

18@8 Mirror Mirror On The Wall (2013) – Group Show

18@8 has a long history that practically defines Wei-Ling Gallery. The gallery's debut exhibition when it moved to its premises in Brickfields, the initial concept behind 18@8 was simple: to gather 18 of Malaysia's top contemporary artists under one roof at 8 Jalan Scott. Since its first instalment, the show has seen many incarnations. It has travelled to Karachi, prodded artists to tackle different themes, and the last few years have seen the increasing involvement of international brands, whose products have served as happy mediums for the 18@8 artists.

This year, 18@8 sees yet another manifestation. The former roll call of 18 artists has been cut down to a tight dozen, and the artists not only tackled the theme at hand, but also worked with Furla's Candy Bags. Boasting simple lines and a transparent jelly-like body, the bags simple countenance served as playgrounds for 18@8's 12 artists, and each artist also produced an artwork in their signature style.

And this year's theme? The short answer: man. From the earliest artworks of the Classical age to religious paintings or historical portraiture, art has always found a deep and fascinating subject in each and every one of us. However, this year's 18@8 looks specifically at man's love for himself and how it has unravelled with the advent and rise of Social Media platforms, which allow for an unabashed showing-off of one's self and which serves as a weak but easily-accessed avenue for self-validation. Narcissism thus lies at the centre of this year's 18@8, and the participating artists have extended their views into other related areas, such as selfishness, self-adornment, perfectionism, and even acceptance by others.

In Ivan Lam's painting, it's a look inwards, as his painting speaks of the duality within the artist, or more specifically, of others and himself. "I guess it's all explained in the text on the first panel, where I am everyone and everyone is me," he states, succinctly. Ivan's argument is that no matter how we try to set ourselves apart from others, we are essentially the same inside.

Our differences can be a point of contention, though, and it's a case of opposites in Sean Lean's painting, which narrates the cultural clashes between himself and his mother, a staunch Taoist Buddhist; her prayer materials are seen taking centre stage in the work, but it's the artist's cartoon heroes like Superman and Captain America that command the background.

This familial difference is common today. Asian parents still hang on tightly to religious or traditional habits, while their children adopt international influences with relish. All this can make for a tsunami of emotional turmoil. Aren't we the same people inside despite having these different values and interests? How do we contend with society, if we feel so markedly different on the inside? Yau Bee Ling addresses these thoughts on conformity and individuality. Inspired by the writings of Rudolf Steiner about human freedom, the man and woman in Bee Ling's painting serve as metaphors for our inner and outer self; "This, perhaps, was my best attempt to visually construct the way I relate the interactive process between the tension of one's outer narcissistic behaviour for the world and my perfect inner-self," she says.

We all harbour certain ideals for ourselves, but there's a definite danger in over-privileging number one. Ilham Fadhlil's dreamy painting projects this cautionary message, likening his subject – a woman called Phantom Limb – to Narcissus, and who was so absorbed with her own reflection in a pond that she didn't realise that she was already dead. Self-absorption, in short, can be isolating or deathly even, and Zulkifli Yusoff's work functions on a similar plane, using the local parable of 'The Birds and the Tortoise' as a lesson to all. In the tale, two birds helped a tortoise travel safely to greener pastures, but news began to spread like wildfire about a flying tortoise, and so the tortoise became big-headed from the praise it received and pride became its downfall.

We can deflect these self-harming situations through moderation, suggests Azliza Ayob. As far as narcissism goes, the artist believes that a little self-absorption can be a good thing; her

painting, *The Enchanted River (Of Temptation)*, features a sanctuary-like river in which to escape to, but Azliza warns that the merits of self-love only remain as long as we do not overindulge. Why? Because the bubble might burst, says Cheng Yen Pheng, who has proffered a painting of over-inflated balloons that threaten to explode from the confines of the canvas – a pictorial warning against boasting, so to speak.

All these messages of caution are fitting for today's audience. As mentioned loosely before, Social Media has changed the way we live and view ourselves, and this freedom to carve our own identities on the Internet has also sparked an inadvertent rise of materialism. Choy Chun Wei isn't happy about this predicament. Inspired by Bertolt Brecht's poem 'Traders Song', there's a Marxist slant to his work, which rejects materialism and the senseless pursuit of wealth in the name of self-love. Bigger cars, a thinner nose, and a fatter bank balance are all top-of-mind wants in today's Malaysia, says the artist, and this thought is similarly addressed in Kim Ng's colourful mixed media work, where the artist argues that narcissism isn't purely about beauty, but that it's also a craving for something that fulfils a personal desire or need for control.

To hanker for acceptance or to pursue gratification from material goods stems from a weak self-esteem, notes Kim, who laments that this trait does travel beyond the personal sphere and into the socio-political realm, too. Ask Anurendra Jegadeva about this and he would probably nod his head in agreement, as his painting, *Peace/ ecaeP*, speaks of the ill treatment of the Muslim Rohingya people in Myanmar by militant monks in the name of Theravadan Buddhism. Does the belief in a greater good justify injustice? Is self-belief enough reason to belittle others? These weighty thoughts are balanced with Anu's playful Furla bag, which features famous world leaders and cultural icons. However, the Popish qualities of the felt cut-outs of Elvis Presley or Barack Obama project a superficial lustre that mirrors much of our world today; whilst a cluster of people dive deeply into serious matters, there's a much greater pool of people that are far more preoccupied by the latest gadgets or fashion, or by greed and self-satisfaction.

Such surface-level obsessions also play out in Hamidi Hadi's work, which points to the smoke and mirror effect that Social Media affords. The work's resin surface serves as a glassy veneer to the work's text (actual dialogues from Social Media), and creates an optical illusion that can be likened to how a photograph on Facebook can be one big, fat lie. The work's very title, Like, is a further poke at the monster that Zuckerberg has created.

It's clear that we now need to skim through a lot of gloss to get to the truth. Wong Chee Meng contends so, and Fact and Fiction looks at what a stage Social Media is. The artist recalls a quote by Francis Bacon to illustrate the point that his artwork makes "Truth is so hard to tell, it sometimes needs fiction to make it plausible". We live in confusing times, ladies and gentlemen, and technology evolves at such a rapid pace, so it's likely that we'll be addressing brand new problems as soon as we've solved this issue of how Social Media has exacerbated narcissism and wrought related troubles. But despite the discernible lies and unknown truths, as Chee Meng's Furla bag so pointedly says, there's one thing that we are all but susceptible to: love.

By now, 18@8's strength should be apparent. This is an exhibition where artistic individualism is celebrated, and indeed, put on show for all to see. As viewers, it affirms the fact that art remains a wonderful refuge from the deluge of the digital world and Social Media, and by picking the best artists from the gallery's stable, this is one group exhibition that affords variety in the best way possible. But wait, isn't it a little narcissistic of Wei-Ling Gallery to be showing off its best? The gallery is guilty, yes., but, this is one form of narcissism that we'll excuse.

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