

Kiang Malingue

Ho Tzu Nyen *Three Stories: Monsters, Opium, Time*

Installation view of HO TZU NYEN's *Timepieces*, 2023, 43 flatscreens, apps, and videos, durations variable, at Kiang Malingue, Hong Kong, 2025. Photo by Kwan Sheung Chi. Courtesy Kiang Malingue.

For Ho Tzu Nyen, histories are neither linear nor contained. They are spectral, fragmented, and often resistant to the kind of authoritative narratives that empires, colonizers, or even anthropologists have sought to impose. His 2015 video *The Nameless* conjures a ghostly version of the real-life Lai Teck, an enigmatic triple agent who moved between colonial powers, Communist insurgents, and revolutionary forces during the 1930s and '40s in Southeast Asia. Known by more than 50 pseudonyms, this "nameless" figure slipped between identities and across boundaries, leaving elusive traces of his existence across official archives. Lai Teck is not just an individual for Ho, but an allegory for Southeast Asia itself—a region as manifold as the character he portrays.

Ho's exhibition "Three Stories: Monsters, Opium, Time," recently on view at Kiang Malingue in Hong Kong, continued to explore what constitutes Southeast Asian identity as well as how one narrates such a politically and culturally diverse region. On the ground floor, visitors encountered a video installation from the artist's project *Night March of Hundred Monsters* (2021–). Placed within a miniature movie theater setting, the animation is projected onto three translucent horizontal glass panels arranged in a superimposed sequence, deliberately echoing the format

of Japanese handscrolls. Traditionally depicted as a procession of supernatural creatures (*yōkai*) marching through the streets, Ho reimagines this nightly parade, infusing it with Japan's history of imperialism in Southeast Asia and a distinct layer of pop cultural references. Accompanied by a haunting soundtrack, the video projection unfolds in a dreamlike sequence that slowly moves from a prehistoric landscape into a contemporary one; visitors see both mythological characters rooted in traditional folklore, such as the *kitsune* (fox spirit) or *kappa* (river sprite), and hybrid creatures that evoke a sense of overlapping realities.

One of these monsters is *kokutai*, the national body. The figure first appears in a white shirt and red cape—a costume that Ho specifically chose to mirror the Japanese flag—and it gradually morphs into the grotesque form of Tetsuo from Katsuhiro Otomo's 1988 legendary animation *Akira*. In the background, a voice narrates that "the state builders of Meiji Japan used the ideological apparatuses . . . to redirect the heterogeneous complexes of local beliefs in the supernatural toward a homogenized belief." Here, by weaving together the monstrous, all-absorbing animated character and the abstract yet pervasive concept of national mythology, Ho suggests that Japan's modernization project not only

standardized folklore, but also forged new political and cultural ideologies that would later shape its imperial ambitions. The transformation into Tetsuo, whose body grotesquely expands until it self-destructs, becomes a metaphor that connects Japan's trajectory as an imperial power

to its postwar trauma and pop-cultural legacy.

On the second floor, a video work titled *O for Opium* (2023) presented a swirling, dreamlike montage that layers history, personal memory, and cinematic sequences into a hallucinatory haze. At its core is archival footage detailing Singapore's historical role as a British-controlled distribution center for the opium trade of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Ho blends this history with sequences drawn from Stanley Kwan's 1987 film *Rouge* and Sergio Leone's epic *Once Upon a Time in America* (1984). The lush, melancholic visuals, along with the intoxicating smoke, light, and atmosphere, contrast with the historical violence of the opium trade captured in the black-and-white footage. By foregrounding opium as a substance that, while destructive, has often been romanticized as seductive and otherworldly in popular culture, Ho reminds us that history itself is also a process of mythmaking.

The top-floor installation, *Timepieces* (2023), consisting of 43 individual screens, explores the multiplicities of time. Ranging from one-second animated loops to 24-hour computational cycles, the projections comprise an eclectic range of animation, including references to Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), the stillness of Yasujiro Ozu's domestic spaces, Félix González-Torres's clocks, and a beating heart. Visitors watching these varied expressions of duration and movement are prompted to consider how time passes, accumulates, and dissolves. "The challenge," Ho explains, "was how the multiple can be composed, and how these different kinds of time can coexist without hierarchy and without collapsing into an empty pluralism." In the darkened space, the work suggests that time is cyclical, fractured, and heterogeneous, while subtly questioning whether temporal experiences outside of its linear flow might still be reclaimed.

LOUIS LU

