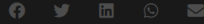


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# How Ming Wong's Wayang Spaceship blends traditional performances and science fiction



## Latest Articles



Review: Ming Wong's Wayang Spaceship

After much running around for the super-busy Singapore Art Week (SAW), I finally exited the warehouse hosting the Singapore Art Museum (SAM) in Tanjong Pagar Distripark. As the vision of the historic port opened in front of me, I sat exhausted on a chair in front of an empty stage. It was roughly 7 pm, and it was quiet, dusking.

inside. It must have been there for one of those pop-up events for SAW, I absently thought. I turned my attention towards the sun setting over on the commercial harbour: large containers, huge machinery, and tower cranes, so emblematic of the port city of Singapore.

Lulled by these idle reflections, I closed my eyes for a moment.

When I opened them again, the stage had been activated. Whoa! Colourful, stroboscopic lights flashing. Music blaring. Multiple screens projecting images that looked like they were transmitted from outer space. The stage suddenly appeared completely different, looking like a performative stage, where a Chinese theatre performance was taking place. I was witnessing the *Wayang Spaceship* come to life.



Installation view of Ming Wong's *Wayang Spaceship*, as part of SAM's The Everyday Museum, 2022; image courtesy of Singapore Art Museum.

## An opera bridging time and space

Of course, the fact that I was resting in front of the installation by chance is just a literary device for the sake of this article. I was purposely there. I knew that Singaporean artist Ming Wong's art installation would activate at 7 pm every day in front of SAM. But I figured how magical it would have been to be surprised by the installation's sudden activation.



Detail view of Ming Wong's *Wayang Spaceship* when it's activated in the evening, as part of SAM's The Everyday Museum, 2022; image courtesy of Singapore Art Museum.

I mostly knew the artist for his re-interpretations of iconic films and performances of classic cinema in his video installations, which often featured himself taking up the roles of different characters.

Having represented Singapore at the Venice Biennale in 2009, and with works currently on display at the Tate Modern and the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City, Wong is definitely a key Singaporean artist of his generation. He is finely attuned to some of the most relevant themes in contemporary art, such as identity and personal narratives, multiculturalism, keeping traditions alive in the contemporary world, and the idea of "authenticity."

The interests of the Berlin-based Singaporean are expansive, and he creates unexpected parallels between the leitmotifs of the sci-fi genre and the tropes of Cantonese Opera. Wong became interested in Cantonese Opera as it was something he grew up with. He began researching the genre by investigating its modernisation in the 20th century, its cinematic transformations, and its relationship with the development of science fiction in the Chinese-speaking world.

Before *Wayang Spaceship*, he explored these themes in other works such as *Windows on The World (Parts 1 & 2)* (2014), *Blast off into the Sinosphere* (2014), and *Scenography for a Chinese Science Fiction Opera* (2015).

## Recreating the traditional wayang experience

The *Wayang Spaceship* is really a culmination of his research, taking the shape of a collaborative artwork, as the artist worked with a network of artists and artisans, including master stage-builder Lee Beng Seng, architect Randy Chan from the studio Zarch Collaboratives, and artist Liam Morgan.

For the work, Wong incorporated a combination of materials such as timber poles and planks from maritime Southeast Asia. The stage's mirror-reflective surfaces were developed ingeniously using dichroic film and polythene sheeting, which are commonly used in the agricultural industry. On specific dates, the stage is activated by live performances by voice artists who are trained in traditional vocal techniques.

"In the daytime, the stage is asleep. It's all just mirrors; it reflects the surroundings, it almost disappears," explained Wong during his talk at SAM. "But once the sun comes down, sound, light and moving images activate the stage, which becomes a magical space."







Installation view of Ming Wong's *Wayang Spaceship*, as part of SAM's The Everyday Museum, 2022. Look at how unassuming it appears during the day before it is activated! Image courtesy of Singapore Art Museum.

He noted that it was important for him to have the work activate at a particular time of the day, and to have a crowd gather like in traditional Wayang shows:

*"It is reminiscent of the days when I would go and watch the Wayang, with people coming and going, as well as those who were specifically waiting there for the show to begin when the sun came down."*

The atmosphere of the spectacular scenography recalls one of Wong's dearest cinematic references, Stanley Kubrick's seminal *2001: A Space Odyssey*, as well as sci-fi cult favourite, Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris*, which centres on the theme of memory. The protagonist of Wong's sci-fi Chinese opera is a scholar-warrior, an alter-ego of the artist, who time-travels through the realms of consciousness, encountering memories of the past, present, and future.



Ming Wong, moving image stills from the *Wayang Spaceship*, 2022. Courtesy of the artist.

### Bringing traditions into the future

Accompanying the *Wayang Spaceship* at SAM was Ota Fine Arts' exhibition *Ming Wong: Pictures from the Wayang Spaceship* in Gillman Barracks, which left me quite taken aback. The show included a series of collages that were created in conjunction with the development and "landing" of the *Wayang Spaceship* at SAM, and are also used as part of the Spaceship's activations.



Installation view of *Ming Wong: Pictures from the Wayang Spaceship*, Ota Fine Arts, Singapore. Image courtesy of Ota Fine Arts.

The artist started creating the images from found photographs of Wayang actors from Singapore and Malaysia from the 1950s-70s. He associated these images with illustrations of Soviet space exploration and science fiction from the same period, which he sourced from Ukrainian booksellers. Wong also added layers of Chinese brush paintings and dichroic film that change colour at different angles.



Detail of one of Wong's collage works on display at *Ming Wong: Pictures from the Wayang Spaceship* at Ota Fine Arts, Singapore. Image courtesy of Ota Fine Arts.

### Drawing on science fiction

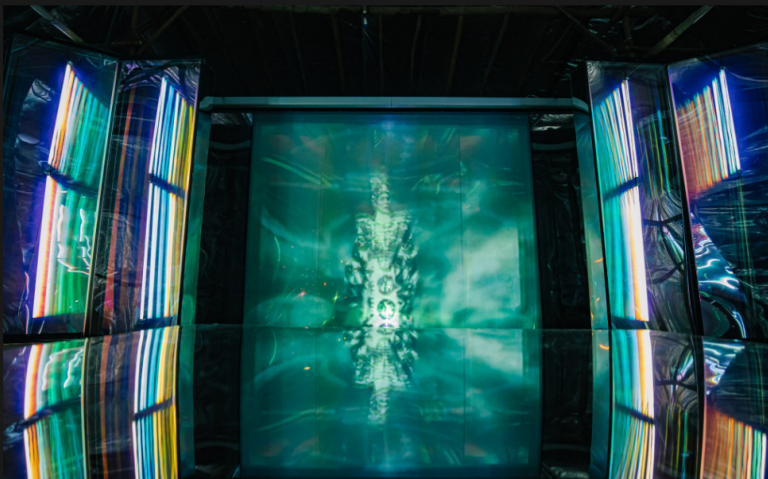
"Does technology drive history?" is the question that Wong deliberately tries to answer in this new work, as he stages fictional means of transport to travel across space and depicts imaginative futuristic weapons. These are not simple props, but rather technologies that can modify our behaviour, as we can already observe with our cell phones.

Indeed, it's common in the sci-fi genre to have new technology that builds on the base of something old and traditional. Think about the Jedi in *Star Wars*, who access the ancestral, all-encompassing Force guiding the universe, or even the soundtrack to the classic Japanese animated cyberpunk movie *Akira*, which has a remix of Indonesian Gamelan music.



These are all symbols for the most pressing issue of today: how can we integrate technology into our everyday lives, without becoming controlled by machines? The way we do that is to have the human spirit, the "Ghost in a Shell", as another sci-fi movie would have it. We want humans and their values to still have control and jurisdiction over technology.

As always the case with Wong's oeuvre, *Wayang Spaceship* can be read on multiple layers. There is a gender-bender element, which has always been present in traditional Cantonese opera performances. Having male actors perform female roles and vice versa is a common practice, creating an interesting interplay between the actor's actual gender, and the one that the actor adopts on stage, spurring reflection on identity in the viewers.







Detail view of Ming Wong's *Wayang Spaceship*, as part of SAM's The Everyday Museum, 2022; image courtesy of Singapore Art Museum.

This is further stressed in Wong's characters' behaviour and looks, something he has always liked to play with in his work on iconic films. We can find this in the costumes, attitudes, and makeup of the *Wayang Spaceship* characters, but this time, this element of traditional performance expresses itself in an unusual sci-fi context.

The location of the *Wayang Spaceship*'s stage in front of the port is also thought-provoking. If the sea roads were, in the past, the primary routes where exchanges of people and goods took place, now we look to the galaxy as the new frontier — as imagined by sci-fi. This is ever so relevant to an island whose culture has been shaped by migration and contemporary technology.



Installation view of Ming Wong's *Wayang Spaceship*, as part of SAM's The Everyday Museum, 2022; image courtesy of Singapore Art Museum.

Walking away from Tanjong Pagar, inspired by this larger-than-life narrative on the infinity of the universe, I was left with the impression that what I saw wasn't just an individual hero's journey. Instead, a much wider metaphor for what I imagine humanity will go through, as we move forward with technological and space explorations, while still remaining human at our core. A big claim, yes, but as I jumped onto the next opening, I allowed Wong's stroboscopic images to linger in my consciousness.

*Wayang Spaceship* is located at Container Bay, Rear Entrance of SAM at Tanjong Pagar Distripark and will be on display until 31 December 2023. [Click here](#) for more details and opening hours.

Ming Wong: Pictures from the *Wayang Spaceship* is on show at Ota Fine Arts until 26 February 2023.

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