



TYLER ROLLINS  
FINE ART

**SITAYANA**  
JIMMY ONG



## FORWARD

TYLER ROLLINS

Tyler Rollins Fine Art is pleased to present an exciting new body of work by Jimmy Ong. Considered to be one of Singapore's preeminent contemporary artists, Ong has been noted for his large scale, figurative charcoal works on paper since his first solo exhibitions in the 1980s. During the past year, he became fascinated with the *Ramayana*, the ancient Indian epic that recounts the exploits of Rama and his dutiful wife, Sita. This epic continues to play a vibrant role throughout Southeast Asia and provides an endless source of inspiration for the region's folk and popular cultures.

A Singaporean of Chinese descent who is now residing in the United States, Ong has brought his own unique viewpoint to this classic story. Inspired by the *Ramayana's* characters and its dramatic themes of love, combat, and heroic adventure, he has created new narratives that are informed by his sensitivity as a gay man to the way gender roles play out in contemporary relationships.

Ong has refocused the epic on the Sita character – hence the exhibition's title, *Sitayana*. He presents powerful and at times disturbing images of female figures. Their muscularity and contorted, aggressive poses place them firmly in the traditionally male realm of heroic action, offering a blunt challenge to the traditional image of the obedient, submissive female. But Ong's approach is never so simple or straightforward. Duality has always been a central preoccupation for him, and his works explore the ways in which multiple identities and perspectives – whether sexual, ethnic, national, or even generational – can coexist within the individual.

With *Sitayana*, these tensions come to the fore, as each drawing reveals different permutations of masculinity and femininity, activity and passivity, tenderness and violence. His drawings do not present traditional images of conflict between these supposed binarisms, but rather they work to undermine the fixed quality of these very notions. Although often monumental in scale, his figures are never monolithic, but instead are multifaceted and complex, an uneasy mix of many divergent perspectives – in short, distinctly contemporary.

All of last year, my ninety-year-old grandmother lamented about how she was a child-bride to an unfaithful husband. In Singapore, I grew up in an endless season of weddings, as my grandparents had seven daughters – thereby forming my own ambition to marry and live happily ever after. In the same family court, the women came together to complain about their husbands and gossip about my father’s numerous failed marriages. Stemming from a not-too-distant generation where women suffered in silence, it only came out of my grandmother twenty years after my grandfather’s death: that he had another family on another shore.

With these drawings, I hope to redress her grievances – to plumb the disappointments she felt towards her husband and son, torn as her mind confronts the past and what might have been.

The popular folklore of the *Ramayana* supplies a parallel with Sita, the vehicle for my grandmother’s grievance. Her story is filled with intrigue: we see Sita exiled, abducted, rescued, burnt, pregnant and banished as a single mother to be the perfect wife to Rama. Hers is a story of an otherwise happy couple in exile that bent themselves to accommodate gods, demons, and even the humble dhobi (laundry man). Here, I am re-telling the story from Sita’s perspective, taking wild artistic license, though not quite a woman’s voice.

## ARTIST STATEMENT

JIMMY ONG

## EDUCATING SITA: THE LIMINAL IN JIMMY ONG'S WORK

SOR-CHING LOW

*Sitayana* is Singaporean artist Jimmy Ong's most ambitious and daring undertaking to date. Not content with merely retelling the *Ramayana*, one of Asia's best-loved epics, Ong is also bent on turning the classic on its head so that Valmiki's tale of the kingly, handsome Rama and his dutiful, beautiful wife Sita is all but unrecognizable in *Sitayana*. In the 3000-year old epic, Sita and Rama are held up as paragons of virtue and idealized visions of femininity and masculinity. This is conveyed by the selfless love of a wife who dutifully follows her husband into exile, undergoes an ordeal in which she is abducted by the so-called demon Ravanna, and then, in order to convince her doubting husband of her purity, subjects herself to a test by fire. Indeed, in this visual tale teased out by the masterful strokes of Ong's charcoal drawings, the two figures are radically transformed. In a purposeful riot of curves, sinews and muscles that is reminiscent of the floating angels on the ceiling of Sistine Chapel, they appear to leap across time and space to speak as contemporary Sita and Rama. In this sense Ong's latest series of work, on exhibit for the first time at Tyler Rollins Fine Art in New York City, is his most sophisticated yet. One of the most talented contemporary artists to have emerged from Singapore, Ong's voice is a compelling one that speaks to his condition as a liminal figure straddling East and West, a gay man who remains conflicted over his duties to his ancestors as a first-born son, and as dutiful spouse.

In Ong's preferred medium, charcoal, Sita's new-found sexuality explodes in a way that brings to mind Peter Paul Rubens' peasants with their powerful corporeal presence and primal energy that seems to rip across the canvas. It is always tempting to cast Ong either as a Western-influenced artist or as a Chinese artist, especially if one were to follow the influence of Chinese calligraphy and painting on his restless brushstrokes. But Ong clearly defies such easy categorization. Straddling East and West, moving in between the two hemispheres, conflicted in duties and allegiances, Ong stays in this state of exile and extends his hospitality to all who happen to fall into that in-between space.

Instead of the idealized traditional Asian woman exemplified by Sita, we see a woman whose repressed energy can hardly be contained and runs amok on the canvas. In Ong's retelling, it was as if Sita has cast off her former self – said *adios!* to the *Ramayana* – and stepped fully into herself in the *Sitayana*. Here the new Sita exudes an intensity that verges on the erotic. In *Sita Flays the Deer*, she wrestles with a deer; in *Khumbini & Sita*, she is the "knightress" in shining armor riding astride a deer as she scoops up another woman; in *Supanaka Wonderbra*, she learns to turn the bra into a sling. In these and others, Sita is full-bodied, Amazon-like, and proud. What is refreshing about Ong's rendition of the *Ramayana* is the intensely personal and empathetic read that he gives to the female protagonist, Sita. As Ong says, "I am not interested in Rama and Sita as deities or the battles that fill the epic... I wanted to know why Sita must go through all that and still is not good enough."

In seizing the epic narrative, Ong intends to empower himself and all other Sita's who do not conform to the idealized forms of womanhood built into the very image of Sita. Re-telling the epic from Sita's perspective is a way for Ong to extend his meditation on his own condition as a gay spouse to that of other women who might similarly share his struggle to live up to the goddess's idealized femininity. In that sense, *Sitayana* marks a change from his earlier exhibitions such as *Ancestors on the Beach* (2008), which looked at the condition of gay men in a country that makes sex between gays punishable. As in most of Ong's work, the real-life events invariably become fodder for his meditation and artistic inspiration. One such event was the debacle over the republic's only women's group, which drew the media's attention when a Christian group, known for its stance against homosexuality, overtook its executive committee. The capacity of women to turn against one another was an insight Ong drew from the event. The modern Sita may be liberated, but her strength is also often used against one of her kind.

The irony of this is not lost on Ong; in *Sita Flays the Deer*, there is almost an appeal for compassion and love. As the caption suggests, the modern Sita is one who assumes the manly task of flaying a deer. But a closer look at Ong's drawing brings to surface the ambiguities of the relationship between the two interlocking figures. The deer, as it turns out, is more human-like than deer-like. In a composition that intentionally references the Pietà, it is Sita who is inconsolable as the human-like deer offers herself up as sacrifice. But Ong does not want us to stop there. Love and cruelty, he suggests, are two sides of the same coin. And the disbelieving finger that pokes into the bleeding wound, recalling yet another narrative from the Gospel, raises another question: where is the line between love and cruelty? The intense suffering of the two figures raises the question of whether such cruelty is necessary, or, to use William Wordsworth's formulation, do humans have to be cruel in order to be kind? The ambiguity of the piece suggests to us that compassion has opposite side: turn the other way and cruelty abounds. But duality is also an effect of desire and, ultimately, of the ego. That desire breeds desire is the second Noble Truth that the Buddha taught. In this regard, one wonders if *Sita Flays the Deer* harbors a secret desire to transcend the ego – a desire transgressed by knifing into the deer?

Duality is a theme that permeates Ong's *Sitayana*, where figures of epic proportions loom with more questions than answers. Even when the wish for transcendence is desired, as in *Sita & Sons* where Sita appears tranquil in the middle of *sati* (trial by fire), Ong admits that that is wishful thinking. Perhaps, because no easy resolution can be found to the persistent condition of duality, Ong chooses the middle path. And in this space of the liminal, the in-between, Ong is at his best. Compared to his earliest exhibitions of brooding individuals inhabiting a void, and the more recent ones that tend to figures in a matrix of relationships, *Sitayana* is expansive and inclusive. His characters, picked from a slew of characters in the *Ramayana*, speak from the vantage of people who are "neither here nor there" and always "betwixt and between" the positions designated by conventions. Whether it is fearless Sita, widowed Supanaka, lustful Ravanna, or gentle Laksmana, Ong's charcoal pays loving attention to these dispossessed men and women, and explores the ambiguity of their condition. In fact, this empathy for the pain of the other is key to understanding Ong's work. Sita, in Ong's artistic rendition, becomes a trope for the various shades of suffering that come in the many different Sitas that Ong imagines. Through the trope of Sita, the artist seems to be asking, what manner of existence can this be when humans are cruel to one another?

The centerpiece of the exhibition, *Dual Sita Dua* (the latter a play on the Malay word for 'two'), could be seen as a visual short-hand of the *Ramayana*, but it also points to the doubleness of Sita. One side of Sita appears serene and maternal while the other appears to be in agony and even indifferent to the baby clamoring for her attention. The plight of Sita is evident in the flames that consume the lower half of her body, as if the act of desiring has birthed not just the two sons but also a whole battle that ensued between Ravanna and Rama along with his army of monkeys. Here, the barely contained turbulence of Chinese brushwork has moved into an interior landscape to emerge in the flames issuing out of Sita. Ong explains, "When there is duality, there is pain."

But if Sita represents the idealized woman of utter submission that the everyday woman is told to aspire to, Ong is deliberate and methodical in deconstructing her in this series of drawings by re-imagining her as the everyday woman he knows best. Spending the summer with his grandmother, who was a child-bride, he was struck by how she is still unable to reconcile with her husband's infidelities. "She rails against him everyday, holds dialogue with him in her head, and because of that, she is unable to die in peace," says Ong. Or his aunties, seven in all, who would daily make a show of obeying their husbands while they spat their water-melon seeds over their litanies of complaints. But the everyday woman is also the gay man and woman who reinvent themselves as Sita to their spouses, and the modern Asian woman who must face her exile alone – and pay the cost of their liberation – *sans* husband, *sans* family. The Asian woman's changing roles and her newly-chosen paths are conditioned and, invariably, fraught with ambiguities and fear.

In *Oh Rama What a Beautiful Deer*, the tension in the relationship between the genders is most evident; it is no longer clear who is in charge. Warning Sita with his index finger not to step out of the enchanted circle that protects her from Ravanna, Rama is at the same time dependent on Sita to remove the arrow from his eye. Sita, on the other hand, turns a deaf ear to Rama and appears to want to keep Rama at a distance. And yet Sita's desire for the deer has set Rama off on his quest, and with that, a whole series of events culminating in a bloody war between Rama and Ravanna in the epic. By circling the power structure of this seemingly conventional relationship in this cloud of ambiguity, Ong points to the changing dynamics in the relationship between man and woman. If *Sitayana* could be read at all as a feminist manifesto, *Oh Rama What a Beautiful Deer* would come closest. Defiant and haughty, Sita has a task to remove the obstacle in Rama's eye. Ong's inspiration for this has come from the *Twelve Ninandas*, a Buddhist teaching device of the cause and effects leading from birth to death, where in one of the pictures an arrow in the eye is symbolic of disturbance in perception. Given this, we might wonder if Ong intends for Sita to reform and disabuse Rama of his distorted perception, which has prevented him from seeing Sita as she truly is.

For one seeking an answer to this question, *Rama Wash Day* might illuminate. Seen with a dhobi man (identified with the sub-caste in India's caste system), Rama is depicted as an old and unattractive Chinese man, somewhat deflated but always attention-seeking. The dhobi dutifully plays his role by carrying his balls, so to speak. The relationship between the two men is as ambiguous as it is clandestine, but the intimate yoking of the two men from different castes also suggests that the dynamics of relationship between men has also changed.

In contrast to the emaciated Rama, Ravanna is sensual, virile, and attractive. Ravanna is a prime example of how Ong is intentionally subversive. Though maligned throughout the *Ramayana* for wrecking havoc in order to satiate his lust for Sita, in *Ravanna Waits*, Ong sets out to redeem the demon who has been cast out and relegated to no-man's land, in this case, the island of Lanka. What is striking about this drawing is not merely Ong's amazing feat of rendering Ravanna's many heads, but also in his ability to capture the mindful expression on them; in that halo of smoke and hair, Ravanna appears almost quite contemplative. Here, Ravanna is shown to be quite the gentleman, quietly taking in the sight of Sita washing her hair while he slowly finishes a cigarette. While the scene is immediately suggestive of post-coital bliss, the caption playfully provides a self-correction: Ravanna waits. The ambiguity is perhaps intended to rescue Ravanna from a history of demonization that has gone on for as long as the *Ramayana* has been told. In that sense, Ravanna, more than any of the characters, represents the unknown and, as such, the least understood.

Like her brother Ravanna, Supanaka is also demonized in the epic. Wanting Rama for herself, the widow transformed herself into a beautiful woman and tried to seduce him, but Rama saw through her guise and, together with his brother Laksmana, cut off her nose. "Hell hath no fury as a woman scorned," the bard has said. Disfigured Supanaka, bent on revenge, goaded her brother to go after Rama's wife. In Ong's retelling in *Supanaka Wonderbra*, Supanaka, far from being chastised, is valorized instead. According to Ong, Supanaka represents the modern, independent go-getting woman. In a playful touch of humor, Supanaka bonds with Sita and teaches her how to turn the bra into a sling. In *Khumbini & Sita*, the transformed Sita comes to the fore in newly-unleashed sexuality as she rides astride a deer with as much confidence as she bends down to scoop up Khumbini, a foe turned friend or, perhaps, lover. Here, Ong is perhaps at his most lyrical as he creates a composition of pure, naked desire as animal and humans stack upon one another.

As individual stand-alone narratives within a larger series, each of the drawings becomes visual prose and is all the more remarkable for the power and complexity of its multi-layered narratives. But to the discerning viewer of *Sitayana*, there is an absence that is oddly disconcerting: while Sita may have gained new freedoms, she appears to have also lost her beauty. This raises an intriguing dilemma, useful perhaps for thinking or re-thinking about the condition of the modern Asian woman: Are freedoms and beauty incompatible? Is feminine beauty a condition of submission and passivity? Put differently, is it not possible for the modern Asian woman to be liberated and beautiful at the same time? Ong responds, "The liberated Asian woman is rarely seen as sexy. This is the dilemma of Asian women. When they are independent and successful, they are often labeled as fierce and lonely." Making an authorial choice, Ong makes a deliberate break from the traditional portrayal of Sita as beautiful and highly desirable. "Sita is at her weakest when she was the beautiful princess. I wish for Sita to be beautiful as a woman of substance. I want Sita to be an everyday sister, mother, wife."

And yet, Ong's observation of the condition of the liberated Asian woman presents his own sphinx and points to the ambiguity of his own desires. Wanting to be liberated and wanting to be desired present a conundrum to the modern Asian woman who wants to – if she could – have it all. And Ong's decision not to paint Sita as traditionally beautiful is perhaps more a reflection of this tension that remains, ultimately, unresolved in *Sitayana*. His desire to present women as powerful, liberated beings but ultimately unattractive is powerfully matched by the desire to become as feminine and pliant and beloved as traditional Sita is. And while desiring to empower the modern Sita, the artist appears also to resist her at the same time, pointing us, in this regard, to a tension that remains unresolved in this exhibition of Ong's latest works. But this tension, which has emerged in the strangely contorted bodies and ambiguous relationships that each of the figures holds with the other, is also what makes *Sitayana* strangely beautiful and provocative.

Sor-Ching Low, a writer and academic from Singapore, has contributed to newspapers and art journals. She currently resides in the United States, where she is a professor of Asian Religions at a liberal arts college.





VIEW OF THE EXHIBITION AT TYLER ROLLINS FINE ART





VIEWS OF THE EXHIBITION AT TYLER ROLLINS FINE ART



SITA & SONS

2009  
CHARCOAL ON PAPER  
65 X 50 IN.





## KHUMBINI & SITA

2009  
CHARCOAL ON PAPER  
49 X 50 IN.



RAMA WASH DAY

2009  
CHARCOAL ON PAPER  
96 X 50 IN.



OH RAMA WHAT A BEAUTIFUL DEER

2009  
CHARCOAL ON PAPER  
96 X 50 IN.





RAVANNA WAITS

2009  
CHARCOAL ON PAPER  
96 X 50 IN.







DUAL SITA DUA

2009  
CHARCOAL ON PAPER  
96 X 100 IN.



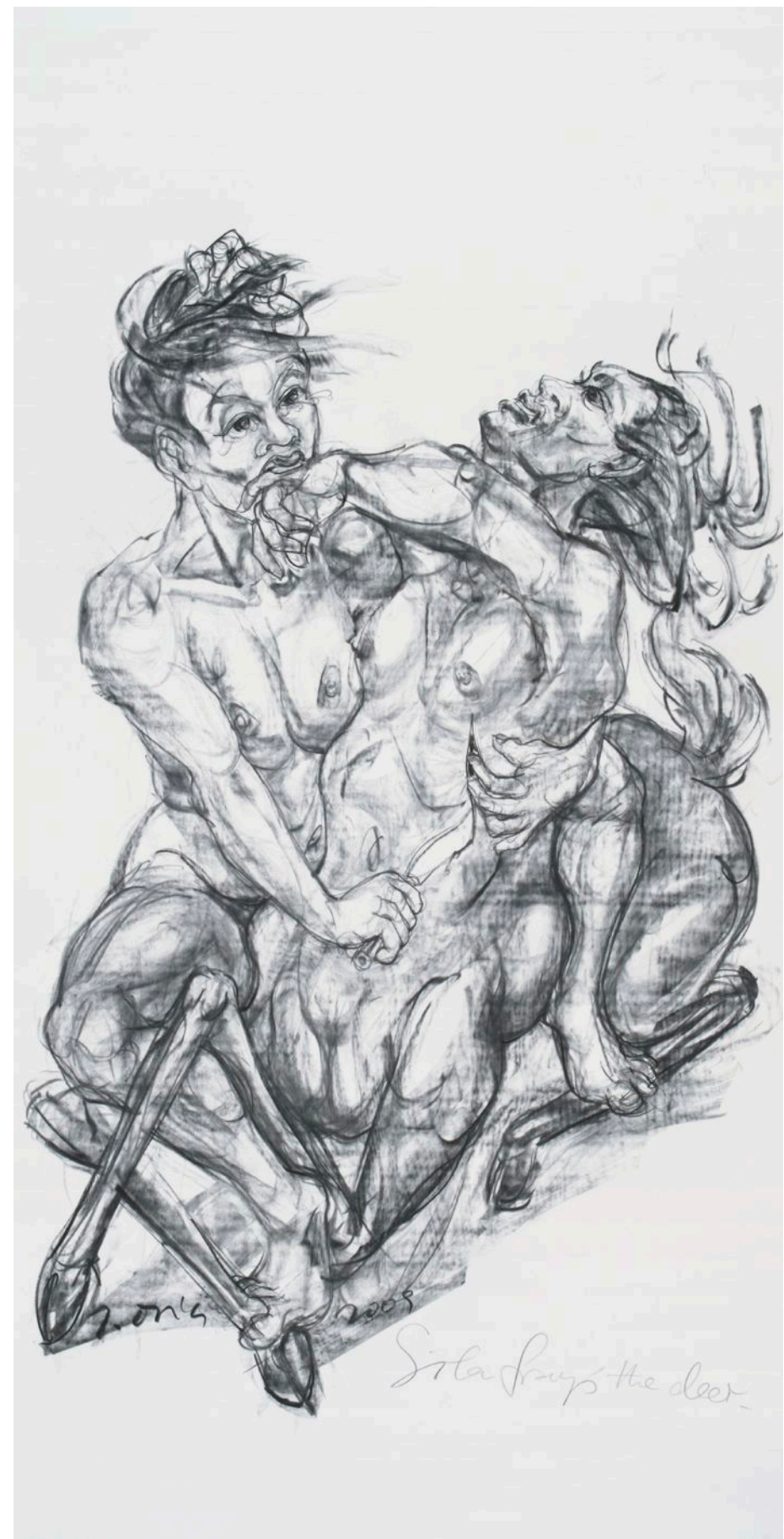
SITA X SATI

2009  
CHARCOAL ON PAPER  
96 X 50 IN.



SITA FLAYS THE DEER

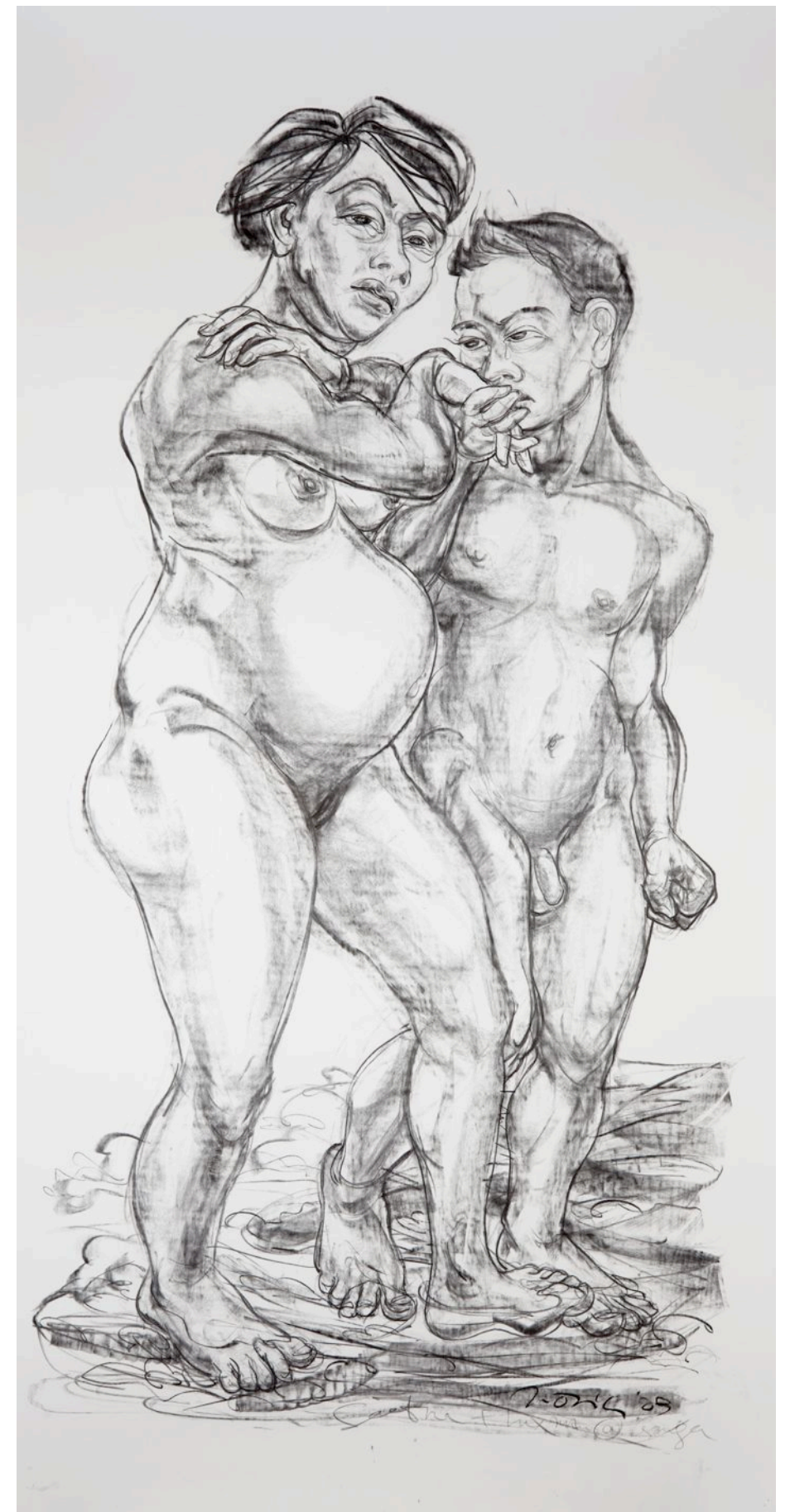
2009  
CHARCOAL ON PAPER  
96 X 50 IN.





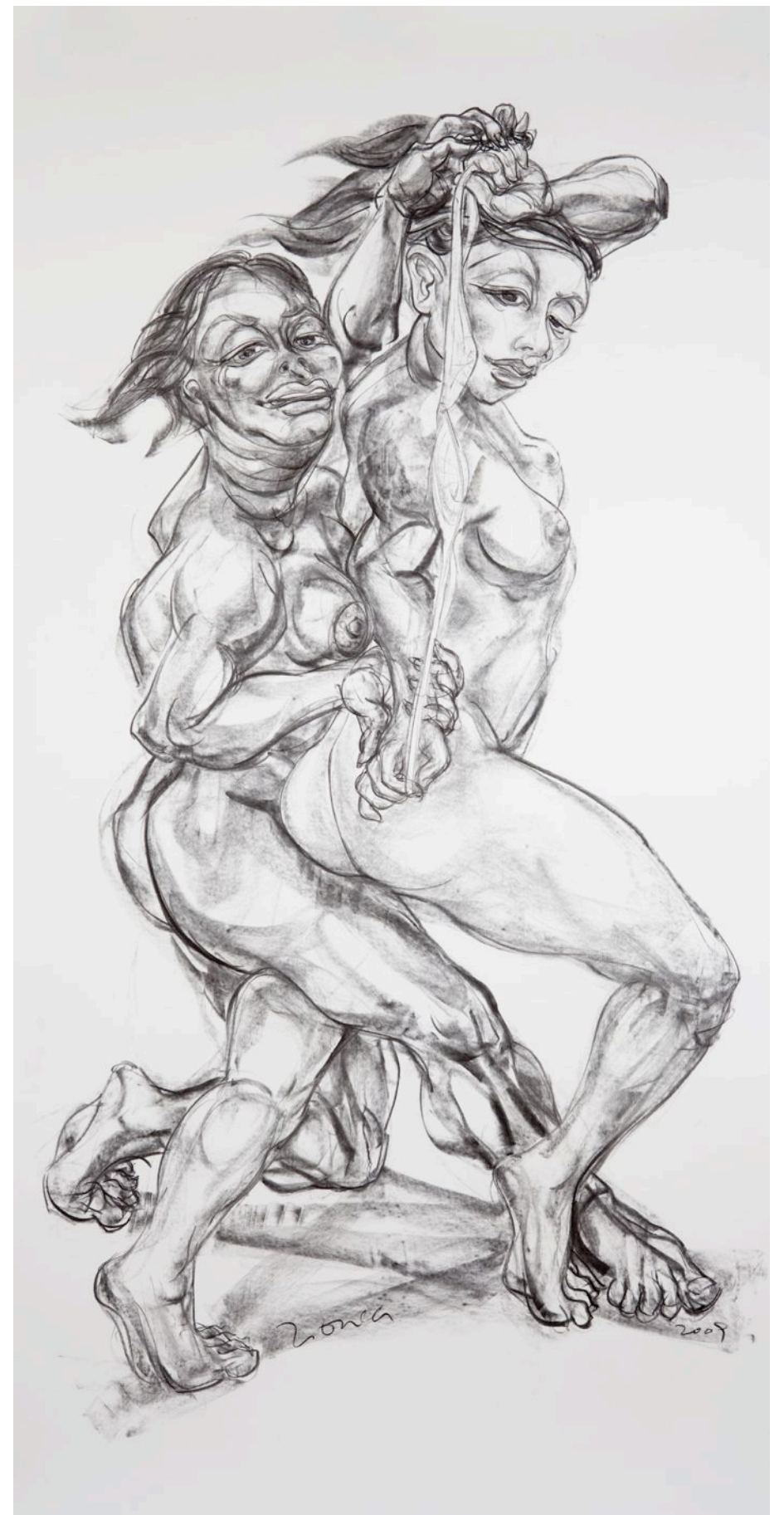
SITA AND LAKSMANA AT GANGA

2009  
CHARCOAL ON PAPER  
96 X 50 IN.



SUPANAKA WONDERBRA

2009  
CHARCOAL ON PAPER  
96 X 50 IN.





THE DHOBI LEARNS THE FUNDOSHI

2009  
CHARCOAL ON PAPER  
96 X 50 IN.



JIMMY ONG

SELECTED BIOGRAPHY

EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND

1989-1992  
Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia, PA.  
Awarded Charles Toppan Drawing Prize.

1988  
Studio Art Center International, Florence, Italy.  
Awarded Anna K Meredith Scholarship.

1984-1985  
Center for Creative Studies, Detroit, MI.  
Awarded Alliance of Independent Colleges of Art  
Scholarship.

1980  
Awarded UOB Painting of the Year, Youth 2nd Prize,  
Singapore.

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2013  
*Elo Progo*, Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York, NY.

2010  
SGD, Singapore Tyler Print Institute, Singapore.

*Sitayana*, Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York, NY.

2008  
*Ancestors on the Beach*, Post Museum and Valentine  
Willie Fine Art, Singapore.

2004  
*Rocks & Water*, Block 43 Studio Gallery, Singapore.

2003  
*Trees in a Garden*, Lunuganga, Bentota, Sri Lanka.

2002  
*Portable Prayer*, Plum Blossoms Gallery, New York, NY.

2001  
*Lovers’ Rocks*, Taksu Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

2000  
*Alter-Altar*, Plum Blossoms Gallery, Hong Kong.

1999  
*Studies for a Deity*, Gallery 456, New York, NY.

*The Other Woman*, Dagmar Gallery, Santa Monica, CA.

1997  
*Lovers & Ancestors*, Cicada Gallery, Singapore.

1990  
*Jimmy Ong- Drawings*, Goethe Institute, Singapore.

1988  
*Familiar Stranger/ Distant Relative*, Artist studio/ Dragon  
Court, Singapore.

*Table Drawings*, Art Forum, Singapore.

1987  
*The Children of*, Arbour Fine Art Gallery, Singapore.

1986  
*Table Drawings*, ArtTrain Gallery, Detroit, MI.

1984  
*The Drawings of Jimmy Ong*, Alliance Française,  
Singapore.

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2011  
*Transfiguring*, The Private Museum, Singapore.

2010  
*Singapore Survey 2010: Beyond LKY*, Valentine Willie Fine  
Art, Singapore.

2009  
*The Air Conditioned Recession*, Valentine Willie Fine Art,  
Singapore.

2008  
*The Scale of Black*, Valentine Willie Fine Art, Singapore.

2006  
*Nature Born*, Langgeng Contemporary Art Festival,  
Magelang, Singapore.

2005  
*Vision & Resonance*, Asian Civilisations Museum,  
Singapore.

2004  
*The Invisible Thread*, Newhouse Center for Contemporary  
Art, Staten Island, NY.

2000  
*12 ASEAN Artists*, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur,  
Malaysia.

*ArtSingapore*, MITA Atrium, Singapore.

*Love on Paper*, Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur,  
Malaysia.

1999  
*Tolong*, Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur,  
Malaysia.

1998  
*German Week*, the Deutsche Bank Art Collections,  
Chijmes Gallery, Singapore.

1997  
*Art Power*, in aid of The Substation - A Home for the Arts,  
Chijmes Gallery, Singapore.

1996  
*Interaction*, Cicada Gallery, Singapore.

1995  
*Figurative Works*, Mulligan Shanoski Gallery, San  
Francisco, CA.

1994  
*Five Directions*, Takashimaya Gallery, Singapore.

*Windows on Singapore Art*, various venues, Hong Kong  
and China.

1991  
*Many in One*, Meridian House International, Washington  
D.C.

1990  
*Art Travel East West*, World Trade Centre, Rotterdam,  
Netherlands.



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SITAYANA

JIMMY ONG

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