

JIMMY ONG

by Judith Christensen

(Dagmar, Santa Monica) Not many artists are gutsy enough to limit themselves to charcoal drawing as their primary medium. That's just what Jimmy Ong, a native of Singapore who now lives in New York, has done. For more than a decade he has utilized this medium to explore the human figure as an expression of inner turmoil, triumph and passion.



"Seamstress I," charcoal on paper, 69 x 44", 1998.



"Siew Luan Sewing," charcoal on paper, 121 cm x 190cm, 1998.



"So and So," charcoal on paper, 84 x 51", 1998.

Ong's artistic training was strong on western tradition. In Italy he did interpretive drawings based on Michelangelo and Goya. Later, in the U.S., he learned the academy style of anatomy and plaster-cast drawings. Although exposed to film and performance, among other contemporary disciplines, he chose the conservative path. He pays homage to the qualities valued by the Renaissance and Neo-Classical masters he admires, yet is not shackled by rigid allegiance to them. His drawings also reflect his Chinese heritage, particularly an understanding of the principles of calligraphic brushwork from the Song Dynasty, as well as a very contemporary viewpoint about the sort of angst late-twentieth century humanity enmeshes itself in.

The tensions in Ong's images exist not just between the figures, but also within each figure. In *Siew Luan Sewing* Ong uses line and gesture to effectively articulate a contrast between two figures. The woman doing the sewing is volumetric. She is not heavy, but she is strong. The dense lines, the heavy shading and the firm neck combine to define a woman set on performing her task. The lines delineating the other figure, who is lying in the lap of the stronger one, are thinner and there is less shading. This figure appears weaker, almost flat. The weaker one's legs seem to hang from the other's arm, as if the stronger one is holding up the weaker. Then there's the act of sewing. Clichés about putting the pieces of one's life together come to mind. The two bodies are so intertwined, it's easy to conclude there's really only one--that the weaker is a reflection of the

stronger and it's her own psyche she's trying to keep together.

In *Seamstress I* the other figure clearly is another's baby, whom the woman is examining with a measuring tape. Still, an argument could be made that the baby is the child from whom the woman developed, and that as an adult she is looking back into that child in an effort to discern who she is and where she came from. The other interpretation is that the measuring is a metaphor for attempting to understand the other. If we know every detail about another--be it child or adult--can't we then say we truly know them?

There is a serenity to the work in this series that is not present in Ong's previous *Lovers and Ancestors* drawings. Although the images in *The Other Woman* grew out of the previous series, the antagonistic struggle between the two figures and the inner pain expressed by the often-contorted figures seems to have diminished. In its place is a quieter introspection, a move from the fiery surges of passion to the arduous quest for understanding of self and others that is both gratifying and elusive.

