

ASIAN ART

The newspaper for collectors, dealers, museums and galleries

Politics and History in Recent Southeast Asian Contemporary Art

“Perhaps not surprisingly, the older and better-travelled participants produced the most satisfying art. Theirs were not the visually facile, mock-subversive pieces that have been spied in Singapore recently, but instead thoughtful, sometimes nearly wistful works mixing an understanding of the weight of history and a genuine engagement with nation, present and future, however critical their message. Not coincidentally, these practitioners tended to be of the generation that remembers Singapore’s art scene before it became a quasibusiness, with grants and public patronage the sole trophies of success.

The work of old hands Jimmy Ong, Tang Da Wu, Jason Lim, and Zai Kuning stood out for its acuity and visual command. Jimmy Ong’s 2010 LKY as *Mother & Daughter*, rendered in the artist’s signature charcoal on paper, was one of the show’s most intelligent and conceptually far-reaching pieces. The drawing, presenting two tussling nude figures, was no different from many Ong studies. But its allusion to gender change – only a superficial reading could reduce its meaning to one of mere sexual orientation – invited viewers to ponder a radical rethink of Singapore from the inside out. Yet if the piece was subversive in its call to change, it did not antagonise, Ong’s placing MM Lee in the role of mother (he is traditionally referred to as the nation’s father) a gesture of tenderness rather than irony. This intimacy between artist and subject went further, LKY also occupying the vulnerable role of fallible daughter. If the daughter is fragile and inexperienced, she is also human, thus suggested the drawing, entitled to be judged with some benevolence by history. More obliquely, and here was the piece’s ambiguously phrased subtext, imperfect as the daughter may be, she represents the future and thus, with all her flaws, liberation from the past. Taking stock of the power of history, Ong also hinted that Singapore might never be free of its past and that LKY, incarnating both mother and daughter, must somehow go on for ever. Jimmy Ong’s LKY as Mother & Daughter, about power, the possibility of change, and the necessity of confronting history-to-be as a direct product of the past, encapsulated the exhibition’s multi-layered concept.”

Iola Lenzi

Making History: How Southeast Asian Art Reconquers the Past to Conjure the Future was from 14 May to 27 June 2010 at Jendela Visual Arts Space, Esplanade, Singapore and Singapore Survey 2010: Beyond LKY Indonesia and was from 5 to 29 August 2010 at Valentine Willie Fine Art, Singapore