

**The Truth About Crash and Burn:  
On Boo Sze Yang's "Boom!" series  
Michael Lee**



Boo Sze Yang, *Boom #2*, 2009. Oil on canvas, 40.5 x 67 cm, Artist's collection.

Of the numerous subject matters Boo Sze Yang has captured in his paintings, the topic of accidents offers the closest approximation of truth about the human condition. The car and motorcycle crashes, plane mishaps, collapsed buildings and fallen bridges in the series "Boom!" (2009), are not matters waiting passively to be described in oils, but demands of the artist a mode of working that constantly threatens to break down, one that weaves vitality with vulnerability. The result is not a claim to the real experience of a tragic accident, but clues to the truth about humans and their innovations.

An accident involving a human being and a piece of machinery is poignant. First, it shocks: not because technology is usually seen as helpful rather than harmful, but the people involved in an accident with a human invention do not aim or plan for it to happen; nor do they believe it will happen to them, even if they are aware of the possibility. Second, it is indescribable: Survivors often fail to find a language to recount what happened. Third, it produces: Every innovation leads to new manners of human injury and death, though unintended. In split seconds, it produces all sorts of interactions within, between and beyond them: the crash and the burn, the bend and the crack, the scratch and the scrape, the pierce and the smear, rendering physical bodies beyond recognition. The accident is nature's way, concentrated.

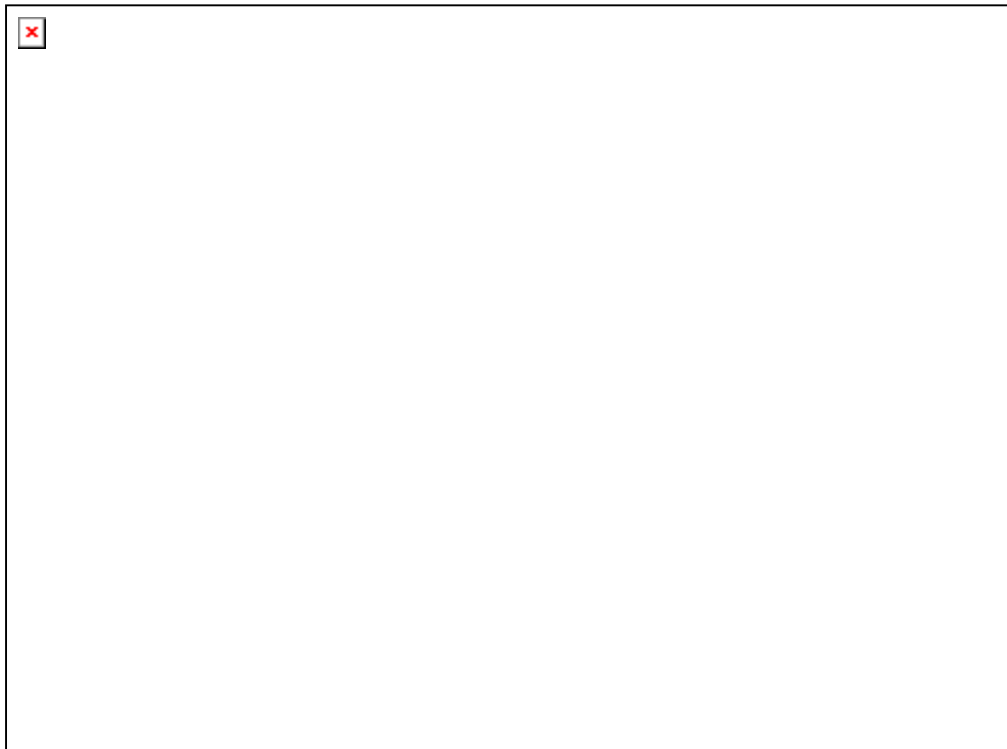


Boo Sze Yang, *Boom #8*, 2009. Oil on canvas, 112.5 x 150 cm, United Overseas Bank collection.

The artist's motivation to paint the subject of accidents is neither didactic nor sensational. This is true in relation to Boo's other series that are more 'meaningful' (the churches in "House of God", 2007; the malls in "The New Cathedral", 2012) and timely (a former political leader in "The Father", 2014). This is true also in relation to the history of art, which is replete with the theme of death as a tool of illustrating life's brevity and absurdity: from the 16/17<sup>th</sup>-century Dutch painters' vanitas featuring a skull among earthly possessions, to Andy Warhol's screen prints of disaster images. Boo's selection and representation of disaster images is characterised by anonymity: Having taken the images from the news media, he does not name the source nor the context of the incident, as if uninterested in the opportunity of tapping on the newsworthiness of particular tragedies. By so doing, he is really suggesting that there is a common base in all such disasters: the disbelief, the devastation, and the impossibility of telling and knowing.

Boo is a virtuoso, in technical terms. Describing his painting process as being "intensive, spontaneous, precarious and re-active", the artist sees himself as a performer of his subject's nature, a process that is "more destructive than constructive.... to the verge of failing". Boo imagines himself as the resuscitator of his destroyed subjects and his inanimate materials; "the painting then comes 'alive'" (artist's statement). To be sure, there is nothing terribly original in each of the painterly gestures Boo uses in the series: One could argue he has curated a party of Pollock's drips, Auerbach's gashes of thick paint, Richter's smears, even the fellow Singaporean painter Ian Woo's doodles, and what not. It's their encounter and combination on Boo's canvasses that result in many visual and tactile effects, which constitute an

engaging analogue to the concentration of physical forces and exchanges among bodies in accidents. Without having been through any major accidents in his life, the artist nonetheless seems vicariously attuned to the nature of materials in and of themselves, as well as among one another. Those encounters in an actual accident, and among the painterly forms and gestures on his canvasses, also produce a third reality, one that is not exactly an aftermath of force and fragility, but their ongoing dialogue.



Boo Sze Yang, *Boom #11*, 2009. Oil on canvas, 46 x 61 cm, Private collection.

*Boom #11* appears to be the exhaust section of a plane wreck, intricately laced in a mesh of twirls and scribbles rendered through scratching on previously applied paint layers. The expressive marks here seem bent on evoking an excess of emotions in the viewers, but are far from unjustified. Given the abject mess of a plane crash, no amount of painterly gestures will be enough to recreate the traumatic experience and irreversible changes, both to machines and human lives. Yet hints of its former glory are visible, thanks to the artist's strong draughtsmanship. It is as if we are returned to the preparatory sketch of a new machine part. Destruction is repeated not adjacently, as in the case of a Warholian print, but in layers, notwithstanding the motorcycle 'twin' in *Boom #22*. Humans have no use for ruins except as a subject of contemplation, but nature does. Leave it to nature to always offer the first signs of life in a scene of devastation. The ruinous in Boo's paintings makes indiscernible the distinction between construction and destruction, between the genres of portraiture, still life and landscape, and between death and life.



Boo Sze Yang, *Boom #22*, 2009. Oil on canvas, 61 x 92 cm, Artist's collection.

Vehicles and structures are not just means of transport or protection from the elements; they are messages about their owners and creators—symbols of wealth, both financial and cultural. By depicting these status symbols in demise, Boo has unintentionally produced ‘double obituaries’, not just of the death of people involved, but precisely through the concurrent demise of their symbols of civility. As diametric opposite of the advertisement made to psyche us into a fuzzy mood all ready to accumulate more things, Boo’s paintings awake us instead: not by bringing us back to life from our respective wretched states, but by reminding that we are all implicated in accidents, from the start thru the end. Boom! We exist, only to end up in a heap.

Text contributor’s biography:

Michael Lee is an artist, curator and publisher based in Berlin and Singapore. He researches urban memory and fiction, and transforms his observations into objects, diagrams, situations, curations or texts. He has staged solo exhibitions at Künstlerhaus Bethanien (Berlin), Hanart TZ Gallery (Hong Kong), Baba House (Singapore) and Alliance Française de Singapour (Singapore). He has participated in various biennales and other major international exhibitions: Kuandu (Taipei, 2012), Singapore (2011), Asia Triennial Manchester (2011), Chongqing (2011), Shanghai (2010), Guangzhou (2011, 2008), World Expo (Aichi, 2005). He curated *Between, Beside, Beyond: Daniel Libeskind's Reflections and Key Works 1989-2014* (Singapore Art Museum, 2007). His editorial projects include *Who Cares: 16 Essays on Curating in Asia* (co-edited with Alvaro Rodriguez Fominaya, published by Para/Site Art Space, Hong Kong, 2010), and *Preoccupations: Things Artists Do Anyway* (co-edited with Cornelia Erdmann, published by laiyen projects and Studio Bibliothèque, Hong Kong, 2008).