

Ho Tzu Nyen: Representing the global collective imaginary | COBO Social

cobosocial.com Updated Oct 13th, 2017

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Ho Tzu Nyen, No Man II, 2017. Multimedia installation Video stills. Credits: Galerie Michael Janssen, Berlin.



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Ho Tzu Nyen, Utama: Every Name in History is I. Singapore, 2003, 23min, Color, Digital File.

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Naima Morelli is an art writer and curator with a focus on contemporary art from the Asia Pacific region. She has written...

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Singaporean artist Ho Tzu Nyen has a new show at the Berlin gallery Michael Janssen, called No Man II. We spoke with him about his process, his conception of his characters as empty shells, and his love for books.

TEXT: Naima Morelli

IMAGES: Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Michael Janssen, Berlin



Ho Tzu Nyen, *No Man II*, 2017. Multimedia installation Video stills. Credits: Galerie Michael Janssen, Berlin.

There are artists who make objects, and are pretty good at their craft. Then there are artists whose production allows them to live and work in the art system. Then there are artists whose work is autobiographical and very much tied to their own lives. And finally there are artists whose art is a continuation of their philosophical understanding of the world. For them technique is nothing less than a direct extension of their mental model.

Singaporean artist Ho Tzu Nyen belongs to the latter category. His first solo exhibition in Berlin at the gallery Michael Janssen opened on September 16 and will be on until November 11, 2017. He presented to a European public a new multimedia installation entitled *No Man II*. The whimsical and mysterious work represents a museum of popular imagination of the human figure. Here we can find characters from mythology, as well as clichés from pop culture. It is a real materialisation of the global collective imaginary.



Ho Tzu Nyen, *No Man II*, 2017. Multimedia installation Video stills. Credits: Galerie Michael Janssen, Berlin.

One minute into the conversation, and Ho Tzu Nyen already comes up with an observation which reveals the underlying conception of his entire oeuvre. Indeed, in answering what compelled him to create *No Man II*, Ho Tzu Nyen explains that in trying to make sense of things, we humans fabricate stories: "It's always difficult to talk about the genesis of something without fictionalize it," he says. "I'll try the best, to tell you how the project started."

The first inspiration came from a poem of John Donne, which the artist came in contact with as a student, called *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions: Meditation XVII*: "I reproduced John Donne poem almost entirely except one small change I made to his text. The poem says that no man is an island, referring to England. Donne says that when a man dies it is like a part of England is washed away. He alluded to England being part of Europe. The only change I made to the text is changing the world Europe to Malaya, the old name during colonial period of describing Singapore and Malaysia together. It was when Singapore was kicked out the Federation of Malaya that our two

countries split up and Singapore became Singapore. Even though *No Man II* has more to do with a global imagination, my own being situated in Singapore still slips through these little things.”



Ho Tzu Nyen, *No Man II*, 2017. Multimedia installation Video stills. Credits: Galerie Michael Janssen, Berlin.

Indeed *No Man II* is a continuation of the video installation *No Man*, which you first showed in Singapore. In *No Man* one could relate the diversity of all these characters with the ethnic diversity of Singapore. Does showing *No Man II* in Berlin took a different meaning?

In *No Man* there were 50 figures, because the work was commissioned for the 50th anniversary of Singapore. The Singapore version was 60 minutes long, with six screens, six mirrors. There each figure was in isolation and didn't overlap with others. They existed in this black space, an empty place. The figures didn't have any narrative connection; they didn't speak to each other or relate to each other. However watching the work for long, the figures might look like they are interacting through gestures and the light. While some figure appeared, others faded. It was almost a theatrical stage. This relation became more intense with *No Man II*. Here we have a foreground and a background, with group of figures that can appear or disappear in these two plans. The Berlin version is six hours long.

How did spectators are meant to interact with the video installation?

We projected the work on a two way mirror, the kind used in police stations for interrogations. You can decide which side is the mirror and which side you can look through by the lighting. The spectator can walk in front of this mirror but they can also walk to the back. In the front side we added two lights, one warm and golden and the other cold and bluish that switch ad topical moments of the song. It relates with the last two lines of the John Donne poem which says: "Don't ask for whom the bells tolls, it tolls for thee." So don't ask for who the church bells are ringing, they are always ringing for you. At the moment one of these two lights would fade out and the audience would see their own reflection amongst of all these digital figures.



Ho Tzu Nyen, *No Man II*, 2017. Multimedia installation Video stills. Credits: Galerie Michael Janssen, Berlin.

Another thread that went into the work was your experience in working with computer graphic and 3d animation. Why did you decide to use computer generated figures?

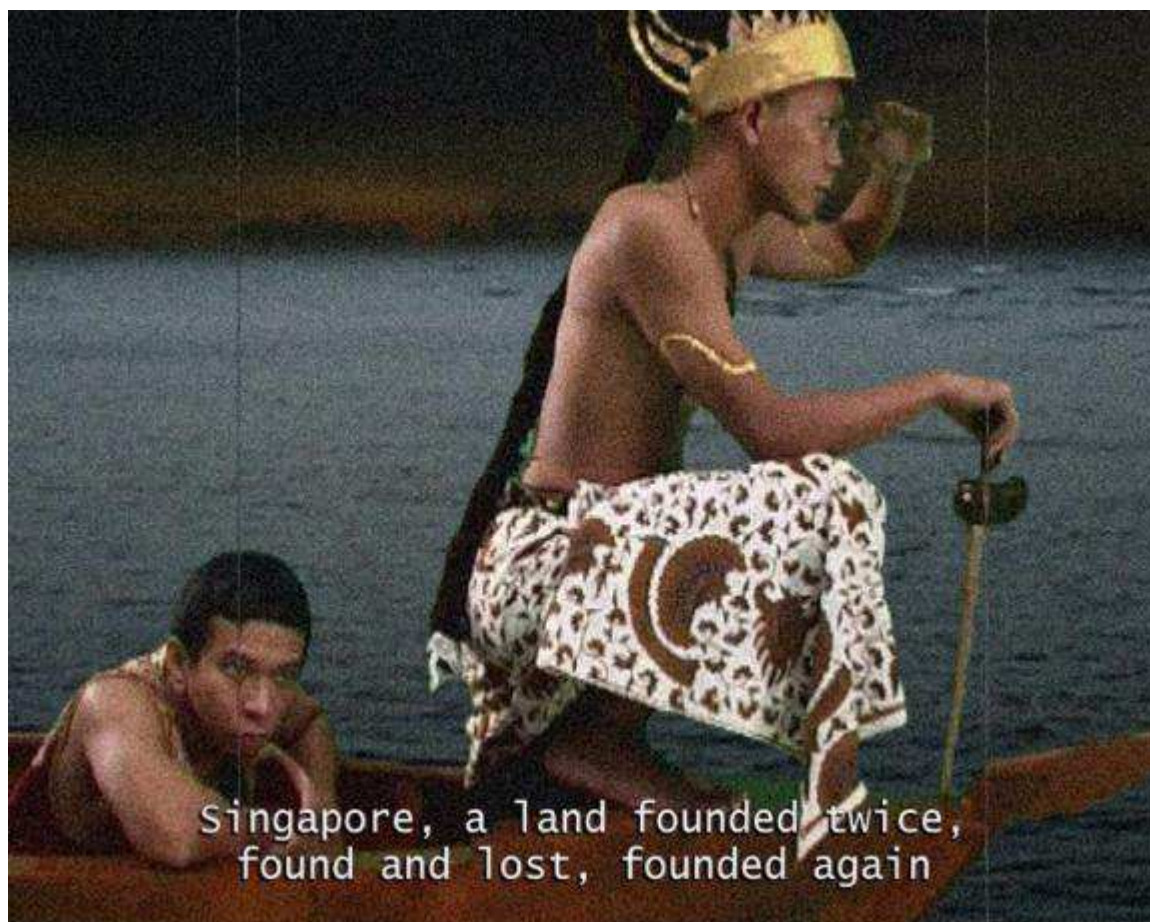
Some time ago I found a website which allowed you to purchase and customize thousand of different figures. I think that website was used mainly by people who were making computer games or digital pornography. I was quite fascinated with the possibilities of figuration; for me these figures were hollow shells. I combined them with the tools from another website that offered human gestures. They had a range of motions that were popular at a certain moment in time, like zombie movements, or particular dance movements. They somehow captured the imagination, a tension at this point in time.

In the beginning the work was a montage of forms and movements which had no possible correlation with each other. I liked to play putting the movements of a zombie in the body of a child or a robot. Again, I related it with the humanist meaning of the John Donne poem almost in a ironic way, which became another layer. The poem talked about human connections, but it was spoken by this non-human digital figures with these very complicated origins.

We can find this blend of real and mythological figures also in one of your most celebrated works: *Utama - Every Name In History Is I*, which focuses on Singapore's narrative. You often pointed out how historical and mythological figures always serve a need for the present, in contemporary times. How did you articulated this in *Utama* versus *No Man II*?

A lot of works I'm doing today have lines or threads that came from *Utama*, which was more or less my first exhibition, the very first film I made. Compared to *No Man II*, *Utama* had a direct relationship to Singaporean history, whereas *No Man II* stems from this more undefined, global imaginary. At the same time I always saw all the figures that appear in *Utama* as hollow shells. The difference is that all the historical figures appearing in *Utama* were all performed, or acted, or embodied by the same person, who is actually my friend, Singaporean sound artist Zul Mahmod. It was one body that could manifest different identities, so it was hollow.

That has a direct relationship with *No Man II* where all these figures are literally digital hollow shells. They can be used, augmented or possessed for different meanings. My attitude towards human figures in my work, is to think about them as puppets that can be manipulated in different ways. This logics of figuration extends for most of my work and for myself as well. I'm talking about a certain kind of emptiness that is always part of my thinking in relation to figures that appears in my film or videos. That's why I work with non-actors, because then they are more blank. They don't act, they don't dramatize.



Ho Tzu Nyen, *Utama: Every Name in History is I*. Singapore, 2003, 23min,

Color, Digital File.

Does your fascination with the idea of emptiness comes from a personal place for you?

These figures being empty is how I see myself, a figure which is sort of empty. I can transform by working with other people. It's a natural process for me. It's my perception of human subjectivity. I don't have a great faith in my own interior being, I can see I'm already a combination of different people into me as a daily occurrence. I don't mean only through interactions, in fact I'm already always in modification even when I'm not interacting with anyone, every second I'm modifying in time.

You said that most of your inspiration comes from reading, which is a solitary activity. Does this then becomes collective through the process and the themes that you represent?

Yes, I plan alone first and then I work with others, which I really enjoy because of course, I really enjoy human company. However, while reading is physically solitary, mentally you are always in a good company. A book is already the presence of someone else, and every book is made of many other books. Every one is tied to a literature that came before it, just like every philosophical book is engaged with a number of other philosophical traditions. When you open a book you feel you are with a multiplicity of others.

[Ho Tzu Nyen: No Man II](#)

Potsdamer Straße 63 Berlin, 10785, Germany

Now – October 21, 2017

About the artist

Ho Tzu Nyen's artistic practice, which primarily includes film and multichannel installations, explores the construction of historical narratives through images and events such as documentary, theater, art, philosophy, and archival materials. The layers of appropriated and original visual materials converge into complicated meditations on topics such as colonialism in his native Singapore, religion, and even abstract ruminations on concepts such as the cloud. Environments and site responsiveness are also important parts of his work, a recognition of the way a work's context can alter one's viewing experience. Singapore's representative at the 2011 Venice Biennale, Nyen has also participated in the São Paulo Biennial and the Cannes and Sundance film festivals.

Naima Morelli is an art writer and curator with a focus on contemporary art from the Asia Pacific region. She has written for ArtsHub, Art Monthly Australia, Art to Part of Culture and Escape Magazine, among others, and she is the author of "Arte Contemporanea in Indonesia, un'introduzione" a book focused on the development of contemporary art in Indonesia. As a curator, her practice revolves around creating meaningful connections between Asia, Europe and Australia.

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