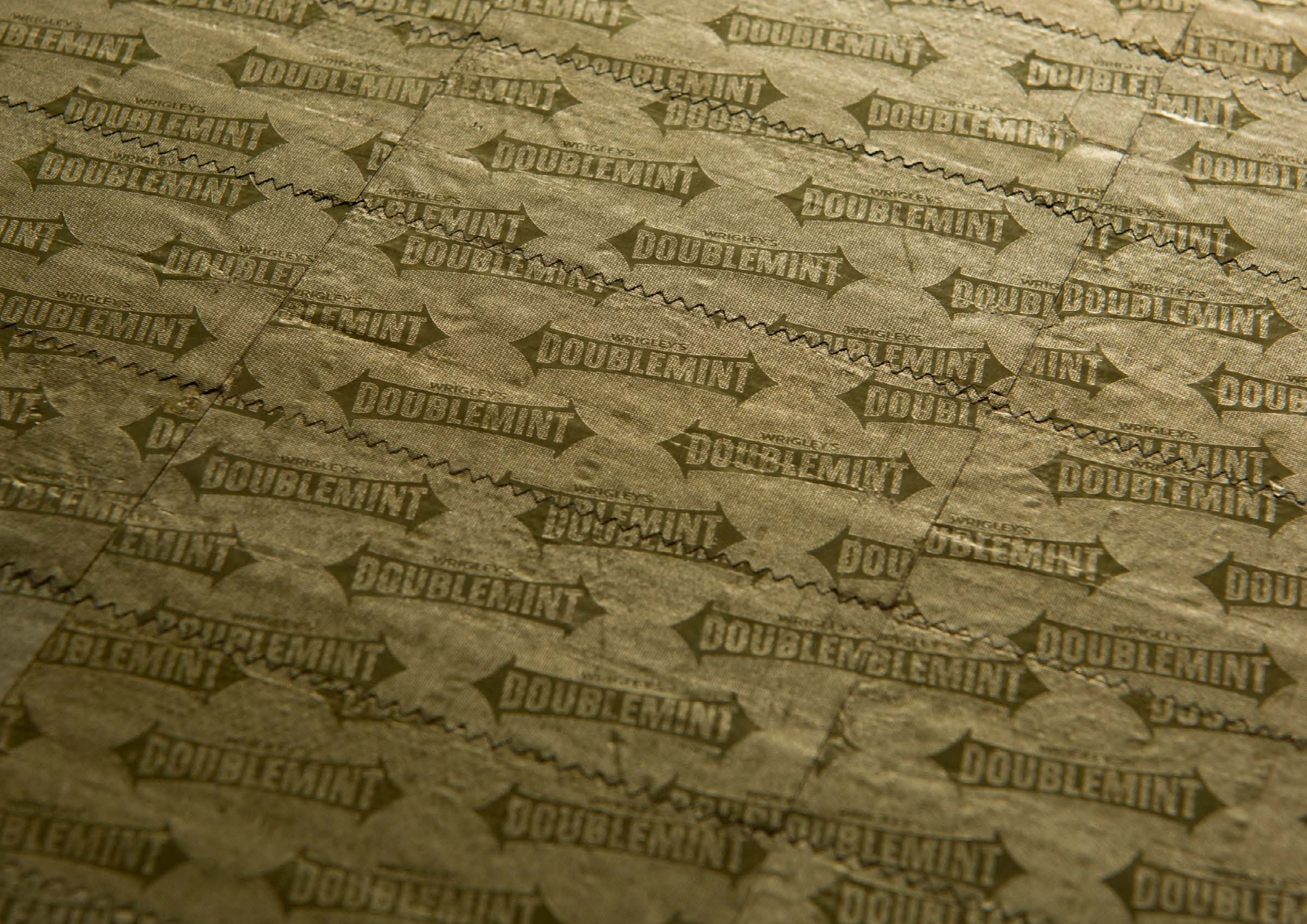


Hu Qiren All That Glitters



Curated by Gillian Daniel



All That Glitters

Curatorial text by Gillian Daniel

What is in an image? How do visual symbols give form to identity and self-expression? Hu Qiren's third solo exhibition at Richard Koh Fine Art, *All that Glitters*, explores the notion of visual language and how it is used in articulating self and place. In a series of new mixed media works that reflect his signature sleek and playful aesthetic, Hu continues the explorations of Singaporean identity that underpin his practice.

By the artist's observation, a personal or collective experience of Singapore is often mediated by symbols, whether by intention or circumstance. Some of these symbols, like the Merlion, are created by the state to project an image of itself to the external world. Along with other icons like Gardens by the Bay and Marina Bay Sands, the Merlion helps to place-make by creating an impression of Singapore as a contemporary First World city with a unique culture and cityscape. While Singapore is proud of these impressive icons, Hu observes that other everyday visual motifs, like the white singlet worn by "kopitiam uncles", organically evolve in a ground-up way to become familiar sights. Still others develop metaphorically in our mind's eye, as we go through life in Singapore. In this latest series of works, Hu probes and layers a range of visual references, which for him are representative of the city. Through these gestures, he contemplates the ways that images can give form to identity and self-expression.

In a white cast of an ear, a gold \$1 coin glitters. Titled *Hear, hear!*, this seemingly simple work contains only two visual elements: the ear and the coin. But multiple layers of meaning can be uncovered through a closer consideration of these symbols.

The most recently issued \$1 coin features the Merlion, an official icon the use of which is regulated by the Singapore Tourism Board (STB). For Hu, the Merlion is representative of the way that the city-state presents a curated external persona. The \$1 coin also gestures towards an urban legend that Hu grew up with - the tale

that Lee Kuan Yew, the founding Prime Minister of Singapore, reportedly went to a geomancer to foretell the nation's future in its early years of independence. Lee was told that, for the fledgling nation to prosper, every citizen should carry a *bagua* or "eight areas" symbol. In Chinese *fengshui*, the *bagua* is used to deflect bad energies. The octagonal design of the *bagua* was thus incorporated into the \$1 coin, the legend goes. The plaster cast the artist creates of his own ear refers to a sight he often observed as a child, when the older generation sometimes tucked coins in their ears as they frequented the neighbourhood coffee shops.

Aside from making fond reference to the familiar and the folkloric, *Hear, hear!* also critiques some darker realities of life in Singapore. The installation of the ear on the wall evokes the saying that "the walls have ears", commenting on the state of surveillance in Singapore.¹ Hu also includes the coin in his opening work as, being a medium of exchange and a physical representation of value, it reflects the pursuit of profitability in a free-market Singapore. In these various nuances, *Hear, hear!* sets the tone for the rest of the exhibition.

With its reference to the Merlion, *Hear, hear!* also begins an exploration of the iconography of the lion – a thread that runs through a cluster of works in the exhibition. The lion is a symbol of unique significance in the articulation of the Singapore story. One of the oldest founding myths of Singapore is the legend of the Palembang prince, Sang Nila Utama, and the fictional lion that gave the city its name. According to the *Malay Annals*, when first exploring the island, the young prince encountered a strange beast that his adviser described as a lion. Believing this to be a good omen, Sang Nila Utama decided to establish a new settlement here and call it *Singapura* or "Lion City".² However, the animal was most likely not a lion but a tiger. In the *Malay Annals*, it was described as having a red body, black head and white breast. Scholars have pointed out that lions are not found in Southeast Asia, while tigers were commonly encountered.³

1 There are plans to more than double the 90,000 cameras currently installed in Singapore to 200,000 by 2030. For more on this, see for example Aqil Haziq Mahmud, "Surveillance cameras can keep us safer but raise privacy concerns: Teo Chee Hean", *CNA*, Accessed 10 August 2024, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/surveillance-cameras-safe-raise-privacy-concerns-teo-chee-hean-htx-techx-summit-2608041>

2 Originally from 1436, the *Malay Annals* is a fictionalised history of the Melaka Sultanate. The text went through many revisions with successive Malay rulers and played an active role in shaping regional identity. For more on this, see for example *Sejarah Melayu: The Malay Annals*, compiled by Cheah Boon Kheng (Petaling Jaya: The Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, 1998)

3 John N. Miksic, "Singapore's Ancient History, 1299 – 1604" in *Singapore and the Silk Road of the Sea 1300 – 1800* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2013) 150

4 Sazali Abdul Aziz, "'Time to bring back the Kallang Roar!", *TNP*, Accessed 10 August 2024, <https://tnp.straitstimes.com/news/singapore-news/time-bring-back-kallang-roar>

Despite this, the name stuck and, in 1964, STB commissioned the Merlion as its official logo. The fantastical creature with the head of a lion and a tail of a fish referenced the myth of Sang Nila Utama and recognised Singapore's deep maritime history. The Merlion was designed by a British zoologist Alec Fraser-Brunner and the first statue created by the pioneer sculptor Lim Nang Seng. Although STB has since changed its logo, the Merlion has continued to be a familiar state symbol.

ReCAPTCHA Merlion is a tongue-in-cheek work that references the state histories of the mythical creature. In 1987, the Merlion was catapulted to international stardom when Singapore played host to the Miss Universe contest. Representatives from 68 countries gathered in front of the landmark for an iconic photograph, which Hu discovered in his research in the state archives. The photograph captured his imagination for the way it so clearly encapsulated the pageantry and performativity of state symbols. But over the photograph, he layers the "reCAPTCHA" test graphics frequently encountered in our online world. An acronym for "Completely Automated Public Turing Test to Tell Computers and Humans Apart", the Google-owned CAPTCHA test is used in computing to deter "bot" attacks. reCAPTCHA does this by asking users to select images that correspond to a prompt question, to prove they are human and not a computer bot. Hu's reference to the reCAPTCHA test comments on the way that state icons can end up feeling manufactured and robotic, even as they are devised to represent Singapore's rich culture. Hu's bot test also critiques the way life in Singapore can sometimes feel like we are being made to pass unspoken "tests".

In *The Lion's Roar*, the artist continues to explore the symbol of the lion. The work also gestures to the "Kallang Roar", a term coined by Singaporean sports journalist Jeffrey Low in 1976 after Singapore beat Penang in a Malaysia Cup football match that was witnessed by a 60,000-strong crowd.⁴ The term has since

referred to nationalism, as captured in the 2008 film, *Kallang Roar the Movie*. Hu renders the word in over 20 kilograms of granolithic stone. This paving stone is a common sight in Housing Development Board public housing estates. Through this, he comments upon the pervasiveness of the lion motif in the popular imagination in Singapore. The work's materiality also literally imbues it with a sense of weight, referring to the deep cultural and social histories of the lion symbol.

In *DOUBLEMINT*, Hu returns to an artistic strategy that he has pursued throughout his practice. In earlier works, Hu has meticulously collected symbolic but commonplace objects and ritualistically assembled them into new configurations that meditate upon the conditions of life in Singapore.⁵

DOUBLEMINT is the result of Hu's intrigue with the unique story of chewing gum in Singapore. The much-publicised ban of the sale, import and manufacture of chewing gum took effect in Singapore in 1992, in an effort by the government to rid public pavements of the blight of ubiquitous gum stains seen in other cities. Since then, chewing gum has been held up as an example of both the city-state's alleged eccentricity and its overly regulated nature. Aside from purchasing gum on his travels, Hu also persuades friends and family to add to his collection when they go overseas. To create the work, he removed the gum and retained only the foil packaging. Each of the 1,088 pieces of foil was then systematically cleaned, ironed and glued onto canvas. Their pin-straight grid arrangement is a comment on the orderly citizenship that Singapore requires of her people. The work's strict composition and gold palette represents the ways in which the relentless pursuit of economic prosperity in Singapore requires us all to get in line, even if we might be artists, cultural workers or others who do not easily fit into this mould.

⁵ For example, in *Study of Composition with Lines* (2022), Hu fastidiously saved the elastic loops from the surgical face masks that were an everyday reality during the Covid 19 pandemic. These were recast into a sanitised abstract composition that commented on the uncanny nature of those unprecedented times.

Hu continues to reflect upon the conditions of life in Singapore for its various labourers in *Not for Hire*. In the context of *All That Glitters*, Hu's most incisive critique is to be found in this wall-mounted installation. In a caged cabinet sits a pair of severed feet that have been cast from the artist's own. For Hu, the pace and price of life in Singapore necessitates its citizens to subject themselves to a relentless daily grind. Despite this, social mobility is becoming increasingly difficult to attain, especially for those of the lowest socio-economic strata. The sheen of the cage in relation to the exhibition title also reminds us that the polished veneer of Singapore comes at a cost.

Ideas of mobility also underpin *Chariots*. In the work, four skateboard decks bear the traditional Chinese character 車 or "chē". In common speech, the word means "car" or "vehicle", but in this work it is better translated to "chariot". Hu renders the decks in the colour palette of 四色牌, "sì sè pái" or "four colour cards". This rummy card game has a long history in Southern China and is a beloved form of entertainment in Hu's family. Growing up, Hu spent his afternoons in his grandmother's house while his parents were at work. His grandmother often spent the afternoons with her friends playing 四色牌, as Hu whiled away his time riding his skateboard and dreaming of other places he could one day visit. When he was eventually old enough to learn to play, the 車 or chariot card was his favourite for its ability to move freely across the gameboard. In this reflective work, Hu delves deep into his personal memories and family histories in search of visual symbols that anchor him to a particular time and place, while embodying his desire for freedom of movement.

Midriff (Kopitiam Edition) is a framed image of the artist's own bare torso, dressed up in the white singlet that is a frequent sight in *kopitiams* or "coffee shops" throughout Singapore. In Hu's own words, the self-portrait captures his current "dad bod". While it might not conform to society's standards of beauty and perfection, his "dad bod" is a daily reminder of his ties to his two-year

old son, Chi Bin. *All that Glitters* features a series of work made in a new phase of Hu's practice, as he begins to juggle artistic labour and full-time employment with new parenthood. Ask residents of Singapore about the way the island's "kopitiam uncles" wear their singlets rolled up over their bellies, and most would be able to confirm this quirky trend. In this playful work, Hu explores the motifs that have come to define his personal memories of life in Singapore.

Ultimately a love letter to the city where Hu lives and works, *All That Glitters* brings together a range of visual references from various corners of Singapore to reflect upon the unique experience of life here, which can be at once hyper-global and engineered to precision, as well as remarkably local and idiosyncratic. Hu himself finds droll humour in this reality and invites viewers to bring their own stories and experiences to the works. Through this, he strives to advocate for a more expansive embrace of all versions of his city.

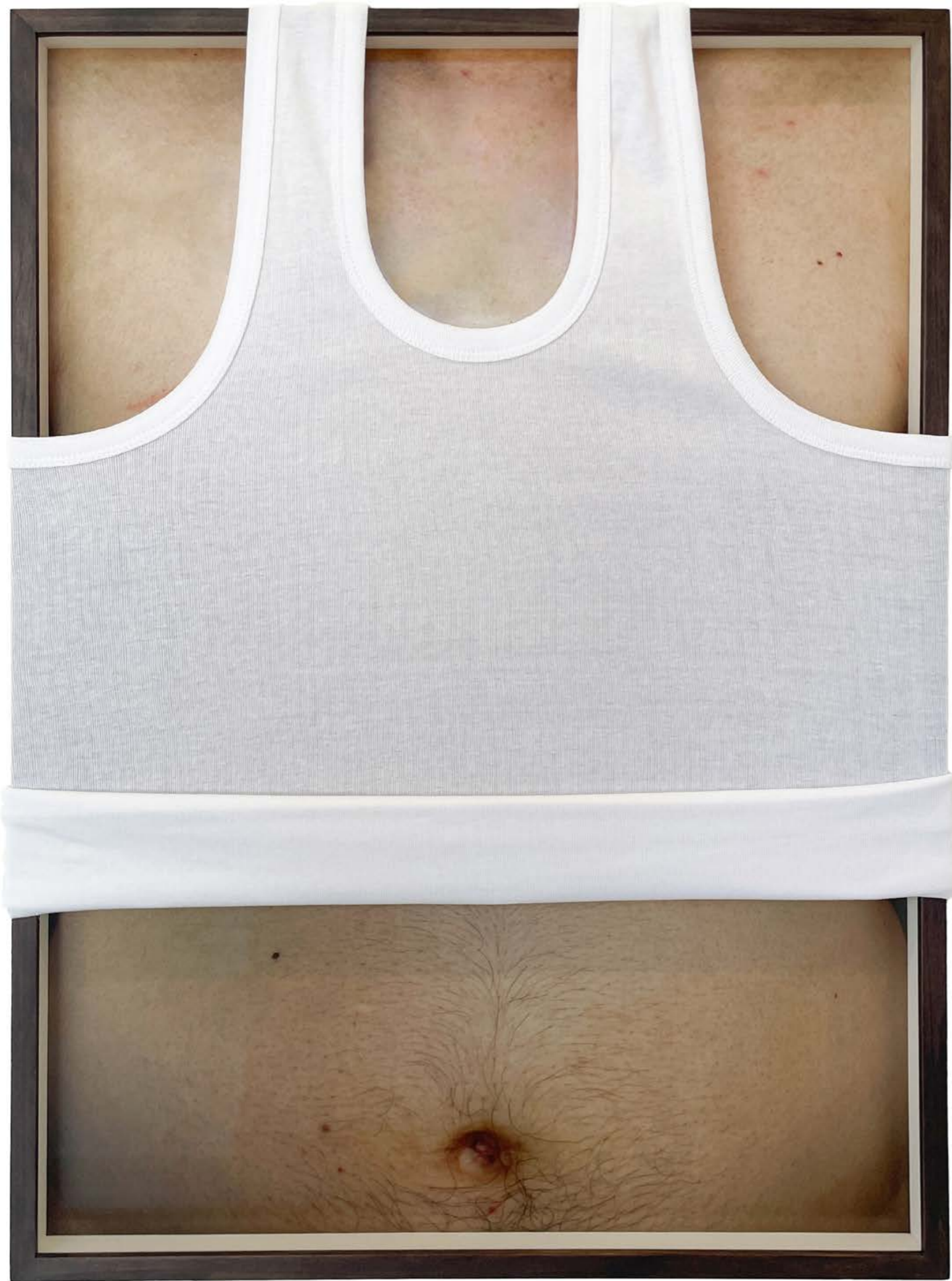


Hu Qiren All That Glitters

Curated by Gillian Daniel

24.08 - 14.09. 2024





Midriff (Kopitiam Edition)

2024, White singlet and archival inkjet print, 42 x 59.4 cm

Hu Qiren's third solo exhibition, "All That Glitters", explores the notion of visual language and the ways it is used for self-expression.

In a series of new mixed media works, Hu unpacks the symbols that for him evoke Singapore. He observes the way state icons like the Merlion are put to work in articulating the polished personas that the Lion City strives to project. But a look below the surface reveals vernacular symbols - such as 四色牌 (or "Four Colour Cards") and the white singlet - which are deeply rooted in Hu's family and community histories. For the artist, these personal references speak to the "in" jokes and shared memories that are part of the beating heart of a place. Regardless of their source, he finds droll humour in the way these diverse symbols reflect experiences of life in Singapore, which can be at once hyper-global yet remarkably local, as well as engineered to precision yet idiosyncratic.

Ultimately a love letter to the city where Hu lives and works, "All That Glitters" dwells on the joy and expansiveness that becomes possible when embracing all versions of the self.





Hear, hear! (Left ear)

2024, Dollar coin and plaster cast, 15.5 x 15.5 x 7 cm

Select all squares with

merlions

If there are none, click skip



SKIP

reCAPTCHA Merlion

2024, Archival inkjet print, 42 x 59.4 cm



Hear, hear! (Right ear)

2024, Dollar coin and plaster cast, 15.5 x 15.5 x 7 cm



The Lion's Roar

2024, Signage in granolithic finish, 62.5 x 47 x 5 cm



Installation view of "All That Glitters" at Richard Koh Fine Art, Gillman Barracks, Singapore, 24 August - 14 September 2024



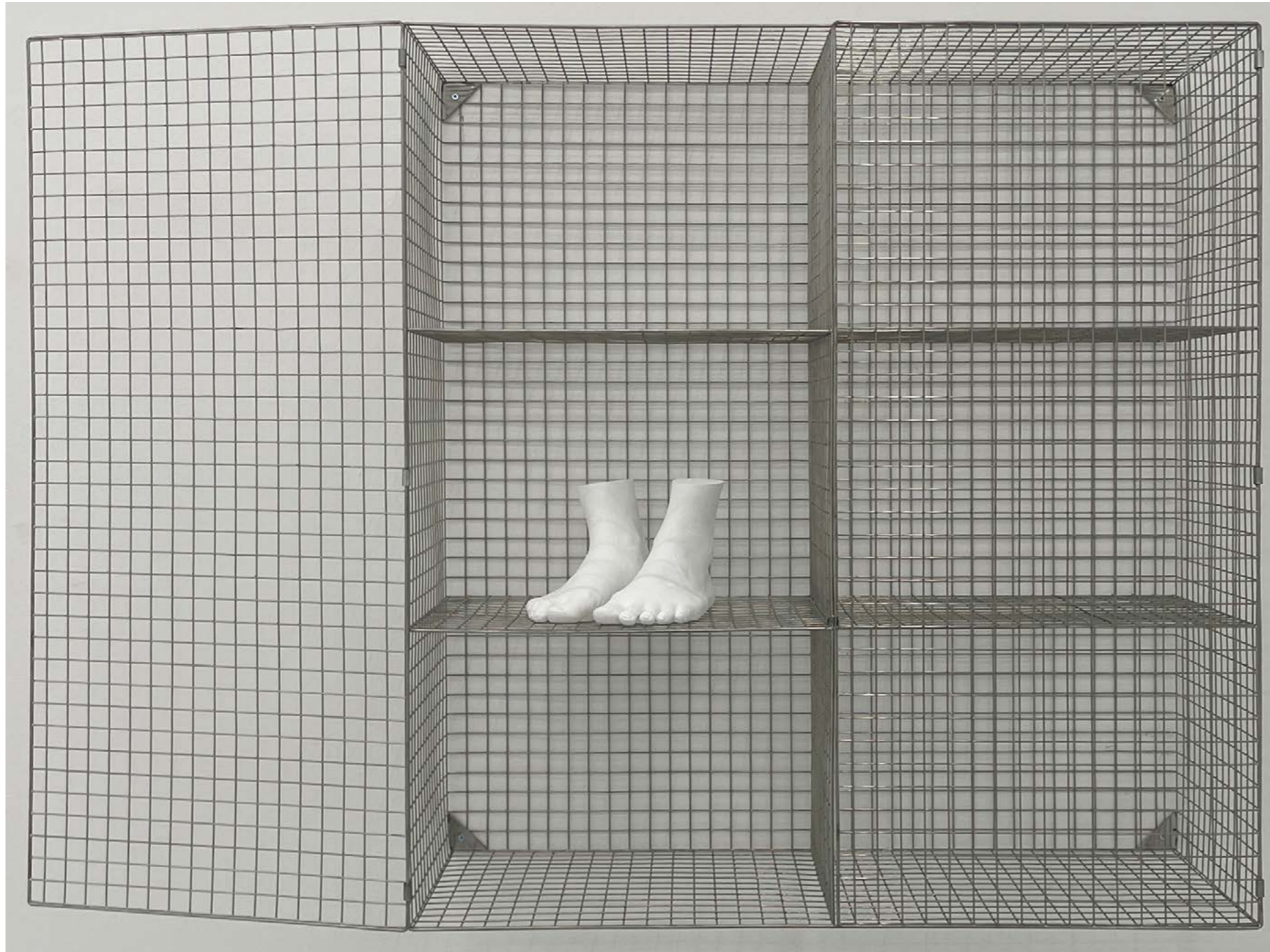
DOUBLEMINT (Gold Edition)

2024. Chewing gum foil on canvas. 168 x 168 cm



Chariots

2024, Industrial paint on maple wood, 20 x 80 cm



Not For Hire

2024. Found object, plaster cast, and wire mesh cabinet, 90 x 97.5 x 35 cm

NOVEMBER



Hu Qiren

(b. 1983, Singapore)

Hu Qiren is a visual artist, educator and administrator, whose practice investigates the myriad forms of imaging making, incorporating a wide range of media, including photography, video, installation and performance. Expressing a vibrant visual vocabulary inspired by his own identity and tradition, Qiren synthesizes cultural binaries, while incessantly challenging notions of authenticity, belief and value systems.

After completing his studies in Photography and Digital Imaging at the School of Art, Design and Media, Nanyang Technological University of Singapore in 2012, Qiren obtained a scholarship the following year to further his education in Fine Arts at Parsons The New School for Design. During his time in New York, he apprenticed under the tutelage of Hiroshi Sugimoto for more than 5 years before he returned to his native country, Singapore.

He has showcased his works at international galleries, institutions and festivals including the One World Trade Center, Queens Museum, Aperture Foundation, Louvre Museum, National Museum of Singapore, National Gallery Singapore, Singapore International Photography Festival and ART SG. In 2016, Qiren was the grand winner of the Harper's BAZAAR Art Prize.

Education

- 2015 MFA in Photography, Parsons The New School for Design, New York, US (Provost Scholarship)
- 2012 BFA in Photography and Digital Imaging, School of Art, Design and Media, Nanyang Technological University of Singapore
- 2003 Diploma in Interior Architecture and Design, School of Design, Temasek Polytechnic, Singapore

Selected Solo Exhibitions

- 2024 *All That Glitters*, Richard Koh Fine Art, Gillman Barracks, Singapore (Curated by Gillian Daniel)
- 2022 *Strange Times*, Richard Koh Fine Art, Gillman Barracks, Singapore
- 2021 *A Grocer's Essentials*, S.E.A. FOCUS Curated: hyper-horizon, Tanjong Pagar Distripark, Singapore (with Richard Koh Fine Art)
- 2019 *Dunman Higher*, DECK, Singapore

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 2024 ART SG, Marina Bay Sands Expo and Convention Centre, Singapore (with Richard Koh Fine Art)
- 2023 ART SG, Marina Bay Sands Expo and Convention Centre, Singapore (with Richard Koh Fine Art)
- 2022 *State of Play*, Richard Koh Fine Art, Gillman Barracks, Singapore
InterPrintations, Straits Gallery, Singapore
- 2021 Julius Baer Next Generation Art Prize, Singapore
7th Singapore International Photography Festival, Art Science Museum, Singapore
- 2020 *In Our Own Frame*, RKFA SG 10th Anniversary Show, Richard Koh Fine Art, Gillman Barracks, Singapore
A DECADE APART / TOGETHER, Richard Koh Fine Art, Gillman Barracks, Singapore
- 2019 *See | me + ChaShaMa*, One World Trade Center, New York, US
- 2018 *Queens International*, Queens Museum, New York, US
- 2016 *Nonspace*, Recess Gallery, New York, US
Moscow International Foto Awards, Moscow
Harper's BAZAAR Art Prize, Robinsons The Heeren, Singapore

2015 PUSH PULL, Sheila C. Johnson Design Center, Parsons MFA Photography Thesis Exhibition, New York, US

The Body Collection, Exposure Award, Louvre Museum, Paris

Hyphen, Tyler School of Art, Temple University, Philadelphia, US

Future Projections, Studio One, Auckland Festival of Photography, Silo Park, New Zealand

2014 PHOTOFEAST, University Center Lobby, Parsons New School of Design, New York, US

The New Academy, WAH Williamsburg Art & Historical Center, New York, US

Photoville 2014, Brooklyn Bridge Park, New York, US

First Summer Open, curated by Chris Boot, Executive Director, Aperture Foundation, New York, US

Made in China, Brooklyn Fire Proof, New York, US

2013 Photoville 2013, Brooklyn Bridge Park, New York, US

13th Pingyao International Photography Festival, Shanxi Province, China

Conversations with the Everyday, Centre for Contemporary Art, Gillman Barracks, Singapore

PORTRAITS - ポートレイトの新しい息吹, Theory of Clouds Gallery & Community Worldwide, Kobe, Japan

2012 3rd Singapore International Photography Festival, Singapore

12th Pingyao International Photography Festival, Shanxi Province, China

ADM Show 2012 : A Reflective Dialogue, 2902 Gallery, Singapore

2011 Kuala Lumpur International Photoawards, MAP KL White Box Gallery, Malaysia

Incandescent : Shedding light on the Cultures and Caves of Yunan, 2902 Gallery, Singapore

2010 Asian Mosaics, 2nd Singapore International Photography Festival, City Square Mall, Singapore

International Orange Photo Festival, Changsha City, Orange Island, China

The Crowbar Awards, Shangri-La Hotel, Singapore

5TH Ngee Ann Photography Exhibition, Ngee Ann Cultural Centre, Singapore

Variegated Realities, Alliance Francaise de Singapour SOCIETE GENERALE Private Banking Gallery, Singapore

2008 Singapore Young Photographer Award, The National Museum of Singapore, Singapore

Awards

2021 Silver, Le Prix de la Photographie de Paris (PX3)

2016 Honorable Mention, Moscow International Foto Awards

Grand Prize Winner, Harper's BAZAAR Art Prize

2013 The Provost Scholarship, Parsons The New School For Design

2012 2nd Prize, Kwek Leng Joo Prize of Excellence in Still Photography

2011 Silver, The Crowbar Awards, Still Life, Nature and Landscape Photography Category

Winer, People's Choice Kuala Lumpur International Photoawards

2010 Winner, Project Shutter, United Nations Association of Singapore

Bronze, The Crowbar Awards, Still Life, Nature and Landscape Photography Category

2009 Winner, Scene By Scene, an Asia Pacific Screen Awards production in association with CNN

2008 Merit, Singapore Young Photographer Award, Architecture Category

Activities / Community Involvement

2016 Judge panel, 6th CDL Singapore Young Photographer Award (SYPA), Singapore

2015 PHOTOFEAST, University Center Parsons The New School for Design, New York, US

2014 Parsons the New School for Design (Teaching Assistant for Justine Kurland, Core Studio: Thesis 1.C.Fa14)

Artist Talk, Anglo-Chinese School (International), Singapore

Artist Talk, National Library, Singapore

2013 Artist Talk, Academy of Arts & Design, Tsinghua University, Beijing, China

Artist Talk, 13th Pingyao International Photography Festival, Shanxi Province, China

Gallery Assistant for Gallery Koyanagi (Hiroshi Sugimoto), Art Stage 2013, Marina Bay Sands, Singapore

Artist Assistant for Ishu Patel, STATES OF CHANGE: Works by ADM Faculty, School of Art, Design & Media, Nanyang Technological University of Singapore

2012 Photographer for short documentary "Empowering Lives", a film by United Nations Association of Singapore (Youth Council) Creative Team

3rd Singapore International Photography Festival (Youth Programme Manager and Instructor for House of Photography)

Artist Talk, 3rd Singapore International Photography Festival, National Museum of Singapore

Guest Speaker for Student Education Program "Conversation with the Black Box", Maris Stella High School, part of the, 3rd Singapore International Photography Festival, Singapore

Artist Talk, China Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA), Beijing, China

Artist Talk, 12th Pingyao International Photography Festival, Shanxi Province, China

Artist Talk, ADM Graduation show 2012, 2902 Gallery, Singapore

ADM Graduation show 2012, Major Representative for Photography and Digital Imaging cohort, Singapore

Artist Assistant for Professor Vibeke Sorensen, Chair of School of Art, Design & Media, NTU, Singapore

Artist Assistant for Ishu Patel, Unmediated Moments Unchanging Asia, Photography Exhibition, Leica Gallery, Singapore

Artist Assistant for Shinji Ohmaki, Moment And Eternity, presented by The Fondation d'entreprise Hermès, Singapore

2011 Artist Assistant for Michael Lee, Singapore Biennale 2011

Guest Speaker for "I Am Talented", as part of Project Inspire organized by United Nations Association of Singapore

2010 Artist Assistant for Shannon Castleman, Jalan Jati Project, Indonesia

Photographer for Sustainable Borneo, A United Nations Association of Singapore-Rotary Initiative



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A digital catalogue for "*All That Glitters*", A solo exhibition by Hu Qiren
Curated by Gillian Daniel

Essay by Gillian Daniel
Design by Nor Harith

Richard Koh Fine Art
Blk 47 Malan Road #01-26 Gillman Barracks Singapore 109444

24 August - 14 September 2024

Front cover page: Detail of *Hear, hear! (Right ear)* (2024)

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