

18@8 Heirlooms: Group Show (2015)

Tradition

A way of thinking, behaving, or doing something that has been used by the people in a particular group, family, society, etc., for a long time.

The stories, beliefs, etc., that have been part of the culture of a group of people for a long time.

Tradition lies at the heart of most social groups and they manifest in different ways. You see it in the morning assemblies of primary schools to birthday cakes and their accompany singsong, or in gatherings over festive holidays and the frantic dives into the culinary creations from the family matriarchs. Tradition. It is central to many of our lives, providing comfort, a sense of gleeful anticipation or hidden horror, and above all, a chance for memories and stories to develop. Tradition. It is what defines us

With that, it would not be erroneous to view 18@8 as a tradition for Wei-Ling Gallery. Now in its tenth year, the group exhibition has been an annual event on the gallery's calendar and each of its permutations has offered audiences a different batch of artworks revolving around a singular theme. Notable 18@8 exhibitions include a nomadic display of works at the Amin Gulgee Gallery in Karachi, Pakistan, themes like 'Vice and Virtue' challenging artists to explore dichotomies between different vices and virtues, or 2009's '1Malaysia: Beyond the Canvas', which saw participating artists using non-canvas mediums to communicate. Charitable roots have also spread in 18@8 shows that have raised valuable funds for organisations like the SPCA and ACRES, and despite all 18@8's different guises and locations, it is the art that takes precedence and participating artists offer a visual vocabulary that is both uniquely their own

yet which comes together in artistic unison for Wei-Ling Gallery's definitive group show. Tradition? It is, indeed.

This year, 18@8's theme, 'Heirlooms', plays close heed to the very nature of tradition. An heirloom in itself is a physical object that bears historical or cultural significance, and artists were tasked to create artworks with messages that could be handed down through the ages. This order stemmed from the state of the world today. "Participating artists have been asked to create an artwork mirroring this, projecting a message of his/her hopes, fears, advice; an heirloom of sorts that will be passed down from one generation to another. We cannot be certain of what the future holds, but what we do know is that we are living through times which will become historically relevant in the long run, and we are merely players on the stage, as the story unfolds," reads the curatorial statement.

It is a timely artistic directive from Wei-Ling Gallery. The past year has seen episodes ranging from religious battles to earthquakes, as well as migrations on a global scale and unyielding doctrines and statements that have shaken the sanctity of our nationhood. Though 18@8's participating artists haven't all pointed to specific events, their artworks do resonate with our times in one way or another. Chin Kong Yee's lyrical portrayals of street corners in Paris proffers his signature style, but also comes at a time when the number of displaced refugees in Europe have passed the one-million mark. And as they seek survival through the bureaucratic crevices of the world's powers, their sole solace may be in the night sky and the universe, where they harbour hopes for a better future; wishes upon the very same star that Chin himself spotted in Lyon, and which instigated these paintings. Chong Kim Chiew's *White Over White, Black Over Black – Map* has some link to this topic. A work that grapples with the fluidity of national borders, the mixed media work is an abstract depiction of maps, and – as aptly recorded in the exhibition catalogue essay that accompanied this series – "history and its changes are nothing but a mirror of the unstable human identities."

Nature is one constant amidst historical change and human folly. In Chen Wei Meng's work, *Di mana bumi dipijak, di situ langit dijunjung*, the artist reminds us of nature's omnipresence and might. "This is the site that our life took place, and we are fortunate enough to have ourselves located in a beautiful land like here," reads the artist's statement. His depiction of a coastal Malaysian road and a sprawling blue sky is testament to this, and the work flaunts our minuteness in comparison to nature's vastness. It's an enduring message and one that leans towards more spiritual terrain. Like Yau Bee Ling's work, *The Desired Seeds*, where hundreds of red saga seeds are laid over hands in various gestures; some are cusped in prayer, others curled up in a ball, active, or in motion. The composition is a visual metaphor for the rise of gadgetry today and the fall of more 'hands-on' practices like farming or planting, and how the artist has found a sense of calmness in the latter and in her challenges as a mother.

Or, does spiritualism lie in more literal evocations like in the tradition of flesh-piercing during Thaipusam? Rajinder Singh explores this rhetoric in his corporeally-driven works, created in collaboration with the London-based collective, Drenched Co. Using skin-toned silicone pieces, *A pound of my flesh* explores "the meaning in and around the traumatized body" and whether religious rituals or ceremonies can help us to heal in modern-day Malaysia. Indeed, the challenges in our nation are fertile subject matter for the 18@8 artists. Seeing a past twelve months of various political scandal and economic slowdown, Malaysia's own heirloom might be one that's tainted black like Hamidi Hadi's *Long table meeting after the last supper*, a work that represents Malaysia's desire for greatness, but the choice of using charcoal lends some dark irony to these dreams and caution comes by way of its accompanying work, the *Tiang Sari* installation, whose recycling of termite-ravaged construction pieces proffer a warning of unstable foundations, if good values are cast aside in our lives.

More lessons can be found in Ruzzeki Harris' *Everybody Judge*, though the tone is more humorous and sarcastic. In the work, four judges stand with forced seriousness and their authority is diminished by the stark contrast between their wigs and the sunglasses on their faces. Might this work be a comment on the authority of today? Minstrel Kuik has certainly dived into this topic, analysing the facial features of Malaysia's fourth Prime Minister, frame-

by-frame. A horizontal film-strip-like work, *Father says he loves me* narrates the tale of the artist's own return to Malaysia in 2007, her accidental discovery of a speech by Dr Mahathir during a visit to Kelantan, and her subsequent questioning of the system. "As a first guinea pig of the controversial 3M-education system in the 1980s, the strongman image of Mahathir Mohamed has been omnipresent in the print and broadcasting media throughout my childhood and teenage years. If I were to feminize Malaysia as my motherland, should I blame the Father of progress who has torn apart the link between the mother and her child? Should I blame him for reducing our love into mere slogans?" asks the artist.

And, should question marks accompany our everyday discoveries? Choy Chun Wei seems to suggest so with a sombre-tinted heirloom titled *The Unknown Landscape: The Fleeting News*. Wide and sprawling, the surface of the artist's triptych is made up of thousands of words cut out from newspapers, and bears evidence to the artist's distrust of what is projected in the mass media. There may also be socio-political leanings in Juhari Said's wood-based sculptures, as elements from nature – a stronghold in the artist's oeuvre – serve as a vehicle for commentary and mingle with medium-based explorations.

In Sun Kang Jye's *Ten Commandments*, it is more of the latter. A series of ten works on water colour paper, the artist explores the canvas as a new form of sculpture and, based on minimalist principles, creates new images out of the negative and positive spaces on the canvas. This dichotomy – of voids and occupied spaces – can also be traced in Wong Chee Meng's three paintings, which speak of repeated mistakes in our region's socio-political landscape and where black stripes and splatters that cover the batik background can actually be removed with conscious human intervention. "The aims are to provide hope even if today we stay in darkness and to encourage audiences to be part of this optimism," explains the artist, with a sense of positivity that does stand out among the 18@8 Heirlooms.

Still, art's merit doesn't lie in the optimism or grief that they espouse, but rather, in its ability to provoke thought, stir emotions, and encapsulate times. Art can be a container for current

affairs or a vessel for history, or as Wei-Ling Gallery have correctly surmised, an heirloom. This year's 18@8 exhibition celebrates this intrinsic quality that art holds, and by doing so, gives us audiences more of the good stuff. 18@8. A tradition that propagates the best. And, despite its changeable appearance, is a tradition that warrants being repeated. For a long time to come.

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