

Born 1964
Singapore

Education
The Centre for Creative Studies
Detroit, USA

Ivan rehearsing Kantan
1987

opposite
Najib Sitting
150 X 108 cm
charcoal and pastel on paper
1987
Singapore Art Museum Collection

Jimmy Ong

Talking Charcoal *by Peter Lee*



Jimmy Ong is an artist who enjoys the rare Singapore distinction of being critically acclaimed, commercially successful, yet blatantly and unselfconsciously subversive. One may first wonder how this can be possible in Singapore, and then question how it is even conceivable that the artist can garner such notice by producing works in humble charcoal on paper. But these seem to all form part of the conundrum of a very untypical and interesting individual. And coming out of Singapore, it cannot be more exciting.

In the series of exhibitions over the last sixteen years, Ong has continued to surprise critics and viewers with his unique expressiveness in handling charcoal. What is immediately apparent is the way his drawings have their own complex syntax, a rare attribute in a commonly practised art form. At first glance the works may appear to have the qualities of the typical Renaissance drawing - Ong favours figures, often nudes, captured in studied poses or in the midst of some drama of entwined bodies - but on closer examination they have none of the technical effects to create a sense of volume and light that make a Renaissance drawing, such as restrained outlines, the use of hatching and cross-hatching, and the rubbing of the pigment into the paper. Instead one sees a deliberate use of the charcoal's points and edges in the swerving, confident and random strokes that seem to speak its own language, or express the calligraphic quality of a personal, artistic 'script', echoing



Kheng Sitting
1988

the immediacy and brushwork of Chinese landscape painting, shading muscles with the strokes that have traditionally been reserved for rock and mountain. A simple, deft trail of charcoal can delineate sinewy muscle, create illusions of volume, of mass. The viewer begins to follow the charcoal's movement as if it were a dynamic, flowing entity, and in so doing, makes the artistic process an integral part of the drawings' overall aesthetic. Therein lies its uniqueness. Technically Ong's drawings have inherent and intriguing paradoxes - it borrows from a classic Western art form, yet remains so technically East Asian; it may be classically figural, but it also has the rhythmic chaos of a Pollock.

What has also been particularly interesting is the development of themes in Jimmy Ong's drawings over the years. By combining the mundane with the sacred in all their permutations in the depiction of his world, the artist has consistently given his work a contemporary and very relevant edge. The artist first developed a serious interest in drawing in 1984, as a student (aged 20) at the Centre for Creative Studies in Detroit, on winning a scholarship from the Alliance of Independent Colleges of Art. In 1987, his third exhibition, "*The Children Of*", marked the establishment of charcoal as the artist's preferred medium. In a Singapore context, it was an interesting period for drawing as an art form, with artists such as Tang DaWu and Tang Mun Kit producing work in this discipline.¹

The exhibition showed studies of people in Ong's circle - young, passionate individuals on the verge of artistic self-discovery. Many have since won recognition, such as playwright Desmond Sim, actress Neo Swee Lin, actor and director Ivan Heng and entertainer Najip Ali. The works are all light sketches floating in the white space of the paper, showing the hallmarks of his charcoal style already firmly in place, although in execution they are relatively direct and uncomplicated, and are tinged with light colour. A number of examples stand out for their "bold departure from conventional practice", being monumental drawings that instantly raise the subjects to a mythic terrain.² "*Najip Sitting*" (1987) is a portrait of entertainer Najip Ali, who shared an apartment with Ong in the late 1980s. The drawing commemorates the sitter's recent acquisition of a new pair of shoes. At once ordinary and iconic, these works express the excitement and self-consciousness of an artistic group of people, and Ong's own emotional sympathy with this creative energy.

One work in particular heralded the developments that were to come. "*Self Portrait with Crossed Arms*", shows the artist in the nude. Hunched, tense and troubled, the figure expresses the artist's own sexuality, and in doing so, makes viewers confront an uncomfortable but compelling aspect of another person's character. This is no idealistic nude, or academic study, it is an artist revealing himself. In the Singapore context of that time, the self-portrait was courageous, different, and modern.

Colour was soon abandoned, as Ong's themes became darker and more sexual. The influences of a year spent in Florence at the Studio Art Centre International in 1988 where he made studies of Old Masters are apparent in subsequent works. "*January December Skin*" (1989) is a diptych of two nudes, one who seems to be devouring a loose piece of skin, and another who holds a drooping sack of flesh behind his back. A clear and interesting reference to El Greco's more disturbing works is used to convey the artist's own statement on sexual desire and frustration and perhaps on its futility. It also marks Ong's embarkment towards a more symbolic direction. Other works from this period exploring sexuality include "*Sacred and Profane Love*" and "*Self Portrait as Father and Son*" which were both shown at an exhibition at the Goethe Institute, Singapore in 1990. The former depicts a contemplative nude figure sitting on the ground, with another nude reclining behind him, while the latter is a double self-portrait of the artist in the nude as a young boy and old man, which is ostensibly concerned with identity and reinventing the self. Both drawings introduce underlying themes that become more emphatic in his later work - that of "Confucian guilt" and the "duty" to procreate. They also further the artist's fascination with the bizarre and the mundane, and of non-idealised figures, not unlike Lucian Freud's "horror of the idyllic".



Lottery Man
1989

At the same time Ong began to explore alternative pictorial styles, and produced a few works set in articulated spatial contexts. "*Lottery Man*" (1989) depicts two figures seated separately in a coffeeshop, represented by a spare, graphic background of stools and tables. The coarse, bald and shirtless lottery man with his rolled up trousers reads his newspaper with two stacks of tickets by his side. At the next table, a rather heavy-set woman glances uncertainly yet seductively at him. The work began as a study of a female friend that

then extended to a scene inspired by a visit to a hawker centre; the background of tables and chairs came next, and then the title. Although it may seem a rather random process, the artist is actually working on a more subliminal, subconscious level, putting together elements from everyday life in a manner that expresses his view of the world. Ong has often admitted that the female figures in his drawings are representations of himself, and the masculinity of the woman's face suggests this to be an alternative reading. It is also quite possible to see the artist in the lottery man as well, and the drawing as a personal reflection on the various ramifications of desire - of desiring and being desired, of secret, forbidden longings (the woman) and a rough, unselfconscious and open sexuality (the man).

Jimmy Ong's boldest works are the moody, passionate drawings of male nudes produced in the early 1990s, which are part of what he has called "*The Prodigal Son*" series. Shaded in heavy, expressive charcoal, they are sexually charged studies of men in a kind of manic or frantic embrace, or in some instances, performing very subversive sexual acts - a cathartic release of repressed emotional and sexual longing. The works recall the classical Greek and Roman themes of Renaissance drawings in the expressive, entwined figures, but the handling of the charcoal and the arrangement of the figures on paper create a monolithic quality that is spiritually close to the monumental Chinese landscapes of the Song dynasty. But the ironic beauty of it all lies in the realisation that quite often the figures are actually in the middle of rather unspeakable acts. "*Tango*" (1992) depicts a massive figure embracing another whose arms remain open in a gesture of helplessness and non-resistance. "*Fuck*", a dense, rock-like fusion of almost indistinguishable muscle mass, seems to take this direction to its absolute limit.



Remember Grandfather

1996

Ancestral Power Activate

1997



As if he were sublimating these physical, emotional drawings, Ong began to work on a series of lush still-lives and botanical studies from the mid-1990s, which were highly sought-after. The still arrangements of fruits and vegetables with contrasting textures on tabletops provide a counterpoint to his earlier works, although the underlying vigour of his drafting, especially of flowers, remains unchanged. "*Lotus Chrysanthemum*" (1994), an idiosyncratic but elegant arrangement of flora, exemplifies the curious, thought-provoking juxtapositions that Ong so frequently creates.

"*Lovers and Ancestors*", an exhibition of works in 1997, moved away from the dark turmoil of his earlier figure compositions to a more studied, symbolic expression that examined further the struggle between the "selfless" devotion to family and "selfish" desire, while the Rubenesque fullness of the women, and the squat, heavy physique of the men continue to articulate the artist's fascination with the ordinary.

The predicament of the woman in "*Remember Grandfather*" (1996) reflects Ong's own. The burning candle she holds in a seemingly defiant manner, as the artist says, mocks his "empty gesture of filial piety".³ The truth of the matter is revealed with the feet, which are crushed and bound.

The image of a child which becomes an important element in his subsequent exhibitions, is developed in two works from this exhibition, "*Ancestral Power Activate*" (1997), depicting a woman (the artist) paralysed by the power of a divine-like child, and "*His Father's Grandson*" (1997), a work inspired by an old photograph of Ong's parents, where two nudes dance while a child draws a line between them. In both works the child appears as the ancestral conscience, although in the former he is the symbol of old-fashioned family pride and is drawn in the style of traditional Chinese figure painting, while in the latter the child, a personification of Ong's grandfather's disapproval of his parents' marriage, is rendered in a more naturalistic manner. Ong's experiments with his figures and the forms they finally assume have also taken the drawings to a compelling new level where images and styles combine in a surreal way.

"*Alter-altar*", Ong's 1999 exhibition in Hong Kong seems to distill his ideas developed from "*Lovers and Ancestors*" through to "*The Other Woman*" in Santa Monica and "*Studies for a Deity*" in New York earlier in 1999. In these shows, the artist's drawings have become less emotional, more intellectual, textured and complex. They are Ong's religious paintings, monumental, mysterious and awe-inspiring, replete with its own iconography and symbolism, as though the demons and deities in his mind have been identified, visualised and thrown together. The juxtaposed themes and pictorial styles reach a new sophistication, and are unsettling but fascinating. The application of charcoal has also become lighter and more transparent. "*Stitching Deity*" (1999) makes references to the Pietà and to the pyramidal composition of Renaissance Madonnas. It also develops the image of loose flesh seen in "*January December Skin*". A nude woman stitches together a boneless sack of flesh draped over her lap, wearing a disconcerting smile that suggests she is merely performing a routine task.

In "*Three Legs Four Legs*", a rather sinister looking baby with an old man's face crawls in front of a couple engaged in an acrobatic sex act. The position of the couple may seem awkward, but may perhaps be seen in the context of the "yab-yum" ("father-mother") union of Tibetan Buddhist deities, depicted in the form of copulating figures and symbolising the union of qualities such as wisdom and compassion. In "yab-yum" unions, the female deity wraps one leg or sometimes both legs round the hips of the

male deity. As this work shows, the imagery of babies takes on more dimensions in "Alter-altar", becoming more like subconscious apparitions of guilt, lust, duty, procreation, anxiety, and one's untamed emotions. In a more disconcerting work, "Kissing Cousin", a man kisses and embraces another holding two babies who are suckling both men.

Other works show a wide field of inspiration. In "Spearhead Deity" a woman stands on one foot on top of a baby much in the way a Hindu or Buddhist deity would in a classic dancing pose, trampling on a demon or wild spirit. In "Sew Bodhisattva", the female figure assumes the same dancing pose, stitching together a limp figure of a man. These references to religious art seem to celebrate a sympathy with the power of symbolism and iconography, and they perhaps unlock the key to understanding Jimmy Ong's artistic approach. They are not sensationalistic or obscene, but rather, they aim to enlighten by creating a fission of visual signs.

Jimmy Ong's art began as reflections on his immediate world; his recent move to America has made him address his issues in the global context. And they are important, contemporary Asian issues - sexuality, religion, filial piety, guilt, the conflict between personal gratification and the public good, nudity, taboos, heritage in the modern age. At the same time these hard-edged statements are tempered by a very human fascination with nature and plant life. But it is his obsession with the human figure that places him at the cutting edge of contemporary Asian art, together with the many renowned figure painters who at the moment seem to find a potent type of expression in the representation of the human form.

Although pictorially his drawings may be a modern-day Tower of Babel - El Greco cannibals, Buddhist deities, Pietà, Najip Ali, all pass our eyeview like a scanning of channels on cable television - there is nevertheless an uncanny consistency about the works and a clarity of vision. One cannot help but see paradoxes - sacred and profane, simple and complex, a rare artist and his common stick of charcoal. It may be hard to pin down the art of Jimmy Ong, but at least some things are certain. It is not only articulating the reality of the present; in its own way, it is playing its part to shape the wider dialogue on perception, insight and identity.

Peter Lee studied Chinese archaeology at School of Oriental and African Studies, London University and is now an art consultant based in Singapore.



His Father's Grandson

1997

opposite

3 Legs 4 Legs

208 x 128 cm, charcoal on paper

1999

Jeff Chen Collection

Notes

¹ Kwok Kian Chow, "Channels and Confluences, A History of Singapore Art", Singapore Art Museum, 1996, pp. 141-146.

² T K Sabapathy "Means of Expressing the Self in Terms of Others", The Straits Times, 29 May 1987.

³ Jimmy Ong, "Lovers and Ancestors", Cicada Gallery, Singapore, 1997, p. 20.