

An Intimate World

Singapore artist Jimmy Ong's drawings represent the opportunity to create both a deeply personal narrative and an objective study of the complexity of human relationships and longing.

By Ian Findlay

For more than a decade, Jimmy Ong's attachment to drawing has been an intensely absorbing one. Drawing, with a long and distinguished history, as seen in the stunning anatomical studies by Leonardo da Vinci, and in more recent times by Picasso's mythological drawings, is now an art form considered of ancillary importance by many contemporary artists.

Jimmy Ong's work reveals an artist of substance in the tradition of drawing and one with a deep commitment to his medium. He has shown himself capable of singular versatility in creating both delicate and revealing self-portraits, and robust, moody works, as well as maintaining a remarkable consistency of visual achievement. Even as a young student, he showed surprisingly mature emotional strength and a strong sense of visual tension and the ability to surprise, whether in the intensely feminine quality of some of his work or in sadness of people coming together or being apart. "In his works, we witness an intense, absorbing vision unfolding. In this world the human figure is dominant in a drama of its own," wrote the Singaporean critic T. K. Sabapathy in 1988

in *The Straits Times* of Ong's work.

A series of individual portraits executed in 1987—most of which were charcoal on paper, but some highlighted with color—show a confident artist fascinated with defining his subjects through the subtleties of gesture, line, and mass to bring them alive to the viewer. At the same time, these early works demonstrate Ong's determination to capture, even in the most

sentimental of his works, something of the psychology and inner life of each subject, as well as show something of his own inner world. Then, as now, Ong is perhaps more revealing of his male subjects than his female, which, though he captures an enticing feminine quality, is neither about sexuality nor sex. The portraits of a decade ago are strong, figurative works, yet tinged with a certain tentative sentimentality.

But Ong's early hesitancy has long passed on to confidence. What stands out in the development of his drawing, besides his growing maturity and confidence, is his ability to capture subtle nuances of gesture and mood that add greater depth of intensity and sophistication to his work.

"You wonder, for example, about the arrogant set of a head, the thick neck, the self-conscious muscularity of a roughly developed torso. Strong, clean, linear. The Rugged Society. Then you notice long-fingered hands, trailing impotently. And so it comes as no surprise to see, in another study, the same figure shrouded in a blackness of introspection," wrote a critic in 1987.

Drawing for Ong holds many mysteries. Here experience and relationships are subject to reinter-



Jimmy Ong, *Tango*, 1990, charcoal on paper, 180 x 150 cm. All photographs: Courtesy of Cicada Gallery of Fine Arts, Singapore.

pretation, both of which are at the heart of his work, and particularly strong in *Lovers and Ancestors*, his most recent collection. Even though he has made both paintings and sculptures, drawing is the one art form which has come to define Ong as an artist most completely. He sees drawing and painting as "essentially the same approach, same problems but [with] a different medium." But the act of drawing with charcoal, his preferred medium, is a liberating experience, he suggests, that has a unique character and immediacy. Charged with many subtle difficulties for the indifferent artist, drawing holds no fears for Ong, who long ago accepted that not every work is a success, whether he is dealing with a simple portrait or an expressionistic group of figures.

"I like the capacity of drawing to create space or a sense of void. Drawing has the quality of duality in that it can define something in a full or empty way in a way that painting can't. I chose charcoal because it is capable of giving a very sensitive modeling of the form. It is very sensitive to recording the expressionistic quality of gesture. I chose to use paper [of a certain size] consciously so that it is within my arm's reach to control the stroke. Anything too big and you really have to step out of yourself. It is a choice that the work is within my frame. The size of a work could be a reflection of the artist's ego," says Ong. "You work within your limitations. Paper is as unforgiving as oil painting. You can draw over and over again in the same way as oil to allow changes. Frank Auerbach has done this, but it is more about recording the process. My criteria is that I am very involved in space, whereas Auerbach is very involved with the texture of the work. I feel that he has created some kind of psychologi-

cal quality. I have an advantage in that I am dealing with more than one figure so I can employ facial expressions, figures, and partial closeness of the figure together to create tension."

The world in which Ong has immersed himself as an artist—the nude figure alone, in pairs, and in groups, and still lifes—may seem too narrow to some people. Yet, the flow and drama of his line, his modeling, and use of space suggest worlds beyond the figure, landscapes

personal information. The directness, then, is like a mirror to us, seeing within the individual character or figures something which moves us because the emotion is something that is a part of us.

Oscar Kokoschka, as an equally young man, had a wonderful ability to reveal the inner world of his subjects in his painted portraits, as did Henry Moore in his air-raid shelter drawings in London of people waiting out patiently the bombing of their city, and Kathe Kollwitz's prints of the dispossessed. Whether it is the great draughtsmanship of Rembrandt, or the frighteningly dark visions of Goya, or the gestural strength of the painter Frank Auerbach that Ong admires and has soaked up, he is his own master. Their ability to suggest the world beyond the surface is something Jimmy Ong possesses. It is fine gift. But sometimes he is dissatisfied, even with his studies.

"Sometimes, [I use studies], but most often I don't. I work directly on paper but if it doesn't work, I throw away the whole thing; it could be compositionally that it does not work well or compositionally it might work well but the line is not good enough, then I throw it away," says Ong. "I work on a piece at a time. If I



Jimmy Ong, *Bicycle Wife*, 1991, charcoal on paper, 150 x 180 cm.



Jimmy Ong, *Master's Voice*, 1991-1992, charcoal on paper, 150 x 130 cm.

start something else. I have to put the work away and bring it out later."

From his early individual figurative works and *Table Drawings* and *Children of...* in the late 1980s, to his most recent works in *Prodigal Son* (1991-1994) and *Lovers and Ancestors* (1996-1997), Ong's work is essentially the development of a particular narrative. His development of the human figure deals with human relationships within themselves as the individual or with others, the immediacy of themes such as loneliness, anxiety, sex and sexuality, nudity, and love and intimacy, and family relationships, as well as his personal narrative. Regardless of the mood of each piece, or whether it is done from a posed figure or from memory, there is a spontaneity of gesture and emotion that comes from his direct contact with the paper and the charcoal. It is easy to imagine Ong, charcoal in hand, standing ready before an almost life-sized piece of paper ready to engage its surface with his vision. He rarely works from studies or plans, and this is part of the success of his work, for the gesture and shadings have a grand freshness about it.

Where Ong was looking for a recognizable representation of the figure in works such as *Self Portrait with Crossed Arms* and *Joseph* (both 1987), he quickly moved away from conventionally posed figures to a denser, more robust line and form reminiscent of Henry Moore's *Coalmine Sketchbook* and *Shelter* sketches of the early 1940s. But even in his earliest drawings, Ong was clearly aware of the power and scope that the medium offered to go beyond mere surface realities and to project an astonishingly wide range of feelings and emotions. The strength and depth of his achievement becomes ever clearly in his *Prodigal Son* series in works such as *Bicycle*



Jimmy Ong, *Pas de Deux* (1 of 12 pieces), 1997, charcoal on paper, 46 x 30.5 cm.

Wife, Tango, and Master's Voice. These works, as well as his more erotic works, dealing with sexual encounters, which have never been shown, contain a greater gestural freedom that, while refreshing, is



Jimmy Ong, *Chinese Son*, 1996, charcoal on paper, 137 x 128 cm.

darker in mood and in physical tension, as well as more concerned with mass and volume. The heavier line and more pronounced modeling suggest the artist is more engrossed physically and emotionally with his subjects than in his previous work.

In *Lovers & Ancestors*, Ong has returned to an earlier preoccupation with the figure—a concern with the inner life and physical nature—combined with a more intuitive understanding of his subjects. Here also Ong's narrative highlights both the intensely personal nature of his work, where he is an implied participant, and the more subjective world of an observer. In *Hair - Hair* (1996) and *Pas de Deux* Ong is observing the mechanics of relationships, physical, mental, and emotional where the figures, although separate entities, appear to exist as one.

While reflections on emotional life are clear in much of Ong's recent pieces, he is also drawing a narrative which is deeply rooted in his own cultural beliefs of family history and his relationship to it in popular art forms such as prints. Through symbolic and formal representation in works such as *Chinese Son*, *Remember Grandfather*, (1996) and *His Father's Grandson* (1997), Ong creates a unique tension and subtlety. "I can employ suggested relationships to create content. They could be brother and sister or husband and wife. The duality in drawing to create volume and mass can suggest a single figure or two people where there is the suggestion of together or separate, growing into or out of each other. In *His Father's Grandfather* the child is the father of the man," says Ong.

"In *Chinese Son* I saw an advertisement for a washing machine. The woman in the advertisement looked happy [fully clothed] so I decided to do a picture of a pregnant woman naked, the swollen stomach [as] the cen-



Jimmy Ong, **His Father's Grandson**, 1997, charcoal on paper, 214 x 127.5 cm.

ter of attention. I added a man at the back and by doing so I created a sense of space—a room. I put a cigarette in his mouth (since it could be an hour in execution). There is the suggestion of sex in the cigarette. I added a look to the woman, a look of pictures that she is turning. It has figures in it."

At their heart, Ong's drawings are essentially autobiographical, but Ong is very aware of the independence of his works, and a finished work, with all its problems and moods, is often a surprise to him. Whether his work is seen by people to be about many themes or a single theme, such as sex, love, and intimacy, which are often present, his recent drawings have a greater economy than his early, more formal portraits.

"Very often what I can accomplish on paper is dictated by what the progressive result of process tells me what to do," he says. "Looking back at drawings I have done, I am often surprised by the draw-

ing itself, I am surprised by a line or volume or form. My work should tell my story continuously. I am the artist, so I have a right to add fiction. It was not my intention [for my work] to be a continuous narrative. I am very conscious that, when you are doing a narrative, people tend to read a story into it. I want them to respond to it and not read it as a narrative necessarily. I want people to get into my work as a pictorial and visual experience. Now I am involving myself with the other, the family, so it is not about the conflict of self that I am so interested in now, it is about others. Love and intimacy are about possession. To love selflessly is impossible, it takes work to love. It is sometimes easier to connect with a painting than with a person. It is sexuality that dominates my work and not sex. I am interested in understanding myself against the rest of conventional love and society, so I do use my work to resolve my own conflicts."

Born in Singapore, in 1964, Ong has honed his skills as an artist in a wide variety of locations. He studied in the



Jimmy Ong, **Hair - Hair**, 1996, charcoal on paper, 217 x 128 cm.

United States at the Center for Creative Studies (1985-1986), Detroit, and at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia (1989-1992), as well as in France and Italy. Through his training and his preoccupation with always drawing to his highest expectations, Ong has produced a vital body of work. The discipline in making his work, however, has changed. The need for constant daily production has gone, and in its place has come a fresh approach. Also evident in Ong is the maturity to look more critically at his work and to reveal more of his secrets.

"I drew every day for five years. When I was at school, I drew every day. But not now," he says. "Now, I look at something every day. It could be my own drawing or someone else's. It is easier now to talk about my drawings. I look at it when it is over. Now I can be objective. When you finish [a drawing] you stop feeling the pain of the situation and the conflict that you have been with. It is a like self-therapy." Δ