

Gerald Leow - Sacred in the Profane and Profanity in the Sacred | COBO Social

cobosocial.com Updated Jan 12th, 2018

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Gerald Leow, Divine 2, 2017. A Pair of Digital Archival Print, 56 3/10 × 42 1/10 in, 143 × 107 cm, Editions 1-2 + OAP.



Gerald Leow, Sleep , 2017. Digital Archival Print, 11 × 14 3/5 in, 28 × 37 cm. Courtesy of the artist & Chan+Hori.





Installation View of I am Time Grown Old To Destroy the World at Chan+Hori.Courtesy of the artist & Chan+Hori.



Gerald Leow, Slayer, 2011. Courtesy of the artist & Chan+Hori.



Installation View of I am Time Grown Old To Destroy the World at Chan+Hori.Courtesy of the artist & Chan+Hori.



Gerald Leow, Mat Rock, 2011. Courtesy of the artist & Chan+Hori.





Gerald Leow, *Divine 2*, 2017. A Pair of Digital Archival Print, 56 3/10 × 42 1/10 in, 143 × 107 cm. Courtesy of the artist & Chan+Hori.



Gerald Leow, *Cribs*, 2015. Courtesy of the artist.



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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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Naima Morelli speaks with Gerald Leow about his latest series of work, exhibited at Chan+Hori this June.

TEXTS: Naima Morelli

IMAGES: Courtesy of the artist & Chan+Hori.



Gerald Leow, Sleep , 2017. Digital Archival Print, 11 × 14 3/5 in, 28 × 37 cm. Courtesy of the artist & Chan+Hori.

Let's be honest. Although the reason why most of us arrived to art – whether we are collectors, curators, art lovers or writers – it is mostly because of passion. But in order to expand your viewpoint, we must also make an effort to understand something that is far from our sensitivity, take a step back and also take things which you are not necessarily in love with into consideration. Every now and then though, a show happens, an artist presents work that make us jump out from our detached contemplation, exquisitely intellectual appreciation of art and get right into a state of total enthusiasm and excitement.

That is the case for me with the work of Singaporean artist Gerald Leow. His work is very near to everything that I consider meaningful, enticing and attractive about the world. His work is a portal into cultures, aesthetics and symbology from all times, drawing on their commonalities.

Connecting something very old and mysterious to something very new and apparently mundane is like casting a spell. This spell somehow clears up our thinking rigid categories and reveals an underlying reality where everything is ultimately connected. The objects invested with this spell are the works that the artist creates. You can put it on your shelves, and every time we look at them, you are drawn into the beautiful ambiguity of reality.



Installation View of I am Time Grown Old To Destroy the World at Chan+Hori. Courtesy of the artist & Chan+Hori.

The first time I met the artist, a laidback, reserved and frank guy, I sat at the table of a Singaporean hawker centre where he decided to have our interview. He didn't even had the chance to speak that. barely containing my enthusiasm

and letting go of any semblance of professionalism, I told him: “You know, I don’t usually say that to artists that I interview, but your work is *freaking awesome!*”

The best part is that his work keeps on getting better and better. His latest solo show called “I am Time Grown Old To Destroy the World” was on June of this year at the Singaporean gallery Chan+Hori, curated by Khai Hori. In the show we could find his recurrent interest for anthropology, ancient mythology and metal fonts. His art keeps on speaking a postmodern language and it handles with depth.

“In the past, I used to be interested in this idea of authenticity and culture, which probably is what ones does when assessing one’s identity, especially in a world where culture is so fluid today. But one thing I realise now is that, my interest on a deeper level wasn’t so much about what is the definition of authenticity. I had resolved that quite early on. It is rather about the transgressions between what is permissible within a culture and what isn’t. It’s actually the difference between the sacred and the profane.”



Gerald Leow, *Slayer*, 2011. Courtesy of the artist & Chan+Hori.

From the Chan+Hori show I could see how the artist had evolved his way of working from his previous body of work, comprising of traditional house realized with the structure of metal font, or Shiva statues dancing the destruction dance, juxtaposed to the logo of the metal band Slayer.

“The Shiva is such a bastard work,” told me the artist back in 2015. “Actually people think the Shiva is a sacrilegious work, but it’s not. Shiva is the destroyer, so it’s so funny we have the same concepts in two different cultures. I changed the font and then it becomes something evil. The idea of slayer, this idea of good and evil, is a very Christian, like the concept of the devil. There isn’t in Hinduism. In this you can’t draw parallels with Shiva the destroyer. It’s two different universes which ended up producing a similar end result. You can compare them and put them together. For example, in your thunder earring... ” he pointed out to my big yellow lighting bolt earring, “...I see Judas Priest. You can talk about it as a sculpture, and also an earring. It’s how we choose to talk about it. And that’s the spirit of good art.”

Gerald’s studies in sociology heavily influenced his way of looking at the work: “I did only three years in social science, but it gave me a very good tool box. The way of thinking and understanding concepts, it helped me in understanding art theories. In social science there is theory but there is also field work. I’m addicted to learning. For me there is no difference between learning theory and learning with my hands.”





Installation View of I am Time Grown Old To Destroy the World at Chan+Hori. Courtesy of the artist & Chan+Hori.

In June you had your first solo show in your own country. Do you look at it as a moment of maturation in your artistic path?

I have done a previous solo in, but this show at Chan+Hori was the first in Singapore. I think this show was different from the previous because for this show I had the opportunity to create solely for it, so I was able to tie a lot of ideas down, which was something I have never done before. And also, now I'm in a much better head space too. I'm also more financially sound with less studio rent to pay, so I was actually able to afford to make these works. It requires money to act on ideas.

Maybe one can see it as a maturation, though I'm not too certain myself, since I've had these ideas in my head for a number of years already. They were just not organised in this manner. However, as the show developed, I think my approach gradually changed.

In the sculptures you used the aggressive forms of Judas Priest's band logo and mixed it with shapes reminiscent of a reclining Buddha or Hindu gods. How did you start conceiving the works for the show and did you have specific visual references?

Some of the forms were first sketched in my head, then on paper, as well as on the computer. Then gradually, as some forms stuck, I finally worked with the shapes cut in steel in the studio. This is the most fun part. Nothing beats this tactile process, in some way sketching is to save money and minimise wastage. I didn't have specific references, I simply used purely symbolic standard forms of idols or figurines. Visual references such as the reclining Buddha I think are second nature since anyone with a reasonable knowledge of art history would have these forms floating in their head. So much of our vision is anthropomorphic, which I guess is the most interesting part in dealing with abstraction, both for the artist and the viewer. I chose to work with a colour changing automotive paint for most of the sculptures to express this idea of camouflage and illusion. Not all that glitters is gold.



Gerald Leow, Mat Rock, 2011. Courtesy of the artist & Chan+Hori.

The title 'I am time grown old to destroy the world' is of course a sentence by J Robert Oppenheimer after he witnessed the first detonation of a nuclear weapon in the US in 1945. What aspects of this anecdote attracted you?

The poetry of that line struck me when I first read the Bhagavad Gita, it was a line that Krishna uttered when asked by Arjuna to reveal his true form. I like how in that one line, the author is able to express both the soft and violent aspect of destruction. Much like I would imagine when Oppenheimer saw that

first detonation, the violence of the mushroom cloud within a space of silence and light.

Even though Oppenheimer was not an Hindu, it seems that his interest in this mythology was part of his mental framework for making sense of his actions. In the light of this, how does ancient Hindu mythology is relevant to today's society?

He was a scholar of Sanskrit, and read the Gita not just as mythology but as a treatise in philosophy. I like this approach because I think when we don't get hung up on the cultural aspects, or the period specific nuances, but we can appreciate the wisdom in the teaching as it is. Hinduism is a worldly philosophy, one that doesn't shun away from talking about war, yet is infinitely concerned about the inner peace of the individual. It is a science of the mind and also the body, so if you ask me how is relevant it is today I would say that it is very much so in the same way as reading a stoic philosopher like Epictetus is today.

Another common translation of the sentence is "Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds", why did you prefer the version: "I Am Time Grown Old To Destroy The World"? Does the work in the show have a relation with the idea of time?

There are a few translations of the text, I happen to prefer J.A.B van Buitinen's version which is the most poetic in my opinion. Everyone else tries to objectively translate, but I prefer a bit of artistic licence in translation. I like how in Indian philosophy, they speak of this concept of time as the destroyer of all things, in the Mahabharata they say "time cooks all beings". In the show, the image of the nude youthful body to me represents an image of the passing of time, in the same way as the rust on the steel sculptures.



Gerald Leow, Divine 2, 2017. A Pair of Digital Archival Print, 56 3/10 × 42 1/10 in, 143 × 107 cm. Courtesy of the artist & Chan+Hori.

For the show you collaborated with Ivanho Harlim. I know you guys have been friends for a long time. Were there any challenges in the process combining your two languages together?

Yep we have, and we have collaborated in his field of fashion photography before, though the show was the first time we have worked on a project on contemporary art together. The process was rather smooth, I think because we are aware of the differences in each of our languages but we are also aware of the singularity of the message to be expressed. It's really an exercise in translation. What's important is a mutual respect for each of our languages, and an understanding of how both languages work. We need not be able to speak it, but we need to understand how it works.

The duality between the spirit and flesh is also another strong element of the show. What can the modern language of fashion say about this ancient paradigm?

I think for me what fashion thinks about this is less important than how fashion expresses this. I cannot speak for fashion and my interest lies in how the language of fashion expresses this idea, which is shown in the images Ivanho and me produced. Some images of a nude are juxtaposed with the same model painted in blue glitter, as a representation of the divine. Others

are of the model in yogic type poses but are actually BDSM slave poses. We decided to produce the images in a classic studio style, to keep very much to the language of fashion photography.

My interest in using fashion for this show is also as a representation of the craft of image making. Not just on the level of photography and film, magazines, but also the idea of creating an image of a person. I thought it would be interesting to contrast it with the world of the material, of object. And at the end we cannot say that the image is sacred and material is profane or vice versa, because there is the sacred in the profane and also profanity within the sacred.

What projects are you currently working on, and do you have any new show coming up?

I'm working on a new large sculpture for Singapore Art Museum which will open during Singapore Art week in January. It's a continuation of the work I showed at the Palais de Tokyo a few years back. It will be a sculpture in the form of a traditional rice granary that people can rest in on the lawn of the museum. No new show at the moment, but getting quite fired to start on new works because I've moved to a larger studio, so possibilities abound!



Gerald Leow, Cribs, 2015. Courtesy of the artist.

[Harvest by Gerald Leow](#)

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About the artist



Gerald Leow uses found objects from the cultural landscape and reworks them to shed light on the problematic nature of authenticity, culture & identity. His interests include anthropology and the study of material cultures. Gerald was included in The Singapore Show: Future Proof at the Singapore Art Museum at 8Q (Singapore) 2010, and is currently The Substation's Associate Artist for 2014.

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,

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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