makes his paintings. I then imagined that this temporally suspended, half-conscious state he inhabits helps him achieve a perpetual, destabilizing alienation from reality when working. Familiar things do look strange—uncanny, or *unheimlich* in Sigmund Freud's analysis, not incidentally, the subject of Shum's university thesis—when you're perpetually jet-lagged.

I also did tell him I wouldn't mention that there are many paintings underneath what we see of his canvases, but we'll never know if that's actually true—or not until someone x-rays one of them and finds the Chinese landscapes and abstractions he muttered something about beneath the surface. Shum works on his paintings until they have to go, and someone comes and takes them away, all the while making problems that—in his telling—he then challenges himself to find the solution for. It's all about the process of "getting lost in the material," he said. Like someone who loves tinkering with engines or building their own computers, Shum is on this constant search for an unattainable and undefined kind of perfection that alternately leads to ruin and then renewal.

"How do you know when it's finished?" I wondered aloud. "The difference between 'done' and 'not-done' is when there are no more problems to solve," he explained, "But you can always create more problems."

Shum has been painting since he was a teenager, when he first copied a Monet landscape with a lake and sunset at an art camp in Hong Kong, "unconsciously" using a dry-brush technique, which "worked quite well," he said. Not that many years later, his first show at Empty Gallery, "Vortices," took place in September 2020. Shum's canvases—they're all vertical in a 3:2 ratio but come in different sizes—were like apparitions that had fallen out of an alternate time and place. My colleague who reviewed the show described the titular painting as a "whorled landscape seen through the ghostly silhouettes of people and a giant balloon." I wondered at the time: was that not an angel coming to deliver God's message to two figure-like forms beneath a gothic-looking, tree-like object, in the canvas titled *Annunciation* (2020)? Are those two figures in a boat, in *Dream Construction* (2020), looking at the aurora borealis, or are they being rowed across the river Styx while the souls in purgatory behind them are screaming in agony? If you didn't know better, you have assumed the artist was a drinking-buddy of Edvard Munch circa 1910.

It is not just the unconscious flotsam washing up on the shores of Shum's waking intuition that feeds his work; a washed-out photograph of a plant was tacked on the wall next to one of his still-in-progress canvases. And as befits a painter who loves to paint, Shum also loves other painters. Piled around the studio are books on the Nordic symbolist Munch, French 17th-century classicist Nicolas Poussin, German postmodernist Sigmar Polke, and infamous exoticizer of Pacific-island cultures Paul Gauguin ("Please don't tell me you actually like Gauguin," implored Kaitlin). His interests extend beyond the painterly, with volumes on 19th-century photographer Eadweard Muybridge's *Animals in Motion* (the images that proved the un-seeable truth that horses don't



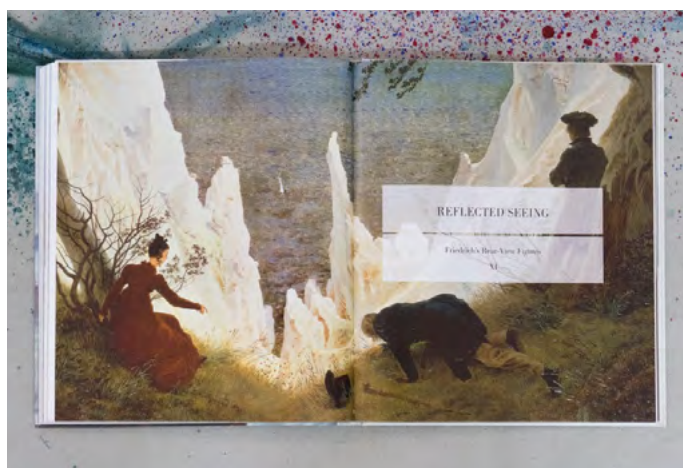
Left: Two large, still-in-process oil paintings standing upright against the wall. Right: Photo of a sketch stuck above his color testing on the wall, next to the piece that he was working on.



Left: HENRY SHUM, *Dream Construction*, 2020, oil on canvas, 181.2×121.2×5.6 cm. Right: HENRY SHUM, *Annunciation*, 2020, oil on canvas, 201.2×133.2×5.6 cm. Both photos by Michael Yu. Both images courtesy the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong.

keep their legs on the ground at all times while galloping); Mark Fisher's dire analyses of our social conditioning, *Postcapitalist Desire* (2021); and other tomes scattered under piles of rags, tubes of paint, brushes, used palettes, and paper cups of dried pigment. On a painterly tangent, he showed us a craggy rock in a detailed illustration of Caspar David Friedrich painting, the *Chalk Cliffs on Rügen* (1818), and then pointed to a canvas resting on the floor and said, "There it is, look, upside down." Sure, I thought, that could be a rock-like form. Our unconscious also borrows imagery all the time; it's what comprises our dreams.

I worried aloud that the imaginative, free experimentation that Shum finds in making his paintings might clash with the alienating reality of the art industry. Our mention of Fisher, who postulated that for us today it's easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism, had led us down a path of resignation to the economic conditions that are unlikely to change in our lifetimes—even his, the 24-year-old speculated. But despite all the criticisms lobbed at his favored medium merely because it's considered easier for galleries to sell, Shum was unfazed. He was visibly excited about traveling to New York; it's his first time and there's a lot of art to see there. He had wanted to catch the Jutta Koether show at Reena Spaulings Fine Art but it will have closed by the time he arrived. He said he was "ready" for the city's cutthroat competitiveness. "I don't mind criticism," he said, "because if other people can see bad things about my work, I've probably already seen it." It's his imagination, and raw material, after all.



Top: Photo of the books laid on the floor at the artist's studio. Bottom: A spread from a Caspar David Friedrich catalogue published by Prestel, showing a part of Friedrich's oil painting *Chalk Cliffs on Rügen* (1818).



# OCULA

Insight | Exhibition

## Hong Kong Spotlight: Six Artists to Watch

Showing in partnership with Fine Art Asia at the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre between 27 and 30 November 2020, Hong Kong Spotlight is Art Basel's first physical presentation in 2020. Ocula Magazine highlights six artists on view among the curated booths of 22 participating galleries.



Henry Shum, *Dream Construction* (2020).  
Oil on canvas. 181.2 x 121.2 x 5.6 cm.  
Courtesy Empty Gallery.

Henry Shum

Empty Gallery's black box was the perfect setting to showcase the impressive hand of Hong Kong-born painter Henry Shum, who graduated with a BA in fine art from Chelsea College of Arts only in 2020.

The title of Shum's first solo show with the gallery, *Vortices* (26 September–21 November 2020), drew from a term describing the spiral-like structure of the cosmos, and the compositions of each oil on canvas painting invoked this term in the articulation of thresholds, as in *Before a Mirror* (2020), where a figure gazes up at the sky through the elegant arch of an architectural branch.

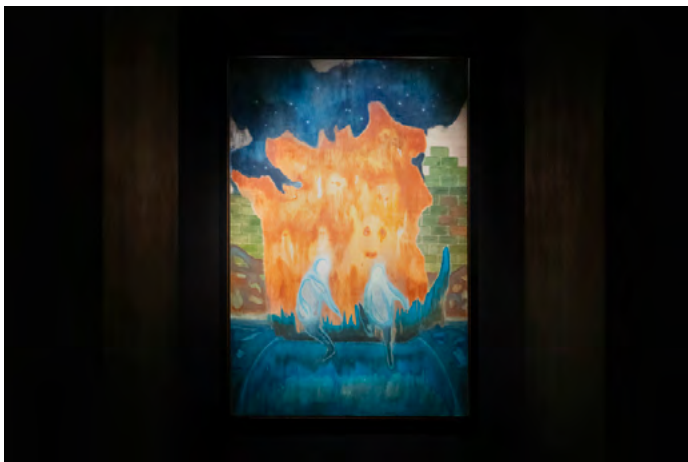
At Hong Kong Spotlight, Empty Gallery presents a selection of Shum's paintings, which are striking for their assured command of material balance, in which veils of colour build to create that effect of an ink-dipped brush on rice paper, in which colour bleeds across the canvas's weave. The result is akin to turning a flat surface into a pool of reflections.

Take the namesake painting of Shum's Empty Gallery show, *Vortices* (2020), which shows the diaphanous outlines of people circling a giant balloon, their forms woven into the earthen contours of a landscape that ripples up the canvas towards a midnight horizon breaking through a wall of lighter blue.

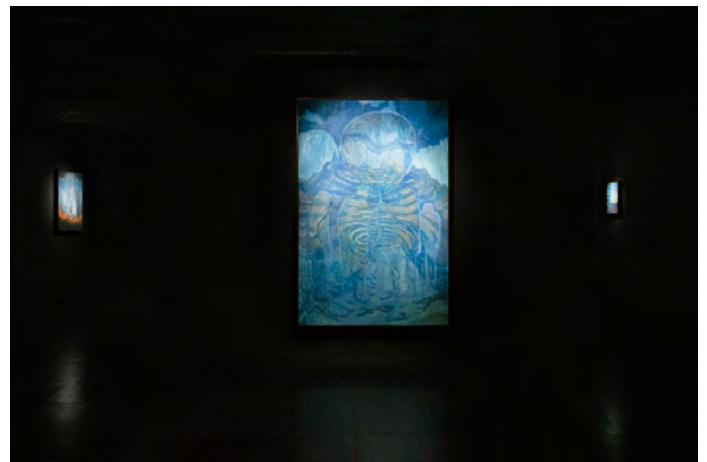


## ENTER THE VOID: HENRY SHUM'S MYSTICAL "VORTICES"

The vortex-as-portal is a recurring motif that conjures the irresistible yet terrifying pull of the unknown. For poet and artist William Blake (1757–1827), it takes on a spiritual dimension as a symbol of transfigurative passage. These mysterious connotations suffuse painter Henry Shum's "Vortices," a fever dream of perilous journeys and mystical awakenings in Empty Gallery's darkened sancta.



Installation view of **HENRY SHUM's** *Dream Construction*, 2020, oil on canvas, 181.2 × 121.2 × 5.6 cm, at "Vortices," Empty Gallery, Hong Kong, 2020. Photo by Michael Yu. All images courtesy the artist and Empty Gallery.

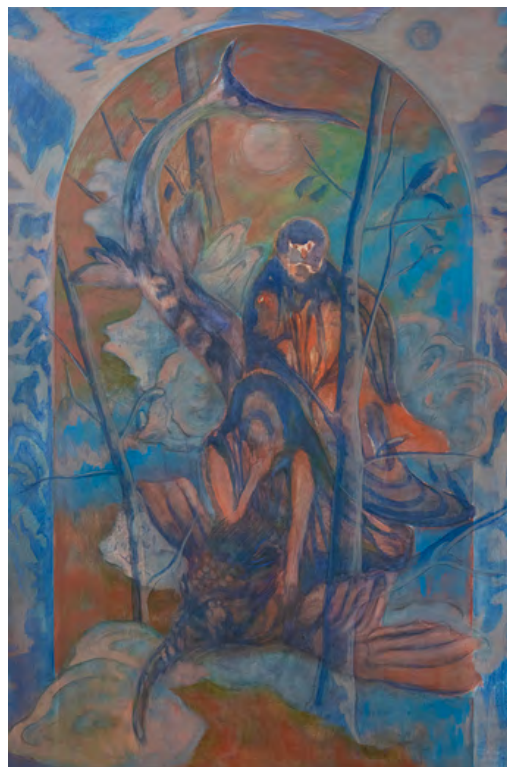


Installation view of **HENRY SHUM's** *Vortices*, 2020, oil on canvas, 201.2 × 133.2 × 5.6 cm, at "Vortices," Empty Gallery, Hong Kong, 2020. Photo by Michael Yu. All images courtesy the artist and Empty Gallery.

Blake's influence went beyond the show's title, as seen in Shum's *Vortices* (2020), a large oil canvas of a craggy, whorled landscape seen through the ghostly silhouettes of people and a giant balloon. The near-symmetrical ridges and radiant washes of sapphire and celestine recall Blake's striking compositional harmony and attention to color-shading, exemplified in works such as *The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed with the Sun* (c. 1803–05). Shum's painting is particularly impressive in its depiction of the distorted night sky and furrowed terrain on the glistening curvature of the balloon.



**HENRY SHUM**, *Annunciation*, 2020,  
oil on canvas, 201.2 × 133.2 × 5.6 cm.



**HENRY SHUM**, *Ancient of Days (Descending Elephant Fish)*, 2020,  
oil on canvas, 201.2 × 133.2 × 5.6 cm.

In a cryptlike space, the towering canvases *Annunciation* and *Ancient of Days (Descending Elephant Fish)* (both 2020) echo the palette and diagonal lines of Blake's Biblical illustration *Jacob's Ladder* (c. 1799–1806), in which a sleeping Jacob dreams of women and angels on a staircase that spirals toward the sun. Rendered in rusted reds and celestial blues, *Annunciation* portrays a shrouded figure lying at the base of a crooked trunk that hints at Blake's winding ascent. Next to the motionless body, a figure in a saffron-hued cloak sits up as if startled awake, looking away from the viewer at three observers on the tree. *Ancient of Days* acts as the work's fraternal twin, with a fantastical elephant-headed fish contorted to mirror the S-shaped tree, and a pale orange sun as a foil to the other's starry sky. Shum complicates the picture plane in these two works, framing the central image of each in an outlined alcove. Yet this boundary bears no relation to architectural reality. In *Ancient of Days*, for instance, translucent clouds and spindly twigs breach the recess, even as other elements of the scene terminate at its edges, as though the alcove is vanishing in sections.



**HENRY SHUM**, *New Sun*, 2020,  
oil on canvas, 121.2 × 81.2 × 5.6 cm.

Elsewhere, the esoteric anti-realism of Symbolist art finds expression in *New Sun* (2020), in which a bright, ringed orb floats in the center of a wooded landscape bisected by a terrace. Rendered in murky purls of jade and bottle-green, the scene appears to be underwater, yet the mysterious sphere glows with a surprising sharpness. Likewise, in *Before a Mirror* (2020), silver starbursts dance around a faceless figure, who is framed by trees that form a perfect arc overhead offset by a diagonal-leaning trunk, recalling the composition of *Annunciation* and *Ancient of Days*. Evoking the changing atmosphere of twilight, the background is split into neatly dissolved sections, from a cerulean sky to a soft sunset yellow that sinks into the fresh green grass.

Shum's darkly imaginative paintings were well-served by the design of the gallery, where the addition of archways and candlelit niches lent a gothic sensibility to the show. The architecture was used to spellbinding effect in the installation of *Dream Construction* (2020), which suddenly blazed into view through a high archway as one turned through a dark passage. In the painting, two ice-blue silhouettes clamber into (or out of) a turquoise gondola that appears to be melting into the watery depths, as a wall of flame rises from the vessel, along with spectral faces that peer out at the viewer.

Shum's nightmarish visions of eerie landscapes and ghosts pay homage to Dark Romanticism and Symbolism with captivating originality, lingering in the mind long after one exits the byzantine space. Blinking on the sunlit pavement after this stygian sojourn, I thought of the lone figure described by poet and critic Jean Moréas in the "*Symbolist Manifesto*" (1886), the protagonist moving "in circles distorted by his clean hallucinations, his constitution; in this distortion lies the only reality."



# ARTFORUM



View of "Henry Shum: Vortices," 2020.

HONG KONG

## Henry Shum

EMPTY GALLERY

3 Yue Fung Street 18 & 19/F Grand Marine Center

September 26–November 21, 2020

Shadowy figures congregating in groups and in pairs, on boats and in nocturnal groves, inhabit "Vortices," Henry Shum's first solo exhibition at Empty Gallery. Largely rendered in a palette of blue, brown, and orange alongside hints of green, fourteen paintings slowly and steadily captivate the eye through the artist's restrained repertoire of gestural drips, stains, and veil-like washes, guiding visitors through the labyrinthine corridors and darkened rooms of the Hong Kong gallery. The black box installation, a hallmark of the space, here lends Shum's compositions a mysterious aura, their subjects adrift among natural and supernatural settings.

The exhibition further benefits from the construction of arched doorways that frame works incorporating this same architectural detail, among them *Annunciation*, 2020, *Woman and Child*, 2019, and *Ancient of Days (Descending Elephant Fish)*, 2020. Likewise, in *Before a Mirror*, 2020, where a veiled figure gazes into a natural vault formed by the junction of two supple trees, Shum limns the spiritual associations of the arch—a feature of sacred space, both real and painted, manmade and geologic—from the cloisters of Fra Angelico to the Great Arch of Getu.

The artist's interest in traversal—between two and three dimensions, between the real and the symbolic—is also manifest in the exhibition's namesake work, in which five transparent figures gather beneath a celestial and diaphanous balloon-like form that seems to open onto another dimension. The question lingers: Does this portal lead to an astral plane, or into the abyss?

Ysabelle Cheung, "Henry Shum Vortices", *ArtReview Asia*, Vol 8 no4 2020

# ArtReview Asia



**Shen Xin**



**Absent Friends**

## Henry Shum *Vortices*

*Empty Gallery, Hong Kong 26 September – 21 November*

The typical Annunciation scene heralds the springtime conception of the Messiah; not so in Henry Shum's 2020 rendition. This is something more ambiguous. The Virgin Mother, falling back to the floor, is painted in rusted, muddy ochres; the face of the archangel Gabriel – who is perched on a tree like a bird – is blurred and inscrutable. Around them, patches of cyan and mysterious rhizomic shapes seep into the image.

The 12 paintings in Shum's *Vortices*, his debut solo show at Empty Gallery, contort the conventional genres of portraiture, landscape and religious imagery, upbraiding the fixed traditions that surround them. For example, the two figures in *Woman and Child* (all works 2020) immediately evoke the kind of tropes found in the maternal portraiture of classical *Madonna and Child* paintings, but on the evidence of the title, it is unclear whether the female is even the baby's mother; similarly, the pastoral vista of *Memory of a Landscape*

seems generic until you begin to puzzle over its orientation, the algae puddles at the top of the canvas confusing clouds with water. These subversions are connected to the artist's treatment of oil paint, which he dilutes into thin washes that evoke the lambent, abstracted ink paintings of the postwar New Ink Movement in Hong Kong, in particular the works of Lui Shou-Kwan. Yet even these references to certain influences are deliberately muddled. The giant mythologised creature carrying two figures in *Ancient of Days* (*Descending Elephant Fish*) is ostensibly a reference to similar spiritual imagery from the Qing dynasty, yet it is mounted within a recessed physical archway next to *Annunciation*, making both paintings appear more like sequential images in a faded church fresco. Here, Shum equalises European and Asian art history canons, essentially dismantling the constructed notion of one's importance over the other.

In these canvases, we also see hints at more subconscious terrain. Shum's figures are translucent and embryonic, their presence ambiguous among trees, mountains and lakes. As in a dream, we wonder how we arrived at certain scenes: in *Revolution of Night* we witness one figure holding another around the neck, unclear whether they are escaping danger or whether a crime is being perpetrated. This sense of dream logic is further embedded through architectural elements: two archways in a cloisterlike passage, newly constructed for the show, lead only to dead-end walls, and several of the paintings feature similar archways or brick partitions, complicating the viewer's perception of place in the exhibition. Are we looking into our own psyche, or out into the world? Shum seems to suggest spiritual communion between ourselves and the cosmos in the portallike corridors and in the glowing orbs hidden across multiple canvases, which appear like celestial moons or earthbound eyes. *Ysabelle Cheung*



*Revolution of Night*, 2020, oil on canvas, 181 × 121 × 6 cm.  
Courtesy the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong



# 美紙

ART AND PIECE



## 佛洛伊德和羅漢圖：與香港藝術家沈璟的對話

在某個禮拜走進香港仔田灣的Empty Gallery，於漆黑一片中欣賞香港新興藝術家Henry (沈璟) 耐人尋味、猶如走進夢境的個人展覽《Vortices》(漩伏)。儘管年僅22歲，Henry 的創作靈感、用色技巧和題材均出乎地成熟有層次；筆者聞之，便立即聯絡畫廊，有望認識這位不多露面的年輕本地藝術家，深度了解他的創作歷程。

C: Cusson Cheng (美紙 Art Editor) ; H: Henry Shum (藝術家)

C: 展覽的作品有部分的靈感來自夢境和意識流，你為什麼對這些概念有興趣？

H: 展覽標題「漩伏」是一個比喻，是一個會無間斷吞噬面前一切的實體，包括消化我們日常生活的平面意象。「Vortices」亦源自「vortex」的古字，被哲學家用此描述現實如螺旋般的結構。我在讀大學的時候對精神分析 (Psychoanalysis) 尤其有興趣，特別是佛洛伊德的「夢的解析」(The Interpretations of Dreams)。雖然作品並不是直接講述這些學術概念，但亦可以說是我創作過程的開端。

C: 某些作品亦挪用宗教氣息濃厚的符號，對你來說是有什麼特別意義嗎？

H: 我創作作品時，重點歸於我使用的物料。油彩和其他混合媒材較難控制，故此我讓它們作為作品敘述的主要連結。某些作品所繪畫的宗教圖像可能與我文看過的化復興時期的經典作品和佛教羅漢圖有關。

C: 你與Empty Gallery 的創立人Stephen 怎樣相識? 能夠在畫廊開設個人展覽有什麼感受?

H: 三月的時候雖然我還在讀書, 但因為疫情提早回港。不久後, 畫廊總監 Alex 在Instagram 看到我的創作並與我聯絡, 之後才正式與Stephen見面。我其實到現在也不敢想像自己能夠在Empty Gallery展出自己的作品, 感覺不可思議。

C: 有沒有什麼籌備個展的小趣事可以跟我們讀者分享?

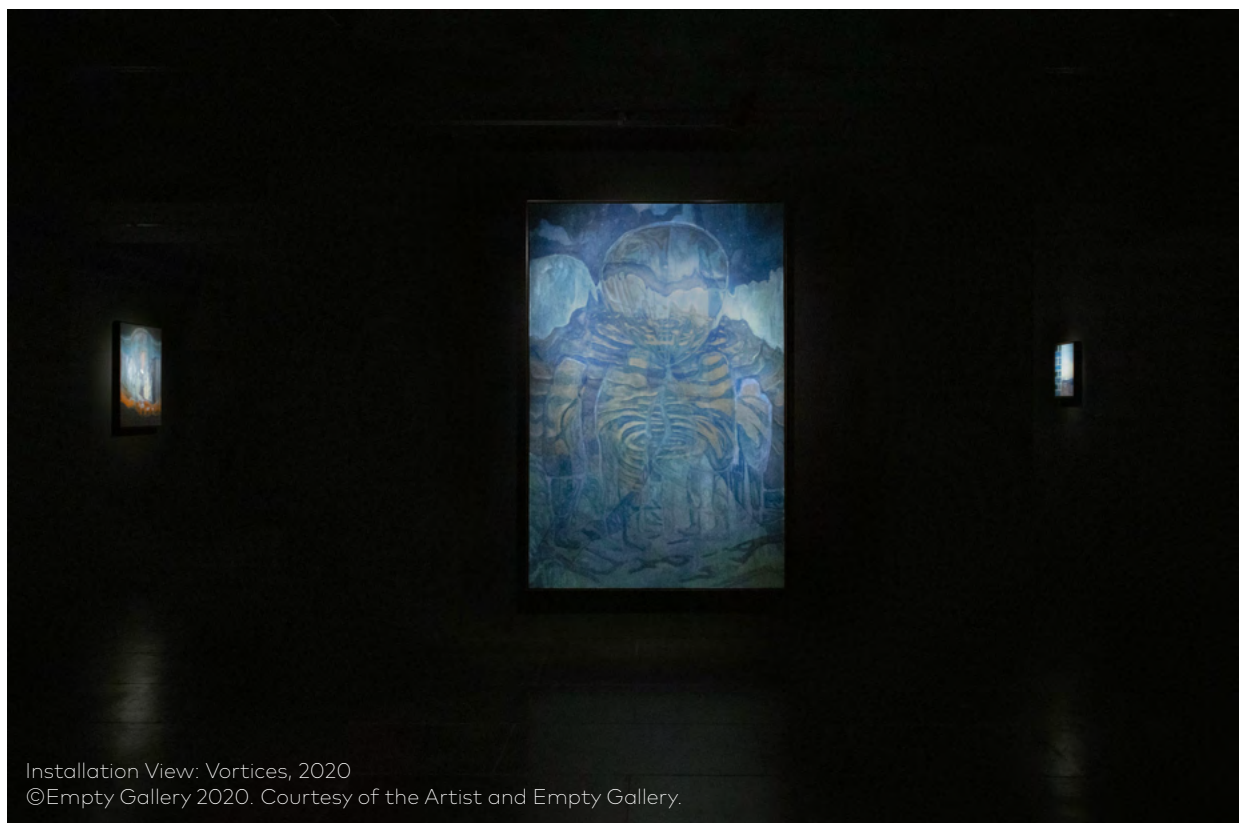
H: 坦白說, 籌備這個展覽有莫名的壓力, 因為沒想過剛畢業便有畫廊受邀; 決定展期並選好作品後, 因大部分畫作仍在英國, 故此我必須快速安排運輸公司將作品送回香港。而且我亦為個展創作一系列新作, 本身的體質在沒有充足睡眠的情況下容易不適, 故此也在蠻辛苦的狀態下完成準備工作。

C: 我知道Empty Gallery 在11月於會展的 Basel Spotlight 亦會展出你的作品, 可以告訴讀者一些預告嗎?

H: 在藝博會中畫廊會展出我一些大型畫作, 並且少量紙上作品。每次我都務求自己創作不同題材的作品, 所以觀眾會有另一番感受。

C: 作為一位年輕藝術家, 你在將來有什麼抱負?

H: 我希望可以繼續試驗油彩和顏料, 創作與眾不同的畫作; 也想繼續專研各樣繪畫和影像的歷史, 使自己的眼界和創作技巧不斷進步。



Installation View: Vortices, 2020  
©Empty Gallery 2020. Courtesy of the Artist and Empty Gallery.