

In the Forest of the Second Floor Appears a Red Hand

By Amin Gulgee

I do not teach. Thus, when I was asked by Lim Wei-Ling to come on board as a mentor for her Wei-Ling Gallery Incubator, I was apprehensive. I have known Wei since 2004 and I have had several shows at her gallery in Kuala Lumpur. Wei curated an ambitious exhibition of contemporary Malaysian art in 2006 at my gallery in Karachi, the Amin Gulgee Gallery. In 2017, when I was the curator of the inaugural Karachi Biennale, I invited the respected Malaysian artist Ivan Lam for a project in my city which engaged with local school children.

My reluctance to accept this role was overcome by the affection and respect I have for Wei and her husband, Yohan. They both have transformed their art space into much more than a venue for the art market. The Wei-Ling Gallery's ethos is to encourage art awareness throughout Malaysia and promote fresh perspectives. I also have a fondness for the country of Malaysia. Its people have shown me great hospitality and generosity. The food there is to die for.

On March 19th, 2026, Wei and I interviewed seven candidates for the Incubator. Wei asked me to pick one or two of the artists to mentor over the course of the next six months. Each would create a body of work which would be exhibited in her gallery in October. I selected three distinct individuals: Forrest Wong, Ejin Sha and Mira Ariel Ong. This triumvirate led me on an Odyssey in which the sirens sang. I believe that I learnt as much from them in this process as they learnt from me.

Forrest immediately engaged me with his irreverent personality. He would giggle intermittently throughout our Zoom conversations, bringing his face close to the screen. His eyes would wildly glisten as he spoke about his past trajectory as a performance artist. He seemed to have an inclusive practice inviting the audience to participate in his acts. This artist exuded a shamanistic energy and an awareness of the spirits surrounding us. This man with long black hair beckoned me down the rabbit hole into his parallel reality. In this magical realm, nothing is what it appears to be. It is a dreamscape. For Forrest, it is the immediate moment that matters. He relishes collapsing time. He unearths personal and collective memories from the past, placing them in the present, foreseeing what may come in the future. He explains, "A ritual, repetitive movement or seemingly unnecessary gesture may become the beginning of another world. Each act becomes a seed of transformation, passing from body to image, image to object, and action to trace."

In sharp contrast to Forrest, Ejin is a controlled being. With her hair pulled back, the artist is extremely careful when she speaks. Each reluctantly-uttered word is measured. Perhaps Ejin's disciplined communication stems from her education in graphic design in which space is meticulously divided. However, in her work, Ejin courageously enters an area where division is not easily possible. She walks up a staircase towards a second floor. This second floor was a place from the artist's childhood which she was not privy to. She attempts to excavate, unearth and imagine a level she was never allowed to enter. In the archeology of her practice, many a ghost reside. They appear as objects, signage and landscapes. She processes memory through pressing, rubbing, molding and casting. Ejin writes, "A mold records a presence through absence; a cast becomes something that has disappeared." The artist goes on to muse, "Attending to an image/Inherited story that haunts me/The 'visit' home that hopefully heals my inner child."

Mira Ariel is the youngest of the three artists. This 23-year-old with her hair stylishly cut short addressed me with wide-open, brown eyes. Although the sound of her voice was soft and melodic, I could sense steel within her. After graduating from high school, Mira was planning to go to law school. However, Covid struck and, during the lockdown, she began experimenting with needlework, traditionally considered a seemingly pursuit for girls. Her approach, however, was subversive. Her trajectory has engaged in creating images of women in relief from soft fabric and embroidery. She depicts these females in the stark style of a comic book. They are often provocatively dressed, but they are never passive. They confront the viewer with a questioning stare. Mira helps support her art practice through freelance modeling. She is well aware that she is being scrutinized. The artist asks, "Who holds the power? The one looking or the one being looked at?" In her new body of work, an enigmatic red hand appears. Mira notes, "The red hand represents touch, possession and the gaze placed upon the female body. It can suggest comfort or restraint, intimacy or intrusion."

Each one of these three artists that I conversed with were pushing themselves outside their comfort zones. I admired their courage to discover new mediums to express themselves. This process of trial and error was exhilarating. I truly feel that one learns more from one's mistakes than one's successes. Also, what I found fearless about them was that their works were intensely personal and revealing. They allow the viewer to glimpse into their vulnerabilities and hurt. Throughout our dialogue, I discovered much about each artist and it was fascinating for me how different and yet alike they were. Their backgrounds were varied, however each one strived to uncover a truth about themselves.

Forrest, Ejin and Mira invite us into their very separate yet conjoined worlds. It is a reality where shamans speak to nature; where spirits of an unknown level float; where a red hand is placed upon an idealized woman's body. Their universe tells tales of rituals, memories and

defiance. It makes me think of the three witches in the opening scene of *Macbeth*, who chant, “Fair is fowl and fowl is fair: Hover through the filthy air.” It is within this liminal level of ambiguity that these three artists exist. Their “filthy air” induces us not only to dream, but to also question the world we live in.