WHAT'S BEHIND THE GIANT AI VIDEO ARTWORK ON THE M+ FAÇADE

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On certain nights, a flicker of movement may be visible across Victoria Harbour – fabric swirling aflutter, a gesture half-seen, a face that shifts just as it becomes recognisable. Ho Tzu Nyen's "Night Charades," projected on the façade of M+, does not demand direct attention. It waits, ambient and atmospheric, like a dream the city may have forgotten. Composed of AI-generated tableaux that rearrange themselves with every loop, the work resists fixed meaning, offering instead a game of recognition and misrecognition.

Produced through experimentation with AI, *Night Charades* may be Ho's largest public work to date, yet it encapsulates core concerns in his artistic practice: the preoccupation with fragmented, even contradictory narratives in resisting and subverting unitary accounts—be they mythic, historical, or speculative. Together with his works on view at *Three Stories: Monsters, Opium, and Time,* running until May 13 at **Kiang Malingue,** one can see how the unstable terrains of myth, history, and image-making have long been home for the Singaporean artist.

Consider his earlier work, "Utama — Every Name in History is I" (2003), which playfully and critically unpacked Singapore's history by way of the myths surrounding the naming of Singapore by Sumatran Prince Utama in 1299. Or take "The Cloud of Unknowing," an installation at the Singapore pavilion of the 2011 Venice Biennale, which explored the concept of the cloud in landscape paintings by artists from Caravaggio to Wen Zhengming through vignettes of characters in public housing estates. In the Western tradition, the cloud stands for the unknowable and incoherent barrier between the earthly and the celestial; it thus also symbolises the limits of perception and the blurring of orderly boundaries. This refusal to cohere, this seeping around the edges is what has long fascinated the artist.

Still: 'The Nameless', 2015 by Ho Tzu Nyen – Courtesy M+

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Ho's hypnotic video work, "The Nameless" (2014), perhaps best highlights his penchant for provisional histories. The video follows the mysterious life of Lai Teck, a triple agent with over 30 aliases who infiltrated the Communist Party of Malaya while serving French, British and Japanese intelligence through the 1930s and 40s. With his life clouded by rumours, somehow a story is told through voiceovers and subtitles over a cinematic montage splicing footage from 16 films featuring the Hong Kong actor Tony Leung Chiu-wai. As the actor shifts personae from gangster poet (in *Cyclo*, 1995) to lover (*In the Mood for Love,* 2000) to politician (*Lust, Caution,* 2007) while walking, counting, thinking, smoking, and so on, Lai Teck's protean identities emerge; doubt and suspicion about truth and fiction swirl against the backdrop of war, insurgency, and betrayal. There is, moreover, a neat, uncanny parallel between espionage and acting: just as Lai Teck is not really Lai Teck, Tony Leung, too, is not really being Tony Leung.

In film, this genre of "supercut" has a well established history. In art, one might recall Christian Marclay's "Clock" (2010), a 24-hour montage of clocks and watches ticking minute by minute taken from thousands of clips in film and television history. For Ho, however, despite the slippery uncertainties, a tentative narrative is nevertheless attempted, carving out some sense of an actual historical past paradoxically through fictional footage. Just as he insists on the impossibility of pinning history to a single narrative thread, he also seeks to bring to life characters silent in official histories.

Still: One or Several Tigers, Ho Tzu Nyen – Photo courtesy the artist

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The preoccupation with fragmentary narratives is pushed much further in "The Critical Dictionary of Southeast Asia" (2012–ongoing), a sprawling, open-ended work which is among his most renowned. Organised alphabetically (A for animism, C for circle/corruption, H for humidity, and so forth), video clips drawn from the internet and film history are shown algorithmically. The endless permutations of short films means that each viewing (accessible online) produces a new constellation. A narrative voice-over, at times manic and at other times chanted, relates various theories about Southeast Asia — from the political concept of mandala states to symbolic myths and histories about tigers and weretigers — while a stream of related footage flash by. The critic Adeline Chia has called "Critical Dictionary" "the Great Southeast Asian artwork," in the sense that it "creates a pulsing, polyphonic and protean archive of regional representations that came together and fall apart in an unfolding process of legibility and obscurity, becoming and unbecoming."

The work pays homage to George Bataille's heterodox, para-surrealist "Critical Dictionary," which destabilises conceptual order and rationalism with philosophical provocations. But perhaps a closer affinity could be found in Milorad Pavić's post-modernist novel *Dictionary of the Khazars*, where narratives emerge from the cracks of the encyclopaedia entries presented in three splintered versions. Having to sleuth through fragments, hints, and contradictions, the reader is thus faced with the conditions (and construction) of truth. Similarly, Ho's "Critical Dictionary" unravels regional coherence into the amorphous identity of the region – not least the fuzziness of the term "Southeast Asia," a region historically imagined from the outside rather than from the inside. Suspicious of grand narratives, Ho's work is incessantly intertextual and self-conscious.

Installation view at Kiang Malingue – Photo by Onn Sek for Zolima CityMag
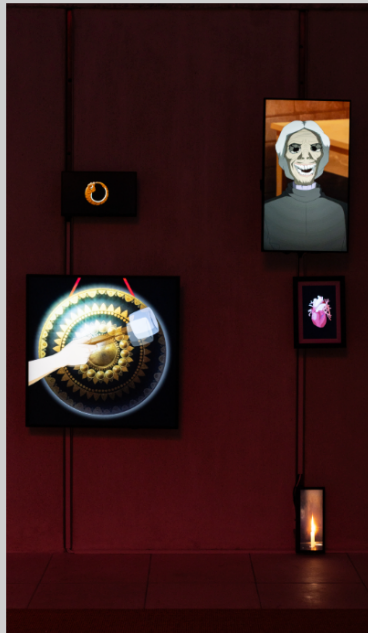
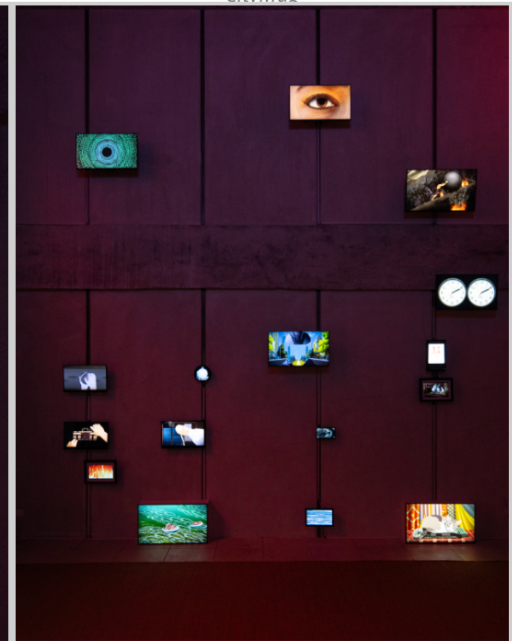*Ho Tzu Nyen 'Three Stories: Monsters, Opium, Time', Hong Kong, 2025 –*

Ho Tzu Nyen – Photo by Onn Sek for Zolima CityMag

Installation view at Kiang Malingue – Photo by Onn Sek for Zolima CityMag

Ho Tzu Nyen 'Three Stories: Monsters, Opium, Time', Hong Kong, 2025 – Photo by Kwan Sheung Chi, courtesy Kiang Malingue

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At Ho's exhibition *Three Stories: Monsters, Opium, and Time* at **Kiang Malingue,** are two independent works that bear some relation to "Critical Dictionary": "O for Opium" (2023) and "Timepieces", which previously accompanied the installation "T for Time" (2023), not shown presently in Hong Kong. "O for Opium" weaves a history of opium and its

aestheticisation, opium as substance and structure: a drug, a weapon of colonial exchange, and a form of narrative fog. The montage of hazy imagery over footage of clipper ships, old film sequences, and archive footage from the Golden Triangle recounts the political economy of the opium trade, with a feverish sensibility. Like many of Ho's works, the vocal narrative sustains the narrative throughout the montage.

"Timepieces" (2023), here presented in yet another format, includes numerous animated videos that explore time through loops of various forms. A few examples for flavour: Sisyphus rolling his boulder; the tiger chasing and then swallowing his tail; the jittery hands of someone defusing a bomb counting down; and a reference to Felix Gonzalez-Torres's artwork "Perfect Lovers," with the touching of two clocks, set computationally to local time. That the work is almost devoid of words is notable, with the artist seeming to attempt working on a purely visual level.

Like Dante's *Inferno,* the lowest part of this tripartite exhibition held perhaps the greatest interest. Two works from his project Night March of Hundred Monsters are shown here, which deal with the netherworld of yōkai —monsters, demons, or spectres — which the artist intertwines with the history of Japanese imperialism. One of these, "Night March of Hundred Monsters — 100 Monsters" (2025), presents a visual procession of these yōkai, depicted in video animation. Originally presented in a large format that suggests a horizontal scroll, here, the newly commissioned installation versions form a mini-theatre which add layers to the projection, emphasising depth and perhaps intimacy.

In another viewing box is "Night March of Hundred Monster — 36 Ghosts" (2025), which is formally structured as an encyclopaedia of monsters and spectres. The format echoes classic ukiyo-e prints where each spectre would be accompanied by a short fragmentary text, sometimes poetic, sometimes wry. Here in the work, an animated monster would appear on the screen, accompanied by a Japanese descriptive voice-over, before morphing to the next monster. Yet the narrative blurs myth and history, and ranges from the humorous to the horrific: some skewer historical figures, while with some others, folkloric creatures are fused with war criminals. The result is unsettling but seductive.

There is Tsuchigumo, a shapeshifting spider that appears as a manifestation of non-Yamato people resisting the unification of Japan. Or the grotesque fruit of the Ninmenju, the human-faced tree, bleeding. Then there is the slime mould, "undecidable if it is plant or animal," as the voice-over intones, becoming a metaphor for political ambiguity. Or the Illusory Monk, standing in for the many Japanese soldiers who claimed to be monks in the final days of World War II. An assortment of other monsters that prey on corpses or nightmares emerge and fade, while the Tiger of Malaya, the Japanese general Tomoyuki Yamashita, also makes an appearance. The result is not didactic; rather they perform a monstrous historicism.

At one point, the description of Ungaikyo, the Mirror Beyond Clouds, recounts: "The True forms of demons are revealed in the mirror—absorbing a little of each demon it reflected. It eventually becomes one itself. Whoever fights monsters should see to it that he himself does not become a monster. And if you gaze for long into an abyss, the abyss also gazes onto you." After the 36th ghost, the monitor's lights flare up dramatically, and viewers see their own reflections on the screen, now caught in the same spectral procession.

Across the harbour, on the immense **LED facade of M+**, "Night Charades" is Ho's most public-facing work to date – and also his quietest. It is his first piece without sound. "I sometimes say I make videos in order to have sound," he remarks. The absence challenged him to attempt embedding rhythm in the moving image instead.

The resulting work is a 14-minute loop drawn from a pool of 50 AI-generated scenes, fragments taken from classic scenes of Hong Kong cinema, from the choreography of John Woo films to the aestheticised romanticism of Wong Kar-wai. The production involved testing each scene across a range of AI platforms — each with their own quirks and parameters — before selecting and further modifying the results. In most cases, the original backgrounds were removed, leaving only figures suspended in empty space. These isolated figures were then reprocessed through more AI platforms to simulate effects such as wind, smoke, or fire, all with a glossy effect reminiscent of advertising imagery. A sequencing system rearranges each loop differently, sometimes drawing 20 scenes, sometimes 40, allowing the viewer to encounter the work differently each time through algorithmic recombination.

The charades themselves are enigmatic tableaux: pleated costumes flowing in artificial wind, gestures repeated in uncanny rhythm. It is a game of charades — recognition and misrecognition — where familiarity flickers and disappears. In lieu of a master narrative, the viewer is invited to intuit connections. "What interests me most about AI in my experience with *Night Charades* is the sense of multiplicity," says Ho."There's no longer a single correct or pure version – only multiple renders and variations. That fascinates me."

In a way, "Night Charades" is less a narrative than an ambient ritual. As Ho puts it poetically, "We're projecting these images back into the city – a city that dreamt up these images in the first place." If the city is the dreamer, then Ho's work — an unstable reservoir of half-remembered myths, cinematic gestures, and spectral histories, at times filtered through algorithms and artificial intelligence — stages the conditions of unknowing, and in doing so, gives shape to the logic of the present.

"Night Charades" is on display at M+ until June 29, 2025. Click here for more information.
Three Stories: Monsters, Opium, and Time, runs until May 13 at Kiang Malingue.