

The Tiger Show (2010)

Wei-Ling Gallery's group show centred on the Chinese calendar is looking to be a tradition for the gallery. It previously embarked on this theme with 'Rooster Mania' in 2005 and this year - the year of the Tiger - eleven artists have each brought forth a different interpretation of the animal in question.

Ahmad Shukri Mohamed presents a mixed media piece featuring tigers floating against a colourful backdrop of elements. A t-shirt has even been embedded into the artwork, though it is the scenery of a jungle that forms the central portion of the artwork, alluding to one of the artist's main preoccupations: the devastation of nature to make way for modern-day development.

This theme carries through to the work by Umibaizurah Mahir. Her playful ceramic pieces feature prints of wild animals and they are presented atop flat metal pans. Coupled with the butcher's thermostat on the left-hand side of the specially-fashioned plinth these sculptures rest upon, the artist suggests that wild animals have become nothing more than trophies or food for the consumption of man.

These artists' despondency is warranted. These big cats - certainly of all the animals in the Chinese zodiac - bear the worst fate in our modern world; a few subspecies are extinct, others are on the critically endangered list, and they continue to be hunted or caged for our spectatorship.

Chin Kong Yee's horizontal painting refers to the latter. The painting shows us four felines, but could well suggest the nervous pacing of a trapped single tiger. The tiger circles around the small space, and as we move towards the right portion of the canvas, we see its vibrancy and flaming orange fur drained to a lusterless blue.

It's quite a contrast to how Yusof Ghani has portrayed the tiger. In both his abstract works there is a strong sense of movement and magnetism; the charcoal drawing sees the tiger charging across the canvas with predatory speed and this momentum continues in his colourful oil painting that renders roaring features of the animal. The latter can also be seen as the filine counterpart to the artist's ongoing Wajah series, where the human physiognomy is rendered with equally vigorous brushstrokes.

Marvin Chan, on the other hand, blends both human and animalistic traits into his two portraits. The subjects are children and their features are seen amalgamated with the tiger's unmistakable and beguiling eyes. The pair of works announces two things: the inherent sincerity and grit children possess is akin to the fearlessness of the tiger, and, we can all learn something from animals. "The right attitude," says the artist, "can empower any person to become a greater entity, but only if the person is not imprisoned by fear."

Might we all possess animalistic quirks? Jeganathan Ramachandran suggests so with his unconventional portrait of a man with whiskers and tiger stripes all over his body. His innards are revealed to us like an x-ray, and instead of internal organs, we are presented with animals from the Chinese zodiac in varying sizes. The work concludes that we have peculiarities of each sign inside us but to different degrees.

Justin Lim updates the tiger in his pop-esque portrayals of Be@rbricks, the highly sought-after designer collectible toys. There is a clever play on mediums in Lim's work, where paper and Perspex are contrasted (also reminiscent of the packaging of these limited edition figurines) and there's a sense of unpredictability in the work, as the tigers are shown flanking its prey.

Tigers in Phuan Thai Meng's contributions to the show are not represented directly. They're seen as wall-projections and the artist has portrayed himself in the act of painting them. Phuan's two artworks rest in the realm of hyperrealism and could be mistaken for

photographs if not for the evidence of paint seen on the surface. The precision and skill in these miniature works are notable, and these paintings (of paintings) prompt you to study them closely and rethink the very act of painting.

Anurendra Jegadeva's portraits offer a twist to the fray. The artist has chosen to portray fighters of the Liberation Tigers of the Tamil Eelam (LTTE, or, Tamil Tigers) and to address the contradictions in the roles these individuals play. His paintings of monks carrying guns exemplify this best, as the guns they carry are starkly at odds with what their bright orange robes symbolize. Also on show are four portraits by the artist, whose ash markings and striped uniform - loosely resembling a tiger's stripes - stand out clearly amidst the moody blue background.

The military theme also features in Zukifli Yusoff's work, though it is of a different kind. Zukifli's work boasts a local flavour and showcases the artist's updating of history with digital prints and vivid colours. Military elements - swords, pistols, and planes - are juxtaposed with a realistic portrayal of the tiger and a portrait of Tomoyuki Yamashita, a Japanese General who was once nicknamed the 'Tiger of Malaya'.

Jalaini Abu Hassan also sets his protagonists in a local setting, the interior of a traditional wooden house. The tiger has been portrayed as a slain beast and there is a woman at the furthest end of the canvas who appears to have just woken up, catching the finale of the murder and the fleeting of the bloodstained warrior. The artist has played on contrasts of movement and stillness in 'The Great Fall' and it is his metaphor on the decline of power and the legendary Harimau Malaya.

Wei-Ling Gallery's 'Tiger Show' has been a good opportunity for participating artists to display their virtuoso and distinct styles. It offers audiences varying interpretations of the same theme and brings our local artists one step closer to being fierce contenders - tigers, some might say - out there.

Rachel Jena, 2010