

Publication: Asian Art News

Date: Mar/Apr 2008

Headline: Feng Zhengjie at the Singapore Art Museum

EXHIBITION REVIEWS

...deeply felt struggle, aspiration, a search that she has tenderly scooped out of the material that she now holds to herself like a mirror. *Salaming Budag (Blind Massage)* is an example, consisting of two figures facing each other. They are both one and the same: the first lovingly scrutinizes the face of the other, reaching out with groping sensitive fingers, feeling the mold of eyes, temple, and cheekbones and how they have been shaped by life and its experiences, fingers solicitously "how life has treated you." At the same time, it is also an image of the quest for identity: what woman has gone through, what she has stood for, or what she has emerged from as a survivor. This piece conveys a deeply felt quality; it is as though the artist kneaded the material clay for it to acquire the substance of life.

Si Felicia ang Martir (Felicia the Martyr) is unusually poignant, stirring feminist sentiments. The figure consists of two parts, one, a torso bending backward and touching the ground with superhuman effort, and two, the head of the martyr herself resting in death on the ground. There is a strong contrast between the dynamic tension of the overstretched torso and the still head with its half-smiling and peaceful expression. Possibly derived from her life as wife and mother, but whether personal or general, it strikes a nerve in women, and men likewise, in the wide gamut of their relationships.

The closeness of the sculptures to her own personal self is likewise conveyed in the works, *Sa Akling Isip (In My Mind)*, *Alpin sa Puso (Slave to the Heart)*, *Ipaglalaban Ko (I Shall Stand for It)*, among others. *Sa Akling Isip* exposes the full potential of the medium and

what depth it may convey, as the clay becomes transformed into a thinking face, the force of its spiritual energy breaking out in two antennae-like forms on its head. The expression is so inwardly absorbed, without the least distraction, but so pure in its concentration. As in her other works, there is no effort to idealize but always to seek the lineaments of truth, as the features become signifiers of feeling and value. *Alpin sa Puso* is more outward in spirit, as it faces the world with a fierce cry issuing from its circular mouth, the figure geared for battle like a warrior with chest, shoulder, and waist emblazoned with a regalia of silver, gold and red. As in her other figures, the artist clearly does not observe classical symmetry in the limbs, but uses disequilibrium to add sharpness to the quality of figure. *Ipaglalaban Ko* achieves the point where realism slips into expressionism. Uncannily enough, the face does not shout but is instead quietly but strongly resolute in its half-closed but focused eyes, its high eyebrows, and prominent cheekbones, all in all, a strongly modeled face with not a hint of distraction and loose transitions.

Nevertheless, Varona owes some debt to classical mythology when she alludes to Persephone or Demeter, as in *Ang Pagdadalaga ni Persephone (The Coming of Age of Persephone)* or *Demetria ang Ina (Demeter the Mother)*. But the debt is not only that of the nomenclature of characters, but also a conceptual base which she begins with, but in the process she explores and distorts in order to bring out other directions and meanings, arriving at unexpected effects. *Ang Pagdadalaga ni Perse-*

phone shows a girl emerging fully and sinuously from a dark enclosing medium, as though to affirm her coming of age. *Demetria ang Ina* recalls the truncated Venuses, but without their undisturbed physical serenity, as the piece bears instead the marks of punishment on body and mind creating strange configurations that one cannot readily name.

The figures of Anna Varona certainly bear the marks of the best sculpture, that is, when the medium or material becomes transformed by the spirit of the artist, with her intentions, aspirations, messages, and values. In art, she will find the joy of expressing truth and beauty, as well as achieving fulfillment as a person.

Alice Guillermo

...

SINGAPORE

Feng Zhengjie at the Singapore Art Museum

It is hard to resist the first reaction of dismissing Feng Zhengjie's kitschy *The True Colors of the Pink Calendar Girls* as only skin-deep beauties and his paintings as more superficial commercialized work under the label of contemporary Chinese art. But take another look beyond the smooth white porcelain complexion of the pin-up girl and the cute-looking pink skull and rose combination in Feng's *Life Like Flower Series*. The contemporary pursuit of utopia in China through mass culture is effectively depicted through Feng's oil paintings of the perfectly made-up beauties. The Barbie-like model with her

ghostly white skin conveys the Chinese ideal beauty, complete with the Western ideal of the slightly opened bee-stung lips painted in bright Mao red. Despite the aura of light that surrounds Feng's version of ideal beauty, the carefully curled eye lashes and painted eyebrows can not off-set the feeling of unease expressed through the windows of her soul.

Look into her oddly shaped, upside-down eyes and you see the tiny pupils suspended in tension at opposite ends amidst the sea of white. Despite the artist's denial, the iconography immediately brings to mind the 'white eyes of anger' associated with Bada Shanren's (1626-1705) fish which contemporary Chinese artists such as Zhu Wei and Zeng Fanzhi have also adopted in their expression of confusion and loss in the rapidly changing material world.

Feng Zhengjie's beauty in the triptych, *Life Like Flower No.2* is precariously sandwiched between the image of a skull and that of a flower in full bloom. The image of the pink skull, a sugar-coated reminder of the death first appeared in Feng's 2006 triptych *My Parents*. The light-hearted rendition of the pink skull in side profile in *Life Like Flower No.2* is in sharp contrast to the somber head-on impact of the obituary-like portrait of the skull in *My Parents*. This marks Feng's journey out of the darkness of his parents' death in 2006 with an acceptance of the reality and a new attitude towards the taboo subject of death. The gigantic size of the canvases of *Life Like Flower No.2* further elevates imagery of the full-bloom rose, awkward poster girl, and skull to the level of cult icon.

Feng Zhengjie has cleverly transformed the contrasting gaudy colors of red and green from the Chinese folk art tradition into a more fashionable and softer pastel shade of pink and green. The pink candy-floss-coated paintings give the viewer another perspective into the psychological state of unsuspected individuals caught in the whirlpool of rapid social change that has come to characterize the story of contemporary China.

Tan Hwee Koon

...

THAILAND

Bangkok

Narumon Padsamran at Bangkok University Gallery

Initiated by Bangkok University lecturer and curator Ark Fengsmut, the annual exhibition program for graduate and emerging artists, *Brand New*, has quickly become one of the best platforms at which to gain credible domestic exposure. Of the five shows to date, the international breakthrough of artists such as Yuree Kensaku, Pornaweesak Rimsakul, Arin Rungiang, and Nathawut Singhthong are clear evidence of just how important the program has become. To avoid any possible nepotism advisors have started inviting guest curators to participate. Dutch curator Mari-



Narumon Padsamran, *Luk Tung (Mo*



Feng Zhengjie, *Life Like Flower No.2*, 2006-2007, oil on canvas. 300 x 400 cm, 300 x 500 cm, 300 x 400 cm respectively. Image: Courtesy of the Singapore Art Museum.