

Through Rose-Tinted Glasses

In a world cluttered with inequalities and crowded with tension, can the artists of today still manage to conjure up a brighter vision of the world for the distressed public?

Through Rose-Tinted Glasses gathered twelve artists who attempted to navigate the minefield that is contemporary society today. Negotiating issues ranging from race relations in the United States, homelessness in India, to censorship in Malaysia, featured artists have presented works that serve to reflect on present social issues while still leaving viewers with lingering questions regarding the possibility of becoming active change-makers in society.

A large four-panel portrait of a censored face by Malaysian artist Sean Lean, *Blue Square, Red Circle, Green Hexagon and Yellow Triangle*, a piece as cryptic as its title bewilders the viewer not by what it shows but what it censors. One needs to step away from the portrait in order for the image to form itself. And when the image does spring into focus, a flashback to Anwar Ibrahim's 1998 'black eye' incident is unavoidable. In censoring the face, only keeping the black eye visible to the viewer, Lean criticizes practices of censorship in Malaysia. Regarded as having some of the toughest censorship laws in the world, what the Malaysian government restricts from the general public and what it allows to be passed to mainstream media shapes the narrative that the everyday Malaysian lives and breathes.

In this sense, the question becomes, does seeing the world through rose-tinted glasses suggest that we are not delving deep enough to uncover and question existing truths?

Lean's work leaves the viewer wondering about the genesis of the narratives issued by mainstream media, and who is the silhouetted figure in power behind dictating what the public see and how they perceive it.

Indeed, this sentiment is carried on by TOPY's wall painting *Corruption is Over! If You Want It*. The text, written in Chinese ink, occupies the wall, easily commanding the viewer's attention. Aesthetically, it appropriates Yoko Ono and John Lennon's *War is Over!* poster, which was pasted on bill boards across 12 major cities in the United States in 1969 in protest against the Vietnam War. The black type on a white background, center-justified text has been slightly altered to fit the context of Malaysia. The changed slogan now reads *Corruption is Over! If You Want It*, a direct rebellion against the deemed culture of corruption.

In a similar vein to Lean's and TOPY's work, Kim Ng's series *Secretion, Concealment, Stealth* comments on the manipulation of truth throughout history. The repeatedly overlapping silkscreen-printed colors create the impression of garden-scapes, yet little does the unsuspected viewer know that the repeated patterns serve to conceal a set of unknown truths previously inscribed on the canvas, as Ng used canvas pre-painted by others in the making of the works. The act of concealing the already-painted canvas with colorful patterns mimics the way political institutions deny existing truths by presenting the public with a refined version of the truth, thus disguising controversial issues and silencing loud opinions. The result is a collective social and political amnesia that aims to filter reality through its own rose-tinted glasses.

Like Lean, Ng further challenges the authenticity of existing social and political institutions, pushing the viewer to look beyond the constructed image during the process.

In contrast to Lean and Ng, Ruzzeki Harris does not shy away from directly addressing the failure of authority to retain transparency with its citizens. In *Malodorous*, Ruzzeki depicts a barrister wig overlaid with text of the word 'Malodorous'. The barrister wig, a clear reference to law and power, is depicted in the process of deterioration, as highlighted by the blotches of paint and the recurrent presence of flies. It is through the powerful combination of text and symbol that Ruzzeki criticizes how powerful individuals abuse their power to serve the needs of the elite. The artist's comment on the malodorous odor of rotting power echoes TOPY's statement, warning that a society whose corruption has infiltrated its very foundations is analogous to a cadaver attracting flies.

Shifting the focus from institutional power to the one inherent in each individual in society, Cheng Yen Pheng's organic work *Untitled* highlights individual's efforts in combating corruption. Outlines of individuals coming together as groups are depicted through sketches and stitches on rice paper as they join effort to pull against the 'alang', the long coarse grass symbolizing outdated traditions and modes of thinking. "Do you think it is possible for communities to weed off this deeply rooted lalang?" asks the artist. The tactile visual nature of the work, as one visitor noted, tempts the viewer to pull at the lalang. Indeed, one would hope that it also leaves the viewer thinking about the power within the grasp of individuals and how they are as much responsible for the betterment of society as institutional systems of power are.

Following Cheng, Yim Yen Sum extends the dialogue of the exhibition and looks at how systems of power have shaped the relationship between individuals and the city. *What Are you Looking At?* is a series that depicts portraits of homeless people in India. Being the ghosts of the city, the homeless people float around unacknowledged, neither by the government nor by the people who walk the streets everyday. Yim attempts to shed light on the fragile relationship between homelessness and the city through her unique choice of materials and technique. The portraits, a young child, an old woman wearing a sari, and two sisters, are crafted using embroidery on gauze, a material commonly used to treat injuries. In the context of the work, the delicate act of embroidering and the use of gauze, a symbol of self-healing, reveal the degree of care required to heal the injured relationship between the city and its most fragile group of people, the homeless.

Another artist who examines the relationship between people and people in a country is Anurendera Jegadeva. *Black Princess* and *White Prince* is Jegadeva's attempt of a candid portrait of the current racial tension in the United States. The viewer need not look further from the landscape behind each figure to note of the stark contrast between their daily lives. Whereas *White Prince* exists in a calm setting, *Black Princess* sees the arrival of thunderous clouds, an inauspicious presence that speaks of the challenges and inequalities faced by Black Americans in the United States. Each portrait is framed by a string of words that is oddly incompatible with the figure depicted. For example, in *White Prince*, the canvas is framed with the Democratic party's blue color and a slogan that reads 'Black Lives Matter', which is associated with the activist movement BLM that originated in the African-American community with the aim of combating the violence and systematic racism directed towards black people. In *Black Princess*, the Republican party's red color and Donald Trump's 2016

presidential campaign slogan 'Make America Great' frames the canvas. In mismatching the figures with their opposite campaigns, Jegadeva aims to burst the separate bubbles in which each race individually exists in. Yet, as evident in the distant gaze of the black woman, seeing the privileged side is sometimes a difficult chore for the imagination to carry.

For Diana Lui, Cheong Kiet Cheng, and Annabelle Ng looking at the world through rose-tinted glasses requires introspection. To Lui, this came in the form of a personal journey to Egypt, a country which resonated with the artist spiritually. Overcome with a sudden feeling of *deja vu* while walking along the River Nile, Lui was led to reflect on and re-evaluate both her identity as a woman and her role in society. The life-size photogram, *Aum #3*, is the outcome of her emotional journey. Interestingly, the creative process behind the work was in and of itself an intuitive performance in the dark that gave the artist the freedom to physically and emotionally navigate her identity. The outcome resembles the tree of life, with the artist's silhouette being surrounded by sand and sunflower seeds collected from Egypt and various other seeds from the rain forest of Taman Negara, Malaysia, which upon closer inspection appear to resemble the shape of an embryo. In *Aum #3*, Lui asserts that is through disconnecting from the world and reconnecting with our inner selves that we can start to become better individuals.

Notation II, III, IV by Annabelle Ng delves deeper into the abstract, but echoes a similar sentiment. Through mapping, recording and tracing time as it passes, Annabelle poetically reflects on the fluid nature of memories and the way their meaning is shaped and reshaped through time. Past memories shape one's perspective and view of the future, but the present time also alters one's perception of past memories. Ng pushes the viewer to reflect on the nuances of past memories and analyse how they have influenced one's present mindset current outlook on life.

Continuing the theme of introspection and mediating on one's personal life, *Johnny Johnny Yes Papa* is Cheong Kiet Cheng's own reflection on family life and the nature of the relationships contained within. Life is about how to live with "friction and not suffocate in the undercurrent" Cheong asserts. The painting is imbued with surrealist symbols, most predominantly being the eyes, which to Cheong refer to visibility and the ever-changing perspectives from which she looks at the world.

It is through looking at the world from different perspectives and point of views, reiterates Chin Kong Yee, that allows one to birth ingenious solutions for issues at hand. In *Maze*, Chin depicts a scene inside the station of the metro in the city of Berlin. For the artist, whose work is wrapped in perspective, nothing is every stagnant - images change and evolve as you look at them. Indeed, this is reflected in his unique artistic style, labeled "Actuality Accorded Painting", which he uses to capture the world through a fish-eye lens, merging space and time into one instant, and evoking a sense of surrealism in the process. But what catches the viewer's attention beyond the places depicted is how each painting could be displayed in multiple arrangements, regardless of whether it is flipped vertically and horizontally. Through fluid arrangements, the gallery appears to be an extension of the space depicted in the works, and the observer becomes an essential, additional element in the work.

Another work that emphasizes the importance of constantly updating our perspective and outlook on the world is *Glass Gellage LIX* by Czech Republic artist Michael Macku. The sculpture, depicting a seashell, is constructed using Macku's unique creative photographic technique, labeled Gellage. The unique method, a ligature of collage and gelatin, involves transferring exposed and fixed photographic emulsions onto paper. The transparent, plastic material allows the artist to shape and reshape the original photographs, thereby extending their meaning and changing their relationships during the transfer. To view the sculpture from the side is to see the seashell fade out of view. The changing presence of the seashell, appearing and disappearing depending on one's perspective, speaks of the importance of constantly venturing out of our comfort zones and finding new ways of looking at the world.

The exhibition takes on a renewed meaning with Fairuz Sulaiman's live audio-visual performance *You Are Not Your Eyes*. The performance aimed at translating something as abstract as sound into a tangible, visual experience. A few set of parameters are created within two different loops, an analogue loop and a digital loop. The result are visuals that are self-generated and constantly changing dependent on the surrounding sound in space. Through the interactive performance, which engulfs the viewer, we are reminded that in life, as in art, change is the only constant.

If anything, the exhibition shows the public how to navigate the world in times of social and political unrest. It is an urgent reminder that we must be in constant search of the truth, which can only be achieved by constantly looking at the world in a different way. And as Robin Williams notes in *Dead Poets Society* (1989) "Just when you think you know something, you have to look at it in another way. Even though it may be silly, you must try."

As the visitors leave the gallery, we hope that they too, try.

Through Rose-Tinted Glasses is on view until 31st January at Wei-Ling Contemporary.