the images by Keiko Sasaoka, Tomoko Kikuchi, Masumi Kura, Kazuma Taguchi, and Chino Otsuka were disturbingly aloof.

In Fishing, Keiko Sasaoka (b. 1978) captures desolate shorelines and rocky outcrops in this series of unlovely landscapes that resemble impromptu holiday snapshots. The steely tones of these color works render them monochrome, triggering a documentary feel to the wary balance of sky, land, and sea. Samani, Hokkaido (2010) presents an odd splinter of rock against foggy sky; watery brushstrokes sketch its tide-pool reflection. Despite the occasional figure of a fisherman, Sasaoka’s florid images are somehow incomplete, quickened only by bright patterns of foamy wave spew or rocky spatters at low tide. This fragmentary awareness is echoed in Kazuma Taguchi’s portraits. Taguchi (b. 1979) uses magazine photographs to create realistic paintings of women: she then photographs the paintings, reconfiguring them as dim, intangible gestures. In several of these works, pale multiple exposures blur into darkness, an elusive face in At a dead end, in deep (2009) is a somnorous vapor. Taguchi’s rich, gelatin silver prints embrace shadowy tones of sepia, blue, and charcoal, which, when coupled with her convoluted, Richter-like technique, evoke the half-melted imagery of an old film staggering on torn sockets.

In contrast, the lurid photographs of Tomoko Kikuchi (b. 1975) are tense and solid. Kikuchi, a longtime Beijing resident, began her ongoing documentary series Land I in 2005, which explores gender issues by following Chinese drag queens. With little besides their titles offer context, most of Kikuchi’s color images are merely dark in both tone and theme; yet a honey-red glow invigorates a few, including the expectant Lala waiting for her performance at 80 years old farmer’s birthday party, Sichuan province (2011). Context is also absent in the works of Tokyo photographer Masumi Kura (1975), who sought to reinvigorate her creative eye by tracing an ancient pilgrimage route in the color series, Adventures of Kura. In doing so, Kura indulges in a form of lackluster street photography intended to preserve the unseen moment. This imagery works best when she permits pattern and color to disrupt otherwise banal shots of people waiting in line or loitering on street corners. A vivid umbrella in Semma, Osaka (2009) exults one mundane moment on a beach.

A sense of detachment was discernible in all these works—even, unexpectedly, in the very personal photographs of London-based Chino Otsuka (b. 1972), who untangles her own childhood memories from the grip of nostalgia. In her series of double self-portraits entitled Imagine Finding Me, Otsuka digitally juxtaposes her adult image within old photographs of herself as a child. The child and the adult Otsuka pass on a stairway in 1981 and 2000, Ofuna, Japan (2000); they are oblivious to one another in Beijing; they eat bread together in Paris. Rather than sentimental indulgences, however, Otsuka’s washed-out color photographs are chaste and evocative. Her video installation 1978 and 2009, Kitakamakura, Japan (2010) is accompanied by the faint summer hum of cicadas; young Otsuka in red coversalls stands alone on a hilly street, then fades away as her adult self slowly emerges into being, only steps away.

In negotiating the constraints “between me and this world,” each of these five photographers pursues a different, almost passive imagery. Ultimately, this show was underscored by its eloquent sense of submission, and its reluctance to assign definitive visual meaning to expressions of solitude, alienation, and the past.

Marybeth Stock


Installation II ABCDE of the Energy Fields series comprises a monumental pentaptych, which fills an entire wall. Multiple nimble brushstrokes traverse outsized chalk-hued paper and, in their delineation of space and mass, give structure to the piece. Each thick black line appears as the naked branch of an enormous tree; the splatters and spots of ink in its wake the twigs and tendrils. Lines are controlled, their trajectory resolute and their vitality totally uncompromised despite crossing panel divides (polyptychs are a common feature of Verdier’s work.) The composition is simple, the work minimalist, yet Verdier gloriously encapsulates the very essence of a chilly winter scene.

Nature is an underlying theme in the 55 pieces of this exhibition. In Memories of Norway, fleeting glimpses of the Norwegian coast are immortalized in drawings and minimalist abstract paintings. The drawings reduce the coastline to three or four dense and impenetrable black pastel strokes, suspended in space. Despite the economy of line, they are immediately recognizable as dramatic mountain landscapes. They are small, intimate, and static whereas the paintings they juxtapose are large, visually loud, and dynamic. In Memories of Norway 5 brushstrokes are syrupy, jagged, and impulsive.

Fuelled with drama and spontaneity, they rise and fall, stop and start, haphazard and at random. They are replete with life as the living scenes they represent. Unlike the flat surfaces of traditional Chinese paintings, Verdier introduces the third dimension as ink is applied copiously and unevenly to confer depth and texture. The undulations, ripples, and furrows are representative of the imperfections of the landscape portrayed. In Fractalscapes III – Paysage dans l’énergie d’un trait a solitary brushstroke is isolated in what seems a fitting tribute to Verdier’s primary tool. Each stroke is ‘magnified’ to reveal the finest detail. As if time has stopped, these works are almost topographical studies of land and sea, a microcosm of our own living and breathing universe.

Verdier’s use of the brush is revolutionary and further distinguishes her practice from pure Chinese tradition. Homemade and huge (often over two meters tall), the brush suspends freely from the studio ceiling to take full advantage of gravity. Acting as intermediary between heaven and earth, Verdier’s body weight is used to guide the mammoth implement. Bicycle handles enable her to gain more momentum and move spontaneously. Her capacity to twist and turn is integral to the creative process and infuses her paintings with energy (op) and power. Circles were painted in a single 360-degree rotation from within the canvas. True to Chinese tradition and the compositional importance of negative space, the rings remain open and unfinished. Hitherto monochromatic, it is in the Circles and Color Flows series that Verdier really harnesses the Western aesthetic and, for the first time, she bathes her beautiful strokes in color. Reminiscent of and inspired by the early 15th century Flemish Painters and their ‘jewel-like’ tones, Verdier contrasts a black hoop with a vivid mustard yellow in Cercle-Ascèse, jaune, evocative of a summer’s day; a burnished ochre-brown in Cercle-Ascèse, brun clair, reminiscent of autumn’s rotting leaves; the moodiest and most somber of charcoal grays for winter; and an arresting lantern-red circle against a vibrant viridian green in Cercle-Ascèse, Rouge sur vert flamand, redolent of new life that comes with the Spring.

Color Flows represents the synthesis of line and color, of expression and control, of movement and life, and the culmination of Western and Eastern artistic sensibilities in Verdier’s work. Color Flows 7 boasts chunky, rich-red brushstrokes, which meander fluidly and freely across an exhilarat-
ing, luminous, tri-paneled green field. The lines pulse rhythmically to the beat of a twisting river, a rugged coastline or the path of the wind.

In the horizontal polyptych Color Flows 8, black labyrinthine strokes frenetically navigate an incandescent red field prompting thoughts of volcanoes and what lies beneath the earth's crust. Verdi's intuitive selection of color fully complements the vigor and precision of her brushwork such that her paintings are engaging, compelling, and, above all, bursting with life.

The works resonate particularly well in Singapore where green space is limited. They provide momentary respite from the urban and serve as a pertinent reminder of the grander scale of nature.

Jo Shrosphere

Engaging Perspectives: New Art at the Singapore Center for Contemporary Arts

The Center for Contemporary Arts launched its inaugural exhibition at Gillman Barracks at the beginning of this year. In Engaging Perspectives: New Art from Singapore, a compelling lineup of nine Singaporean artists and collectives explored both tangible and intangible patterns of "the everyday within the context of Singapore." The results included photographs, paintings, and installations ranging from reflections of the mundane to visions of the stars.

These artists, all born in the 1980s, were a mix of emerging and internationally established talents that included Ang Song Nian, Black Baroque Committee, Mike Chang, Nah Yong En, Bruce Quek, the Singapore Psychogeographical Society, Frayn Yong, Jasper Yu, and Zhao Renhui. Their works were exhibited individually, in separate rooms within several of Gillman's restored colonial-era buildings. These boxy spaces, with their bare concrete interiors, invite an intimacy that particularly complements installations and smaller works.

This atmosphere underscored the meditative aura of Bruce Quek's animated video Consider (Singapore): Cadastre per Aspera (2013). In this study of urban environments, Quek captured patterns of Singapore's artificial light sources and reinvented them as a starry galaxy of depth and splendor. On a more earthly plane, Ang Song Nian raised questions of possession versus obsession in Towards a New Interior (2013). Ang's two installations and large color photographs portray tidy heaps of discarded furniture; one photograph frames a window, whose interior view is obliterated by towers of hoarded rubbish. This near-documentary inquiry into the potency of materialism contrasts vividly with Frayn Yong's stark forms. Yong manipulates cardboard, pencil leads, and slender tree branches to construct fragile, slightly bewildered sculpture. His small pencil-lead matrices are demure: tiny dollops of glue bind varying lengths of thin graphite into delicate, origami-like polyhedrons that threaten to unfurl into planar flatness. The Castle, Another (2013) is a cinderly tower of demented graphite spider webs.

Other works, while entertaining, were rooted in lauded metaphor. Mike Chang's mixed-media Arrival Reception (2013) invited visitors through a doorway to experience literal versus conceptual aspects of "transition," likewise, any implied irony was lost amidst unsuitable analogies of guillotine-as-camera/executioner-as-photographer in The Photographer: An Executioner's Assistant (2013) by "not-a-collective" Black Baroque Committee. In Jasper's Travelogue (2012), Jasper Yu presented several mixed-media transparencies founded on street photography, which incorporated minute, amusing elements of movement into frozen crowd shots.

Two photographs by Nah Yong En portrayed vertiginous nightscapes that drew the gaze upward into the sky; but his series The Overseas Moon is...