



# Framing Stories

**RICHARD KOH FINE ART PRESENTS THREE ARTISTS WITH A SHARED COMMITMENT  
BY ZAKI JUMAHRI**

Richard Koh Fine Art will show the works of Mequitta Ahuja, Nadiah Bamadhaj and Trong Gia Nguyen at Art Central 2018. The artists explore diverse themes revolving around artist self-portraits, the Indonesian social climate and reconstruction of childhood memories respectively. Yet collectively, they share a commitment to questioning viewers' expectations of— and attitudes towards— representation, culture and their environment.

## Mequitta Ahuja

This series, 'Performing Painting' references different modes of depicting scribes. What did you want to explore?

The imagery in 'Seated Scribbler' relates to four types of images in art history: paintings of saints writing the gospels, portraits of learned people, paintings and statues of scribes and self-portraits in manuscripts. Some of the earliest self-portraits are depictions of scribes. I've distilled the link—scribe to self-portrait— in a single image. By projecting her shadow onto the page, it becomes a vehicle for her self-portrait. I've shown my subject writing as a pretence for presenting her as a maker of self-portraits.

What inspired you to use earthy, neutral tones, and simplicity of form? I wanted to distil every element, including shape and colour, to its visual essence. I portray the body in simplified form. The unadorned figure is one shape within a composition of shapes and the underlying abstract structure is presented in clear, flat planes. The works' visual impact comes from their simplicity.

We see beyond the scribe's immediate surroundings. In 'Author', we get glimpses of the world outside and in 'Interpreter', we see a curtain's edges. What was your motivation behind the framing?

The works of Giotto, "father of the Renaissance", serve as inspiration. In particular, one aspect that I borrow from Giotto is the cut-away room which is a visual fiction that gives viewers access to a private space, inside and outside simultaneously.



Top left to right: Nadiah Bamadhaj, 'Pessimism is Ridiculous II-I', 2017, charcoal on paper collage, 122 x 150cm; 'Pessimism is Ridiculous II-IV', 2017, charcoal on paper collage, 122 x 150cm. © Nadiah Bamadhaj/Richard Koh Fine Art

Bottom left to right: Mequitta Ahuja, 'Seated Scribbler', 2015, oil on canvas, 213.3 x 203.2cm; 'Author', 2015, oil on canvas, 213.3 x 203.2cm. Images courtesy Mequitta Ahuja/Richard Koh Fine Art.



### Trong Gia Nguyen

This series mixes painting with recent photography of buildings featured in old family photographs. The variances in the painted figures' details from 'Enid, Pine Street' to 'Saigon, Loc Vinh' hint at issues of time and memory. Did you draw upon your memories for the paintings?

The paintings, based on archival prints and polaroids, are rendered in the form of colouring book drawings that have already been coloured in, with the lines removed. They superimpose the past with the present, and make the point that memory is not fixed but constantly changing. I chose oil pastels which are crayon-like and never fully dry, which equate the organic nature of memory.

### What role does time play through your photography?

Since photographing these houses within the last four years, some of them have probably changed. I find that time allows memory and narrative to evolve, and I allow ideas and images to decide for themselves when they begin and end.

This series seems personal and specific to your experiences as a Vietnamese-American and yet, counterintuitively, relatable to a wider audience. What is it about your work that speaks to such an audience?

I want to use my artist soapbox to speak as universally as possible, because deep down we all more or less want and need the same basic things. I utilise recognisable entry points that bring a viewer in. Gradually, the work guides the viewer on a crooked path to somewhere more uneasy and uncertain, which leads to conversation, debate, and reflection. 📍

More information at [rkfineart.com](http://rkfineart.com).

### Nadiyah Bamadhaj

#### What is the background story of the *cungkup* you depicted?

I encountered the *cungkup* in a small village on the East Javanese southern coast, where community practice is steeped in Javanese mysticism and superstitions. Each *cungkup* houses a gravesite. Each gravesite has a custodian: either a volunteer or someone chosen by the community who feels moved by spiritual forces. For superstitious reasons, a *cungkup* in disrepair is left untouched by the custodian, decayed by the elements.

#### Why focus purely on the physical, starkly rendered attributes of various *cungkup* in states of disintegration rather than including human forms?

I've had a long fascination with architecture. I find that physical structures reference the body in the way they house and classify people. For the *cungkup*, they can only house one figure within their scale and structure.

In this series, the tension surrounding the relevance of Javanese mysticism for the *cungkup* exemplifies the conflict between *Kejawen*, those who value hybridity in identities, and *Santri*, those who value purity. Is this a call for people to understand the threats to *Kejawen* and pursue a course of action?

While I've made work based on political or societal issues as food for thought, I've never made a call for action. The latter is wishful thinking. While the *cungkup's* origin is specific to Indonesia, by isolating it from its environment, any viewer will understand the universal message of decay and disintegration.

Left: Trong Gia Nguyen, 'Saigon, Loc Vinh', 2015, oil pastel on canvas, mounted C-print, 101.6 x 76.2cm each.

Right: Trong Gia Nguyen, 'Enid, Pine Street', 2015, oil pastel on canvas, mounted C-print, 62 x 91.4cm. Images © Trong Gia Nguyen/ Richard Koh Fine Art.