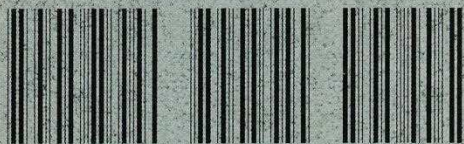


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SOUTHEAST
ASIAN ART

PHUAN THAI MENG



MADE IN MALAYSIA

Rewards • 诱惑
2009
acrylic & oil on canvas
180 x 270 cm



thus able to announce his position on painting as an act of staging an event or an image yet at the same time draw from his brush the ability to provide a blunt but incisive narrative of Malaysia.

Since winning the Juror's Choice Award from the Philip Morris Malaysia - ASEAN Art Awards in 2000, Thai Meng has since gained regional recognition for his meticulously crafted paintings that explore between-spaces within an urban environment. His process is described by artist Yee I-Lann in *The Painting Show* as 'honing in on the ordinary as an attentive observer to the awkward relationship between these spaces and its inhabitants.'

In his second solo exhibition, Phuan Thai Meng continues to turn the familiar into a surreal-like dream world, employing a number of strategies that evoke the uncanny in his tableaux. Social issues such as consumerism, urban decay, domestic ennui find their way into the series, collectively presenting an unsettling picture of our contemporary experience, at the same time, revealing the complex lives we lead through a sharp and incisive portrayal of the disquieting sites or objects that surrounds us.



Made in Malaysia explores the topic of nation-building by taking a look at a broad range of issues. Weaving these issues into one another as a series, Thai Meng hopes to create multiple entry points into a national narrative, examining its ambition and follies in a non-judgmental manner. On a parallel development, Thai Meng is also keen on expanding what a series of work means. The prevalent notion of what constitutes a series in the local art context is generally determined by the stylistic variations that are contingent to a core style. Thai Meng challenges this view, allowing the disparate paintings in this body of work to compel a revisioning on what a series could be. In this instance, the series is made up of juxtaposition. Because it is not governed by a particular style or process, meaning is generated in the 'between spaces' through comparative reading.

Although Thai Meng is often described as a photo-realist painter, the artist is also aware of the constructive language in his painting and demonstrates a fine level of reflexivity. *The Road to... • 腐* illustrates the ambitious transportation infrastructure of the country on a scale that creates a vertiginous impact. These elevated roads stretch out in seemingly endless direction. More over, by excising certain parts of the support column and revealing the plywood structure behind the painted surface, Thai Meng compels us to acknowledge the painting's material support as much as he uses painting as a window into another world. This tension between the pictorial world and the painting's physical structure brackets the divergent pictorial languages between minimalist objectivity and representation in one shared space.

Location and site in Thai Meng's paintings are crucial to his practice. The artist sees the painted environment or locale as unrealised or imaginative installations. It is here that Thai Meng found a resonating art form. In installation art, the space is transformed into a personal vision of the artist through which the audience is able to immerse themselves often in surrealistic environment. The surreal qualities of Thai Meng's paintings borrow from this interest in translating the language of installation into painting.

In *Move Forward • 奔*, Thai Meng projects us into a dilapidated warehouse, with two oversized town-planning guide sitting neglect in the cavernous hall. Described as an

The Road to... • 腐

2009 acrylic on canvas 200 x 153 cm each (x 4 panels)

apocalyptic vision of Kuala Lumpur, the painting prophesies a city on the brink of collapse. In the absence of human, the city which is represented by the town-planning guide lay wasted within an industrial warehouse that would have once signify progress and development.

The in-between is also apparent in the slippage between the English and the Mandarin titles. For those who can read both languages, one could hazard the translation is merely an approximation. By juxtaposing the English and Mandarin titles, Thai Meng highlights the label as an integral framing device through which different linguistic registers could suggest divergent meanings that the image could possibly contain.

In *Bait* • 排排坐, 吃果果, the close up painting of colourful glistening candies is given an English title that suggests notion of enticement and entrapment. We are compelled to ask what is the motive behind its attractive surface? Is there deceit in this generosity? The Mandarin title however is an excerpt from a Chinese nursery rhyme that roughly translate as, 'Let us sit down in a row and eat our sweet-sweets', evoking a child-like attraction to the mountainous pile of sweets. If the Mandarin title alludes to the innocence of childhood and the generosity associated with candies, the English title does the opposite, suggesting something far more sinister behind what is offered. The two titles that Thai Meng insists on giving to each of his paintings is a statement about the ambiguity and openness of the pictorial language.

Made in Malaysia is not without its distinctive brand of wit and humour. *Solution* • 愚昧, sees Thai Meng hone in on a recent news event in this painting installation where a lingerie encased in a glass box complements a dream-like painting depicting a mannequin turning her back against



Bait • 排排坐, 吃果果 2009 acrylic & oil on canvas 91 x 122 cm

an overturned bed that is suspended in mid-air. Referring to the remarks made by a local member of the parliament who suggested that housewives should dress more sexily for their husbands while they are at home to prevent husbands from hitting on their hired help, Thai Meng's interpretation highlights its farcical nature, reflecting back perhaps on the foolishness of the suggestion.

These stories although self-contained come together to form an epic account of what Malaysia is. Humour, pathos, delight, tragedy and collapse all become an interconnected moral allegory on the choices we make and the consequences we will have to bear.



Move Forward • 弃

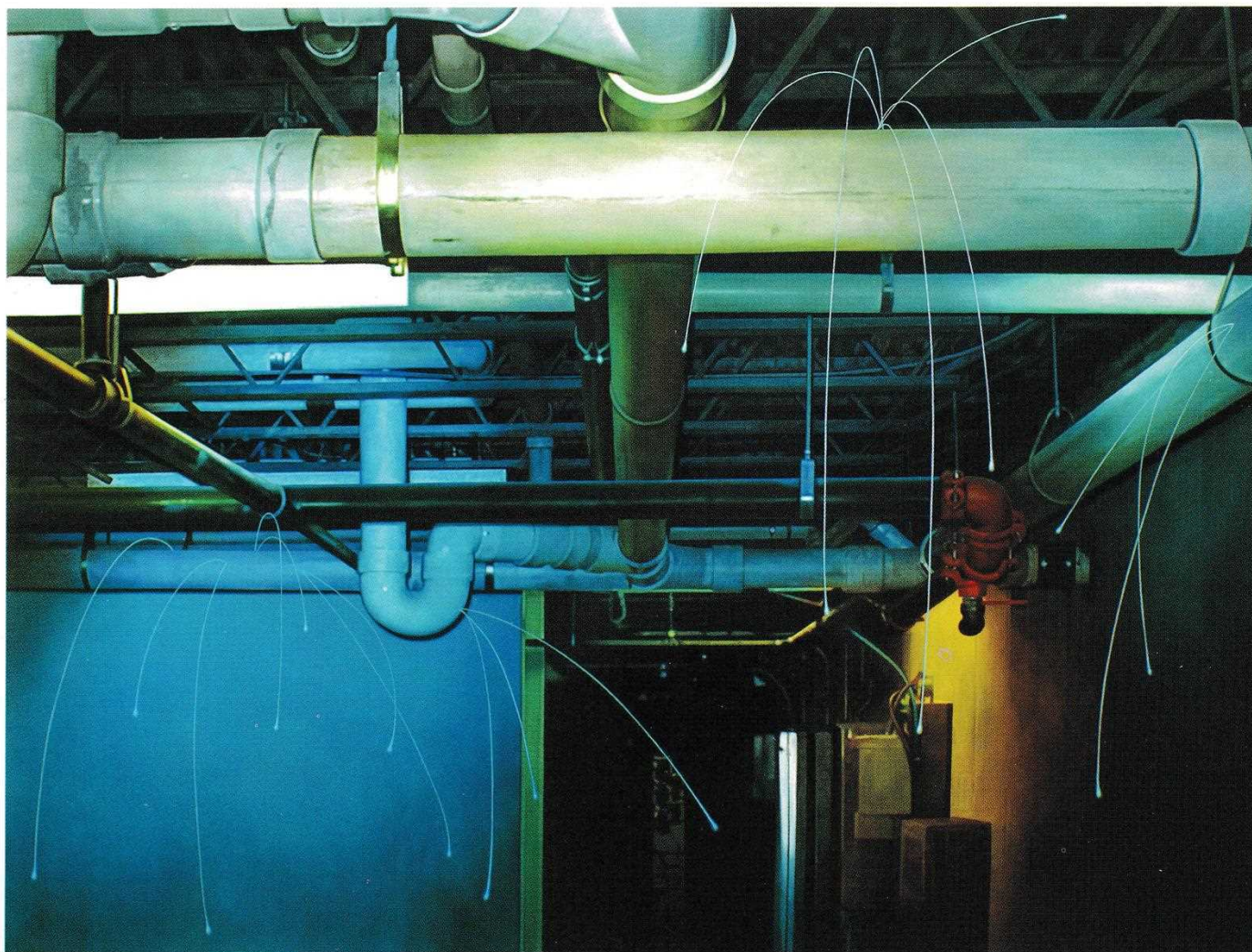
2009 acrylic & oil on canvas 91 x 122 cm

made in malaysia *simon soon*

Our social and cultural spaces rarely acknowledge the importance of the artistic as a site where the imaginative and the ambiguous can critically engage us. Creativity is often seen as a non-commitment to ethics, or at least transcends any moral imperative, serving instead the commercial spectacle that has shaped the way we consume culture.

Made in Malaysia repositions the artist as a social agent and not an isolated creator, whose craft draws directly from the social realities he comes from, not from some hermetic mind or discourse. Phuan Thai Meng's paintings, photo collages and installations are often given semblance to the ordinary reality, but there is always that one detail, a tear in the canvas, a wheelbarrow flying towards the reader that revises how we come to terms with his intention as an artist.

Take *Artificial Fountain • 欲* as an example. The painting describes the first sign of an impending structural breakdown of a building. The image of bursting pipelines with streams of water spurting in all direction forms an acerbic criticism at the lack of quality control and poor workmanship in local construction projects. However on closer inspection, the perfectly formed leakages look more like stuck on stage props than real water. By choosing to stage it, Thai Meng is



Artificial Fountain • 欲 2009 acrylic & oil on canvas 122 x 163 cm



Solution • 愚昧

2009

acrylic & oil on canvas, lingerie

91 x 122 cm

(painting shown is part of installation)

PHUAN THAI MENG is a full time artist, arts educator and founding member of the artist collective Rumah Air Panas (RAP). He received his Diploma in Fine Art majoring in painting from the Malaysian Institute of Art in 1996. Thai Meng has been exhibiting regularly since 1995.

His most recent exhibitions/projects include: *Tenggara, Southeast Asian Contemporary Art* at Novas Contemporary Urban Centre (CUC) in Liverpool (UK) and *Tukar Ganti* at VWFA Singapore in 2008, Curator team of 'R.A.P. Project – Walk In or Walk Out' at *Notthatbalai Art Festival* in Lost Generation Art Space (KL) in 2007, Production Manager for KPS (Koletif Pembangun Seni - Collective Art Developer) *Let Arts Move You* project with KTM commuter trains, *Mind, Body & Soul*, 2006 at Wei-Ling Gallery, *Crowds* at Reka Art Space and Artist Resident in *Conversation: Malaysia*, 2005 and *3 Young Contemporaries*, 2004 at VWFA Kuala Lumpur.

Thai Meng was a finalist in the 2006 Sovereign Asian Art Prize, Hong Kong, and won an Honourable Mention Award in 2003 as well as the Juror's Choice Award in 2000 from the Philip Morris Malaysia - Asean Art Awards.



Pose A • 沟渠 2009 oil on paper 38.5 x 29 cm

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EXHIBITION DATES: 9 - 26 SEPTEMBER 2009

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