

July 22, 2024

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Link: <https://observer.com/2024/07/art-review-time-and-the-tiger-hessel-museum-art-ho-tzu-nyen/>

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Now On View: Ho Tzu Nyen’s Poetic Meditations On Time, Tigers and Colonialism

“Time & The Tiger” at Hessel Museum of Art marks the artist’s first major exhibition in the U.S.

By Mána Taylor · 07/22/24 12:21pm



Ho Tzu Nyen, *One or Several Tigers*, 2017; (still) Two-channel video: ten-channel sound, smoke machine, automated screen, show control system, wayang kulit puppets in aluminium frames. Courtesy of the artist and Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College

To encounter Ho Tzu Nyen’s work is to be confronted by a multitude of philosophical and poetic reflections. Upon opening several glass doors and walking through an echoing sky-lit lobby at CCS Bard’s Hessel Museum of Art, the sounds of Ho Tzu Nyen’s videos will start to faintly appear in the dark rooms ahead. A whispering voice narrates, while a panoply of images echo the words spoken. *Critical Dictionary of South-East Asia* (2017-) is a video project that the Singaporean artist created that is currently publicly available online. In the video, a voice alphabetically parses through words: “N is for Nation,” “O is for Ocean” and “T is for Tiger.” Layers of found footage act as emblems for the narration, contextualizing the history and specific dictionary created by the artist. The visual doesn’t necessarily compliment the audio, but it acts as a way to think about something beyond its obvious meaning. The voice continues on, occasionally switching from whispering to singing.

At the opening one afternoon in mid-June, Ho Tzu Nyen told Observer that his videos *T for Time* (2023-) and *Critical Dictionary of South-East Asia* (2017-) are being edited live, by a set of algorithms. “Every loop is constantly different. So, the narratives change and the sequence changes.” In *T for Time* there is an impressive display featuring two screens—one is directly behind the other so that its essence is visible even if it’s out of focus. “The algorithm also decides which layers stay in the front and which stay in the back,” Ho explained. This adds a sense of mystery and intrigue palpable in many of Ho Tzu Nyen’s videos. He is able to create elegance despite the fact that there is often too much going on—too much to see and hear and register all at once.



“Ho Tzu Nyen: Time & the Tiger” is on view at CCS Bard’s Hessel Museum of Art. Photo Credit: Olympia Shannon, 2024

Ho told Observer that it's exciting for him as well to see his work change through the algorithm and to always see it differently. "The only thing which doesn't change," he said of *T for Time*, "is the saxophone playing in the background. That's sixty minutes of fixed sound." The saxophone plays on no particular time signature and floats above effervescently, all while Ho's narration speaks of clocks and time zones. "In 1914, time was homogenized by the war," the narrator says, almost hypnotizing us with imagery of clock gears.

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The exhibition "Time & the Tiger," organized by the Singapore Art Museum and Art Sonje Center (Seoul), considers Ho's work as one entity. While each video has its own singular narrative, they complement and echo each other's themes. A phrase narrated in one video can sometimes be found in another. It's easy to walk in and out of the rooms, arriving at a video in the middle of it, leaving and finding meaning in the exhibition as a whole. I found myself going back into the same rooms multiple times to experience different segments of videos or see them in a different light as well as to see them re-contextualized by the algorithm. I soon realized that I had missed one room completely. There, I found a duel between a man and a tiger in *One or Several Tigers* (2017), a two-channel video with a ten-channel sound system.



Ho Tzu Nyen, *One or Several Tigers*, 2017; (still) Two-channel video: ten-channel sound, smoke machine, automated screen, show control system, wayang kulit puppets in aluminum frames. Courtesy of the artist and Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College

There is an image hung on the wall—one of the few non-video works. It's something you might pass by without noticing. The image, a wood engraving made by Heinrich Leutemann in 1865, depicts a chaotic and gestural scene in which a tiger is leaping towards an object that looks like a microscope. A dozen men shield themselves from the tiger, while the only white man in the scene stands surprised, eyes fixed on the tiger, but his pose is almost a salute.

The tiger is leaping towards an instrument known as the Theodolite, a surveying tool used to this day, that can measure both horizontally and vertically. In *One or Several Tigers*, this scene is dissected and examined in video form. The two characters, the tiger and colonizer, duel in the two-channel video in which the screens face each other. We hear in an operatic voice, “No humans were harmed, only the Theodolite.” It’s an uncanny moment of realization, that the tiger does not harm humans as it is expected to. Instead, as is portrayed in the engraving, the tiger only attacks the very thing that humans have imposed on each other outside of nature: colonialism, nation-building, measuring. The tiger attacks these and also becomes more human-like, merging with the colonizer in song as they operatically express themselves while floating in mid-air. The tiger is not the sly malicious mammal it is thought to be. Instead, the tiger sings with its arms stretched out in the shape of a standing human. (I’d also urge anyone to stay long enough to see the screen lift and reveal a beautiful glowing image made with puppets.)

In many ways, Ho’s work speaks for itself. It is packed with content created by a thoughtful essayist, spewing fleshed-out sentences vibrantly into your ears. The artist narrates a history that is polyphonic, not singular. Multiple stories exist within one story of a country and place, and his videos parse multiple angles of oppression and conflict in various countries. While this can also be overwhelming to listen to and watch, there is also elegance. Ho Tzu Nyen elaborately guides us through the many layers of his country and lets us ruminate with all of them at once, in sound and video, without missing a beat.

“Ho Tzu Nyen: Time & the Tiger” is on view at Art Sonje Center in Seoul through August 4; at CCS Bard’s Hessel Museum of Art in Annandale-on-Hudson, NY, through December 1; and at MUDAM in Luxembourg from February 7 through August 31, 2025.



Ho Tzu Nyen, *Utama - Every Name in History is I*, 2015; (still) Single-channel SD video. Courtesy of the artist and Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College