

Utopia (2011) – Haslin Ismail and Hee Chee Way

When artists choose to curate their own show, they tend to choose paths that play on their strengths and interests. The challenge comes in the form of reinterpretations of familiar subject matter or by way of pushing their practices further. And, by wearing the hat of a curator, they bypass the authority of another individual and enjoy a higher level of independence.

Haslin Ismail and Hee Chee Way came together with that level of autonomy, and what they saw in each other was a mirror image; both had a youth imbued with fantasy and comic books and both shared a love for science fiction and fantasy. So, inspired by the notion of fantastical worlds and imaginative creatures, the two artists embarked on the task of portraying their own versions of the notion of Utopia.

Utopia: perfect worlds, idyllic situations, and an imagined state where everything is fine and dandy. All these descriptions fit the bill and define the word, but how have the artists portrayed it?

There are no Shangri-Las or green pastures in this exhibition, but instead, Haslin and Chee Way have borrowed the language of science fiction and fantasy for their artworks, where strange creatures possess the artworks and the surreal elements in their futuristic worlds look starkly different to our own.

What is Utopia then according to the artists?

To answer this, we need to look at the artworks themselves and the correlations between Haslin and Chee Way. First, there are crossovers between the works of both artists, symbolic

elements that prophesize how things may be in the future. Consider the puppet strings. They're visible in Haslin's mammoth *The Very Extraordinary Voyages* (2010-11) and suspend Chee Way's inflatable toys mid-air, in front of paintings (*Migration* [2011]) or connecting one part of an installation to the next (*Growth* [2011]).

This can be read as an allusion to the future and how humans or other creatures may be controlled by external forces – a practice that's already seen in contemporary activities like factory farming, where the lives of animals are controlled for human consumption. A dolphin trapped in an artwork, as seen in Chee Way's seven-painting installation, *Cycle* (2011) , intensifies this argument.

Then, there are cracks in the works of both artists – figurative cracks evidenced by the crackled surface of paint in Chee Way's hanging bear figure (the exact shape of the popular *Be@rbrick* figure, another allusion to boy's toys and pop culture) in *Migration* (2011) or in Haslin's *Welcome Aboard* (2010- 11) , where fissures causing chinks in the earth break the stable foundations of the landscape, and metaphorically imply that there are ruptures or flaws in these worlds.

This pessimism does not go unnoticed and it's enhanced further by both artists' strong use of geometric forms, sharp triangles in particular, to depict what the artists envisage as futuristic landscapes. Pointy edges hint at inhospitable and harsh terrain, inorganic life, and with no discernible human forms visible (the closest things resembling people are collaged figures from magazine cut outs and Haslin's painted robots), you stop to question: where is everybody?

In this sense, Utopia according to the works of the two artists is a paradox; it is gloomy and not at all what its definition suggests. There is no idealism here. The heavy use of dark colours recall dark clouds, painting overcast prophecies, and the dearth of distinguishable organic life suggests the end of the world as we know it.

Is this our future?

If so, it is bleak. But, let's look back even further. The topic of Utopia is something that artists have explored before. In the early twentieth-century, artists – bearing witness to rapid modernization and the imminence of World War I – proffered projections of futures filled with machines, flying vehicles, and skyscrapers, and these predictions have, in many ways, come true.

Is it strange then that artists today, miles away, view things in a similar vein? Paint entire landscapes made up of cogwheels as Haslin has done in *The Open Cage* (2009-11)? And is this what Haslin and Chee Way feel altogether, that our futures are so grim?

The catch is here – another paradox, another oxymoron. Beneath the fractured surfaces and the strangely unfamiliar creatures in Haslin and Chee Way's works is something more hopeful. The artists' versions of Utopia, so to speak, are the very worlds that they disappeared to in their youth, and the very creatures that they daydreamed about and drew upon for this exhibition.

Utopia is a celebration of the things Haslin and Chee Way love; the former has always blended the surreal and the fantastical in his artworks, whilst Chee 10 11 *The Very Extraordinary Voyage* . Mixed Media on Canvas . 305cm x 305cm . 2010/11 Way's penchant for digital art allows him to bring his creatures to life with the help of video projections.

Freedom and a genuine love for their subject matter is what these two artists deem as Utopia, and the opportunity to break free from the constraints of curatorial briefs and other restrictions has arguably allowed them to flourish.

But even if we remove the biographical references in our viewing of these works, there is still poignancy. Frederic Jameson noted that “Utopia has always been a political issue, an unusual destiny for a literary form” and his statement rings true for Haslin and Chee Way’s works.

We routinely consider our futures within our immediate or larger communities, strive for a collective betterment, or aim towards social or political change to achieve a state where everything is perfect and in order – Utopia. And, whilst it is an odd conclusion to come to considering Haslin and Chee Way’s works have roots in youth and the make-believe, there is no escaping the argument that the very word Utopia probes us to think about change.

The works in today’s exhibition may represent Haslin and Chee Way’s daydreams about idyllic worlds and use relics from their youth, but they also probe us to think about our lives. The dead tree and uniformed cardboard box cut-outs in Haslin’s *Imminent Utopia* (2011) – a great exploration of materials (one of the artist’s preoccupations during the process of creating works for Utopia) – force us to think about nature and how it’s slowly being superseded by human consumption (the same goes for the artist’s use of discarded materials in *The Queen* 2009-11, whilst Chee Way’s little black figures in *New Born* have only their material and shape as an indication of their colourful, jocund past. Today, they are all the same. Their individuality has been stripped away with a wash of black paint, and their characters and individuality float across the gallery, only to be trapped within frames.

There is both caution and celebration in this exhibition. Futuristic worlds are as playful as they are menacing, but despite this oxymoron, Haslin and Chee Way will both tell you that there is no better world than the ones they have created for Utopia .

Rachel Jena, 2011.