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“Singapore: Ho Tzu Nyen”

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Singapore: Ho Tzu Nyen

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Installation view of HO TZU NYEN's *T for Time*, 2023, voile screen, scrim walls, real-time algorithmic editing, and compositing system, two-channel synchronized HD video, 16:9 format, color, and eight-channel sound: 60 min, at "Ho Tzu Nyen: Time the Tiger," Singapore Art Museum at Tanjong Pagar Distripark. Courtesy Singapore Art Museum.

Ho Tzu Nyen

“Time & the Tiger,”

Singapore Art Museum, Singapore

Ho Tzu Nyen has maintained a longstanding fascination with the historical migration of tigers across Asia and their presence in the region's histories and mythologies, particularly as weretigers in Malay cosmology. Traditionally perceived as liminal figures, tigers inhabit the interstitial zone between civilization and wilderness, the living and the ancestor-spirit world, and as symbols of diverse temporal concepts connecting the past, present, and future. The transition of these majestic creatures from apex predators to endangered species due to human activities prompts the artist's reflection on the complex interplay of various time scales, wherein human desires and destinies fluctuate.

In his first midcareer survey, “Ho Tzu Nyen: Time & the Tiger,” the Singaporean artist and filmmaker beckoned audiences to engage in an immersive exploration of time, history, and identity. The co-organizers, Singapore Art Museum (SAM) and Art Sonje Center (ASJC), enabled excellent technical design and audio engineering carried out by Artfactory in Singapore, the artist's longtime technical collaborator. Notably, it employed spatialization techniques to craft three-dimensional soundscapes within SAM's galleries, providing a sensory-rich experience for all eight major installations.

At the heart of the exhibition was Ho's multimodal work of six videos and a giant fan, *Hotel Aporia* (2019), originally presented as a site-specific installation at a ryokan for the Aichi Triennale. At SAM, *Hotel Aporia* was restaged across four Japanese-style rooms adorned with tatami mats and *shoji* screens. A cacophony of overlapping conversations punctuated by the rhythmic roar of propellers against a constant, resonating hum filled the space, triggering a cascade of cellular responses. Following the Japanese custom, visitors were obliged to remove their footwear before stepping into the metaphorical inn. Inside, videos, largely composited from existing materials, depict faceless figures entangled in Japan's World War II imperialist expansion, prompting viewers to envision themselves in the characters' precarious situations. Strategically positioned speakers and subwoofers, along with precise audiovisual coordination, rendered the echoes of war palpable, coursing through the rooms like a gust of wind. *Hotel Aporia* thus unveils the layered complexities of a turbulent era, illustrating how individuals, propelled by the same forces, embark on distinct trajectories.

Another video installation work, *CDOSEA* (2017–), abbreviated from Ho's longest-running project, *The Critical Dictionary of Southeast Asia* (2012–), was initiated to investigate the multifaceted concept of Southeast Asia through 26 terms in the English alphabet. An audiovisual database, *CDOSEA* uses an algorithm to produce random sequences, forming ever changing narratives that mirror the region's perpetual malleability. The presence of algorithmic components was also apparent in the newly commissioned work *T for Time* (2023–), which serves as a compendium of the artist's reflections on the heterogeneity of time. In this video work, he uses preexisting still and moving images, including those that depict characters from his other works, underscoring the archival and intertextual orientation of Ho's practice. The clips, transformed into 2D animation, undergo algorithmic rearrangements to create multiple versions of a roughly 60-minute film, dramatized by free-jazz scores. The work is complemented by 39 Timepieces, individual videos showcasing different types and scales of time that are explored in the film.

Positioned in a separate, dedicated gallery, *One or Several Tigers* (2017) is a performative theatrical installation incorporating elements of wayang kulit, or shadow puppetry. It explores the ambiguity of the tiger-human relationship and its symbolism in colonial and postcolonial Singapore. The installation presents a duet of screens between a computer-generated tiger and a man locked in eternal cosmic orbit. A hypnotic voice narrates the two characters' encounters across historical timelines, weaving together fact and fiction. Amid industrial and electronic beats, the boundaries between man and beast blur until they become indistinguishable.

In "Time & the Tiger," works benefited from a sophisticated setup, providing a polished and immersive journey through diverse narratives and temporalities. Radiant bursts from discreetly positioned LED lights behind specific projector screens create a lasting visual imprint on the audience. Meanwhile, the persistent presence of tigers roamed within the exhibition's sonic landscape. Discernible only through rumbles and tremors, these allegorical animals served as a reminder that time, history, and identity exist in a state of constant flux within a rhizomatic network.

Yvonne Wang is ArtAsiaPacific's Singapore desk editor. She is also a freelance art writer, contributing to various leading art publications and collaborating with art platforms to create bespoke content. Yvonne holds an MA in Asian Art Histories from Goldsmiths, University of London, and an MSc in Politics and Communication from the London School of Economics.