



Courtesy of the Artist

Details, JIMMY ONG, *Winn & K*, 2008, oil on canvas, 30"x 40"

# The Private Museum

Carla Bianpoen

It is said that collectors of visual art works are increasingly playing a role in the art market. But few, if any, are known to have made their collections accessible to the general public. This situation is regrettable in the view of Daniel Teo, a collector, who considers it important for the general public to see good art works, something that collectors can certainly boost of.

The Private Museum, covering 103.5 square meters, is located in the former Catholic Boys High School, in the arts and cultural belt just across from SAM-8Q. The four-storey building which was built in 1938 covering 5,249 sq m was put up for proposal to develop into an integrated art facility. Daniel Teo, had put in a successful bid for the building of which he has fond memories as a student there from 1956-1961. It was a golden age, he says. Apart from the Private

Museum, the building also houses the Academy for dance, owned by former Singapore Dance Theater director Goh Soo Khim, Daniel Teo's wife.

"Collectors are usually too shy to show their collections, but perhaps a special space where even part of collections could be shown in full or in thematic exhibitions may spur their interest". Of course Daniel Teo is not just a collector. An architect by profession with a bachelor's degree in architecture from the University of Melbourne, Australia, Daniel Teo is a member of SIA, RIBA, FRAIA and APAM (architectural bodies), associate member of SIP and APA (planning bodies) and a registered property manager of International Real Estate Institute. Daniel is also the chairman and managing director of Tong Eng Group and Hong How Group of Companies whose companies' businesses range from property development and investment holdings in commercial, residential, industrial and hospitality sectors in Singapore, Malaysia, China, Australia, the UK and Sweden. Daniel also sits on a public listed company as director of Popular Land Pte Ltd (a subsidiary of Popular Holdings Ltd). In August 2005, he was appointed as a member of the National Heritage Board and also sits on the board of LTA's Architectural Design panel on MRT stations and a member of Arts in Transit by LTA. He is the vice chairman of Thong Chai Medical Institute of Singapore, director of Singapore Dance Theatre, chairman of Singapore Philatelic Museum and a member of Preservation of Monuments Board. He has sat on a few public listed companies such as Popular Holdings Ltd, Courts Ltd and

WONG MEI SHEONG, *Sorry, mummy*

Sunway Group and currently in International City Development Pte Ltd.

In-between his many engagements, art is still the closest to his heart. In 1994 Daniel Teo partnered with the Swedish Wetterling Gallery in a joint venture known as Wetterling-Teo, bringing to



WONG MEI SHEONG, *Fembot appraises Kosciuszko*

WONG MEI SHEONG, *Fembot seeks Enlightenment*



Singapore American artists like, James Rosenquist, Robert Rauschenberg and Frank Stella as well as pioneers of the POP generation such as the British artists David Hockney, Allen Jones and Richard Hamilton.

Today Daniel Teo wishes Roy Lichtenstein stay closer to home. He founded the Private Museum to urge his fellow collectors to give the general public access to good art by showing their collections, or even just part of them. The Private Museum has successfully put on a retrospective of Walasse Ting, with works borrowed from collectors.

But Rachel, Daniel Teo's daughter who manages the Private Museum, explains the museum also showcases works of artists who do not easily get a place in commercial galleries.

One such show was held in April, with works by Wong Mei Sheong and Jimmy Ong. Both are Singapore artists who are living abroad. After having a joint show back in 1987, each had left Singapore and gone separate ways, Jimmy to the U.S. to pursue a domestic union while Mei moved to Adelaide, married and raised three children. The two met at a friend's house recently and decided to do a joint show again, presenting old works and new works revealing how they have fared over the years. They thought the Private Museum to be the perfect place to do so.

Spread over two parts, the exhibitions at the Private Museum are titled



WONG MEI SHEONG, *Long Lankin No. 15*

Transfiguring I and II. The first part showed the artists' early paintings while part two revealed a fascinating change in the mediums. Mei Sheong who started painting in oil had now shifted to prints while Jimmy Ong, who started off with drawing as his medium of choice and is known for his raucous charcoal drawings expressing human passions and emotions, now presented a series of oil paintings in the New England style.

The changes in style, medium and themes were closely related to the life and educational experiences of the artists. **Mei Sheong** followed a fairly varied path of interest. Majoring in Literature and Philosophy as a graduate of Western Australia (1980), she pursued fine art at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux Arts, Paris (1981-86), completed her Masters of Art

in Environmental Studies at the University of Adelaide (1995), studied at the Centre for Creative Photography (2003-2004) at the Adelaide Central School of Art, and majored in printmaking from Adelaide College of the Arts (2006-2010).

Her interests are evident in the poetic narratives of her signature Long Lankin series in which rhymes reminisce the folk tale. Long Lankin is the English legend/ballad of a bogeyman in childhood stories. Imageries and reveries are further spurred by the tones of music. When playing music, she feels transformed into a different space, she says. Environmental issues such as global warming, and the human condition are revealed in her prints where color combinations and the human form stand out in remarkable perfection.

**Jimmy Ong**, had studied at the Center for Creative Studies in Detroit, Michigan (1984), where he was awarded an Alliance of Independent Colleges Arts Scholarship. He then studied at Studio Art Centre International in Florence, Italy, under the Anna K. Meredith Scholarship, and at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia, U.S.

Having moved into a Waspy historic neighborhood in Vermont in 2005, where using fixative for his charcoal drawing in a garage with closed windows in winter time was not possible, Jimmy decided to set up a painting studio during the winter months. (waspy refers to WASP,

WONG MEI SHEONG, *Mirror Mirror*, intaglio print on archival paper, 24.7 x 31.6 cm





◀ JIMMY ONG, *Peng & Tuck*, 2005, oil on canvas, 30"x 40"

an acronym for white Anglo-Saxon Protestant to denote an elite social tier in American society).

But painting in oil after 20 years of drawing, was no easy task, the works turned out to be 'amateurish', he said. The New England Colonial style as epitomized by Ammi Phillips became a convenient style to emulate for fun.

Jimmy said in Vermont gay marriages were legally recognized, and that was one of the reasons he settled there. Yet he continued to feel an outsider, being the only Chinese in the village, except for the Chinese in the restaurants. A fleeting sense of loneliness made him invoke the images of his Chinese friends. Interestingly, he paints them as they are in his memory, not as they would be now. He dresses them in the typical New England fashion, but leaves their feet bare, invoking Chinese habits at home.

The following are Jimmy's elaborations for each of his paintings: *Peng & Tuck* is a portrait of a gay couple from Singapore. I want to imply they are couple by birthright, as marriages are made in heaven. The dog is a real portrait of one of my dogs, symbolizing fidelity. In

▼ Details, JIMMY ONG, *Peng & Tuck*, 2005, oil on canvas, 30"x 40"



▲ JIMMY ONG, *Winn & K*, 2008, oil on canvas, 30"x 40"

▼ JIMMY ONG, *Li & Mei*, 2009, oil on canvas, 30"x 40"



▲ JIMMY ONG, *Kong-An Brothers*, 2006, oil on canvas, 30"x 40"

real life one of them is now handicapped so I made one older than the other like an older sibling taking care of the less capable one.)

*Kong An Sisters* is a portrait of two real Chinese-Jewish sisters I know in Singapore whom I portray as the boys that their parents had wished them to be. Also another one of my dogs and the cane refers to a revered grandfather whom I knew personally.

*Winn & K* are a real couple in Singapore, they seem most comfortable in their colonial dress as they are both actors. There is an epithetic line written on the ribbon which is her favorite line from the script in a play; and a building block is encrypted with letters of the alphabet and characters as coded knowledge between the artist and the sitters: )

*Mei and Li* are also husband and wife, but in this arrangement they look like brother and sister, which is highly unlikely as they would not be able to wed. The flowers are the kind that they held at their wedding and the toys at their feet codes about them that I know as personal friends.

Jimmy Ong's re-invention of the New England style with Chinese faces, may have started as a fun activity, but his seasonal engagement with it (in winter time) may run deeper, revealing a quiet move from the wild and passionate to a more contemplative pondering of identity. 24