

Tangled Unity: New Histories in Film and Video from Southeast Asia



Kiri Dalena (1975, Philippines)
Charles Lim (1973, Singapore)
Ho Tzu Nyen (1976, Singapore)
Ming Wong (1971, Singapore)
Nguyễn Trinh Thi (1973, Vietnam)
Tromarama (Indonesia)
Hsu Chia-Wei (1983, Taiwan)

If one were to ask, “Pacificaly, where is Southeast Asia?” a probable, if pedantic, response might be, “what specifically do you mean?” True, the initial question employs some creative grammar (and reveals general ignorance about global affairs), but it is not entirely incorrect in its invocation of the Pacific as an adverb. The region is predominantly maritime and easily pinpointed on a map, located as it is between China and Australia. The landforms that comprise it are positioned to see dawn before India, which lies further west. Its geography, mostly tropical, spans two hemispheres, cradled by Indonesia, whose major shores touch different oceans. Finding the “where” of Southeast Asia is a far less difficult procedure than discerning the “what” that defines it. The broad trends of recorded history trace a shallow overview insufficiently portraying the stories of occupation and conflict shaping life in its diverse countries. Convention, put simply, fails, prompting the need for voices as distinctly concerned with Southeast Asia as they are themselves Southeast Asian. Michael Janssen is pleased to present a selection of these voices for the 52nd edition of ART COLOGNE.

At first glance, the clever stop-motion animation and synchronized multi-channel installations by the Indonesian collective Tromarama seem lighthearted and amusing. Self-propelled porcelain tableware runs amok on sidewalk and sand in *Ting** (2008). Propinquity, made a decade later, features disembodied feet hopping into the extrinsic space beyond monitors, landing changed again and again. But it is the indexing of paint brushes, watch straps, mop handles and other instruments in *Belonging* (2017) that provides the clearest statement about objects, for each is laden with a human past. Expended labor is the oft ignored cost of manufacturing an orderly existence filled with tea cups and shoes.

The aura of the past takes on a spectral quality in Ho Tzu Nyen’s *No Man II* (2017). Fifty characters from Singaporean history, mythology, and internet pop culture are projected on mirrored glass, their digital bodies passing through foreground to background in slow rotation while wailing John Donne’s 1624 poem “Devotions upon Emergent Occasions—Meditation XVII.” The question of unity is at the core of *No Man II*, because if “No man is an island,” as the poem states, then how can such disparate entities find commonality in the most desperately strange circumstances? Applied geopolitically, an analogous question could be asked of Southeast Asia itself: what constitutes its unity beyond language, religion, and government?

For Ming Wong, identity blends on a multi-axis spectrum, along which he slides freely and with critical joy. Both *Four Malay Stories* (2005) and *Aku Akan Bertahan / I Will Survive* (2015) exemplify his metamorphic

abilities and consistent focus on the mutability of self. In the former, Wong performs sixteen separate roles in an homage to Malay director P. Ramlee, whose mid-century genre films promoted a social pluralism reflected in the stories they told. The equally complex *Aku Akan Bertahan / I Will Survive* (2015) parodies the “human versus nature” narrative by placing four, brightly-costumed figures at the ancient site of Jogjakarta. Lest one question their safety as bejeweled creatures in the wild, a rendition of Gloria Gaynor’s “I Will Survive” assures us of their strength and provides the soundtrack to which they also perform classical Javanese choreography...with a bit of hip hop and Indonesian pop added for good measure.

Nguyễn Trinh Thi likewise culls classic movies in the making of *Eleven Men* (2016). A collage essay at heart, its central figure and singular constant is the face of Nhu Quynh, one of Vietnam’s most famed actors, whose films are spliced together in a digest of career defining roles. Accompanying the sequences of appropriated cinema is a monologue adapted from Kafka’s short story, “Eleven Sons.” The result is a meditation on gender dynamics and the politics of love. Whether working with found media or gathering her own, Nguyễn is an excavator of meaning behind human interaction with others, their landscapes, and their spirituality. *Letters From Panduranga* (2015) follows two voices corresponding across opposite ends of Vietnam. They are allies in their respective searches for authentic heritage and confidantes in their dismay regarding its survival against modern industry and capital.

Industrial architecture with war-time significance is the motif by which Hsu Chia Wei explores forgotten histories of the era. *Drones, Frosted Bats and the Testimony of the Deceased* (2017) shares memories of a Japanese fuel plant located in Hsinchu, Taiwan. The four-channel installation layers the voices of former employees over footage of a drone exploring the plant’s ruined interior. Real-time edits performed by a computer tangle the network of information in a manner recalling the tangled legacy of Japanese colonialism in Taiwan. *Takasago* (2017) is concerned with similar themes. The Takasago International Corporation’s Hiratsuka Factory is the setting for a rendition of a Noh play sharing the company’s same proper name. The title of video, factory, and script is an obsolete term for Taiwan, and it links the unlikely components of this work. Through “Takasago,” time and place are inextricable due to the lasting ramifications of military occupation.

Charles Lim Yi Yong’s zone of interest falls between surf and turf. For over a decade he has surveyed the contours of Singapore’s edges with the skills of an Olympic sailor and the lens of an artist. His project, entitled *SEA STATE* (2005-2015), pointedly observes the various conditions that establish the boundaries of the island city-state, from a hardline wall in the ocean to the artificial extension of coastlines. *SEA STATE 6: capsizes* shows him repeatedly tipping and righting a sailboat in a self-imposed trial of human versus nature. *SEA STATE 0: all the lines flow out* contemplates the ecological dimensions of Singapore’s drainage infrastructures. Even in *finalsaba 4* (2018), water remains ubiquitous as a twilight shore frames ruminations about the history of art and interpretation in Southeast Asia.

So too does the image of water introduce us to *Gikan Sa Ngitngit Nga Kinailadman (From The Dark Depths)* (2017) by Kiri Dalena. Part cinematic poem, part documentary, this tribute to a drowned activist continues Dalena’s chronicle of human rights violations in the Philippines. The film opens with a woman plunging into a subaquatic field of red flags, one of which she selects for underwater choreography. Wielding the semaphore—a symbol of significant political connotation in the Philippines—she slices through her liquid environment with long arcs that terminate in solid stances of power. Upon concluding her routine, she propels herself upward, flag in hand, to break the surface and breathe freely again. Dalena’s films are as much the output of her art practice as they are a means of resistance to issues of injustice. Her perspective is rooted in her homeland but is globally attuned, and she asks the same of her viewers.

With the world stage in mind, the artists cited herein command the moving image in accordance with their own methods of decalcifying (and de-Westernizing) the past, inspecting authority, and celebrating identities suppressed by both. They work beyond the standard narrative to recalibrate our consciousness for a 21st century as rapidly changing as the societies from which they come and the swaths of roiling water that connect us all.

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