

Singapore Art Museum
Monash University Gallery

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Synthetic Materials, Memory and Ephemerality

Rapport: eight artists from Singapore and Australia is an exhibition exploring notions of symmetry and exchange, identity and culture. By placing art works from Singapore and Australia side by side, *Rapport* seeks to set up a critical dialogue between practices that emanate from two different environments. *Rapport* is co-curated, a collaboration which has encouraged shared decision making and a synthesis of ideas and thoughts. Exhibited in both Singapore and Australia, *Rapport* is a cultural project marking a new partnership between international institutions, artists and cultural workers.

The exhibition consists predominantly of art works by younger artists who are working across media from photography to found objects, inflatables to sculpture. The resulting installations negotiate personal issues such as childhood, coupling, materiality and spirituality that are pertinent to each artist's own cultural background. While this particular group of artists have produced individual works for *Rapport*, three themes emerge as threads binding the various components of the exhibition – synthetic materials, memory and ephemerality.

Synthetic Materials

...the principle of commodity fetishism, the domination of society by "intangible as well as tangible things," which reaches its absolute fulfilment in the spectacle, where the tangible world is replaced by a selection of images which exist above it...¹

Hany Armanious, Christopher Langton and Matthew Ngui utilise synthetic materials such as PVC, vinyl and plastic. Formed by industrial methods, these materials are manipulated in order to reveal a preoccupation with popular culture, advertising and the everyday. The resulting visual spectacles take their cues from video games (Armanious), information technologies (Langton) and films (Ngui), sources based in the consumer cultures that dominate our lives.

Hany Armanious' strange totems of various lengths are carved out of plastic pipes to form concave and convex shapes. Like fragile spears, they lean precariously against the gallery wall recalling indigenous sculpture. Tapered to a fine point, the elegant forms are denied the robust and sturdy

quality of totemic sculpture. Instead, they are transformed out of a synthetic material, a base product. Various colours of plastic and different sizes make up a group of contemporary carvings or synthetic relics.

His vinyl wall drawing of thin waves marks out a continuous pattern of narrow black adhesive strips onto the wall. Armanious employs vinyl tape, an everyday material, that is rolled across the gallery walls. While like a mural, the work has a legacy in the bar code and conduit. The wavering bands recall Op Art's delight in the optical but acknowledges the prominence of the stripe in high modernist abstraction. The stripe, however, has now been relegated to a synthetic wall drawing of continuous, wobbly waves. Armanious states that the wave refers to a kind of digital language, an encoded series of lines. Moreover, flowing streams frequently appear in video games in which the player is required to negotiate floating logs in order to advance to the next stage of the game. A visual game, *Untitled work* is at once shiny, dazzling and artificial.

Christopher Langton's giant inflatable children overwhelm the viewer with their scale and multiplicity. Like oversized consumer items, the sculptures might be sinister toys or bizarre souvenirs, conveying perverse psychological states through their relationship with the viewer. Taking their cue from advertising, Langton manipulates magnification to captivate an audience with a humorous and threatening device. Langton transforms advertising techniques such as scale and colour within the gallery context to produce an entertaining group.

Brat Pack suggests youth, camaraderie and arrogance. Menacing yet amusing, these cartoon characters fill the gallery space in absurd ways. Two boys and two girls sit defiantly, gesturing provocatively in order to assert their respective roles in society. By acting out and role playing, these gigantic figures stridently take up socially prescribed positions with tenacity and petulance. The result is a dominating spectacle of childlike couples who are perched confidently yet uneasily in the gallery.

Like Langton, Matthew Ngui is interested in toys but in relation to food and sculpture. These three elements are playfully combined in *Food, Toys and Sculpture*. Ngui's work aims to cross cultural boundaries whereby the interpretation of the installation changes depending on the audience. Ngui deals with the perception and generation of meaning in his work. As an artist based in Perth, Australia and Singapore, Ngui negotiates the issues and contextual changes of meanings through notions of cultural difference.

The nature of food in relation to the kitchen, labour/gender stereotyping and as a commodity is explored in Ngui's recent work. Food is looked upon as an aesthetic expression in terms of colour, taste, tension, texture, size and function. In this multi-media installation, a still from Ang Lee's film is used because of its preoccupation with food and how that relates to the desires of the Chinese culture. In the Chinese tradition, the meanings of a culture are affirmed and values of the elders are often passed down to the next generation at a dining table.

Working through various issues and media, the artist's focus is constantly shifting. The layering of relationships – food and toys, time and sound, movement, space and placement, installation and the human body – is constantly shifting to create dynamic relationships. Thus, the medium for the work is best described as time-based installation. Using bits of film, slide sequences and sound, aspects of the installation are presented differently over short spans of time. This, along with illusory timber constructions, photographs and drawings, makes up a multifaceted installation. The audience then, in *Food, Toys and Sculpture*, is invited to partake in the work in order to understand the meaning of the installation which, after all, is different for each individual.

Memory

What, then, is time?...It might be correct to say that there are three times, a present of past things, a present of present things, and a present of future things...The present of past things is the memory; the present of present things is direct perception; and the present of future things is expectation.²

Amanda Heng's work frequently stretches across cultural boundaries in order to extend her insight into an alternative consciousness. Like Ngui, Heng has spent a period of time in Perth undertaking post-graduate studies. Working across cultures, Heng attempts to negotiate a space for herself within certain social boundaries. Performance is intimately linked to her visual practice as she often works collaboratively to produce provocative installations involving movement, sound, objects and words.

In *Another Woman*, Heng shows us that communication reaches far beyond language as she explores the deep bond, based on her own experience, between mother and daughter. Personal boundaries are negotiated with photographs that display this relationship in various positions. The installation reveals a matriarchal bond of closeness between women

through different poses suggesting the fluid nature of relationships. Heng's interest in art and life, especially familial relationships, transforms a daily reality into a visual installation. Intimacy appears in a tender embrace between mother and daughter, remembering the past and the future. In doing so, she reclaims and articulates the connection between women establishing a rapport with gender.

Carolyn Eskdale's enclosed muslin room of draped furnishings is like an entombed white cube. The furniture is from the home in which she was raised, now wrapped and sealed as a childhood memory and shrouded in an opaque room of white muslin. Devoid of occupants, untitled room is a psychological space, inaccessible and locked away in time. Her chamber of gauze walls is an environment of palpable surfaces and textures metaphorically containing a domestic interior of memories. This room within a room evokes a melancholy entombment as if the past has been banished to an impenetrable vault of sheer fabric, the furniture only visible through the gossamer walls.

Together with her fastidious and meticulous drawings of fabric and tiles of surfaces she recalls as a young girl, Eskdale's work relays an interest in domestic objects and personal items. Memory and the past are inextricably entwined within the white chamber recalling a passage in Marcel Proust's *Swann's Way*:

The past is hidden, beyond the reach of the intellect, in some material object (in the sensation which that material object will give us) which we do not suspect. And as for that object, it depends on chance whether we come upon it or not before we ourselves must die.³

Nicola Loder's haunting grid of black and white photographs of children are at once powerful and melancholic. Loder has photographed a group of children in isolation, cropped and enlarged the images so that the children appear removed from their familial context. Like mug shots or passport photographs, these faces recall Roland Barthes' meditation on the impact of photography and the history of looking:

What the photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once: the photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially... I want a history of looking. For photography is the advent of myself as other: a cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity.⁴

Through the photograph, then, aspects of the self can be exposed. Printed in varied tones producing warm and cold accents, Loder's work is like a giant abstract canvas of various tonal shifts and gradations. Enchanting yet

overwhelming in volume, ordinary faces roughly reproduced appear as a consuming wall of photos. This is an interchangeable flood of pictures in which one recognises everyone and no one; these nameless children are random specimens or generic portrait photographs. Displayed within the format of a grid, the monumentality of the grid as a structure is combined with the innocence of children whose response is ambivalent. At once joyful and sad, rows of faces are laid out, overblown, elusive and temporary. A mood of stillness pervades this ghostly album of faces. Moreover, it is unclear what period the images are from as if their archival resonance is suspended in time.

Arranged in rows, Loder's children are isolated in various states of looking, smirking, staring, of jollity or seriousness, of loudness or gentleness, of introversion or extroversion; eyes gazing in different directions, sometimes closed. The focal point of all these fixed gazes – whether frontal, in profile, with their heads slightly tilted, their eyes turned towards or away from the camera – confronts the viewer. There are the plainly confident ones, the searching ones, and those who fall in between these two categories. There are those who thrust themselves out of the black-and-white plane of the film and there are the quiet, contemplative ones. The anonymity of these pictures is more striking than exaggerated individuality: an inventory of personalities, memories of lost childhoods.

Loder's grid of aerial photographs taken from a hot air balloon and inflated in size captures details of the Victorian countryside. Toned in blue, the photographs reveal different gradations of the landscape: a landscape which is scarred and obliterated, devoid of human life. Traditionally, the Australian landscape has been depicted as an untameable wilderness, however Loder's version is a generic, pasteurised landscape that is grided and ordered. Irrigation trenches, cattle paths and hedges stud her barren landscape, like objects in relief.

Ephemerality

Breaking the cycle of life into different stages, Salleh Japar presents a world in a state of crisis revealing a sense of life and its development relative to the decay of society. 'The societies that we live in seem to lose their sense of destiny... My works can be reduced to three interrelated concepts, revelation, unity and humanity, all of which constitute the balance of internal and external experience.'⁵ Salleh expresses the importance of symbols in his work – 'symbols are realities contained within the nature of things. It is through

symbols that one is awakened; it is through symbols that one is transformed and it is through symbols that one expresses.'⁶

In his installation *Untitled*, the symbol of the cradle can be seen to represent the fragility of human experience suspended in protective cocoons from the surrounding environment. The cradle can also be seen in a larger context as the staging point where renewal and evaluation take place in human development. Here they have been extended further to bear the attributes of the self discovery of life's journey. In the state of *Fana al bashariyyat* (the passing away of human character), the cradle 'carries' the person's own attributes and character while the coffins bear the passing away of the physical body: a state which seeks liberation of the self through the disintegration of the negatives.

The different sections of the installation address the multiple layers of thought and imagination, the use of varied types of materials like wood, tar and sand as well as light (or lack of it) and air (heat and cold) all create a memorable experience for the participant. *Untitled* is an extension of *Fana al bashariyyat* into the symbolism of the artist's social development and experiences which are deeply influenced by Islamic and Sufic traditions. Through his artworks, these traditions facilitate the search for the roots of the artist's own being to attain 'moments of intuition, imagination and inspiration, of pauses between things, of silence within the anxieties of this age.'⁷

In Baet Yeok Kuan's works, the conflict and harmony between modernity and tradition are apparent. The manner by which individuals recognise and identify things changes with time as well as with cultural differences. Baet is especially interested in exploring these differences in viewpoint so that disparate positions are able to 'meet each other.' The works *Body* and *Untitled* explore differences in perspectives on the human body through time and culture – East versus West.

In *Body*, the images of male and female figures are photographically transferred onto baking trays and hung on the wall directly underneath trays filled with water and containing images that allude to birth. The tension between the themes of gender and generation, of the old and new are softly but firmly communicated. The two installations represent two periods in the creative process – one conceived in 1992–4 and the other created in the actual gallery space of the exhibition. Though both works draw their impetus from the human form, the viewpoints presented differ with the passing of time.

Untitled is made of cast plaster formed from balloons and found objects. The collection of the iconic objects that make up this installation have a subtle intuitive logic that governs their scale, size and location. The choice of object never appears irrational and a sense of precision is conveyed in his work. The wall mounted sculptures form conventional reliefs, carefully placed to relate to and articulate the architectural spaces in which they are shown. They nestle in corners, hang to the ground and their particular contact with the wall invests them with a sense of weightlessness which allows them to float off the wall. The objects of cast plaster allude to various body parts through the size and placement of the forms relative to the body as a whole.

The audience is invited to share the sensations represented in Baet's work by coming to terms with the whole and the individual components, drawing from all the experiences portrayed therein. The quiet nature of the work belies the forceful, lingering ephemeral influence they have upon the viewer.

By establishing a rapport between cultures, *Rapport* presents works that are laden with spectacle, inscribed with memory, and infused with ephemerality.

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¹ Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, Black & Red, USA, 1983, no. 36.

² St. Augustine, *Confessions, Book IX*, Penguin Books, UK, 1961, pp. 263, 269.

³ Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, Volume One, Penguin Books, UK, 1984.

⁴ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, Vintage, UK, 1993, p. 4.

⁵ Artist's Statement, 1996.

⁶ Artist's quote, *5 Directions: recent artworks by five young Singapore artists*, exhibition catalogue, Takashimaya Art Gallery, Singapore, 1994, p. 8.

⁷ Artist's Statement, 1996.