

The past is never where you think you left it (2016)

A curated group exhibition by Gowri Balasegaran

This exhibition takes its name from *The Ship of Fools*, an allegorical novel by Katherine Anne Porter probing the tragic failure of the Western world in the 1930s to prevent WW2. The name was originally derived from a parable in Plato's *Republic*, where Socrates posits that a simple democracy may descend to dysfunction and chaos without a wise captain.

Porter, in her quote, was essentially referring to how experience changes us, how we are not the same people we were yesterday, and consequently how the way we recollect the past evolves too. This exhibition explores the relationship between the past, the present, and the future that is evoked in Porter's quote, in particular the dialogue between the past and the present/future. The past is reliant on memory, it is not fixed but made up of impressions or fragments which we cohere into a whole. Thus, our interpretation of the past is subjective, forever being modified by new experiences arriving from our future into the present.

Taking this as the premise of the exhibition, we invited nine artists to produce artworks encompassing their interpretation of the idea. As part of the brief, we requested that each participant submit an item from their past which had some relation to, or was in dialogue with, their work from the present. What those items were and the nature of their relationship with the work from the present was up to the artist. We were delighted at the richness and the breath of the concepts and themes addressed by the works.

Gan Sze Hooi and Kim Ng have made the comparison between the values once predominant in the past that we now can aspire to in the present, presenting a nostalgic view of the past. Minstrel Kuik looks back on Malaysia's perception of itself, on the anniversary of its rebirth in the wake of the Bersih 4 rally; whilst Anurendra Jegadeva examines Malaysia's relationship with China then and now. Ivan Lam *The Past Is Never Where You Think You Left It* and Choy Chun Wei invoke art historical interpretations – both have reconfigured a 'found' item with a

past of its own into an artwork with a very different future, evolving Marcel Duchamp's notion of the readymade. Azril Ismail revives a long dead art practice, bringing new life to the world's first-ever photographic process, the daguerreotype and its successor the wet-plate collodion; whilst Rajinder Singh explores how collective memory can help us deal with the trauma of our impending mortality.

### **Minstrel Kuik – *The Rebirth of a Nation***

Minstrel Kuik's practice explores ideas around identity, ideology, truth, and disillusionment on a personal and collective level. She deconstructs public images and universal symbols in her work forcing the viewer to interrogate them on a personal level. Here, an installation invites the viewer to ponder on the meaning of nationhood in the anniversary of its independence, in the wake of an event that called for clean and transparent governance. An installation made up of two Malay newspapers from August 31st 2015, a day after the Bersih rally, comprises two screens from spreads which have been cut, sewed together, and sealed with wax from traditional red candles, imbuing a rose-red transparent effect to the paper. Inside the installation is a newspaper which the artist has recomposed to include the last message from Tunku Abdul Rahman in 1988 in which he talks about the propaganda of newspapers and the need to safeguard the true meaning of Merdeka.

The multiple effect of rose tinged transparent newspaper acts as a metaphor for openness and honesty. Yet, the dual visibility caused by the wax also mutes the legibility. We scrutinize the words and subsequently become more aware of the underlying meaning behind them.

### **Anurendra Jegadeva – *New Gods, Old Gods II***

Humorous, trenchant and at times caustic, Anurendra Jegadeva's work addresses themes around migration, globalisation and urbanisation. Frequently narrative in their depiction, his

paintings and installations are a commentary of the world today and how it has been shaped by historical events or personal memories. For the exhibition, Anu has repurposed old furniture and statues from his mother's house, integrating them into a shrine – like installation. The work explores the country's relationship with China, which began with Tun Razak's historic 1974 visit to Peking and culminates today with his son's prime ministership.

Anu's work calls to mind a quote from Henri Bergson: "The present contains nothing more than the past, and what is found in the effect was already in the cause." Here, however, the future and the past appear to bear little relation to one another, and the present – as history has shown us time and time again – is never what we hope it to be.

### **Chong Kim Chiew – *Untitled / Invisible Word***

A major component of Kim Chiew's practice is his maps – arbitrary boundaries which are symbolic of multi-layered histories defined by wars, exiles, and migrations. Kim Chiew has continued his investigation into boundaries for the exhibition by juxtaposing works from the past and present. A series of multiple monochrome seascapes painted after the artist returned from studying in China in 2005, depict flat, horizontal views of a calm crepuscular sea suggesting new visions of a mind expanded. These works have been placed around a larger scale new painting resembling the grey camouflage worn by soldiers, but rather than a clean-cut pattern the artist has allowed the paint to run down the canvas like rivulets or tears. Subtly painted on the camouflage are names of towns. To the unknowing observer, they appear to trace names of places across the peninsula; few would recognize them as places of conflict during the Communist Insurgency in 1948.

Initially, the camouflage painting appears at odds when placed against the seascapes. Yet the lack of any perimeter tracing or separating the towns points to a blurring of boundaries, a quality which is also invoked in the seascapes where land and sea appear to fuse. In line with Kim Chiew's work from the present day, he seeks here to metaphorically remind us that the

conflicts from the past, though forgotten, have lasting repercussions, and brings in mind Henri Bergson's citation that "The pure present is an ungraspable advance of the past devouring the future. In truth, all sensation is already memory."

### **Ivan Lam - *Past, Present, Future***

Cool, colourful and fiercely intelligent, Ivan's Lam's visual language is inspired by popular culture, autobiography, current affairs and every day vistas. His paintings are characterised by the use of polymer house paints and resin which imbue his work with a highly chromatic, hyper-real quality. For the exhibition Ivan has created a work comprising 18 small 'paintings' derived from T-shirts worn during the painting process. Spanning over 15 years, the cotton material of the humble, utilitarian T-shirt has provided a repository for the artist to dab his brushes when mixing paints or changing colours.

Through repeated wear, the material has accumulated a plethora of colourful gestural-like applications and mark-making we normally associate with a canvas. At a distance they appear like a swarm of birdin flight, or the flow of tidal currents – their application at once immediate, heavy, light, intense and concentrated.

Here, a by-product of the painting process – painstaking and historical – has been transformed and imbued with new meaning, elevated to form the work itself. The artist whom has unknowingly created the gestures through chance or accident has, in a wry temporal twist, been (re)claimed ownership of his 'work'. In the tradition of the readymade of Marcel Duchamp, Ivan's T-shirt paintings challenge concepts around authorship and appropriation of old artefacts.

### **Choy Chun Wei – *Bricolage of Identities II***

Choy Chun Wei's assemblages and collages are informed by a strong design aesthetic. He is driven to "push the limits of his understanding of design and exert it to integrate it into the fine arts." Found objects and the environment – newspaper cut outs, recycled objects and conventional waste – constitute the materiality of his practice. Through selection and manipulation of these objects in tandem with an alternative mode of seeing as influenced by John Berger, Chun Wei aims to incorporate new design possibilities into these objects.

For the exhibition Chun Wei has turned to the traditional printed material as his found object. In the age of digital culture, material such as the letter and even the still ubiquitous calling card are gradually being sidelined or phased out. In this piece, Chun Wei has amassed a number of calling cards, manipulated them to edit out most of the information, and rearranged them to form a collage with a geometric grid, almost architectural in composition. Interspersed subtly throughout are snippets of a found hand-written letter juxtaposing the personal with the impersonal, typography with handwriting, the human hand with machine. Through a process of reconfiguring the material culture of objects with a previous life of their own, Chun Wei has imbued a new life into them. Like Ivan's T-shirt paintings, the past has indeed surged back into present.

### **Kim Ng – *A River Runs Through***

Kim Ng is an award winning print maker, whose mastery of the medium has led him to create his own unique renditions. Displacement, places from memory, or spaces undergoing change are themes explored in his practice, as is the work for this exhibition.

A simple projected moving image derived from an old photograph of his father's self-built wooden house, is placed alongside a PVC cutting and a woodcut. The image has been manipulated to give the effect of water coursing through the house, echoing his own memories of a river which ran near his father's house. Accompanying the image is a diptych: one side a flashback from the last 30 years including street scenes from his hometown, a

celebration in a Chinese temple, and a more recent image of police barricades; the other is a more discernible scene of a factory. The abstract/hazy nature of the imagery suggests a notion of the past as feel-based rather than factual based. The images suggest a view of past as a place of security, of simplicity and conviviality; the present one of instability and alienation.

#### **K. Azril Ismail – *Table study – Skull, Warrior, Bird & Guide Book and Mother, Daughter***

Azril Ismail is known for his extensive photographic studies into institutional spaces such as prisons and railway stations. His practice is currently centred around cultural remnants from the past, which is complimented by an interest in early photographic historical processes.

*Table study*, an anthropological still life, is a daguerreotype, an image made using the world's first photographic process developed in the 1830s; whilst *Mother, Daughter*, utilises the wet plate collodion process developed in the 1850s. Both images depict classic/enduring genres of art history, the 'Madonna' and child and the still life. This, coupled with the effects of photographic processes characterised by include shadows and varying definition and lighting, invoke an early 20th century aesthetic to the image, despite being implemented recently. Azril's photographs beautifully capture the essence of his subjects – the sense of tranquillity and the bond between a mother and child and what the early African tribal subjects deemed as the 'spirit' that inhabits inanimate objects. In returning to the past for his processes and subject matters, Azril's images are imbued with timelessness.

#### **Gan Sze Hooi – *Zinc Generation Lost***

Sze Hooi's practice encompasses drawing, painting and interactive installations, which enable the viewer to participate in the work. He is interested in heritage spaces and the conflict between progress and preservation, modernity and tradition, development and an authentic co-existence with the natural environment.

*Zinc Generation Lost* is a reference to the disappearance of the old-fashioned kampong houses made built their characteristic zinc roofs. The closed surface of the interactive installation is a melange of roofs falling on top of a house. It opens to reveal a scene of family celebration with parts of canvas burnt away – as though the memory is lost, or has been destroyed. We can just discern the artist holding a baby, his head replaced with the beak of a bird. *KG Hakka Mantin* – is a charcoal drawing of an aerial view in the style of old maps of a real kampong named Hakka Mantin, whose present day descendants are fighting to preserve from planned destruction and redevelopment. Studying the map up close reveals that its inhabitants are co-existing in multi-cultural harmony.

In both works the past is represented as a simple life of family and community that espouses an authenticity, free from the trammels of motorways, high-rises and malls. It is a somewhat nostalgic view but Sze Hooi is merely exhorting us to look back into the past to find that the values that society can only aspire to today.

### ***Rajinder Singh – Untitled I and II***

Rajinder Singh's practice deals with far ranging subject matters from the esoteric, to the sublime, the mathematical the philosophical and the spiritual. For the exhibition, Rajinder has produced a diptych silk-screen painting which deals with memories that have been formed through collective experience, shared consciousness and collective action. He is interested in the way memory from these collective rituals from the past give us support to weather the transitions and traumas of the present. For Rajinder, memory is not merely a recording of something but as a concept, like Walter Benjamin who saw recollection as representing an open door to another image on the memories canvas. Thus, for Rajinder memory is more about interactions and how that has helped shaped his perceptions and reality.

In the work, Rajinder has created a collage of temples from around the world. Through photo-shopping photographs of over 20 different places of prayer, he has created two similar but not identical images. Sepulchral and almost skull-like or talismanic in form, the images appear as a kind of memento-mori. Through deploying the silk-screen process, no two prints are absolutely identical. The differences between the images point to imperfections in our memory, where no recollection is identical. The intermeshing of the different temples suggests a merging of all the rituals, people and memories. They echo the inter-linking of memories as the rhizomes posited by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, allowing for multiple, non-hierarchical entry and exit points. The rhizome has no beginning or end, it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo, past yet present.

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July 2016