

The Pavilion of Malaysia - Holding Up a Mirror

The Pavilion of Malaysia is pleased to present its inaugural exhibition *Holding Up a Mirror* at the 58th edition of La Biennale di Venezia. Four artists – Zulkifli Yusoff, H.H. Lim, Anurendra Jegadeva and Ivan Lam – contemplate identity in its various forms: self, society, culture and history, at a time of immense political and social change. The exhibition reflects the overarching theme of the Biennale, *May You Live in Interesting Times*, set by this edition's curator Ralph Rugoff.

Malaysia is a confluence of many cultures and multiple histories, which have intertwined over centuries, integrating narratives of diaspora and migration. The artists exhibiting in the Malaysian Pavilion are themselves an illustration of these different ethnicities and origins; while each artist is *Malaysian*, their religious and cultural roots illuminate the many histories embedded in the Malaysian identity.

The phrase *Holding Up a Mirror* from which the exhibition borrows its title means "to depict something as it really is". One of its earliest references in literature appears in *Hamlet*, Shakespeare's tragedy, where the eponymous protagonist impresses upon a troupe of actors that the "purpose of playing" is to "hold the mirror up to nature".ⁱ Hamlet was originally thought to be linking good acting with an authentic or natural performance. Another interpretation suggests that Hamlet was expounding on the importance of drama as a vehicle of truth, not merely as entertainment. It could be argued that Shakespeare's use of the metaphor "holding up a mirror" was polysemous, and that both readings are 'true'.

In today's world, truth and its many versions can no longer be quoted without spin; fake news and conspiracies make the stuff of global headlines; fear and scaremongering underpin the rhetoric of politicians, and images "contaminate us like viruses".ⁱⁱ Within this global context *Holding Up a Mirror* presents four artists' subjectivities on the concept of identity. The exhibition takes as its starting point the notion of identity as the space where the personal and the public intersect, where myth and history collide, and where national and international perspectives are constructed. Zulkifli Yusoff's *Kebun Pak Awang (Mr Awang's Garden)* is an ode to a way of life and values which are being eroded today; H.H. Lim's *Timeframes* is an anthology of cerebral and physical journeys of the self, and actions attempting to transpose the abstract into the physical; Anurendra Jegadeva's installation *Yesterday, in a Padded Room* is a satirical view of contemporary culture; whilst Ivan Lam's *One Inch* is a phenomenological exploration of the space between 'I' and 'we'.

Zulkifli Yusoff's installation *Kebun Pak Awang* (2010) is an exemplary reflection of his overall practice, which is an exploration of personal, national and cultural identity through the lens of history and socio-politics. His use of different media and techniques is protean, ranging from painting, drawing, print-making, sculpture and installation. He fully exploits these techniques to create his cultural iconography and symbolism, in which are embedded narratives of nostalgia, belonging and memory.

Kebun Pak Awang was named after the eponymous radio show in the 1970s about a farming family – effectively propaganda encouraging Malaysians to grow their own produce. It relates to another body of Yusoff's work entitled *Tun Razak Speech Series – The Green Book* about the discourses and policies of Tun Abdul Razak, Malaysia's second prime minister. The Green Book Programme was Tun Razak's agricultural initiative implemented in 1974 to make the country more self-sufficient and to improve the livelihood of rural farmers, many of whom had suffered from the falling price of rubber, of which Malaysia was a major exporter. Small fragmented farmers were incentivised to band together to form cooperatives facilitating larger scale commercial production, and the general public inspired to grow vegetables for their own consumption to reduce the burden of inflation and recession. In this way *Kebun Pak Awang* harkens back to a time when the development of the nation was regarded as the collective responsibility of all.

The installation comprises a cornucopia of wooden objects mounted on opposite walls and arranged in a geometric pattern. Printed on the wooded objects – or bursting out of the surface in semi three-dimensional form – are various tropical fruits motifs – a papaya cut into two, bananas, durians, jackfruit and bitter melon, most of which are overlaid onto a neat grid, suggesting the trappings of a more structured cultivation. Appearing on some of the blocks is the 'f' of the Felda logo (The Federal Land Development Authority, the government agency of which Tun Razak was the architect, set up in 1956 to tackle rural poverty and facilitate diversification of the economy). A wooden wheelbarrow, pull cart, shelving unit holding 'products', and flooring recalling the raffia mats so ubiquitous in *kampung* houses, are all covered with the same fruit motif. The entire arrangement is reminiscent of a rural plantation or orchard setting in a *kampung*.

The screen-printed fruit bears resemblance to the quasi-scientific drawings of the early British colonialists who assiduously documented the treasures of their discoveries as they went about exploring the country. Situated in this wider context, the fruit motifs become the receptacle of a wider historical narrative. More than mere fruits, we apprehend the symbolic trajectory of their representation, which includes the bounty of the colonialists, a thing of exoticism, to be studied, classified and conquered; to the actions of a newly independent country to create self-sufficiency and support rural livelihood; to a way of life that is under threat.

The aspect of national identity raised in Yusoff's work calls to mind the contrasting theories of the political scientists Benedict Anderson and Partha Chatterjee on the emergence of sovereign nations and nation-building in Asia. Anderson wrote that the "Last Wave" of new states, like Malaysia, who commenced their nation-building at the end of World War II with the demise of colonialism, were reliant on models of nationalism based on the Western tradition. Chatterjee, on the contrary, argued that the Asian "nationalist imagination" was based on one of *difference from* rather than *identity with* Western forms of nationalism. He argued that anti-colonialist nationalists produced their "own domain of sovereignty within colonial society in the spiritual sphere of cultural identity, well before beginning their political battle with the imperial power". This spiritual sphere is rooted in elements such as landscape, family, and language, amongst other aspects, and evolved as the nation came into being and took shape. It is this "cultural identity of the spiritual sphere" which Yusoff captures so vividly in his symbolism – tropical fruits, so endemic to the Malaysian landscape; cultural artefacts denoting *kampung* life; and historical icons with their nation-building policies.

Yusoff's installation situates self and identity in context of the wider collective of society or nation. Civic progress necessitates a civic mindset; we cannot better our lot without bettering the life of others. History is linked to and defined by certain periods in time; there are clear delineations and contrasts – ruptures even – between past and present in Yusoff's work. These aspects provide an interesting contrast with H.H. Lim's subjectivity which, on the other hand, is not limited to a specific time or place or historical period. Past, present and future roll forwards and backwards seamlessly, and place is a concept located somewhere in the artist's mind.

Born in Malaysia, H.H. Lim has lived in Rome since 1976, traveling and working between the Italian city and Penang island in Malaysia. This peripatetic life and cross-cultural blending is reflected in his practice which is conceptual in nature and embraces a variety of genres and media, such as video, installations, painting and performance. Lim's abundant experiences, in which time and place are conflated in memory, form the conceptual basis of his explorations around the nature of meaning.

For the Biennale Lim is exhibiting two bodies of works under the title of *Timeframes: Four Seasons* (2019) a triptych painting, and *Comment Sense* which comprises *Sitting Sculptures* (various years) an installation of chairs, along with four short video films *Patience* (2002), *Enter the Parallel World* (2001-2006), *Red Room* (2004) and *Falò* (2017). *Timeframes* is a personal anthology of Lim's experiences and investigations expressed in a variety of aesthetic modes. Linking the works loosely and appearing in

different guises is the chair, whose role shifts repeatedly from protagonist to shadow, to prop, or simply as a vehicle to pontificate the works.

Sitting Sculptures, an installation of approximately 28 chairs, is both an explicit and implicit enquiry into the role of chairs in everyday life. Lim invites the public to sit on these chairs and view the work, additionally situating them as a conduit linking the other works. The chairs, arranged randomly, are all unique. Nearly all of them have had their seats removed and replaced with hard metal on which are carved random words. Sitting on the cold, hard seats, we contemplate the large triptych *Four Seasons* opposite. We come to realize we are sitting on an appropriated object that is both an artwork and a chair. Through Lim reconfiguring the chair's role from artwork back into chair, imbuing it with its original function, we come to fully apprehend its importance as an object of physical and metaphorical support, our silent uncomplaining companion for rest, play, work and dining, and the seat of our unconscious from which ideas flow.

Four Seasons, a triptych painting, is a panorama of the artist's experiences extending back over the years. Lim has created a landscape of symbols, the language of the artist's memory, painted layer upon layer like the flotsam and jetsam of his unconscious. The work is an accumulation of signifiers; fragments from the artist's own past, a wider history of mankind, and a reflection of the world around him. The Malay words *Selatan*, *Timur*, *Utara* and *Barat* (*South*, *East*, *North* and *West*) painted horizontally on the top left allude to the artist's experiences in the East and West. References to Malaysia abound, along with other signs – linguistic, theological, commercial, travel, spiritual – with many images painted over, indicating that although older memories are replaced with newer experiences, they never fade entirely.

Falò, a one-channel video installation, is the documentation of a happening at the *Focara di Novoli* festival during which the artist set fire to the remnants of a banquet including all the chairs. Lim has compared the experience of the burning chairs to burning his shadow, a statement that recalls the writings of the psychoanalyst Carl Jung. Jung designated the shadow as the darker and dangerous side of the personality existing in the shadowland of the person's unconscious. The shadow, however, is also perceived a seat of creativity, whereby the "dark side of one's being; their sinister shadow... represents the true spirit of life as against the arid scholar."ⁱⁱⁱ Individuation, which occurs in mid-later life, involves a conscious accepting and integrating of one's shadow and persona, at a time when the individual has sufficient maturity to come to terms with their experiences. In a Jungian context, Lim's chairs which appear throughout his works, and which the artist himself professes to be the seat of his creativity, could be understood as Lim going through the process of individuation and coming to terms with the 'darkness of his own shadow'.

Nearby, three video installations document happenings and actions – *Patience*, *Enter the Parallel World* and *Red Room*. These video installations document the embodiment of three virtues into physical acts – patience, mental balance and self-control, which were inculcated by the artist's mother to his younger self. In transposing these virtues into physical acts – fishing in a tank with the line suspended 3cm above water, balancing on a ball, and 'nailing' his tongue to the table – Lim creates new meanings for these virtues. Lim uses his body as both the subject and object of the work, his position within the work is both passive and active – and there is a constant reversal between these subject-object and passive-active modes. He turns the virtues on their head through playful, irreverent Dada-esque displays, which require another kind of physical and mental endurance, and in doing so, lateral qualities are turned into literal acts and back again.

Lim's subjectivity is made up of signifiers collated through his own experiences, past and present, where the referent (the thing in the world which a word or phrase denotes or stands for)^{iv} is juxtaposed with alternative meanings or possibilities. Artworks which have come to life in one form, see another life when placed in conjunction with other works, rendering them with new, additional, and frequently paradoxical meanings. Lim's search for alternative meanings contrasts directly with Anurendra

Jegadeva's installation *Yesterday, in a Padded Room* (2015) which is a reflection of our image-saturated world, and by contrast an excess of signification which, as Jegadeva suggests, is ultimately devoid of any meaning. Both artists' works illustrate aspects of post-modernism: Lim's though post-modern art's multiplicity of meanings; Jegadeva through literally holding up a satirical mirror to today's world.

Ostensibly, *Yesterday, in a Padded Room* brings to life an extract from the mythic *Kedah Annals*, a work of Malay literature believed to have originated in the 18th century, chronicling the foundation of the Malaysian state of Kedah. According to the text, Garuda the Hindu deity and Solomon, the Muslim prophet and monarch, concurred to divide up South-East Asia – land North of the Thai border would be Hindu; land South would become Muslim. The installation depicts the war room of the two monarchs: two empty bling golden thrones languish at the centre of a tarpaulin flooring depicting a sea of sharks. Ancient-style head carvings representing Garuda and Solomon protrude from the backrest of each throne and leer like gargoyles at us, whilst the seats' perspex interiors are home to an assortment of objects arranged like the innards of a pinball machine. Flashing lights and voices even emanate from the chair. Nearby stands a vitrine containing a map of the divided lands and an arrangement of cheap souvenirs and memorabilia. Lining the walls like a lunatic's cell are padded cushions, painted, printed, decorated and defaced with images of kings and queens, heroes and villains, saints and sinners, entertainers and amateurs, the learned and the fools. One can imagine today's politicians enthroned in Jegadeva's padded room, hammering it out over territorial hegemony, their arguments and rhetoric as nonsensical as a madman's.

The social anomie depicted in *Yesterday, in a Padded Room* resonates strongly with Frederic Jameson's description of the post-modern condition in his book *Post-Modernism or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Jameson's dystopic version of the present is characterized by a breakdown of the distinction between high and low culture; a fascination with pastiche and the "whole degraded landscape of kitsch and schlock" (cheap or inferior goods); a new depthlessness which manifests itself both as a superficiality and as a proclivity for literal flatness (e.g. flat screen TVs and skyscrapers with reflecting windows); and additionally, a captivation with a whole new technology based on reproduction rather than industrial production. Like Jean Baudrillard, the philosopher, Jameson believed in our inability to tell the real from the simulacrum, nature from artifice, reality from representation.

Stylistically, Jegadeva's work is essentially a sardonic view of our love of the kitsch and pastiche; it is a parody of pastiche. The installation's bling golden thrones, flashing lights and abundance of dime-store paraphernalia highlight the garish reality of our everyday desire. The portraits on the padded cushions point to our obsession with fame and celebrity and the 'cult of the personality'. From Elvis to Stalin to Lord Muruga, the icons refer to the later 20th century's proclivity to iconise modern day heroes and villains and to transform older historical figures into clinquant icons. Jegadeva has paired up unlikely historical heroes, celebrities and villains – Hitler and Gandhi; Imelda Marcos and Cory Aquino; Johnny Cash and Johnny Rotten are some examples. These duos clash in our minds like discordant sounds, yet they also share common ground.

Perhaps the most resonant aspect between Jameson and Jegadeva's works is the way in which historicity (historical authenticity) is depicted. Jameson wrote of post-modern's weakening of historicity, where historical reality is obscured by ideology. He described the advent of a "new historical situation" in which we are "condemned to seek history by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history". Jameson went on to analogize the symptom of our crisis of historicity with the state of schizophrenia, which he described as a breakdown in the Lacanian linguistic signifying chain which constitutes meaning. For Jameson, the schizophrenic is reduced to an experience of pure material signifiers, or a series of pure and unrelated presents in time, a scenario he likened with post-modern's weakening links with the past and obsession with the present. Jegadeva demonstrates this historical weakening so trenchantly through conflating past and present, and through portraying figures of history's grand narratives with momentary celebrities in his padded cushion portraits, in effect reducing

history to an ideology of kitsch mass-consumerism. If we look long enough at Jegadeva's portraits, meaning is lost, the historicity of each icon dissipates, virtue and immorality become blurred, past and present become indistinguishable, and myth and history converge.

Jegadeva's depiction of a mythic struggle for hegemony in a pre-colonial world which he situates in today's post-colonial world, is based on one of binary opposition (a quality further evinced by his historical duos). We recognise in his characters the post-colonial other of Edward Said's *Orientalism* – another binary opposition originating from a hegemonic Western system of thought based on superiority, which generated negative stereotypes of the Eastern other.^v The post-colonial other of *Yesterday, in a Padded Room* makes an interesting contrast with the other of Ivan Lam's *One Inch* (2019). Here alterity, or the state of otherness, is an altogether different one based on phenomenology.

One Inch explores dualities and dichotomies in themes relating to popular culture. These dualities sit cheek-by-jowl in his work – harmoniously and in tension – beguiling the viewer to discover the multiple meanings within. *One Inch*, a new work for the Biennale, is at once a reminder of the proximity, and the distance, between self and other. The installation comprises 19 television screens placed at eye level in a small dark room, like a receptacle of our subconscious. The machines are mounted an inch off the wall, their backs to the viewer, the screens facing the wall. Playing in a loop is a compendium of Malaysian films from the 1960s to today. Alternated daily throughout the duration of the Biennale, the sequential play of the screens is never repeated. Upon entering the room, the viewer is immersed in both darkness and light, audio and white noise. The light from the screens reflects off the walls, creating an aura of pulsating light contrasting vividly with the blackness of the back of the screens. The title of the work, *One Inch*, is a reminder of the need to get away from ourselves, for it is only when we step away and reflect that we gain objectivity and understanding.

In his 1964 treatise *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, the communications theorist Marshall McLuhan wrote that culture and societies are shaped by their media, and that the starting point is always with the individual, as media are technological extensions of the body. McLuhan described electronic media as an intensely participatory medium – the immediacy and intimacy with which the world is brought to the viewers in their own homes breaks down the barriers of time and space. The viewers' sensorium is dramatically affected by this participation, and this alteration is so radical that what is on the screen is deemed to be not so important as the deep change that takes place in the sensorium of the viewer, where the self (the viewer) and the larger collective merge into a superficial one. McLuhan described this superficial oneness as the 'global village.'^{vi}

Entering Lam's installation, the glow of multiple screens coalescing into one homogenous luminescence combined with the familiar polyphonic audio, triggers within the viewer the readiness of participation, into the realm of 'we'. However, with the screens resolutely turned away from the viewer, this anticipated sense of 'we' is denied, refuted; and the sound of numerous voices from films, never to be seen by the viewer, reduce each other into an incomprehensible 'white noise'. The space between the viewer and the reversed screens feels uncomfortable, uncanny even – it is neither a place of 'I' nor a place of 'we'; it is a place of separation; the space of the other, of alterity.

One inch is the space between screen and wall. *One Inch* is a metaphor reminding us of the importance of accessing the experience of the 'other', whether other is interpreted through the Lacanian reading of the discourse of our unconscious; or the positivist reading by Levinas as something beyond the self, beyond the limits of one's own being, challenging our self-containment and self-assurance. For it is only through accessing the other, when we are taken beyond our limits, that we are called to the possibility of renewal and of self-transcendence.^{vii}

Yusoff, Lim, Jegadeva and Lam contemplate different subjectivities of identity in its various forms. Their different subjectivities demonstrate the diversity of their practices, and indeed reflect the wider

diversity of contemporary art practice in Malaysia. Placing these artists works in concert, culminates in a blend and contrast of many theories, with the conclusion that identity is heterogenous, constituting different cultures, multiple histories, and is in constant flux. Indeed, identity is a weave of many personal narratives into a shared fabric of public consciousness that is at once diverse and unified.

Gowri Balasegaram

Curator and writer

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ⁱ Hamlet, Act III, Scene II. *“Suit the action to the word, the word to the action; with this special observance, that you o’erstep not the modesty of nature: for anything so overdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is to hold as t’were, the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure.”*

ⁱⁱ Paul Virilio.

ⁱⁱⁱ For Jung the unconscious comprised the personal [or the individual] and collective, which was common to the entire human race and containing universal archetypes. An individual life-cycle’s comprises a sequence of archetypical experiences which are incorporated into his/her personal life. This amalgamation of personal and archetypal, conscious and unconscious experiences of the personality is known as a process of individuation.

^{iv} Oxford English Dictionary.

^v Said, E., *Orientalism*, Routledge, 1978.

^{vi} Hazell, C., *Alterity, The Experience of The Other*, Authorhouse, 2009.

^{vii} Ibid.