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"One Take: Tinger, Tinger"

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One Take:

Tiger, Tiger

The beasts in HO TZU NYEN's *One or Several Tigers* lead us into the tangled thickets of Singaporean identity by Jeremy Tiang

THE ORIGIN TALE OF MODERN SINGAPORE cultivates the image of a gleaming city rising from the wilderness – most recently rehashed in a certain hit film that makes a glib reference to the island being nothing but ‘jungle and pig farms’ before Chinese immigrants arrived, clearing the landscape and making themselves ‘crazy rich’ in the process. In this story, tigers are the antagonist, a feral threat it was impossible to eliminate completely: Singapore is an island, and tigers are excellent swimmers. As late as 1869, Alfred Russel Wallace wrote, in *The Malay Archipelago*, that ‘there are always a few tigers roaming about Singapore, and they kill, on average, a Chinaman every day’.

Given his fascination with national myth-making and the stories we tell about ourselves, it is unsurprising that the tiger became a totem for the Singaporean artist Ho Tzu Nyen. He first took on the big cat in 2003 with *Utama – Every Name in History Is I*, inspired by the granddaddy of them all: the tiger that gave Singapore its name, albeit through a case of mistaken identity. Legend has it that when Sang Nila Utama, a prince of the Srivijaya Empire, landed on the island in the 13th century, he named the settlement he founded Singapura, ‘Lion City’, after an animal he spotted while hunting and took to be a good omen. Lions were never native to Singapore, however, and many historians believe it might, in fact, have been a tiger.

Ho’s recent installation, *One or Several Tigers* (2017), the last in his ‘Tigers’ series (2012–17), draws inspiration from Heinrich Leutemann’s print *Unterbrochene Straßenmessung auf Singapore* (Interrupted Road Surveying in Singapore, 1835), which documents an incident from that year. George Drumgoole Coleman, the Irish architect responsible for the planning and building of much of colonial Singapore, was attacked by a tiger while carrying out a road survey. He survived, although his theodolite did not.

On facing screens, CGI versions of Coleman and the tiger drift by, while a voice narrates their encounter. ‘Surveyor and tiger,’ it intones, ‘civilization and wilderness/ order and chaos/ came face to face/ in that instant/ time is suspended.’ The languid, hypnotic vocals are in sharp contrast to the deadpan surrealism of the visuals. At one point, a tiger drifts through the void, expanding like a balloon until it is large enough to block out the sun. We are beyond time and space, and the tiger manages to be at once historical, prehistoric and eternal.

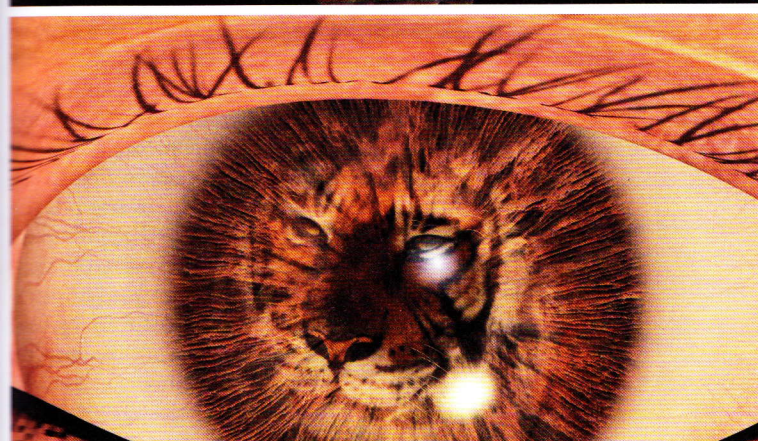
Ho is very taken with the Malay *harimau jadian*, or weretiger. In the video, a human face slowly transforms into a tiger, profoundly unsettling but also weirdly familiar if you were ever a fan of the ‘Animorphs’ series of children’s

sci-fi books (1996–2001). The tiger chants, ‘Weretigers, we’re tigers,’ though the semantic difference is only discernible in the captioned text that appears on screen. Ho says his ‘interest in the tiger stems from the fact that it is always already enmeshed within the human, that these two species were already folded into each other’. Evidence suggests that early humans chose to settle on the edges of the jungle, where tigers were prevalent.

The rest of the video is a loose survey of tigers throughout Singapore’s past, incorporating shadow puppets, live performance and found images and taking in figures such as the ‘Tiger of Malaya’, Tomoyuki Yamashita: the Japanese general responsible for the fall of Singapore. Towards the end of this tapestry, we are introduced to the Indian convicts who were forced to construct the buildings that Coleman and others designed, who were sometimes victims of marauding tigers. The injustices of the colonial prison system are dispassionately laid out as the camera returns to Leutemann’s engraving, focusing not on Coleman but on the dark-skinned bodies surrounding him: his entourage of Indian labourers. Of course, even if they managed to survive, these workers went otherwise unmemorialized, whilst the street and bridge named after Coleman still stand in Singapore today. (Almost 200 years later, the aforementioned film has drawn criticism for featuring an all-Chinese main cast of wealthy protagonists, while its darker-skinned characters are relegated to positions of servility. *Plus ça change*.)

One or Several Tigers embodies the utmost solemnity of religious ritual in every utterance, and in the gravity of the whole enterprise. This has a lot to do with duration: with a work like this, the only possible response is to surrender yourself to it, to slow down your rhythms and accept its pace. This quasi-spirituality continues a sensibility from *Utama*, which begins with Old Testament pastiche (‘In the beginning of Singapore, there was him,’) and ends with a parade of gods in trishaws paying a visit to the merlion, a ‘mythical’ creature invented by the Singapore Tourism Board in 1964.

As a Singaporean writer with an interest in imperialism and an overdeveloped sense of whimsy, I am very much the target audience for an installation in which an anthropomorphic tiger recites gobbets of the country’s colonial history. This wasn’t a frivolous exercise, though; despite the deft sense of absurdity at work here, I also felt something akin to awe. ‘Like the human,’ Ho notes, the tiger ‘is an apex predator’. Behind the gleaming facade of Singapore, he suggests, the tiger never went away and, if we look hard enough in the city and in ourselves, there it will be ●



JEREMY TIANG is a writer based in New York, USA. His debut novel, *State of Emergency* (2017), won the 2018 Singapore Literature Prize for English fiction.

HO TZU NYEN is based in Singapore. In 2018, he has had solo exhibitions at Kunstverein Hamburg, Germany; McaM, Shanghai, China; and TPAM, Yokohama, Japan. His work has also been included in recent group exhibitions at the National Gallery, Singapore; Dhaka Art Summit, Bangladesh; and Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, Germany; and is part of 'Imagined Borders', 12th Gwangju Biennale, Korea, until 11 November.

One or Several Tigers, 2017, video stills. Courtesy: the artist and Edouard Malingue Gallery, Hong Kong and Shanghai