



Severed Symbol: Srijon Chowdhury, Heidi Lau, and Guo Fengyi

Deli Gallery

November 13 through December 20, 2020

By TOREY AKERS, December 2020

Tucked away on an East Williamsburg back-street, Deli Gallery's current exhibition, *Severed Symbol*, centers the slipperiness of visual semiotics with plenty of pathos to spare. The three artists on display — Srijon Chowdhury, Heidi Lau, and Guo Fengyi — share a formal investment in troubled or even monstrous embodiment, the kind of oozing, wanton deviance that makes us all people in the first place. In Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's essay "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," the posthumanist scholar positions the "monster" as a social body, noting that, "like a letter on the page, the monster signifies something other than itself: it is always a displacement, always inhabits the gap between the time of upheaval...and the moment into which it is received". *Severed Symbol* takes up the mantle of cultural miscreation with an eye towards diasporic experience, resistance, and compression, collapsing the space between viewer and object with an unmistakable ache.

Chowdhury's suite of ten paintings, all completed in 2020, hold the wall with the glinting assurance of jewels. The pieces are tiny, just 8" x 6" each, a scale that lends their presence a prayerful kind of closeness, further bolstered by Chowdhury's patent enthusiasm for the macabre. In the *Studio*, a portrait of a flayed artist painting as his former skin dangles from the top of a canvas, draws on storied influences like the *Ayurvedic Man* and the etchings of Andreas Vesalius without sacrificing any wryness; *A spell to end white supremacy* reimagines Goya's iconic *Saturn* as a gory model for reparative justice. Many of Chowdhury's paintings build on motifs explored in his spring 2020 solo turn at Foxy Production, but this tilt towards the miniature at *Severed Symbol* really

really underscores a winking, conspiratorial attitude towards cultural language; even Jesus Christ and Michael Jackson make appearances, stark, illustrative, and sly.

Lau's pair of floor-crawling ceramic spiders, *Mother and Daughter*, (2020) flirt with the edge of abjection; the creatures, silent and dog-sized, sport human hands, broiling, bark-like skins, and gaping surface holes that remind the viewer of their thing-ness, their inherent link to vesselhood. Lau, who grew up in Macao, casts a deft eye towards historical residue. *The Altar*, an eerie, waist-high ceramic statue from 2019, transforms process into content, rendering its ritualistic structure a framework for slow-accruing, fungal memory. The result, as with the eerily decorative *Hanging Garden* (2020), feels at once timeless and immediate, triangulating Chowdhury's paintings to create a sharp sense of longing and hard-won renewal in the face of colonialism's flattening visual influence. The viewer first engages with Lau's work as a spatial encroachment, but learn, upon closer examination, that the monstrous "other's" construction is just that, a construct, lending these ragged amalgams an explicitly anti-imperialist affect.

The inclusion of Guo Fengyi's hypnotic ink scrolls in *Severed Symbol* is a particularly inspired move. Fengyi, who passed away in 2010, was originally labeled an outsider artist thanks to her self-taught start and taste for cheap materials, like ballpoint pens and used calendars; it wasn't until the last five years of her life that she encountered mainstream success. Her totemic, iconographic practice took root in a spiritual commitment to qi gong, the movement-based meditative system she believed alleviated her post-retirement arthritis and allowed her to communicate deeply embedded dream visions, many of which appear in these strange, blooming paper works. *Old Hetu*, a 1992 calligraphic explosion of Buddhist reference and personal flourish, forges a one-to-one relationship with the viewer's body, acting as a simultaneous immersive portal and projection site—to explore the piece is to imagine oneself as the artist, mapping healing through line and placement. This curatorial push towards what Claire Bishop termed "historical contemporaneity", the concept of pairing "new" work alongside ancient artifacts or pieces by artists from a different generation, further amplifies the show's emotional core. In *Severed Symbol*, to look back is to look forward, and to re-evaluate the "major" language is to resist its presumption of authority. WM



Srijon Chowdhury, In the Studio, 2020, oil on linen, 8 x 6 in.