

MAT/RAMLEE

/a solo exhibition by KHAIRUDDIN HORI

INTRODUCTION

In an essay I wrote for the catalogue for a previous exhibition by Khairuddin Hori, I commented that Khai was an artist who, while he seemed to be ‘around’ was also perceived as being ‘invisible’. Well-known and well-regarded in the independent visual arts community, he was unknown to galleries, collectors, museums and the Establishment of the arts scene. One possible reason for his status of being between visibility and invisibility could be the multi-disciplinary nature of his practice. He is a painter, installation artist, performance artist, and theatre director. Yet, across all these fields of practice, it is possible to identify key concerns that find their way into the artwork. First of all is the sheer delight in exploring the possibilities of each form, and going deep into the whys and wherefores of the form of expression: can the form contain and communicate what the artist wants to say – both about it, and about the world? Second, there is the sense of freedom that comes from refusing to be bound by categorization. Khai’s work often explores what is hidden beneath the surfaces of life in Singapore: the underground tensions between past and present, and identity formation. These were vividly expressed in his last exhibition *Us and Them and You*, a series of blown-up portraits of friends and contacts in the Malay community. Back in 2003, Khai initiated and curated *Berita Harian*, an exhibition of young Malay contemporary artists; the baton of this particular project has since been taken up by another young curator, Zaki Razak.

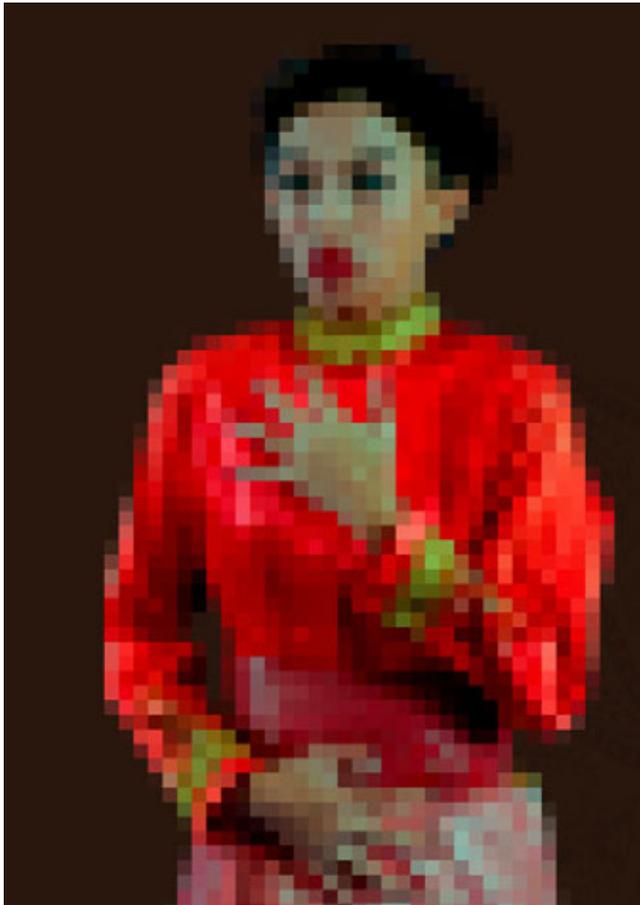
Another aspect of Khai’s practice that is related to the two aspects earlier mentioned, is how Khai’s creative impulses span beyond the making of artwork to the whole question of how to be an artist in today’s fast-changing world. An

inveterate collaborator who has traveled extensively and worked on projects in various countries with artists of different nationalities, Khai's concern about how to be an artist today led to another initiative in his multi-faceted career: the HAO Summit, a training, mentoring and fellowship programme for young artists, curators, and arts managers from the region. Khai pitched the idea to The Substation, where he was an Associate Artist, and as artistic co-director of the arts centre then I worked with Khai on the first iteration of HAO in 2008. In 2010, the second edition of HAO was presented with the collaboration of Villains.

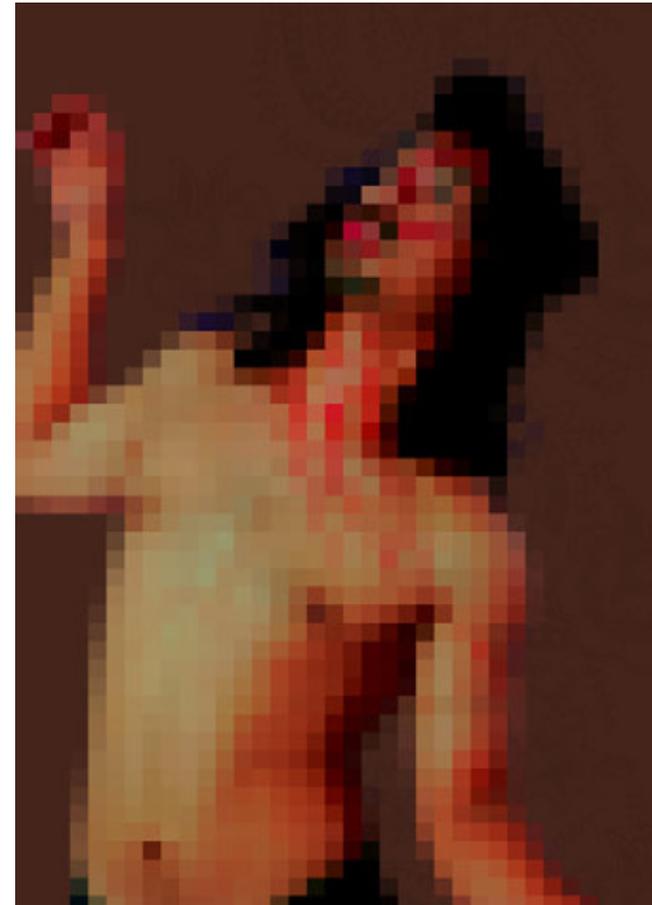
For Khai, being an artist is part of the artistic practice. This accounts for his variegated and indefatigable practice. Working with Khai over the past decade has been enriching, enjoyable and broadened my perspectives on art and art-making. I am glad to finally see this series of work (*Reconstructing Sentol* - which he did around the time of the first HAO Summit) finally in exhibition!

Audrey Wong

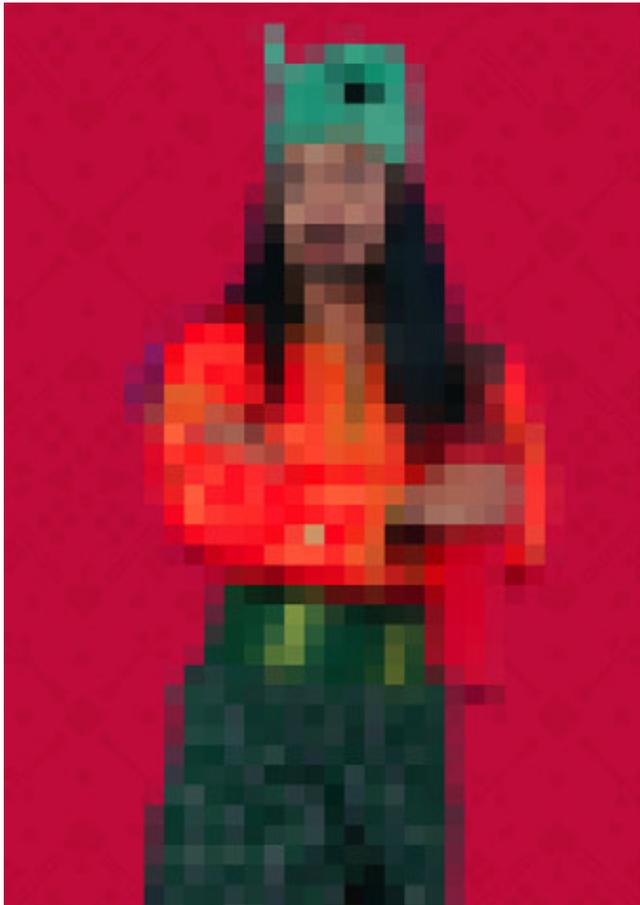
Nominated Member of Parliament and Programme Leader
MA Arts & Cultural Management Programme
LASALLE College of the Arts



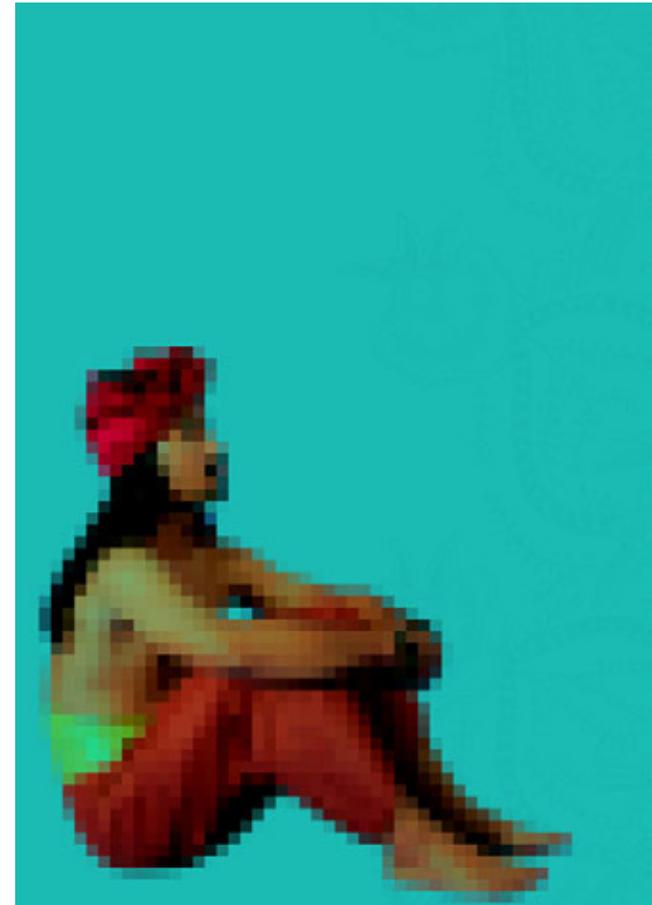
Semerah Padi Revisited
2005 - 2010 | Digital print on paper mounted on aluminum | 84 x 118cm | edition of 3



Semerah Padi Revisited
2005 - 2010 | Digital print on paper mounted on aluminum | 84 x 118cm | edition of 3



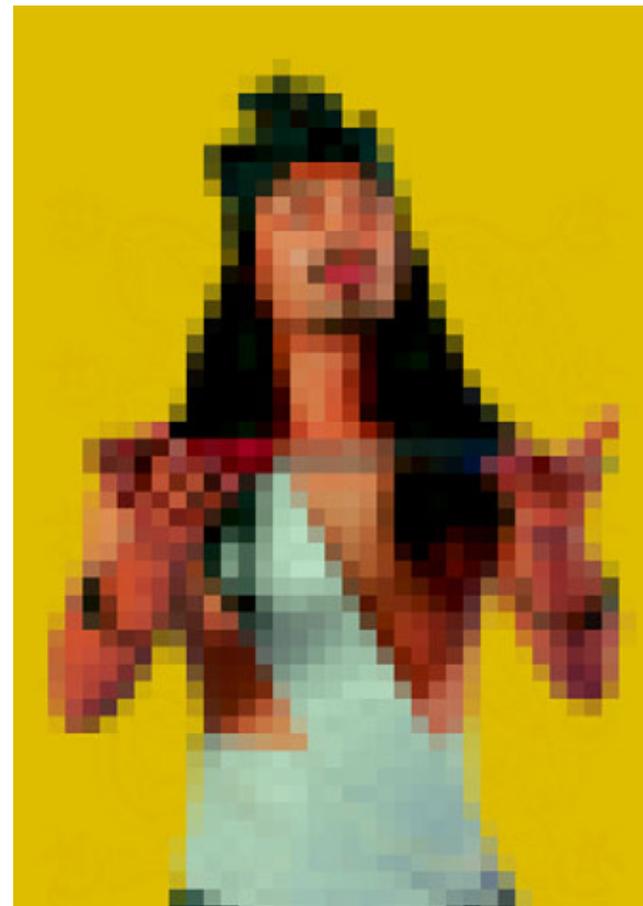
Semerah Padi Revisited
2005 - 2010 | Digital print on paper mounted on aluminum | 84 x 118cm | edition of 3



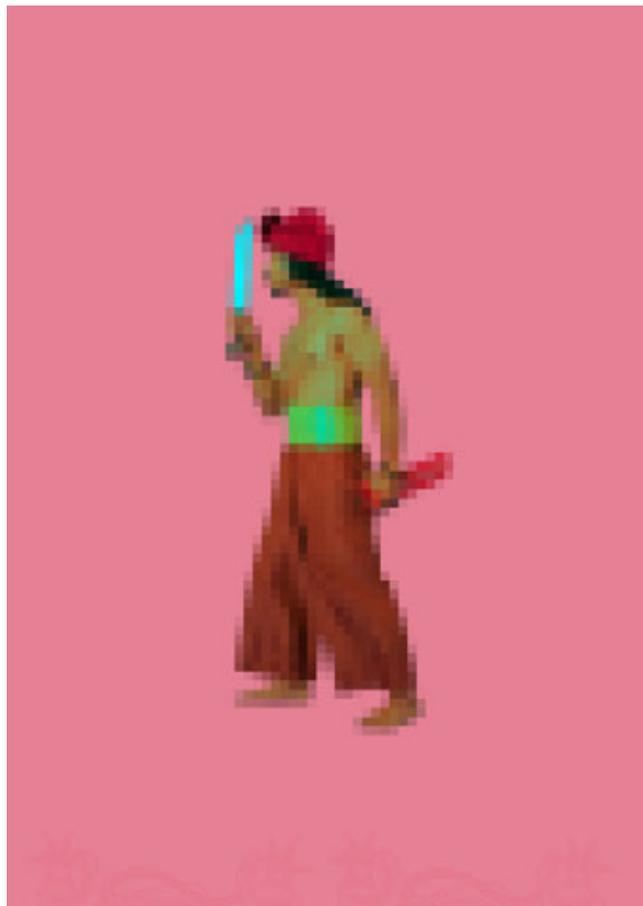
Semerah Padi Revisited
2005 - 2010 | Digital print on paper mounted on aluminum | 84 x 118cm | edition of 3



Semerah Padi Revisited
2005 - 2010 | Digital print on paper mounted on aluminum | 84 x 118cm | edition of 3



Semerah Padi Revisited
2005 - 2010 | Digital print on paper mounted on aluminum | 84 x 118cm | edition of 3



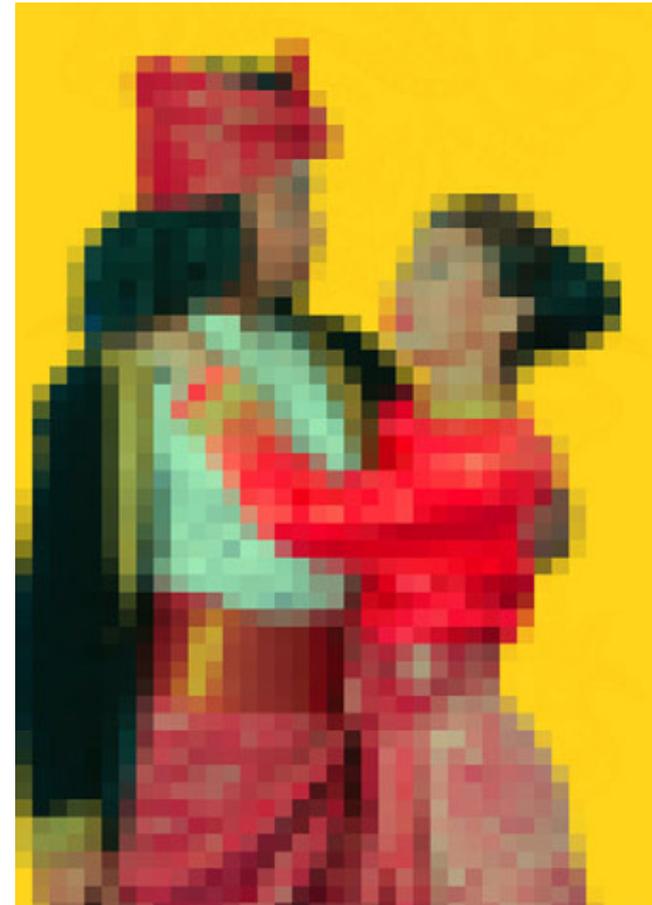
Semerah Padi Revisited
2005 - 2010 | Digital print on paper mounted on aluminum | 84 x 118cm | edition of 3



Semerah Padi Revisited
2005 - 2010 | Digital print on paper mounted on aluminum | 84 x 118cm | edition of 3



Semerah Padi Revisited
2005 - 2010 | Digital print on paper mounted on aluminum | 84 x 118cm | edition of 3



Semerah Padi Revisited
2005 - 2010 | Digital print on paper mounted on aluminum | 84 x 118cm | edition of 3

MAT RAMLEE: An appreciation, a look back

The role of Malay film, and its icons, is a complicated one in Singaporean art and culture in the twenty-first century due to the society's relationship and understanding of its past. Between 1940 and the early 1970s Singapore was home to film studios that produced works of art, entertainment and – often – unending silliness that is still appreciated beyond its own borders. The more than 250 films produced during that era still resonate in all aspects of society, with references appearing in song, language, and any other form of communication. Collectively, these films constitute one of the great texts produced in Singapore.

The complications related to these films lies in the politics and culture of separation. When Singapore became an independent nation in 1965, the role of Malay language film in the nation-state became an anomaly. Originally, these films were a vehicle for owners of theatres to have local product for their audiences in a period when Malay – as is still true – was the national language of Singapore and Malaya, and a tool for unifying disparate ethnic groups. Following separation, the Malay language, and its films, would be seconded as the society focused on English as a unifying tool of communication, and economic and security issues took precedent. It was also during this era that other forms of entertainment – principally television – made cinema going less popular.

Two studios produced almost all of the films created in Singapore between the 1940s and the early 1970s. The first studio, Malay Film Productions (MFP), was located on Jalan Ampas and was an offshoot of the Shaw Brothers' theatre

and amusement park business. MFP began production in 1940 and 1941 with eight films. Although it closed during the Japanese Occupation, production returned in 1947 and MFP dominated the market until the mid-1950s. By that time there were several other studios – such as Nusantara – operating, but the main competitor to emerge was Cathay Keris, which began producing films in 1953. By the late 1950s both of these studios were producing up to twelve films a year. This era, between 1956 and 1964, was a “golden age” for local cinema. Cinemagoers could attend films that not only entertained their audiences, but also touched upon issues and debates in society. It was an era in which artists – in front of and behind the camera – poured their ideas and hopes into film, reflecting the possibilities that Merdeka (Independence) and Merger held in their lives.

Film production in Singapore went into decline by the early 1960s due to a variety of factors. The industry had been beset with labour strikes, and work in other industries – such as journalism – often drew away talent. Administratively, the studios had difficulties replacing charismatic figureheads who migrated or passed away. At MFP, there was a shift of film production to Kuala Lumpur after Run Run Shaw moved to Hong Kong in 1959. The death of Loke Wan Tho, the head of Cathay, in an airplane crash in 1964 was one of the key turning points at the other Singapore-based studio, which went into further artistic decline following the death of influential director Hussain Haniff. The last film made during this era was in 1972, although production had slowed considerably by the mid-1960s as much of the talent migrated to active studios in Kuala Lumpur or sought employment in other industries.

The two Malay film icons featured in this exhibition represent this era of film production between the 1940s and 1970s. Their works are known to an audience disparate in age and geography, with their films more easily accessible today;

they are shown on an almost continual loop on Malaysian cable channels, while in Singapore and Indonesia their works are usually seen on VCD. In many respects, P. Ramlee and Mat Sentol are honoured more today than during their filmmaking heydays. Their legacy in the artistic community and larger society is a thread that connects Singapore to its pre-Independence past. The actual content of their contribution, however, is often obscure – just as the artist Khairuddin Hori has aptly depicted.

P. Ramlee is the dominant icon of Malay cinema. Born in Penang in the late 1920s, P. Ramlee arrived in Singapore as MFP was renewing production following the Japanese Occupation. He began his career as a musician in the studio band, dubbing the singing voice of other actors while also occasionally appearing as a supporting actor. Ramlee soon grabbed the attention of those at the studio, and the wider audience, and quickly became a star. By the early 1950s he was featured in a variety of roles, and his numerous talents – singing, songwriting, acting – soon made him the biggest star in the Peninsula. By 1955 P. Ramlee parlayed his fame into production. He used his position to force the studio to allow him – and his nationalist friends – to write and direct films. Beginning with *Penarek Bechak* (The Trishaw Driver – 1955) Ramlee directed a series of comedies and dramas that were not only profitable monetarily but also artistically.

Among the most important films of this era was *Semerah Padi* (1956). The film tells the story of a community in Sumatra in the pre-colonial era. Using a standard plot of a love triangle, P. Ramlee subtly touches on a variety of issues such as the lack of cultural boundaries between Indonesia and Malaya as well as the role of Islam as a unifying belief. The themes present in the film, which many seem to have forgotten amidst the love triangle and the distance of time, leave Ramlee as an icon that reflects back upon the audience. Khairuddin has

captured this phenomenon through pixelation. It suggests not only the blurring of such themes in Ramlee’s work – as well as many of the films of the era – but also the willful amnesia of his cultural and social milieu. Ramlee and his colleagues were making films that challenged the audience’s understanding of a variety of subjects, ranging from elitism and poverty to the role of the individual and religion in society. That Ramlee is mostly remembered for his wonderful singing voice, or his mastery of *mise-en-scène* in his films, is a shame. The audience should look beyond its own uncertainty over his status, beyond his star power, to bring more clarity to his contribution to the cultural and political debates of the time.

When Ramlee moved to Kuala Lumpur in 1964 it was an end of an era in Singapore-based film. It was also the beginning of the influence of Mat Sentol, who faced a period of declining budgets and audience. Mat Sentol had been involved in film production for years, usually appearing as a background player. With the industry in flux by the early 1960s, Mat Sentol parlayed his unique talents into farce, when he began headlining a series of “Mat” films. The first film – *Mat Tiga Suku* (Crazy Mat) – was made for \$10,000, cheap even in that era. The film was originally planned as a pilot episode for television, but the production was more than the fledgling Television Singapura could afford. By the late 1960s and early 1970s Mat Sentol starred in a dozen films in which his “Mat” character fell down, was misunderstood, and eventually backed into a successful conclusion; all were made on extremely limited budgets. Although rough around the edges these productions have a charm that overproduced films of today rarely have.

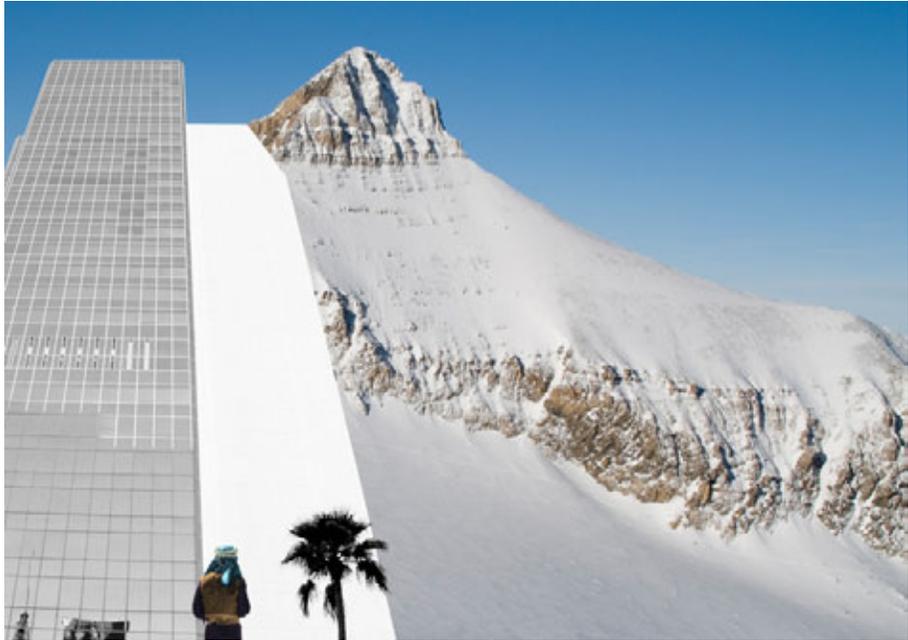
The limited budget that Cathay Keris provided for the “Mat” films required innovation. Mat Sentol responded through the development of his own unique form of special effects, often appearing to be hand-drawn cartoons to depict

explosions or flying objects. His appearance on the edges of everyday life in the works of Khairuddin Hori reproduce how Mat Sentol would appear in his own films. His presence in our lives, as is true with his films, is one in which he is both part of the scene and outside of it.

The role of Malay film in Singaporean art and culture is often forgotten. In a city-state that focuses on the future and economic development, the presence of artists from an earlier era is often blurry, or a startling, out-of-body presence in our collective memory. These works force us to imagine, and revisit, this earlier era of production when artistic debates were centre stage in the most popular form of entertainment and when the artists had to work with increasingly slim budgets in a newly independent state. May it shine a light, and reconsideration, of their position as pioneers of the Singaporean art scene.

Timothy P. Barnard

Associate Professor
Department of History
National University of Singapore



Reconstructing Sentol
2008 - 2010 | Digital print on paper | 29.7 x 42cm | edition of 5



Reconstructing Sentol
2008 - 2010 | Digital print on paper | 29.7 x 42cm | edition of 5



Reconstructing Sentol
2008 - 2010 | Digital print on paper | 29.7 x 42cm | edition of 5



Reconstructing Sentol
2008 - 2010 | Digital print on paper | 29.7 x 42cm | edition of 5



Reconstructing Sentol
2008 - 2010 | Digital print on paper | 29.7 x 42cm | edition of 5



Reconstructing Sentol
2008 - 2010 | Digital print on paper | 29.7 x 42cm | edition of 5



Reconstructing Sentol
2008 - 2010 | Digital print on paper | 29.7 x 42cm | edition of 5



Reconstructing Sentol
2008 - 2010 | Digital print on paper | 29.7 x 42cm | edition of 5



Reconstructing Sentol
2008 - 2010 | Digital print on paper | 29.7 x 42cm | edition of 5



Reconstructing Sentol
2008 - 2010 | Digital print on paper | 29.7 x 42cm | edition of 5



Reconstructing Sentol
2008 - 2010 | Digital print on paper | 29.7 x 42cm | edition of 5



Reconstructing Sentol
2008 - 2010 | Digital print on paper | 29.7 x 42cm | edition of 5



Reconstructing Sentol
2008 - 2010 | Digital print on paper | 29.7 x 42cm | edition of 5



Reconstructing Sentol
2008 - 2010 | Digital print on paper | 29.7 x 42cm | edition of 5

KHAIRUDDIN HORI | Born: 1974, Singapore

EDUCATION

2005 | 2006 Master of Arts (Fine Arts, Open University, UK)
Laselle College of the Arts

1992 | 1995 Diploma in Fine Arts
Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2010 US AND THEM AND YOU
The Substation Gallery, Singapore

2007 TRADING CRAFT
Institute of Contemporary Arts | LASALLE College of the Arts | The Substation Gallery, Singapore | The Art Center, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand

2006 I WANT MY F-16
Warong M Nasir, Singapore

2004 45 ARMENIAN
The Substation Gallery, Singapore

2002 REVELATIONS
The Art Gallery, National Institute of Education, Singapore

2001 GODOT
The Substation Gallery, Singapore

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2010 ARTRIANGLE
The National Art Gallery, Malaysia

2010 BERITA HARIAN 2 – UTUSAN MELAYU
Institute of Contemporary Arts, Singapore

2009 JAKARTA BIENNALE 2009
National Gallery, Jakarta, Indonesia

2006 THE SECOND DANCE SONG:
NEW CONTEMPORARIES 2006
Institute of Contemporary Arts, Singapore

2005 BADANG
The Substation Gallery, Singapore

FINDING SUNSHINE
The Arts House at Old Parliament, Singapore

LABILABU
The Esplanade Tunnel, The Esplanade, Singapore

HYPE
The Arts House at The Old Parliament, Singapore

2004 TOK SELAMPIT MILLENIUM
Jendela Gallery, The Esplanade, Singapore

SAMBAL BELACHAN
The Esplanade, Singapore

2003 FUSION STRENGTH '03
Benda Gallery, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

2002 B.E.A.U.T.Y
Utterly Art Gallery, Singapore

FORTY
MITA Atrium, Singapore

SELECTED ARTISTS' RESIDENCIES

- 2005 REAL PRESENCE / FLOATING SITES
Conference at IUAV, Facolta' di Design e Arti, Venice, Italy
- 2004 PVA LABCULTURE
PVA MediaLab Studio, Bridport, England
- 2002 BURNLEY YOUTH THEATRE
Burnley, England

GRANTS & AWARDS

- French Government Overseas Scholarship Award
- LASALLE-SIA Scholarship for Masters in Fine Arts
- Lee Foundation Bursary
- National Arts Council Bursary
- Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) Award
- Arts Fund Committe Project Grant
- Lee Foundation Grant
- National Arts Council Project Grant
- National Arts Council Travel Grant
- Rotary Club – National Arts Council Training Grant
- Singapore International Airlines | National Arts Council Travel Grant
- Singapore Internationale Grant
- Teater Ekamatra Invited Artist Grant
- Swatch International Street Painting Competition

MAT/RAMLEE

February 28 - March 28, 2011

Open daily: 11:00am to 7:00pm

Raffles Hotel Arcade
328 North Bridge Road, #01-04
Singapore 188719

e info@chanhampegalleries.com
t + 65 6338 1962
f + 65 6338 6192
w www.chanhampegalleries.com

CHANHAMPE
GALLERIES