

SPACING IDENTITIES

J. ARIADHITYA PRAMUHENDRA

10 - 31 May 2009



Co-organisers
NUS MUSEUM



Gajah Gallery 



/// The Ducking Conversation (March 1989), Charcoal on Canvas, 193cm x 143cm, 2009

Introduction

Aminudin TH Siregar

Through his works, Pramuhendra has a desire to remember his past, to review his memory. Within it, perhaps there is identity – or at least a construct of it, something once imagined to exist, something that once manifested. As the second child among five siblings (who lost an important figure – his father passed away when he was young), Pramuhendra went through times of intimacy, times when he had not yet questioned his identity: times when he was not yet full of doubt. These were the times he existed within a tight-knit community, a familial system where a son is an integral part of the family unit. Moving on with time, Pramuhendra now enters a crucial period, a transcendent moment. Besides facing moments that insist upon answers of his identity, Pramuhendra is challenging the tendency towards childhood amnesia, the inability of adults to remember the times when they were young.

Pramuhendra's works constitute a personal biography that he uses to reveal the didactic functions of art: to build a bridge to the spirit of his past, to open a road to access his identity. For that, he begins his process by selecting some family photos that to him contain particular memories (historical moments with other members of the family). He arranges these photos based on an episodic memory that was once recorded in time-space associated with emotions and various contexts which he understands. Most of these photos explicitly record his presence, but he also uses a number of photos that do not record his presence among his family.

Reflecting from Pramuhendra's works, we find an understanding that the strategy of looking to the past is perhaps one of the most generic strategies to interpret the present. This attitude is driven not only by disagreements on what occurred in the past or what the past was like, but the uncertainty about whether or not the past is truly past, ended and closed off, or whether it continues, although in different forms ■

Remembrance, Now (excerpt) Shabbir Hussain Mustafa

J. Ariadhitya Pramuhendra's *Spacing Identities* draws upon family portraits from the artist's past in illustrating the intensely problematic yet stimulating exercise of aestheticizing fragments of everyday life in exposing the eclectic, the fragmented, and the relational concerns of identity. Engaging with specific moments in the artist's life, the works accentuate, perhaps even fixate on exposing the constructedness of *our* identities which have come to be assumed as natural and given. Amidst the bizarre and the banality represented by family portraiture, it is assumed that there is no need to present a story nor any great proposition, but a discursive plunge, a powerful reconstitution in the present of *that* position where identity may be expressed.

Therefore, *Spacing identities* is not entirely about making sense of the people in the aged family photographs or portraits but using such photographs from the artist's past as starting points for an investigation of the "image" itself; as productive acts of remembering knowledges of the past, now. The exhibition space, gently, step by step, in a nonlinear manner, enters this minefield of memory, the tangle of *our* histories. Herein, for all the painful differences of the postcolonial moment we find ourselves amidst, Pramuhendra's phantasmatic renderings seem to reek of distress and perhaps even of "loss", and of identity as irony. And it is through these charcoals that we find, lodged amidst the dimmed faces, the shocking reckoning of *our* earlier selves. The encounter is somewhat extraordinary, for unlike the mirror image or photographic semblance, which, however intensely detailed and "real" can only be retained as a memory which exalts a bygone age, the works of *Spacing Identities* authorize a (de)layered simulacrum of our past being; at once familiar under the attentive familiarity of Pramuhendra's memories, at once unfamiliar, held in place by the gaze of museum audiences.

It seems, only words can pull back this veil of circumspect haziness. But can words reveal? Can they empower us to imagine what's behind the surface of these charcoals? What is the story that these renderings tell? What do the overlapping, unsmiling faces and interlacing bodies reveal? Having just participated in the process of its construction, we nevertheless continue to read the images as a



/// Half Full, Charcoal on Canvas, 295cm x 190cm, 2009

record; we read them against some notion of truth value which is seemingly held to be inherent in the paintings. As such, *Spacing Identities* remains the ultimate occasion for a repeated conversation between the artist and his memories; between audience and painting; the audience's continuing "unhappiness" with its obscurity, complicated by the artist's reassurances that these are real, true moments. An uneasy resolution is repeated each time the audience gazes upon a different charcoal drawing; the desire at once to understand, to deconstruct, but also to suppress it ■

About NUS Museum

NUS Museum is a comprehensive museum for teaching and research. It focuses on Asian regional art and culture, and seeks to create an enriching experience through its collections and exhibitions. The Museum has over 7,000 artefacts and artworks divided across four collections. The **Lee Kong Chian Collection** consists of a wide representation of Chinese materials from ancient to contemporary art; the **South and Southeast Asian Collection** holds a range of works from Indian classical sculptures to modern pieces; and the **Ng Eng Teng Collection** is a donation from the late Singapore sculptor and Cultural Medallion recipient of over 1,000 artworks. A fourth collection, the **Straits Chinese Collection**, is located at NUS' Baba House at 157 Neil Road.

NUS Museum launched the **NX Gallery** in 2006. It is conceived as a contemporary art venue to showcase emerging artistic trends in Singapore, Southeast Asia and beyond, as well as to encourage critical curatorial and museum practices. For the NUS Centre For the Arts and the NUS Museum, these aims afford an emphasis in partnerships within the University and beyond, underscored by the recognition that art and culture form a powerful nexus that connect different disciplines and institutional interests. Past exhibitions organized at the NX Gallery include *Picturing Relations: Simryn Gill and Tino Djumini* (May 2007), *Strategies Towards the Real: S. Sudjojono and Contemporary Indonesian Art* (May 2008), *Bound For Glory: Wong Hoy Cheong* (September 2008) and *Jendela: A Play of the Ordinary* (March 2009).

NUS MUSEUM

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Opening Hours
10am - 7.30pm (Tuesdays - Saturdays)
10am - 6pm (Sundays)
Closed on Mondays & Public Holidays

