

EXECUTIVE LIFESTYLE

An artist who lets his pieces do the talking

Jimmy Ong's huge charcoal drawings have an incredible sense of colour, says **BEN MUNROE**

JIMMY Ong, having established a reputation as an exciting and challenging artist, known as much as a confrontational interview subject as an artist of sensitivity and perception, has quit our shores and made a home in New York.

Now he expresses himself in his chosen way, lets the paintings do the talking and, while he converses freely about his life and influences, is rightly reluctant to impose interpretations on his huge charcoal drawings.

For that reason, the detailed notes which accompany some of the works in his latest exhibition *Lovers & Ancestors*, and the quotation-filled chronology in the exhibition catalogue, are largely superfluous to the enjoyment of the art work.

That said, many people will want to know more about the artist after spending some time with his ragged collection of charcoal family and friends, and the psychological profile will fill in some background to help contextualise the artist's development.

Some are going to find this exhibition too depressing and dark, as there is not much laughter on the faces of the heavily-inscribed figures who fill Ong's large drawings on paper.

These are like freeze frames from a dozen films noirs, and while Ong acknowledges the influences of theatre and movies in his work, this story is his life, which he has dredged up from the confusion of memory and translated for the rest of us to experience.

Included in this filmic exhibition are themes of betrayal, struggles between different genders and generations, and possibly contests between different sides of the same person.

Hair Hair (charcoal on paper, 1996) shows a naked man and a woman, the former caught up in the mass of hair streaming from the head of his female companion, who stands at the fore of the composition. Through lazy lids her eyes acknowledge the male presence trying to comb and tame her thick locks. The scissors meant to quell her wild hair hang limply from her hand, swinging open towards the man's concealed genitals.

In *Ancestor Power Activate* (charcoal on paper, 1997) the tension is generational as much as sexual, with a female figure emerging from a dark, heavily sketched background, raising a fist to strike a young boy, cherub-like in his chubby composition and cheeky stance.

The woman, presumably the ancestor, is trapped by the weight of the past, her body is as heavily filled in as the space surrounding her, and the young boy dances into the present.

While Jimmy Ong acknowledges his interest in classical Chinese brushwork, his technical style places him completely at odds with the older form. While calligraphic brushstrokes in ink often cut through the space like a knife through butter, the charcoal lines in Ong's work are thick and build up the paper like a relief landscape.

But he does share with the Chinese masters a thorough understanding of the power of negative space. The spaces outside the lines of his figures, as in *Untitled: Heart-Shaped Void* (charcoal on

paper, 1997), are every bit as important as the space they inscribe.

Ancestor Power Activate demonstrates how Ong's figures are imbued with a sense of movement, through the cartoon-like inclusion of the extra shading and shaping lines, seemingly mistakes and afterthoughts.

The boy is about to fall out of the front of the drawing in his will to escape the blow of the female ancestor.

At the same time, a statuesque balance of mass is induced by the heavy shading, and the two figures in *Hair Hair*, while also endowed with kinetic potential, have the firm posture of a Rodin sculpture.

And while all the paintings are executed in monochrome, there is an incredible sense of colour in the variety of shades and levels of sketching in the limbs and faces.

British artist Lucien Freud is also known for his fascination with portraiture and hard liner realism born through a meticulous attention to furrows of sinew and muscle in the faces and bodies of his subjects.

The posture of the lady in *Remember Grandfather* (charcoal on paper, 1996), at once stoical and fragile, and the composition of *Chinese Son* (charcoal on paper, 1997) are reminiscent of certain of Freud's portraits and interior scenes. Both artists achieve a portrayal of inner pain through the outer stance and flesh tones of their subjects.

Jimmy Ong's possibly personal agenda produces works crammed with universal themes, guaranteed to strike a chord with many other people.

The inner pain and drama trapped within each frame of this idiosyncratic



Ancestor Power Activate: the figures are imbued with a sense of movement, through the extra shading and shaping lines

soap-opera show communicate their contents clearly enough to render additional information a mere footnote to this passionate exhibition.

Lovers & Ancestors by Jimmy Ong is on until Aug 23 at the Cicada Gallery, 31-33 Ann Siang Rd. Tel: 225 6787.



Hair Hair: the two figures have the firm posture of a Rodin sculpture