

## Motherland (2015) – Sean Lean

A stew of colours and cognitive juices have been brewing in Sean Lean's studio, where monochrome and formalism used to rule. In his previous body of work, which featured in an ambitious first solo exhibition titled *Flesh*, paintings of animals were at fore and the works were an exercise in artistic expression – something that was “enjoyable and a relief” for Sean to produce.

These days, it's China, a sprawling land that dominates much of Asia and international headlines, which has been the artist's muse. However, more than the nation of over 1.3 billion inhabitants, it has been the artist's parents who have played the strongest influence. “Motherland is my parents' China, the affinity they feel about the country where their fathers are from,” says the artist. Spurred by a curiosity for his parents' fascination with this land, *Motherland* encapsulates these personal reflections and the 18 works in the show come together as an investigation into “Chinese-ness and what it means to be a Chinese person now”.

### My Family, They Make Me

Work on *Motherland* began two-and-a-half years ago, shortly after Sean's debut showing. The germination of the series' material, though, began somewhat unconsciously and as early as his childhood. “My family is somewhat traditional. My parents speak little English, if any, I went to Chinese schools, and my family were very into Taoism, and still are. We'd have worship ceremonies on the 15th of every lunar month and both of my parents are still vegetarian for Taoist reasons. I was one, too, for about 8 to 10 years,” explains the artist.

Exposure to different cultures fed into Sean's boyhood, and Western influences – from learning the English language through computer games and fantasy novels or comic books –

soon injected doses of difference to his personal identity. Around him, though, others bore little affinity for the same things. “In a way, I think I felt a little lonely then. My dad used to read me ‘Romance of 3 Kingdoms’ as bedtime stories, and I would be reading ‘The Hobbit’ on my own. When I got a little older, I would be reading ‘Lord of the Rings’ and ‘Jinyong’ kungfu novels. It’s surreal thinking back (on this contrast) now; I’d watch ‘Cheers’, ‘Who’s The Boss’, and ‘Full House’ by myself, and watch Hong Kong TVB dramas with the family; I’d read manga and ‘Batman’, or listen to Alan Tam and Nirvana... You get the idea.”

The artist’s college years saw the presence of more kindred spirits and opportunities to discuss shared cultural fascinations, but still, his identity seemed to be in flux. “There were moments which jolted me into feeling like an imposter, and that feeling persists even now, although not as much. I feel like I am always teetering on the edge of two distinct cultural groups, like I am in a cultural no-man’s land,” argues the artist.

If these concerns need some visual representation, you’ll find it in *Dear God*, a 2009 work that encapsulates the dichotomy of Sean’s traditional Chinese upbringing and the influx of foreign cultures into his life. In the work, a traditional Chinese altar takes centre stage and the background sees a mural of iconic superheroes taking flight. This work serves as the unofficial predecessor to *Motherland*, and the work’s contrasts speak of Sean and the inevitable identity mishmash that individuals of his generation face: which gods do I worship – my parents’ or the ones of my choosing?

A question of being Chinese, today

Within the grand scheme of things, this generational divide isn’t foreign matter when considering the history of migrants in Malaysia and the natural evolution of disparate cultures in what was then, a fairly uncharted land. When Sean’s grandfathers – both migrants from China – descended upon Malaya, it’s likely that they held their original values and cultures

tightly. Two generations down the line, those same values would have seen a natural dilution and adaptation to times and other influences.

Yet, what's within never really leaves. It merely changes, and in *Motherland*, this plays out in the potent use of Chinese iconography and how it is represented by the artist. "What I try to do in this series is to take iconic traditional Chinese imagery, and see how much I can take away elements of what makes it traditional while retaining parts that still make it Chinese," Sean explains. Icons like the dragon and phoenix in *Pantone Men* and *Pantone Women* or the Chinese warrior and lord in *Green Door* and *Tiffany Blue* (a work that also features the visage of the artist's mother) are evergreen symbols for Chinese culture and romanticized earmarks of the past, but Sean has reimagined them all by adding twists in the iconography like the crackled effect on the paintings' surfaces that serve as interruptions to the representation of history, and which can also be read as marks of Chinese identity in flux and the ruptures in Sean's own.

This plays out further in works like the trio of classic Chinese New Year symbols of Fu, Lu, Shou (Happiness, Wealth, and Longevity), where a smattering of tongue-in-cheek interpretation is added through the paintings' backgrounds of Roman goddesses instead of the usual pairing of the three male Chinese deities. This parody can also be seen in *Motherland's* two Buddha paintings, where the figures are juxtaposed with graffiti-style text that commands viewers to, simply, 'Believe'.

My history, I write my own

Whilst *Motherland* points to the artist's roots and the iconography of Chinese culture, it is also Sean's imprint for his personal journey and an examination of his identity today. The paintings of Chinese dragons and their iconic counterparts, may herald a modern-day romanticization of the past, but the body of work is more blatantly, a coming of age as a man and a coming of age as an artist. Sean's *Motherland*, is thus both uniquely his own and also,

a stunning visual documentation of where his roots fundamentally lie. China, wherever that might be, mightn't be very far away at all.

Rachel Jenagaratnam

Singapore

August, 2015