

## JUSTIN LIM

Justin Lim (b. 1983 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia) completed his postgraduate studies in 2006 with the Master of Art (Fine Art) programme by The Open University UK conducted at Lasalle-SIA College of the Arts, Singapore after obtaining a BA(Hons) Fine Art majoring in painting. He has exhibited widely in Southeast Asia in various solo and group exhibitions. He was awarded the 2008 Malaysia-Australia Visual Artist Residency at Rimbun Dahan, Malaysia and represented Malaysia at the 2009 Asian Art Biennial held at the Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts. He was also the recipient of the 2011 Asian artist fellowship at the Vermont Studio Center, USA and the 2013 Khazanah Nasional Artist Residency hosted at the Red Gate Gallery, Beijing, China. He lives and works in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

### Education

- 2006 Master of Art (Fine Art), Lasalle College of the Arts, Singapore/Open University UK
- 2005 Bachelor of Arts (Hons) Painting, Lasalle College of the Arts, Singapore
- 2003 Diploma in Visual & Digital Art, Limkokwing Institute of Creative Technology, Malaysia

### Solo Exhibitions

- 2014 Art Stage Singapore, Southeast Asia Platform, Singapore
- 2013 Art Taipei, Taiwan  
Arcane Fantasies for the Flesh and the Sublime, Richard Koh Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2010 Secret Identities, TAKSU, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2009 Gods, Heroes & Myths, Rimbun Dahan, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2007 Agents, Actions & Consequences, TAKSU, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2006 Momentum, TAKSU, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

### Selected Group Exhibitions

- 2013 ARTSTAGE Singapore, Richard Koh Fine Art, Singapore
- 2012 Snapshots, WWF Art for Nature, Rimbun Dahan, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
Collective Alternatif, Malaysian Art Expo, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
ARTSTAGE Singapore, Richard Koh Fine Art, Singapore
- 2011 Asian Artist Fellowship Residency show, Vermont Studio Center, Vermont, USA  
18@8 Save The Planet, Wei Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
Culture Vulture, TAKSU, Singapore  
Garden of Hidden Desires, Wei Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
ROGUE WAVE!, TAKSU, Singapore

- 2010 BOLEH!, TAKSU, Singapore  
1Malaysia Contemporary Art Festival (MCAT), Galeri Seri Perdana, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
SURVIVAL, Rimbun Dahan, Selangor, Malaysia  
Tiger Show, Wei-Ling Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
Locals Only!, TAKSU, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2009 Viewpoints & Viewing Points – Asian Art Biennial, Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts, Tai Chung, Taiwan  
Iskandar Malaysian Contemporary Art Show (IMCAS), Johor Bahru, Malaysia  
Tanah Air, Rimbun Dahan, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
The Fab Four, TAKSU, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
Peninsula & Island, TAKSU, Singapore  
Home, CHAI House, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2008 Shifting Boundaries, Rimbun Dahan, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
Exhibition X, TAKSU, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
Locals Only!, TAKSU, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
Peninsula & Island, TAKSU, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2007 Singapore ART Show, Singapore Art Museum, Singapore  
Nasi Campur, TAKSU, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
ARTSingapore, Suntec Convention Center, Singapore
- 2006 The New Messengers, TAKSU, Singapore  
Rage Against the Dying of the Light, La Libreria, Singapore  
MFA Degree Show, Earl Lu Gallery, Institute of Contemporary Art, Singapore
- 2005 Urban on Urban, Earl Lu Gallery, Institute of Contemporary Art, Singapore  
Balthus Bemused by Colour, Earl Lu Gallery, Institute of Contemporary Art, Singapore
- 2003 Germany in Mind, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
The Circle, Limkokwing Institute of Creative Technology, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
VDA, LICT Atrium, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
2 Arts on a Jade Stone, LICT Atrium, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2002 Breathe in, Breathe Out, LICT Atrium, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
Palestine Day, Islamic Arts Museum, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
Vertical Horizontal, LICT Atrium, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
Eyes Wide Open, LICT Atrium, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

### Scholarships, Awards & Residencies

- 2013 Khazanah Nasional Artist Commissioning Programme, Red Gate Gallery, Beijing, China
- 2011 Asian Artist Fellowship, Vermont Studio Center, USA
- 2008 Malaysia-Australia Visual Artist Residency, Rimbun Dahan, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2007 Taksu Artist Residency Programme (TARP), TAKSU, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2006 Lasalle-SIA College of the Arts Scholarship
- 2003 President's Scholar Award, Limkokwing Institute of Creative Technology, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia



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# Justin Lim

## There is No Other Paradise

SOUTHEAST ASIA PLATFORM  
EXHIBIT NO. 9  
**ART STAGE SINGAPORE**  
16 - 19 JAN 2014

# There is no other paradise

In his early years as an artist and fresh off an undergraduate degree programme at the Lasalle College of the Arts in Singapore, Justin's art skewed towards abstract expressionist tendencies, with enigmatic works that recalled the paint-splattered canvases of Jackson Pollock. His paint was found materialising as energetic marks in his paintings, but the years that followed these nascent beginnings saw Justin's art morphing into something altogether different; the human figure began to make an appearance, symbols and icons slowly crept into his compositions, and visual narratives started to unfold before the viewer. All this meant that concrete stories could now be gleaned from Justin's works, and the artist's voice as a visual storyteller began to become more audible.

Today's body of work, titled *There is no other paradise*, continues along this narrative path, with strong sociopolitical commentaries underlying each work. Societal conundrums are expressed profoundly through the topics of race and identity, and the arguments in this body of work stem from the multifarious nature of Malaysia, Justin's home. In itself, *There is no other paradise* serves as a small nation of artworks where different materials and mediums cohabit. Acrylics on canvas form the majority of the citizens, printed plexiglass paintings inhabit another territory, and a fiberglass and video projection installation makes an appearance, too. The latter is a new addition to Justin's oeuvre, and *There is no other paradise* is a product of both invention and introspection.

## Nostalgia and observations

Introspection, of course, comes by way of the actual messages behind each artwork. Based on the artist's observations of his own country and her people, *There is no other paradise* is a lament against the palpable racial divide and distinctions that still define Malaysia. A multiracial country, Malaysia is often sold to the rest of the world via captivating tourism campaigns – *Asia, Truly Asia, anyone?* – although the sentiment on-ground remains a world away from the message in the marketing.

Justin's works are based on his observations of this predicament. Originally titled *Mandi Bunga (Flower Bath)*, a reference to a traditional cleansing ritual, this penchant for the political started back in 2008. Buried away in the greens of Kuala Lumpur's outskirts, Justin was then on the Rimbun Dahan residency programme and surrounded by pre-election electoral flags and propaganda galore. It was hard to escape from the political campaign noise in his visual landscape, and it was coupled by a thunderous noise from ground level, where thousands of Malaysians took to the streets for one of the country's earliest Bersih gatherings, a public assembly that called for free and fair elections.<sup>1</sup>

"The heart of my work stems from an ongoing amalgamation of social commentary and contemporary reality within a framework of symbolism and make-believe. Corresponding to social issues in contemporary Malaysian society, each work presents a whimsical visual montage of characters and decaying objects, touching on the subjects of racial divide, ethnicity and religion. We are a nation made up of various cultures, religions and ethnicities. I conceived to create *Mandi Bunga* after the recent general elections. I feel that racial divide is becoming a serious threat to the nation, especially as racial politics and tension are arising from recent statements made by local politicians," explains the artist.<sup>2</sup>

These are universal goals, no doubt, but ambitions that remain far from reach for a polarized nation such as Malaysia, whose multiracial society is governed by political forces that remain largely fragmented by race. Barisan Nasional, or the National Coalition, is made up of three main political parties that represent each of Malaysia's three main races – Malay, Chinese, and Indian – and they have remained in power since Malaysia's independence in 1957.

Recent years have seen this political stronghold shaken by oppositional forces, but not without retaliation from the incumbents, who continue to play the racial card in a bid to divide and conquer. And, it's precisely this division that hasn't sat well with Justin. "In Malaysia, I think that we have somehow inherited this mindset of differences between people and their roles in society. Not only that, it has been manipulated for the benefit of those in power. This racial division is more obvious when the government actually supports and upholds it," he remarks.<sup>3</sup>

The work *2 Marikh* was the springboard for *There is no other paradise*. A painting of school children wearing the classic Malaysian school uniform, the composition was based on an old class photograph of the artist's. "I was reflecting on my times as a child, being educated in a government school and sharing a class with friends of all races. When one is growing up in that environment and interacting with people of different races, you are oblivious to race."<sup>4</sup> This exercise in nostalgia is also a comment on the reality of today's Malaysia. In place of actual faces, the artist has painted flowers and branches, which serve as a comment about the fragility of his subject's respective identities today; a Malaysian's individuality is no longer applicable, as this is a nation that categorises her people by colour, creed, and race.

*There is no other paradise* is essentially an examination in "how things were and how things compare today," says the artist, and there's more yearning for idyllic times in the painting *Forgotten Paradise*.<sup>5</sup> In this work, a once-popular addition to any Malaysian backyard sits in solitude at the centre of the painting. The landscape surrounding the swing is unkempt and tinged with despair. Where have all the people gone, you wonder? A scene that would've once been filled with laughter and serenity is now a ghostly vestige of the past. However, the beauty lies in this simple fact: the swing is not lost or broken, but merely forgotten.



2 Marikh, 183cm x 244cm, acrylic and fabric flowers on canvas, 2013



Flowers do not talk, 66cm x 76cm, acrylic and fabric flowers on canvas, screenprint on plexiglass, 2013

## Symbolic reoccurrences and some differences

Jogging our memory is, in fact, another good entry-point to *There is no other paradise*, for many of this body of work's elements can be traced to Justin's preceding series. "I think in order to understand where I come from as a painter, it's important to look back at the older work and then you can see the symbolism that I've used; the meat comes up quite a lot, the skull comes up quite a lot, the flowers come up quite a lot, and now I'm talking about decay and things that are withering and dying. The skull [*Hunter Gatherer #1*] is a pretty straightforward representation of that, it's a good first piece [to look at] to see where I'm coming from."<sup>6</sup>

The skull in *Hunter Gatherer #1* did indeed feature in Justin's preceding series, *Arcane fantasies for the flesh and the sublime*, which was exhibited at Richard Koh Fine Art Kuala Lumpur in April 2013. The same solo exhibition saw the debut of Justin's flowers and animals, but *There is no other paradise* is hardly an exercise in recycling motifs. Quite the opposite, in fact, as the artist has also introduced a number of new elements to his art. The aforementioned *Forgotten Paradise* is a first for Justin in terms of

landscape painting, collage by way of fabric flowers is also something new, and there's also, of course, the artist's installation, *Washing the obsolete in the arms of the absolute*.

"I think it was necessary for me to take a step away from painting for a moment and try a different approach of addressing my concerns. There are some limitations in painting that I found myself unable to address. When I view a painting, for example, I find myself looking a lot at the technique primarily before addressing the message. So in that sense, as a painter, I can easily get lost in viewing things for painting's sake. Working with objects and video allowed me to get away from that and view things with fresh eyes. The simplicity of it was refreshing and the message is extremely direct and to the point. It loses the illusion of meaning that I sometimes question when viewing a painting. With this installation, what you see is what you get," notes the artist.

## So, where is paradise?

Home, says Justin. Criticism may be paramount in *There is no other paradise*, but Justin's works spell more desire than they do malice. This might be hard to digest considering the themes of decay and despair that are present in this series, but central to *There is no other paradise* is a poignant message of hope. One only needs to consider the actual message behind the installation *Washing the obsolete in the arms of the absolute* to understand this.

"The installation *Washing the obsolete in the arms of the absolute* is based on the *mandi bunga* (flower bath), a traditional ritual form of cleansing, practiced widely particularly within the rural community in Malaysia. It is thought to revitalise, strengthen and cleanse the body of evil spirits," explains the artist. In this work, a bathtub filled with various white fabric flowers functions as Justin's canvas, and video images of people with different ethnicities practicing the cleansing ritual are projected onto it. However, the absence of an actual person in the tub represents the lack of any real action to counteract the nagging racial divide in Malaysia. "Are we just merely hearing and talking about it? Or are we making a change to better ourselves for society? I believe all forms of change start from within, once we take up responsibility for the inadequacies of our society and start bettering ourselves can the issue be addressed and confronted," argues the artist.

With this rhetoric, Justin has essentially played auteur to a tale about Malaysia today. And, it is a visually-rich tale about division and the powers that be, but also a story about hope and an aching for renewal. "Race", say the politicians, but "people", says Justin. "If my previous body of work represented something in decay to make way for something new, perhaps this work can represent a new era in bloom and a renewed sense of hope and optimism".



Decadence in bloom, 100cm x 81cm each (triptych), Acrylic on canvas, screenprint on plexiglass, 2013

Rachel Jenagaratnam  
Kuala Lumpur  
December, 2013

<sup>1</sup> In 'Life after Decay: new start, new works, from Justin Lim' an essay by Suraya Warden, the artist stated "I think it's important to depict that society influences to a certain extent how I am today... I think it's hard to run away from politics and religion being in Malaysian society, so I'm just merely pointing out the obvious things. When I was in Rimbun Dahan [the reason] the whole idea of politics came into the picture was because when I moved out there, it was in the middle of the electoral campaign and the whole street was covered with political banners and slogans. I'm not a political artist, but my work sometimes touches on these subjects because you can't really avoid it if it's in your face all the time." <sup>2</sup> Artist's statement. <sup>3</sup> Artist's statement. <sup>4</sup> Email interview with the artist, December, 2013. <sup>5</sup> Email interview with the artist, November, 2013. <sup>6</sup> Email interview with the artist, December, 2013.