

ELO PROGO



TYLER ROLLINS
FINE ART

JIMMY ONG

FOREWORD

TYLER ROLLINS

Tyler Rollins Fine Art is pleased to welcome back Jimmy Ong for his second solo exhibition with the gallery, entitled *Elo Progo*, taking place from January 10 – February 23, 2013. 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. His early, pioneering work focused on sexual identity and gender roles, often within the context of the traditional Chinese family. Now a US resident, Ong has, over the past twenty-five years, explored the ways in which multiple identities and perspectives – whether sexual, ethnic, national, or even generational – can coexist within the individual. His deeply personal works have taken inspiration from a stark analysis of his own experience, and indeed of his own physical form, an ongoing process of what he calls "creative self therapy." In recent years, he has investigated issues relating to marital roles, informed in part by his experience as a spouse in a gay marriage. His inquiry has gradually broadened from the personal to the plural and has incorporated gender archetypes as conveyed through mythology and spiritual traditions. His seminal exhibition, *Sitayana*, exhibited at Tyler Rollins Fine Art in 2010 and subsequently acquired by the National Art Gallery of Singapore, marked the first major public exhibition of this new focus, with its feminist re-imagining of the ancient Indian epic, the Ramayana, a work which continues to play a vibrant role throughout Southeast Asia, acting as an endless source of inspiration for the region's folk and popular cultures. Ong used the *Ramayana* as a point of departure in creating new narratives that were informed by his sensitivity to the way gender roles play out in contemporary relationships.

In 2012, Ong's investigation of the contemporary resonance of ancient myths led him to a series of projects in Yogyakarta, one of the major artistic centers in Java, Indonesia, where he began documentary research into gender roles as reflected in folklore as well as contemporary society, the latter specifically relating to the local transgender community. His current exhibition, *Elo Progo*, takes its name and inspiration from the confluence of the Elo and Progo rivers – one said to be male, the other female – located in the Kedu Plain near Borobudur, one of Java's sacred places. Ong was captivated by this local myth as well as the traditional Javanese practice of meditation in water. The *Elo Progo* exhibition centers on Ong's first public showing of video works, which were inspired by the rituals of water meditation and informed by themes of gender fluidity and mythic transformation. The exhibition also includes a new body of works on paper, done in richly colored gouache, that appropriate a type of Chinese splash ink brushwork in mirrored patterns created by the repetitive folding of the paper along an axis. Through a circular and meditative process of drawing, transferring, and redrawing, which echoes the cyclical, ritualistic time of the videos, Ong has created a vivid series of works that features a recurring, androgynous figure. In various degrees of abstraction, the figure is shown twice in each work, in a mirroring of form that reflects Ong's ongoing interest in ideas relating to duality, the gender binarism, and the fluidity and transformation of identity.

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ARTIST STATEMENT

JIMMY ONG

In early 2012, I came upon two separate rivers, named Elo and Progo, near Borobudur in Central Java, Indonesia. In local folklore, one river, Elo, is thought of as male, and the other river, Progo, as female; they come together and merge as one river, just called Progo. Captivated by the myth and the natural phenomenon, I returned in August 2012 to Jogjakarta to make video works addressing my sentiments about gender roles.

I learned about the Javanese legend of Watu Gunung, the tale of a Javanese king who fell in love with his own mother, and noted how it differs from the Oedipal story I know in the West – for while Oedipus's mother, Jocasta, dies, Watu Gunung's mother, Sita, outwits her own son and emerges triumphant. So I am not surprised that the Elo and Progo rivers merge as one "female" river.

I also learned that the traditional ritual of *kungkum*, a meditation by night in water, is still being practiced in Java. I pictured how being in water in the dark makes one forget his or her body. A recent collaboration* with two women artists involving transgender women (sometimes referred to locally as *makciks*) in Jogjakarta exposed the fact that my thinking had been too binary about what is feminine and what is masculine, and I was only beginning to relax to the *makciks* as really women. So I made videos with some of my friends and collaborators as performers in a *kungkum*-like ritual, having the non-actors walk mindfully into a pool of water, fully submersing themselves in the deep water and emerging as the opposite sex. The two videos shown for the first time in the *Elo Progo* exhibition are variations of the *kungkum* I envisioned.

Kungkum (2012, 4:30 minutes) contains two videos in one, one mirrored below the other, reflecting a male and female slowly descending into water and emerging as the opposite gender. This single channel projection is intended to be shown in a loop.

Sangam (2012, 8:27 minutes) shows three sets of men and women walking serially into water. This is a two-channel video installation: one channel begins with the males and the other channel begins with females. They are shown on two opposing walls, so that the audience's vantage point is in the middle of the body of water, and the viewer witnesses the men and women crossing through his or her own space. A "concerto of frog-like chanting" (*The Frog's Song*) by Wukir Suryadi, a contemporary Javanese musician, is featured here.

Back in my studio in the US, I wondered what kind of performance by the river might neutralize male and female, and I made some preliminary watercolors and gouache storyboards. I am fascinated with how, when one is underwater, one can see one's reflection underneath the water's surface, like in a mirror. The *Gerry Gender* series** began with a clearly defined man mirroring a clearly defined woman. This was achieved by folding the paper in two, so that an imprint of one figure is transferred onto the other half of the paper along the fold. I was thinking of a male and a female in synchrony between the waterline. As I made more variations, it occurred to me how the Rorschach effect smudged my drawing, blurring the distinctions between the figures. I gave in by going along with the chance image that resulted. I was also giving in to not defining the gender of each figure. The whole process is so reminiscent of Chinese Literati painting that I decided to make it into a ritual of "daily practice," incorporating the splash ink style. There was a lot of waste as I tend to overwork the paper, but it became a way of "unlearning" my training as a Western painter of having to make conscious gender representations. The paintings thus document my process of surrendering gender binarisms, stopping at a point when one is more male or more female than the other. The figures in water now appear to me as beings in primordial states, and in gradual submission to the chance accidents of splashed paints, I freed myself from making conscious conceptual representations, attaching neither sex to the mirrored figures.

The artist would like to thank lin lin, Edval, Ferial, Mufti, Renie and Lugas of Yogyakarta for performing the *kungkum* in the videos.

*For more information on the Makcik Project, please refer to the following link: <http://www.mediafire.com/view/?j991apc1a35h9r2>.

** The title of the series, *Gerry Gender*, came to me during the recent US elections, thinking of the term "gerrymandering," the contentious process of delineating the boundaries between opposing political parties.



SANGAM
2012
TWO-CHANNEL VIDEO
8:27 MIN
EDITION OF 5



KUNGKUM
2012
SINGLE-CHANNEL VIDEO
4:30 MIN.
EDITION OF 5



GERRY GENDER #1
2012
GOUACHE AND CHARCOAL ON PAPER
27 X 50 1/2 IN. (68 X 128 CM)



GERRY GENDER #2

2012
GOUACHE AND CHARCOAL ON PAPER
27 X 49 IN. (68 X 124.5 CM)



GERRY GENDER #3

2012
GOUACHE AND CHARCOAL ON PAPER
45 X 25 1/2 IN. (114 X 65 CM)



GERRY GENDER #4
2012
GOUACHE ON PAPER
22 ½ X 29 ½ IN. (57 X 75 CM)



E & P
2012
GOUACHE ON PAPER
22 ½ X 29 ½ IN. (57 X 75 CM)



GERRY GENDER #5
2012
GOUACHE ON PAPER
50 X 24 IN. (127 X 61 CM)



GERRY GENDER #6
2012
GOUACHE ON PAPER
50 X 27 IN. (127 X 68 CM)



GERRY GENDER #7
2012
GOUACHE ON PAPER
25 X 50 IN. (63.5 X 127 CM)



GERRY GENDER #8
2012
GOUACHE ON PAPER
50 X 26 IN. (127 X 66 CM)



GERRY GENDER #9
2012
GOUACHE ON PAPER
22 1/2 X 29 1/2 IN. (57 X 75 CM)



GERRY GENDER #10
2012
GOUACHE ON PAPER
50 1/2 X 24 1/2 IN. (128 X 62 CM)



GERRY GENDER #11
2012
GOUACHE ON PAPER
50 ½ X 25 ½ IN. (128 X 65 CM)



GERRY GENDER #12
2012
GOUACHE ON PAPER
50 ½ X 26 IN. (128 X 66 CM)

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.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2012
Singapore Survey 2012: Strange New Faces, Valentine
Willie Fine Art, Singapore.

2011
Singapore Survey 2011: Imagine Malaysia, Valentine
Willie Fine Art, Singapore.

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.

1998
German Week, the Deutsche Bank Art Collections,
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.



IIN IIN KUNGKUM
2012
GICLEE DIGITAL PRINT
18 X 12 ¼ IN. (46 X 31 CM)

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