

Born 1964
Singapore

Education
The Centre for Creative Studies
Detroit, USA

Ivan rehearsing Katan
1987

opposite
Najib Sitting
150 x 108 cm
charcoal and pastel on paper
1987
Singapore Art Museum Collection

Jimmy Ong

Talking Charcoal *by Peter Lee*



Jimmy Ong is an artist who enjoys the rare Singapore distinction of being critically acclaimed, commercially successful, yet blatantly and unselfconsciously subversive. One may first wonder how this can be possible in Singapore, and then question how it is even conceivable that the artist can garner such notice by producing works in humble charcoal on paper. But these seem to all form part of the conundrum of a very untypical and interesting individual. And coming out of Singapore, it cannot be more exciting.

In the series of exhibitions over the last sixteen years, Ong has continued to surprise critics and viewers with his unique expressiveness in handling charcoal. What is immediately apparent is the way his drawings have their own complex syntax, a rare attribute in a commonly practised art form. At first glance the works may appear to have the qualities of the typical Renaissance drawing - Ong favours figures, often nudes, captured in studied poses or in the midst of some drama of entwined bodies - but on closer examination they have none of the technical effects to create a sense of volume and light that make a Renaissance drawing, such as restrained outlines, the use of hatching and cross-hatching, and the rubbing of the pigment into the paper. Instead one sees a deliberate use of the charcoal's points and edges in the swerving, confident and random strokes that seem to speak its own language, or express the calligraphic quality of a personal, artistic 'script', echoing