

Bewildered (2011) – Toon Hian

At first, Toon Hian - like his art - is completely unexpected.

The scion of a third generation tin-mining family, Toon Hian is the atypical Perak businessman, brusque and busy, completely unassuming with fifteen minutes to spare before his next meeting. Possessed by the usual 'Ipoh-mali' hallmarks, he is refreshingly unpretentious, a contradiction in collared t-shirts with an obviously exuberant zest for living. At the same time, he also happens to be an ardent, unlikely follower and - as he describes it – a minor collector, of the romantic works of George Chinnery – an 18th century English painter from the fraternity of Constable

Deliciously paradoxical, Toon Hian is of course the consummate gentlemen, gracious and hospitable, an old boy of St Michael's where he learnt the fundamentals of drawing and painting and mostly, as he puts it 'how to look after your brushes'. In the 1970s, he went to England to further his studies in Business Law and naturally returned to join the family business.

He also – improbably - draws and paints in his spare time. And what accomplished drawings they are.

Bewildered brings together for the first time, a selection of fine drawings in ink and wash that Toon Hian has, after nearly 30 years - for no apparent reason and out of no where – decided to share with all of us.

And it is an extremely refreshing exhibition.

Especially within the context of a contemporary art movement that is driven by its usual agendas and alliances; dictated by the hierarchies and egos and commercial interests we have all come to expect, Bewildered is a truly unexpected, unhindered and curious delight.

Their aesthetic merits, evident on every one of these precious slips of paper, are obviously undeniable but it will be interesting to try and place these `outsider' works within the usual banal curatorial and art historical categorizations within the jealous confines of our larger art movement.

Nevertheless, it seems as if Bewildered will be loved unconditionally. Toon Hian's drawings are simply that good.

For this artist, it appears that art is not static, as demonstrated by the stream of images through which the lives of all his characters are realized. Loosely divided into various series – Chinese mythology, the landscape, human relations and the animal world - each little drawing is as vital and as paradoxical as the other – here a monkey, there a reference to Han Su Yin, suddenly a Chinese emperor, manic horses, lonely dowagers and then a group of old Indian people.

Unencumbered by the baggage and dictates of the art movement itself, Toon Hian makes his drawings intermittently during the day – between meetings, after work, any free time he gets and as such this body of works read like a diary.

His scenes are filled with figures, at times scant and at other times packed to the brim, beautifully placed within spontaneous and instinctively designed landscapes that point to delightful and unsettling stories that are his but nevertheless allows the viewer to divulge purely on the basis that they are such beautiful things.

Vaguely reminiscent of the animated surrealism of Picasso, these little jewels are never derivative and seem to owe as much to classical Chinese brush painting even as they refer to modern European approaches to image making.

With its vibrant lines and vivacious forms, Toon Hian's drawings are generally fiestalike. They are quite simply, celebrations of themselves – unpretentious, instinctive and hugely enjoyable.

And again - very, very accomplished.

For all their celebratory aspect however, each and every drawing is seldom without its opposite, namely, a sense of the wistful and the misguided. Flashy washes of grey and blue and black are counter-balanced by abrupt, even intentionally awkward forms and illogical scale. Faces drawn so as to be freshly child-like in their pristine directness also feature a grace of line and a weave of details that is the opposite of naivete, an example of the paradoxical in Toon Hian's art can be seen in the tiny intricate Pantomine – one of the few drawings presented in tender washes of pinks and yellow and blue and greens.

Featuring a group of interwoven figures – perhaps risqué women dancers, perhaps everyday people waiting in line to meet a high official or at a line in the Post-office – this extravagant tiny painting, as with all his drawings, possess the standard elements for an erotic appeal. Yet this appeal is not what emerges, because the depiction of these provocative actors and actresses undermines an easy indulgence in sensuality. Bright flourishes of colour in this particular work – mirrored by the luminous washes in his other monochromatic works – act as stage lighting, subverting the throbbing tonal ranges of blacks and blues – in this case, violets and mauves. All of which, again and again in works like A Quarrel with its circle of fighting dog-beasts or the flirtatious Jade Necklace darken with melancholy and a certain pensiveness on the faces and poses of his actors in his otherwise lighthearted places.

And it all happens in tiny scale often no more than six by nine inches! Among the steady stream of figures – in ones, threes or complex crowds is a wonderful rhythm of line – the artist chooses to place his figures and events in a colossal white space and in doing so seems to remove his compositions from any social reality. Far from being an endorsement of life as is, the artist depicts the world around him in exaggerated and manic terms making his celebrations a playful negation of real life instead. Such social distance illuminates the parody of daily life by fiesta participants or nimble, distorted characters in works like Gopal and Jumbo the Elephant or the somewhat indecipherable Birth.

Each one of these drawings, like Toon Hian's larger body of works touch us in different ways. First and foremost – they are eloquently beautiful but almost as important as their aesthetic prowess is that fact that they are surreal explorations in which the artist strips the actors of all their guises to reveal the human reality beneath. The works in Bewildered seem to be Toon Hian's very own set of parables, a kind of wonderful book of virtues.

All the more, because they are – again – so completely unexpected

Anurendra Jegadeva, 2011.