

Heads Up: Group Show (2010)

What? PORTRAITURE???

Heads Up! Is an unpretentious exploration of contemporary portraits by Malaysian artists featuring works by Chong Choon Woon, Ng Bee, Kim Ng, Marvin Chan, Mohd Al-Khuzairie Ali and Chee Eng Hong.

As contemporary practitioners who draw from different disciplines - painters, printmakers and sculptors - it is extremely interesting to see these varied approaches applied to portraiture today.

Even more intriguing is the fascination that these contemporary artists have with the portrait in spite of its stigma of classicism and the argument with portraiture, the search for 'a likeness' provides for nothing beyond the most banal of perception at the very best, it is servant to Kings and politicians, the stuff of fat men and ugly women.

And yet the portrait has a rich and long history arguably at the very heart of the earliest beginnings of artistic practice and history. From the moment the hand-print adorned the cave walls of primitive man, the reason for portraiture, the assertion that 'this is me' and 'that is you' was born.

And of course, this assertion of identity preoccupies us every single day from the music we listen to, the food we eat and how we vote but it seems we still don't know who we are or how we fit.

In the case of our local art scene, no credible account of the origins of a modern Malaysian art can be discussed without taking into account the primacy of the portrait.

From the earliest recorded paintings by Malaysian artists, portraiture or rather, the figurative within larger narratives has largely dominated the picture planes of a Modern Art movement in Malaysia.

Its beginnings can be seen in 1963. Fresh from the euphoria of Merdeka! and in conjunction with the birth of a one Malaysia that embraced Sabah, Sarawak, and Singapore, the Shell Petroleum Company commissioned the first ever Malaysian art 'coffee-table book' which showcased an inclusive series of over 70 portraits of Malaysians by Datuk Hoessein Enas.

These luscious and beautifully romantic portraits fronted actors within the contexts of their everyday Malaysian lives depicted at work and in recreation, from worship to tradition - a progressive, capable and confident people with tremendous hopes for the future.

The line-up of portraits captures the diversity of a Malaysian people from the Nobat musicians and the tribal elders to silat players; from the Malay youth from Kedah to the Indian rubber tapper and the speaker of the house representatives.

It tells the world who we are, where we live and how we live together.

Nearly half a century later, in the realms of One-Malaysia, within a world so complex and fractured philosophically, economically and socially the issue of identity, national, racial, occupational, spiritual, global, continues to dominate our collective consciousness.

Artist have been preoccupied with these issues for the longest time.

In Malaysia, even at the heights of the abstraction of the 60s and the consequent conceptual flirtations of the 70s, the portraits has always played a poignant part in the thinking and development of a contemporary Malaysian art movement.

Ib's iconic *My Father and the Astronaut* the portrait of his father alongside the American astronaut asks questions about how we fit into this brave/complex new world.

Amron's *silat* players of the 70s, with ethereal tenderness ponder the place of tradition and culture within modern living.

Since the 1990s, Portraiture has come to be an integral part of the social narratives that dominate contemporary art in Malaysia. Within its contemporary context, none of it intends to be direct portraiture straight-up formal or stylistic renditions of the sitter.

Wong Hoy Cheong's stylized *Migrant heads*, the massive self-portraits which have consumed the *Matahatis*'; Ahmad Zakii Anwar and Jailani Abu Hassan's cool jazzy juxtapositions of object and likeness all rely heavily on portraiture for their intensity, poignancy and connections with the viewer.

Ivan Lam's experiments with portraits of everyday people in ridiculous scale or Yau Bee Ling's modernist approach to reducing likeness to a weave of mark and primary color all rely on the portrait for the resonance within their works. Meanwhile artists like Yee I-Lann and Nadiah Bhamadaj, explore the portrait in the allegorical and autobiographical all seeking to find their place within their worlds.

This grouping of artists showcased in the exhibition *Heads Up!* provides the starting point for a dialogue about the dynamism of a new figurism in contemporary art and the new relevance portraiture plays within that context.

In thinking about this exhibition and the relevance of portraiture in contemporary art we are faced with two recurrent questions. One is the anthropological, one with regard to identity, who are we, why are we here, blah, blah, blah.

More salient, if portraiture and more specifically figuration are seen as merely the most banal means of artistic perception IN SPITE of its ability to convey and connect with the viewer at large then this dialogue surrounding the relevance of the contemporary portrait begs THAT larger question what is art for?

Anurendra Jegadeva, 2010