

G A L E R I P E T R O N A S

GALERI PETRONAS
KOLEKSI SENI PETRONAS 2012



049106051

RM65.00

KOLEKSI SENI PETRONAS **SIRI 2**

PETRONAS ART COLLECTION : SERIES 2

Presence - An Exhibition of the Photographic



decipher how these remaining elements might relate together. In this work as in the other two, we have to dig deep to reach the full potential of their intent.

The cultural symbolism of the bird is replete with the sacred. In many sacred traditions, it is a poetic expression of spiritual ascension. In Farid A-din Attar's *The Conference of the Birds*, the Simurgh¹² is an allegorical heavenly bird the search for which is a metaphor for one's quest for the Divine Presence. The eagle – the King of Birds – in various ancient traditions is attributed with the power to gaze into the brilliance of the sun, and to traverse the heavens – and unlike the mythic Icarus¹³ who strayed too long and too near the powerful orb, did not catch fire but returned as burnished gold.

The symbolism in this work can be read as a spiritual antidote. The selective obliteration of the main 'icon' is in effect a total annihilation of the picture's original context. The bird is literally 'set free' of the advertising context 'imposed' upon it. By removing the 'unwanted' context, Unglehart has recovered not just the viewer's freedom of (cultural) association with the bird. Importantly, freed of any other objects with which we may relate it to, we are left with a 'naked' bird. Without any other visual prompts, how do we relate to an image of a bird? How do we look at the bird, how do 'see' a bird, culturally, personally? By the same token what is our unmediated experience of a *real bird*?

Other antecedents for Unglehart's iconoclasm have defaced other artworks like the Situationist Asger Jorn's late '50s 'modifications' or altered/over-paintings (inscriptions over second-hand canvases by unknown artists) and Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning (1953)*.¹⁴ The questions raised in such works were many then and now. Who is the author of a modified artwork or image? Is a painting painted by de Kooning and erased by Rauschenberg still a de Kooning or is it a Rauschenberg? Is an 'erased' artwork, erased?

To locate the core of the three works by Unglehart, one needs go the depths of their central nature - their iconoclasm. It is what unites them with all other such works (and essentially acts) that exist (or took place) in the world. And it links Unglehart inexorably to a long chain of tradition, from religion to art.¹⁵

Yee I-Lann has also re-presented found photographic images. But unlike Unglehart's, the source, that is the photographer, of Yee's images is not 'anonymous'. These photographs are a small part of a larger series of similar type photographs. They were digitally re-printed from the 1977-1982 negative archives of Pakard Photo studio, established in Melaka in 1959 by Chinese immigrants Mr. Tam Hong Lam and his wife Foong Han. Had Yee not brought these pictures to light, all this information would probably be of no consequence. The studio photographer, Tam Hong Lam would have remained 'unknown'.

Removed from their original 'private' space to the public space of art, the original purpose and function of the photographs is displaced. Where they would have been previously 'bound for

obscurity', they are now appropriated by art and invested with 'new' layers of meaning that may add to the interminable discourse on representation in relation to the creation of meaning.

The re-photographing of composite photographs or images derived from photographs has its antecedents as long ago as the nineteenth century - not as a 'high art' but as part of the 'photographic amusement' of that era.¹⁶ A more recent lineage for this appropriation in the case of Yee's work, lies with Pop Art, for instance in the work of Andy Warhol - not so much in the photo silk-screens of famous public personalities or icons, but in the early '60s series of images of motor accidents silk-screened into rows of multiple repetitions, or in the mug shots of unwanted criminals.

Unlike Warhol's, Yee's images are not replicated into multiples from a single image. They are not processed through multiple mechanical repetitions and rendered inert as a result. Their sense of replication and inertia comes about via the repetition of the original framework of the photo studio convention, with the ubiquitous limbo backdrop, the flower arrangement, the birthday cake and other props, and the resulting choreography of the human subjects within such a setting. Our viewing of them is determined by the construct of the photo studio. (It is one construct among others that 'processes' us through life.) Yee's found images of obediently arranged people are placid by contrast. But their genealogy connects them to Warhol's albeit more starkly shocking found images of mangled metal and bodies appropriated from news photographs, and grimly 'anonymous' criminals from homicidal archives. In the Warhols, what is highlighted is that the accidental death of a private individual and the covert acts of criminality become public spectacle, through the media and then through art. Death is no longer private, shame is public. Through this process, the private spaces of individuals are robbed. And art completes the theft.

And whose art are these pictures? Who is their author? Is it Warhol's or the anonymous press photographer? Is it Yee or Tam and his assistants? Both are authors in very different ways, Tam being the primary author and Yee the secondary. Or is it the other way round? More than an author, born into a ready-made world of images, Yee like many artists today is a hunter-gatherer and producer of potential meaning. She 'curates' from a vast store of images 'waiting' to be discovered and couched with meaning. For meaning to be found or made, the artist need no longer add 'original' images of her own to the towering 'image' mountain. That would be superfluous. A quote from Duchamp is useful here to point to his persistent legacy. When his then scandalous ready-made urinal (*Fountain* 1917, signed 'R. Mutt') was rejected for the (1917) exhibition by the Society of Independent Artists in New York, Duchamp defended it thus: "Whether Mr. Mutt in his own hands made the fountain or not has no importance. He CHOSE it. He took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under a new title and point of view... [he] created a new thought for that object".¹⁷

What are the new thoughts to be had in Yee's 're-invented' pictures? The anonymity of the strangers in the pictures makes the works impenetrable but for the recognizable cultural signposts they

carry from a different era. Regardless of the temporal divide we relate to these images of adults, adolescents, youths and children sitting and standing to attention for the camera, because in many ways they resemble us. Some of them look like us. They posed for the family portrait as we might have done as parent, husband, wife, child, daughter, son - their stereotypical attires emblematic of their situation in life and stylistic conventions of the day.

When we look at Yee's people, we are supposed to peer into our shared modernity, history, genealogy and mortality. Though these pictures are of the past, they are also part of the present, part of the Malaysian narrative - as the titles of the works suggest. We ask ourselves what is this narrative, what stories do we construct for ourselves?

In Yee's work as opposed to Tam's, there are allusions to such questions; codes to be deciphered, existing as subtexts in Yee's 'found' titles. *Bersatu Padu, Rakan Muda, Keranamu, Menuju Kejayaan* carry the weight of our social contracts; constructs that try to define us collectively. The ingenuity of the work is in the placement of the individual studio pictures belonging to the same genus next to each other, in row after rows. When all of them are seen together as one collective, the conventional setting of the studio, the same ubiquitous setting that backdrops all of the pictures of individuals of different racial appearance, becomes the homogenizing space - just as the aforementioned slogans are meant to effect.

The compromise and appropriation of the privacy of people's lives is peculiar to photography. This is no less true in Gill's *Dalam* pictures of people's homes, but for the artist's studious avoidance of hierarchy in their presentation, their individual placement in relation to each another. This is intended to make each space no more private/public, no more important than the next. With consent, all 258 or so private individuals have shared their living room spaces with us. There is no stolen privacy here; there is open collaboration.

Gill's photographs are not found objects, but one could say they are images of found spaces. *Dalam* is a series of 258 photographs of 'found' interiors of different people's homes she encountered throughout West Malaysia. The meaning in the Malay word of the title *Dalam* is many layered and mirrors the conceptual depth of the work aptly. It means 'inside' as 'within' an 'interior' space. It also means 'deep' as in the depths of thought, and 'internal' where the intimate resides and feelings run deep. It also means 'profound' of meaning, and by further extension 'deep-rooted' and 'steeped'. It also refers to the outer reaches - the hinterland where the geography of *Dalam* extends.

Gill like Yee is naturally inclined towards issues pertaining to the terrain of identity politics. Not surprisingly perhaps, as both artists have personally experienced a geographical 'dislocation'. Yee I-Lann is of Malaysian (Sabahan)/Australian parentage. Gill has lived and worked outside of Malaysia for a long time, but returns often.

And just as the photo studio space in Yee's pictures form the ubiquitous frame for the different subjects photographed, the living room is the frame for the different assemblages of codified objects photographed in *Dalam*. Just as the main subject of Yee's pictures are Malaysians and by implication matters concerning Malaysian identity and the sociocultural, in *Dalam* the same is the case but not via people's bodily presence, but their absence and their trace.

In perpetual Diaspora, born in Singapore, grown up in Malaysia, educated in India and the UK and now residing in Australia, *Dalam* was for Gill a personal journey interior, and in many ways constructed as an experimental project to prove/disprove a hypothesis the nature of which we might conjecture. If one could know the inner spaces of others, one might either experience a profound connectedness or, plummet to the depths of one's inalienable difference. Geographical distances no longer a problematic, then separateness becomes the shared bridge, allowing for Gill's psychological homecoming once and for all. Or is this the case?

For one who has for a long time in her work concerned herself with what it might be like to be another (be it human or vegetal), one intuits that such a scope of project as *Dalam* was driven by a philosophical and utterly sincere need to penetrate the Malaysian psyche – the open and hidden cavities of mind, heart and soul.

Dalam archives for our reflection a symbolic world of things, material remains that read as signs for the corporeal. It also engages us with the incorporeal presence of matter. A sign is something present replacing what is absent, for instance a door can be a sign for 'entrance' and 'exit'. We do not have to witness the entering and exiting through the door to understand what the door is meant for, stands for. In *Dalam*, our eyes wander over the objects and we read them as signs or data. From this data, we construct a self, what kind of person/s would have all these things as clues around them. As the spaces are devoid of people these clues hint at the identity of 'absentees'.¹⁸ And as the perspectives of these pictures place us in spatial relation to the objects, everything is proportioned to the gaze of the observers – Gill and us.

These rooms exert a powerful presence through absence. And in this, lies a profundity the depth of which is rarely felt. This absence is a silence that permeates the viewer as he/she enters the living spaces of *Dalam* with their still-life objects that 'speak' a muted language of signs.

Not only are the inhabitants of these spaces absent in the pictures, but also so are we and so is Gill. In the absence of the inhabitants, we fill this 'void'; we take their place. We become the 'occupiers' of the 258 living spaces of *Dalam* - along with Gill. But being in reality outside of the spaces, we are also 'detached' – on the outside looking in. This dichotomy perhaps mirrors the artist's position as one who is sometimes on the 'inside' and at other times on the 'outside' – sometimes Asian, sometimes less so.

Yee I-Lann

Member - member (2/4), 2002

digital photographic print on Kodak professional paper, 165 x 114 cm





Yee I-Lann

Menuju Kejayaan (1/4), 2002,

digital photographic print on Kodak professional paper, 165 x 114 cm



Yee I-Lann, *Hari Jadi (2/4)*, 2002,
digital photographic print on Kodak professional paper, 165 x 114 cm

Yee I-Lann

Rakan Muda (5/6), 2002,

digital photographic print on Kodak professional paper, 60 x 122 cm

