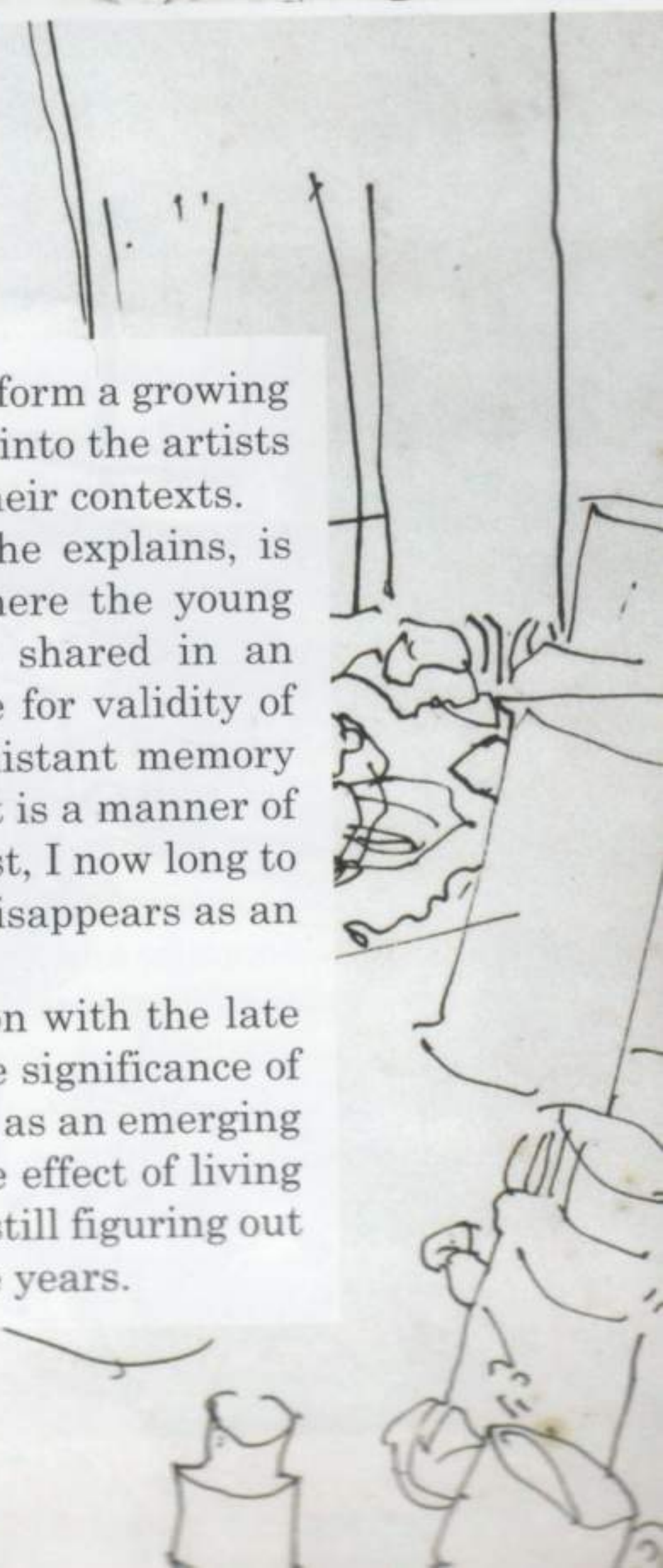


A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN

Singaporean artist abroad, Jimmy Ong, known for his large-scale charcoal drawings, relinquishes his iconic *Chinatown Suite* to the NUS Museum in a symbolic personal gesture. *by HAFIZ RASID*

FOCUS FEATURE



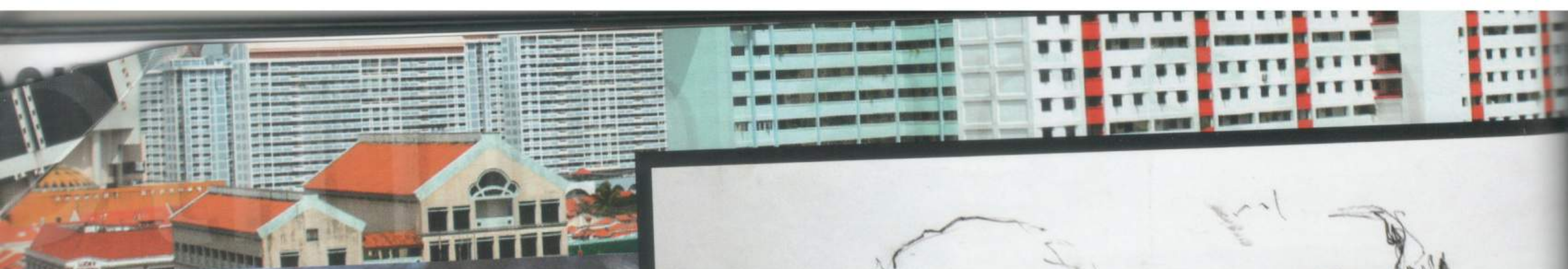
This may sound like a sweeping formulaic statement but in Singaporean artist Jimmy Ong's case, his work really has come full circle. The precocious Ong started his artistic career at age 10 when he would win art competitions for pocket money; he went on to score a scholarship at an American arts college before landing his own solo exhibitions in the 1980s. Today, his well-received *Chinatown Suite* can be seen in NUS Museum, as part of the museum's curatorial and anthropological material.

The *Chinatown Suite* is a body of work completed between the mid-1980s and the early 1990s, a collection of sketches and postcard-sized drawings that he's gathered over the years as a young artist and relegated to his grandmother's house in Chinatown. It is now donated to NUS Museum, and is currently being presented in the *Recent Gifts* exhibition alongside works by the late Lim

Mu Hue. The artworks by the two artists form a growing body of resources that facilitate research into the artists and their practices, Singapore art, and their contexts.

On hindsight, *Chinatown Suite*, as he explains, is akin to a pre-digital Facebook page where the young artist's collection of "sight snaps" are shared in an elaborate collection to display his "crave for validity of his identity;" a state of mind that's a distant memory for the now-pensive artist. "If making art is a manner of validating one's identity for a young artist, I now long to be in a time and place where the artist disappears as an integral part of the society," he mused.

Touching on his latest joint exhibition with the late Lim Mu Hue, *Recent Gifts*, he shares the significance of his earlier work and its influence on him as an emerging artist, and the evolution of his work, the effect of living in America has on his art, and why he's still figuring out the concept of masculinity after all these years.



Tell us about *Chinatown Suite*, the series of sketches currently on show at NUS Museum — how did it come about?

Chinatown Suite is a collection of sketches and postcard size drawings that accumulated in my grandmother's house in Chinatown and were subsequently forgotten. It is a selection of works from the 1980s when I moved from studio to studio in Singapore. The artworks are supported by a "shoebox" of photographs and other travel mementos, including a cassette tape of songs sang and compiled by artist friends in Singapore like Lok Meng Chue, Neo Swee Lin and Koh Joo Khim.

Why did you choose to donate this collection to the NUS Museum?

I have seen what excellent exhibitions the NUS has done with Ng Eng Teng's seminal sketches and small works, and I thought NUS Museum would make a good depository for the *Chinatown Suite* as curatorial and anthropological material.

On style and subject matter, how has your work evolved over the years?

I dare say my work has moved from the personal, and I am a bit tired of talking about myself at midlife. *Chinatown Suite* is about that, a young artist's crave for validity of his identity — it's sort of a pre-digital Facebook page.

Tell me a little about your process for developing the imagery in your work. Once a scenario or idea pops into your head, where do you go from there?

I tend to distrust anything that pops up these days, and if they seem worthy, I often write it down in a journal or take a photo as a reminder. A period of gestation takes place before I selectively work the idea into a drawing in the studio, or shoot a trial video with my mobile phone.

What do you believe is the key element in creating art?

Time. Time to watch and listen. Time to look at your work and look again. Time for making mistakes and undoing or redoing again. Sifting through the works, eliminating false starts and retrieving misses. Having said this, it does not mean I am able to maintain this luxury all the time.

Now, you've branched out to video work, will we be seeing works in various medium in the future?

So far it has only been commissioned by my gallery in New York, I had a show of a couple videos there early last year. It is still a learning curve for me, an exploration of pushing the personas and narratives in my drawings further, bringing in the performative aspect that I have been interested in when I first decided to be an artist in the 1980s.

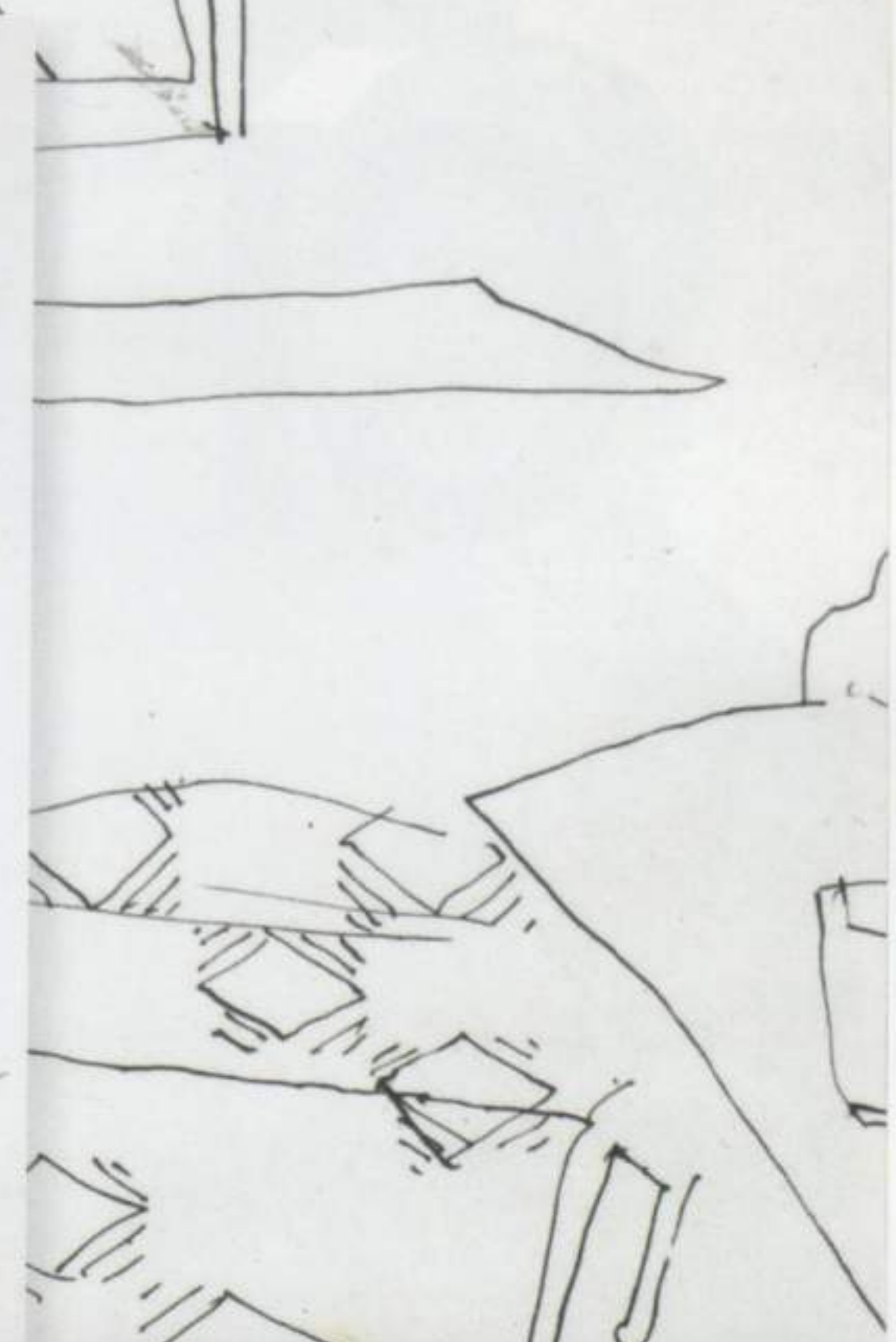
What are your favourite media to use when creating your art?

Not all drawings are adequate as an expression for me. These days if I am not writing it down in a journal, I would catch a trail of images on my phone. And then depending on the appropriate delivery, it may end up as a painting, a large epic drawing or a short video in a loop.





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“If making art is a manner of validating one’s identity for a YOUNG artist, I now long to be in a time and place where the artist disappears as an **INTEGRAL PART** of the society”

A lot of your drawings focus on the male form. What do you think defines masculinity?

Femininity defines masculinity. Any touch of softness or vulnerability heightens the male. Men should not be afraid to embrace the femininity within.

Are there any subject matters that you have yet to touch on but have fascinated you for a while?

Masculinity. I am not sure I know what maleness means, I have only known it as aggression, and have been confused and afraid of it.

Now you’re based in New York — how much of an influence does location and environment have on your work?

The change of seasons is something I now cherish, the winter months becoming incubatory for my work, there is time for contemplation. In recent years I have moved out of New York into Vermont, but go into the city regularly to see the exhibitions, just to see what other artists are thinking. Socially though, Vermont is making me yearn for a greater sense of an artist community. In recent years, I have caught a glimmer of that in Yogyakarta, where I spent a couple of months a year.



Does being away from Singapore from time to time, does that give you a different perspective on the Singapore art scene? How different is it now from the time when you first started?

The state has a big hand in the arts now. There were more private initiatives when I was starting out, most of them were artist-initiated, even though there were fewer artists and lesser venues. A lot of art seems to be offered in Singapore, but the art offered concedes to the tastes of the art consumer in a big way. I am not sure I am quite connected with the Singapore arts scene right now, except to keep track of a few young artists born in the 1980s that I know on Facebook. Young artists now have such pressures to make or break on a first public showing, and show an acute anxiety of their shelf-life.

You’ve exhibited in a few countries around the world. Which audience made you feel most at

ease about your work?

Hong Kong in the late 1990s. Perhaps it’s because of the atmosphere of transition after the colonial handover in 1997?

What do you hope to achieve with your artwork?

Paradoxically, to become invisible or non-existent. If making art is a manner of validating one’s identity for a young artist, I now long to be in a time and place where the artist disappears as an integral part of the society. Kind of like a village puppeteer, in his ordinariness, performs and tells stories, while the villagers expects and watches each evening. The story, the teller and the listener are one. There is no art market, painting of the year or blue chip artists. Perhaps I just need to arrive at the right village.

Recent Gifts, Works and Documents
of Lim Mu Hue and Jimmy Ong,
1 Feb – 31 Jul 2014, NUS Museum