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Artist Ho Tzu Nyen’s solo at Singapore Art Museum unleashes the tigers in Asia’s dark history



Singapore Art Museum director and lead curator of Time & The Tiger Eugene Tan (left) and Singaporean artist Ho Tzu Nyen. ST PHOTO: HESTER TAN

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Singapore Art Museum director and lead curator of Time & The Tiger Eugene Tan (left) and Singaporean artist Ho Tzu Nyen. ST PHOTO: HESTER TAN

Shawn Hoo

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SINGAPORE – A lavish row of tatami-tiled rooms with translucent shoji screens at the heart of Singaporean artist Ho Tzu Nyen's first solo at the Singapore Art Museum (SAM) belies the sombre histories of Japanese militarism housed within.

The spaces replicate Kiraku-tei ryokan, the final meeting place of one Japanese kamikaze (suicide attack pilots) squadron before its last mission and where the members' parents gathered to drink and sing in honour of their dead sons.

Hotel Aporia (2019), first presented as a site-specific work at the inn as part of the Aichi Triennale in Toyota City, also features videos edited with footage from Japanese auteur Yasujiro Ozu's films.

“We have to look at these stories through Japanese eyes and I think the first step is to adopt the Japanese height and perspective of being seated on the tatami,” says 47-year-old Ho, who invites audiences to remove their shoes and sit in each room to appreciate the low angle camera shot characteristic of Ozu.

After encountering this work in Toyota City, SAM director Eugene Tan, 51 – lead curator for Time & The Tiger – conceived of curating a mid-career survey for one of Singapore's most internationally celebrated contemporary artists.



A behind-the-scenes view of how the Japanese ryokan in Hotel Aporia (2019) was installed as captured on Oct 31. ST PHOTO: SHINTARO TAY

Describing Ho's work as questioning the received histories of the region, Dr Tan says: “I was really amazed by the work. For me, it was a real turning point in his practice because something new he was doing was connecting the histories of East and South-east Asia.”

Ho calls Dr Tan “a constant presence, a fellow traveller and a witness to his adventures”.

This exhibition, he says, is a landmark in their two decades of friendship. They met after Ho's first exhibition, Utama – Every Name In History Is I, at The Substation in 2003.

Time & The Tiger deals with Ho's recurrent fascination with tigers and how they have thrived, gone extinct and returned from the dead through South-east Asia's history. “If you follow the fates of the tiger, you can understand in parallel what is happening to our region.”

It also reveals Ho's evolving approach to video art. The oldest work on site, The Cloud Of Unknowing – presented at the Venice Biennale in 2011 – is the only one where Ho uses a camera like a traditional film-maker.

Subsequently, he worked with found footage and the glut of online data, editing them into hazy, intriguing narratives.

In *T For Time* (2023) – his latest work co-commissioned by SAM, which features a series of anecdotes on the nature of time – even conventional editing is outsourced to algorithms, which Ho will tweak throughout the exhibition.

“I think this notion of feeding things into the system and waiting for something new to emerge is in itself an attitude towards time,” says Ho. “Rather than thinking about making videos as working with images or sounds, time is my true material.”



Part of a co-commission by the Singapore Art Museum, Ho Tzu Nyen's *T For Time: Timepieces* (2023) features 38 videos of time-measuring devices like watches, metronomes and the heart. ST PHOTO: HESTER TAN

According to Dr Tan, *Time & The Tiger* is “one of the easiest shows for (SAM) to sell and promote”. It will travel to Art Sonje Center in Seoul and Hessel Museum of Art in New York in 2024, and SAM is in discussions to take the show to museums in the United Arab Emirates and Luxembourg.

He adds: “I can truly say that I can’t see many artists like Tzu Nyen. I’m really proud that he is from Singapore and showing his work all around the world.”

Three must-see works

One Or Several Tigers (2017)



One Or Several Tigers by Ho Tzu Nyen draws from Heinrich Leutemann's print, which was previously on display at the National Gallery Singapore. ST PHOTO: SHINTARO TAY

Heinrich Leutemann's famous 1865 print depicting a tiger lunging at Singapore's colonial architect G.D. Coleman and his theodolite centres the white man, but Ho turns to the Indian convict labourers at Coleman's side.

That Coleman was both superintendent of public works and convicts is no coincidence. After Britain abolished slavery, convict labour was exploited to lay roads and construct their own prison grounds.

"In some sense, I believe this is the genealogy of our reliance on foreign labour," says Ho, who had cast Singapore-based migrant workers in the work and showed them the print that was hanging in the National Gallery Singapore, now at SAM.

The Nameless (2015)



The Nameless is made with footage from various films starring Hong Kong megastar Tony Leung Chiu-wai. ST PHOTO: HESTER TAN

Hong Kong megastar Tony Leung Chiu-wai – known for his spy roles in films like Lee Ang's *Lust, Caution* (2007) – is “cast” as the triple agent Lai Teck in Ho's found film about this man who worked for the French, British and Japanese.

With over 30 pseudonyms, Lai Teck was once the leader of the Communist Party of Malaya and a source of fascination for Ho, not least because he embodied the competing colonial powers in South-east Asia.

Made with footage from various films starring the suave Leung, *The Nameless* questions what backstories each viewer brings to this shape-shifting figure.

Hotel Aporia (2019)



Hotel Aporia, a work by Ho. ST PHOTO: HESTER TAN

Ho's use of found footage by Yasujiro Ozu is no frivolous choice for the fan of the Japanese auteur. Ozu was drafted to produce imperial propaganda in Singapore and was based in the Cathay Building from 1943 to 1946.

He was one of many Japanese artists sent to occupied South-east Asia, but appeared not to accomplish anything notable despite being assigned to make a film about Indian nationalist Subhas Chandra Bose.

In Ho's ongoing *The Critical Dictionary Of Southeast Asia*, he puzzles over what unifies a region so diverse in languages, history and geography. In *Hotel Aporia*, Ho speculates if the Japanese Occupation was a rare period when "Japan synchronised South-east Asia through violence and war".

Book It/Ho Tzu Nyen: Time & The Tiger

Where: Singapore Art Museum at Tanjong Pagar Distripark, Galleries 1 & 2, 39 Keppel Road

When: Nov 24 to March 3, 10am to 7pm

Admission: Free for Singaporeans and permanent residents. For tourists and foreign residents, it is \$10 an adult, \$5 for concession (students and seniors above age 60), free for children below six and those with disabilities

Info: <https://www.singaporeartmuseum.sg/Art-Events/Exhibitions/Ho-Tzu-Nyen-Time-and-the-Tiger>

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