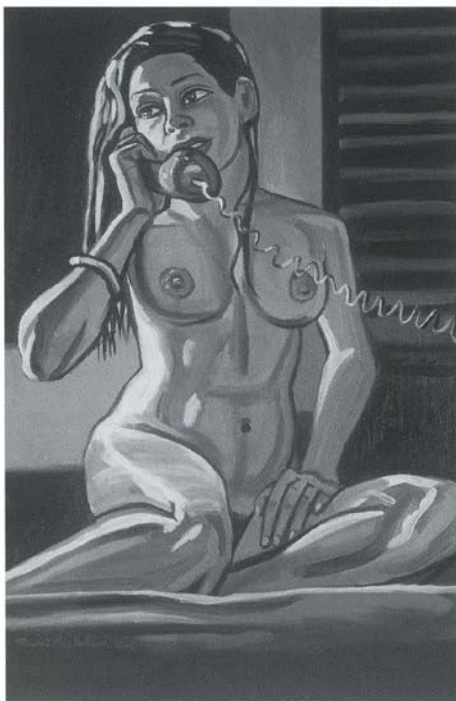


A not so 'private' take on Malaysia
Stewart MacFarlane: Private Life
Weiling Gallery, Kuala Lumpur
11 September – 13 October 2006

By no means is Stewart MacFarlane's exhibition 'Private Life' a timid entrée for Malaysian audiences. Apart from a single cityscape, his thirty-one paintings are nudes that carry the punch expected of MacFarlane's lurid palette and confrontational poses. Rarely is such intensity seen in Malaysia. These works blatantly challenge Malaysia's censorship protocols, which even preclude life drawing at art schools. The exhibition was not an intentional political statement by MacFarlane but rather a bold invitation by dealer Lim Wei-ling of Weiling Gallery who met MacFarlane when studying in Australia in the late 1980s.

For a follower of MacFarlane's work, there are no surprises in these paintings. They are cohesive, mature and embody his strident individuality. The surprise is their place within the Malaysian context, presenting an alternate reading of his urban nudes against the background of an Islamic society. Here there is no *kampung* nationalism which is favoured in Malaysian painting; gone is the delicacy of 'sensitivity censorship', replaced by an unequivocal confidence that owes no debt to borrowed style. MacFarlane's paintings are sensually loaded with ambiguous invitations and the psychosocial state of the modern western city. Take *Upstairs* and *Purple Stockings* for example; in the context of Malaysia the sexually confrontational quality of these works takes on a complex political and theological position, which becomes part of their charge.

It is usual in Malaysia for a painting to have 'a story' as a kind of entry point and it is through this portal that MacFarlane connects with his Malaysian audience. His paintings 'filmic' quality, employing devices of staging, props, harsh lighting and the camera's gaze, invite an objective scrutiny. These are not homely girls bathed in a Rubenesque glow; they are creatures of a contemporary urban-scape. Romanticism is replaced by blatant sexuality in an everyday setting. *Upstairs* 2006, is loaded with pointers to a



Stewart MacFarlane, *The Phone Call*, 2006. Oil on canvas, 91 x 61cm. Image courtesy artist and Weiling Gallery, Kuala Lumpur.

foreboding tale: who are the couple on the laptop screen and what is their connection to the woman? MacFarlane's nude clutches her breast in modesty, her toe turned coyly inwards in a gesture charged and confused. Her gaze is direct, but distant. MacFarlane is a master at constructing internal tension, which extends to include the viewer. We are caught and unsettled by our own voyeurism, an experience not encountered with Malaysian painting.

Similarly in *The Phone Call* 2006, MacFarlane crops the frame, tightly boxing the figure and forcing a claustrophobic engagement with a naked body. We gaze upon her, the offset lighting heightening the drama of the pose. Her form is defined by brutal, abstract slashes of garish green, pallid yellow or red, equally unsettling and evocative. There is no confusion in these works and their directness is both refreshing and confronting within the Malaysian context where protocols of cultural and religious sensitivity dominate.

MacFarlane's reclining females absorb this tension with casual repose, draped like a coat tossed on a couch. We see this illustrated in *Purple Stockings* 2006, where the inverted pose of the model forces the viewer's gaze to work up the body's meandering curves. These unusual angles have become characteristic of MacFarlane's portraits and are emphasised by the theatricality of lighting. At first glance they appear quiet lurid, edging on soft porn, but surprisingly their honesty invites an unaccustomed familiarity. Maybe it is this ambivalence that adds to the strength of MacFarlane's nudes and which allows them to slip under the radar of censorship, allowing their impact to ripple across contemporary painting in Malaysia.

MacFarlane takes his portraits one step further by using a high-gloss varnish that resonates with a sense of 'heroin chic' and 'glam rock'. The suggestion of the carnal is pushed to an extreme for Malaysian audiences in the painting *Black Stockings and Tulips* 2006, where the model flirts with our perceptions of porn, on hands and knees, pouting at the viewer. Such paintings are beyond contemporary Islamic protocols of representation and have a unique place in a Malaysian gallery. That this exhibition was not 'shut-down' is miraculous and is probably due its location in a Chinese-run, private gallery located in KL's 'fringe' Brickfields area. 'Private Life' left one considering context equally with content.

Gina Fairley