

ILHAM CONTEMPORARY FORUM MALAYSIA 2009–2017



“Malaysia 2009–2017” was a pilot project for the Ilham Contemporary Forum, and loosely explored current visual arts practices as well as more broadly defined “cultural projects” in the country. The show was assembled by seven curators, all under the age of 39, providing insight into the engagements of a younger generation of urban Malaysian artistic practitioners, gauging what they think is interesting, urgent, possible—and impossible—in Malaysia today.

Paintings on canvas were nowhere to be found. In the context of a busy local art market dealing almost exclusively in the medium, that spoke volumes. Yet there were compelling engagements with painting, such as: Liew Kwai Fei’s wood-framed color and shape sequences created based on algorithms; Haffendi Anuar’s geometric wall compositions recycling forms from the windows and grills of local housing blocks; and Samsudin Wahab’s *Mud Painting* (2015/17), made as part of a body of work revisiting the artist’s childhood experiences in the rural north. In Chong Kim Chiew’s *Boundary Fluidity* (2014–), the artist paints maps over maps on tarpaulin to meditate on shifting geographies and histories. They lay rolled up or scrunched together on the floor, or hung akimbo from above, and feature in a video as lonely subjects—washed over by the tide, abandoned in a car park, hanging over a balcony—delivering a wistful message about agency and transience.

Elsewhere, forgotten histories were brought to the fore. Chong’s *Banana Money* (2012/17) alludes to the worthless currency issued by Japanese occupiers in Malaya during World War II. The image of an oversized, disintegrating one-dollar banknote was made by peeling brown tape off the gallery’s wall, with a hand of bananas affixed to the same surface, slowly rotting. It was placed opposite Lim Kok Yoong’s interactive

digital project *Operasi Cassava 3.0* (2013)—which presents meanings and memories associated with the plant, including its role as a staple food during the occupation—and next to Chang Yoong Chia’s intricate and powerful postage-stamp collages referencing the race riots of May 1969 and the forced resettlement of mostly Chinese communities by the British during the Malayan Emergency (1948–60).

Anxieties about identity and belonging prevail as nationalist rhetoric skews increasingly toward Malay, or *bumiputra*, dominance. Vincent Leong’s *Keeping Up with the Abdullahs* (2012) has Chinese and non-Muslim Indian families pose for two group photographs, sporting Muslim headdresses and other symbols of Malay culture. Tan Zi Hao offers packets of soil from his home and “Malay Reservation Lands”—which can only be owned by those deemed “natives” by the state—as well as a torn copy of his birth certificate and the artist’s sperm up for exchange in *The Soil Is Not Mine* (2013), a literal but effective reflection on the narrative of “bumiputraisim.”

The migrant voice is the focus of *Pak Tai Foto* (2015), a two-channel video by Au Sow-Yee, in which we hear workers from China, Bangladesh and Myanmar narrate their stories against the setting of a dilapidated 1950s photo studio in Kuala Lumpur, prompting questions about the roles of migrants in the context of Malaysian nationhood.

There were personal chronicles tucked into the show too, such as those found in the dark, allegorical drawings of Hasanul Isyraf Idris, or in Gan Siong King’s short, smart video essays from his 2016 artist residency in Moriya. However, the artworks presented in the exhibition by and large engaged with histories, identities and ideas of nationhood, and were shown alongside cultural projects ranging from a reenactment of 1960s student activism to a cycling map of Kuala Lumpur.

The general elections of 2008 and 2013 marked significant shifts in Malaysian politics, with the ruling party, which has essentially governed since national independence in 1957, losing first its two-thirds parliamentary majority and then the popular vote. In the run-up to the 2013 elections, Sharon Chin collected political party flags from around her neighborhood and painted on them images of weeds, which she says are “tough, persistent and enduring.” Hers is a generation anticipating change, attempting to reinterpret Malaysia through their collective imagination.

BEVERLY YONG

Opposite page

ALFREDO AND ISABEL AQUILIZAN

Flight

2017

Screen print on acetate film with LED light, 115 x 170 x 6.4 cm.

Installation view of “Of Fragments and Impressions” at STPI – Creative Workshop & Gallery, Singapore, 2017.

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Courtesy STPI – Creative Workshop & Gallery.

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SHARON CHIN

Weeds Series

2013

Fabric paint and wax crayon on polyester flags, 75 x 154 cm.

Courtesy the artist and Ilham Gallery, Kuala Lumpur.