

Heartbreak Hotel: 7 Contemporary Artworks to Soothe the Woes of Love

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By Marian Ang | Feb 14, 2024

Do you have an aching heart? Let our specialist picks from the upcoming Contemporary Discoveries (21-28 February) keep you company this Valentine's Day.

Forget the chocolates, roses and candlelit dinners. Each of these artists spotlighted below from Contemporary Discoveries will take you on a whimsical voyage of discovery, filled with heartfelt encounters of humour, tenderness and hope.



Koak, *How to Forget*, 2018 | Estimate: 260,000-550,000 HKD

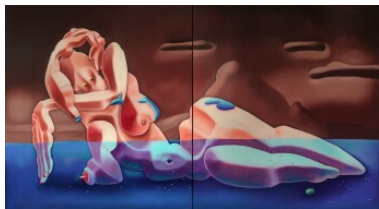
Ever wish you could banish memories of a certain someone? San-Francisco-based Koak's sinuous calligraphic lines inspired by Euro-Japanese animation profess yearning, affection, and passion. Writhing with joy and despair, Koak's characters communicate "beyond or across the black holes of dialogue", connecting experiences of the mundane and personal to issues of the universal and monumental. In balletic flight across the canvas, the severe monochrome palette and tightly knotted heart of *How to Forget* nonetheless succeed in evincing the turbulent rollercoaster of being in love.

"When we talk about [something monumental], there's a sort of simpleness to it – it becomes mundane through its universality, its frequency, its underlying presence in every single aspect of our lives, from our bodies...to thoughts, to love...and when we talk about something seemingly mundane, we are also discussing some of our greatest social issues, from gender roles, to class, to privilege."



Jiang Cheng, *e-51*, 2020 | Estimate: 100,000-200,000 HKD

Jiang Cheng's *e-51* depicts Claire Foy in the role of Queen Elizabeth II in the acclaimed Netflix drama *The Crown*. Educated at the China Academy of Art, Hangzhou, and Berlin University of the Arts, Shanghai-based Jiang rejects conventional identifiers such as race, class and gender in favour of portraying universal human struggles precipitated by dissonant states of mind. "I really wanted to show the emotion beneath", explains Jiang of his larger-than-life portraits. Young Elizabeth, as portrayed by Foy, ripples with emotion behind her composed public façade, caught between the stuffy rigours of royal duty and her profound desire for a "normal" life. Jiang's "e-" series, based on the sound of the gender-neutral pronoun for inanimate objects in Mandarin, usually brings together classical mythological heroes. Elizabeth, with her stoic outlook and unstinting self-sacrifice, *e-51* reminds us, was perhaps our closest modern-day reincarnation of one.



Cathrin Hoffman, *The Seal Was Brittle*, 2022 | Estimate:
180,000-220,000 HKD

German-Iranian artist Cathrin Hoffman casts herself in the role of future anthropologist in "Human Hand For Scale", her first solo show with Nicodim in Los Angeles. The coquettish odalisques of Ingres are transformed into serrated, disembodied creatures that defy – or transcend – human corporeal existence. The Earth of the future is submerged in water, whilst craggy rocks and sparse hovering clouds are all that remain of what humanity once called home. Hoffman's dark humour recalls the Biblical verse of Job 38:14: "The earth takes shape like clay under a seal; its features stand out like those of a garment". *The Seal Was Brittle* provides a witty look at an alternative future had the seal failed to hold true.



César Piette, *Yellow Purple Flower*, 2019 | Estimate:
80,000-150,000 HKD

A flower, that traditional token exchanged by lovers on Valentine's Day, is born again as a grinning, toothy stem in César Piette's surreal "hyperplastic" airbrushed painting. With a background in video game design, the French artist takes traditional art historical subjects as his focus, turning (in his own words) "what is 'representable' into an inorganic, artificial, postindustrial, plastic toy". Here, Piette targets the *vanitas* still life genre beloved by Dutch painters in the 16th and 17th centuries, in which sumptuous sprays of flowering blooms alluded to the sensual pleasures and fleeting nature of love. In *Yellow Purple Flower*, Piette strips away all cultural pretensions and rediscovers the humorous, childlike magic of nature.



Maiko Kobayashi, *Untitled (dance)*, 2016-2019 | Estimate:
40,000-60,000 HKD

Maiko Kobayashi's melancholic little creatures tap into deep emotional waters. Alternating waves of sentiment wash over viewers of Kobayashi's work – tenderness, sorrow, helplessness, and finally peacefulness and hope. Blue tears puddle below whilst dark hands reach out from within, grasping and comforting. Delicate translucent layers of acrylic, pencil and watercolour upon washi paper draw the viewer deeper into the psyche of these gentle otherworldly beings, at times revealing, at other times obscuring their subject. Kobayashi's *Untitled (dance)* fuses Japanese visual traditions such as *ukiyo-e* with Western popular cultural motifs, speaking a universal and timeless message of peace and compassion across cultures and generations:

“The more I get to know things in the world, the more often I feel helpless. But, when I discover that human beings have that essential vitality that will never be lost under any circumstances, my heart fills with courage and hope. The ‘friction’ caused by this contradictory sensation is my motivation to draw.”

Maiko Kobayashi



Roby Dwi Antono, *Untitled*, 2020 | Estimate: 40,000-60,000
HKD

Counting the Japanese icon Yoshitomo Nara and the American Pop Surrealist Mark Ryden among his art world heroes, Indonesian contemporary artist Roby Dwi Antono succeeds in creating a unique visual language informed by Surrealism, Classical Renaissance imagery, and human experience. Dwi Antono’s training as an illustrator is shown at its unadorned best in *Untitled*. With spontaneous, irregular lines and naive forms, Dwi Antono deftly conjures up the glimmering saucer-like eyes, patchy fringe and smudged lips of awkward adolescent in-betweenness. Basing his characters on a combination of real personalities and his own imagination, particularly children and “strange figures inspired by pop icons that were popular when I was a child and accompanied me when I was growing up”, Dwi Antono leads the audience on a bittersweet voyage of personal discovery.

“My works are like a mirror in which I see a reflection of myself. Very often it is where I would criticise the undoing of my past self as well as impart some hopes to my future self.”

Roby Dwi Antono

About the Author

Marian Ang is a Hong Kong-based art writer and researcher, and a regular Sotheby’s contributor.