

Forging Identities

Anthropological concerns are rendered in theater films, paintings and sculpture



1

Rana Hamadeh

The Sleepwalkers, 2016, single-channel HD video: 30 min 30 sec.
Courtesy Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane.



2

Eyerool Darma

Portrait No. 8 (Si Komeng or The Colonial Puppet), 2016, from the "Moyang" series, 2015–, acrylic and charcoal on canvas and wood, 62 x 35 x 10 cm. Courtesy the artist and Yeo Workshop, Singapore.



3

Hilarie Hon

Go on a Voyage, 2016, acrylic and oil on canvas, 75 x 100 cm.
Courtesy the artist and Gallery Exit, Hong Kong.

Rana Hamadeh

NETHERLANDS

Activities once seen as extrinsic to art, such as critical theory, research and even curatorial practice itself, have shaped contemporary art of the last decade far more than art-making. An exemplar of this shift is Lebanon-born, Netherlands-based Rana Hamadeh, who has grouped her discursive-intensive practice under the rubric “Alien Encounters” since 2011. Bringing these intellectual activities together in baroque fashion, she has produced a diverse body of work that hybridizes installation formats and live performances with film and theater.

Her *The Big Board* or . . . ‘And before it falls, it is only reasonable to enjoy life a little.’ (2013–14), shown at Lisson Gallery, London, in the 2013 group show “The Magic of the State,” is a diagrammatic codex of her interests: a green cutting mat featured a diverse range of objects, texts and written concepts (such as “The Law,” “Quarantine,” “Theater”) connected by lines. Among these are bits of collected meteorites, as well as references to Sun Ra’s 1974 Afrofuturist film *Space Is the Place* and Achille Mbembe’s 2003 essay “Necropolitics.” With these references, Hamadeh connects theories of sovereignty and biopolitics to the refugees flowing out of Syria and North Africa in the early 2000s, and to the liberationist possibility of leaving the planet behind altogether—an extension of historian Dipesh Chakrabarty’s arguments in *Provincializing Europe* (2000). These objects and fragments form the basis of a 55-minute, scripted performance that Hamadeh delivers in person.

From using objects as props in *The Big Board*, Hamadeh developed a more performative modality using human actors and the conventions of staged theater. Her film *The Sleepwalkers* (2016), co-commissioned by Nottingham Contemporary (UK), The Showroom (London) and Institute of Modern Art (Brisbane), is based on the story of two Egyptian sisters who were accused of being serial killers in Alexandria, becoming international tabloid sensations in 1921, the year before their execution. The 30-minute film is staged like a play, written in a fragmented and self-referential style with a cabaret-noir-rococo aesthetic, accompanied by a dissonant electronic soundtrack. When shown in a gallery, it is exhibited alongside transparent screens, visually resembling Marcel Duchamp’s *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (*The Large Glass*) (1915–23). Fittingly for such an arcane universe, the work comes with its own illustrated glossary of terms and reference materials, leveling research and concept with aesthetic output.

HG MASTERS

Fyerool Darma

SINGAPORE

In a quiet corner of the Singapore Art Museum during the 2016 Singapore Biennale, two stark-white pedestals faced off with each other. One propped up the marble bust of Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles, while the other stood empty, save for a dedication plaque along the side that read: “Hussein Mua’zzam Shah (1776–1835).”

Those familiar with Singapore’s history will immediately recognize Raffles, a British statesman who is often attributed as the “founder” of the city-state. However, this historical narrative often buries Hussein Mua’zzam Shah, sultan of the Malaysian state Johor and Singapore from 1819 to 1824, who took equal part in laying the foundations of modern Singapore.

This installation, *The Most Mild Mannered Men* (2016), by 30-year-old Singaporean artist Fyerool Darma, reflects on how local figures have been written out of the mainstream history of the region. Excavating forgotten events and individuals that share his Malay heritage, Darma investigates in his practice how remnants of colonial presence still exist today, and how they continue to shape grand narratives.

This line of inquiry is also seen in Darma’s ongoing series of portraits entitled “Moyang” (2015–), the Malay word for “ancestors.” Selecting regional figures from the colonial era as his subjects, Darma directs attention back to these now-overlooked individuals. However, Darma has either masked over the faces with thick charcoal, or has only shown the lower half of the body, commenting on how the contributions of these figures have been obscured. Among Darma’s subjects is Ali Wallace, the Sarawak native assistant of the renowned British naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace, who was only later discovered to have played a significant role in the scientist’s findings of the Malay Archipelago.

The erasure of language in Darma’s work also points to the loss of alternative stories. This is revealed in “Shank” (2016), in which a series of works on paper and canvas features initially discernible text that becomes increasingly abstracted with strokes and scribbles in wax, oil and acrylic. For Darma, this gradual shift toward illegibility mirrors the process by which Singapore is losing touch with its national language, Bahasa Melayu.

In June, Darma will present his second solo exhibition at Singapore’s Yeo Workshop, and is currently experimenting with sound and video, expanding his research on buried legacies in Malay culture and the “historical amnesia” of a nation.

SYLVIA TSAI

Hilarie Hon

HONG KONG

Neon dream worlds contrast with dark colors in the ominous paintings of young Hong Kong artist Hilarie Hon. In a 2017 show at the city’s Gallery Exit, “Bloomy Gloomy Boom,” intense and nightmarish scenes portraying cartoonish characters and ghostly spirits were counterbalanced by playful smiley faces and party hats, revealing the artist’s conflicted perspectives on social interactions, the world and her immediate environment.

These paintings delicately balance the artist’s ambivalence toward life after she experienced temporary loss of sight in one eye in 2016. Hon, who at the time had just graduated with a BA in Visual Arts from Hong Kong Baptist University, had grimly considered the irony of blindness in her burgeoning painting career.

These mixed emotions are rendered on the canvas as figures on unknown journeys to new realms, such as in *Go on a Voyage* (2016). Here, two characters set off on a boat, their jovial expressions contrasting with the foreboding, dark blue waters that signify the unfamiliar. In *Hahaha* (2016), a blob-like, personified entity sits between two rocks in a body of water that is colored red. Hon reflects on the complicated notion of wanting to live on an island, yet being afraid of the sea.

The First Immigrant Landed on a Remote Island (2016) shows a lone figure in front of a neon pink forest, while *I Have Been Staying at My Studio for Too Long and I am Starting to Miss My Home I* (2016) depicts a yellow and pink house with comically drawn mouth, nose and eyes, surrounded by smiley face stickers that one might ordinarily see in a schoolbook. These scenarios present overtly joyous facades, yet fail to conceal an atmosphere of displacement and isolation.

This new series, similar to Hon’s previous paintings created in 2016, were also inspired by the work of Spanish romantic painter Francisco de Goya (1746–1828). Hon draws inspiration from Goya’s ability to capture the macabre and the satirical in the human condition. The artist’s practice is also rooted in existentialism; she describes life as “chasing after wind,” meaning actions are hollow and devoid of meaning. Painting, however, is a deeply personal activity for the artist, and is seen as a way to freeze time. In this sense, she is able to capture singular moments of sentiments on her canvases, such as cynicism and hope.

KATHERINE VOLK