



KOW LEONG KIANG

**INTIMATE
COLLISIONS**



MIDNIGHT LAVA IN PINK

2010

OIL ON LINEN

155 X 155 CM

The embrace of two bodies is an act of love, desire and tenderness. It can also be passionate, conflicting and aggressive. These emotions, however romantic or abject are the manifestation of the instinctive biological and complex psychological needs of every human being for sex and physical closeness. It is a powerful experience that primitively connects us to our own body and that of another. In Art the arousal of the visual and the physical are deeply connected making the erotic subject a compelling area for artists to explore. These creative images of human intimacy produce both universal and symbolic statements of the body, beauty and sexuality as well as trigger personal curiosities and memories by the viewer and artist. Such complex 'collisions' are the focus of Kow Leong Kiang's newest body of work at Valentine Willie Fine Art (VWFA). Looking at the erotic nude the artist explores the dual notion of movement and constraint as two bodies wrestle and play with one another within a contained space. The result is an intimate portrayal of a man and woman locked in physical and subsequently emotional struggle. A new series of paintings have been produced for the exhibition each with a different stylistic approach that reveal Kow's continuing evolution and shifting creative preoccupations. Such a strategy allows the artist to challenge himself aesthetically through the visceral manipulation of his medium. In addition, by conceptually emphasising the tensions generated by his figures the work powerfully brings the status of the nude subject in contemporary Malaysian painting into focus.

Kow Leong Kiang is well known for a visual vocabulary that includes ideas about memory, poetic realism and nostalgia as mediated by a connection to the land, human emotion, portraiture as well as a subtle political/social consciousness in the Malaysian context. Series such as *Floating World* and *Silent Conversations* through their stylistic confidence and popularity have all produced a certain set of expectations for Kow's work. It may therefore, seem unusual to see such a dramatic shift in subject matter. However the nude has been a continuing area of interest for the artist who has spent years mastering his command of human anatomy. Far from total reinvention though, the artist's love of beauty and lyrical formalism are nevertheless still apparent in these more dramatic images of bodies in motion.

The catalyst for this series was instigated by a year long VWFA residency in Yogyakarta during 2008. In conjunction with producing the work for his residency, Kow also began to experiment with ideas around the nude. Inspired by the energy and dedication of the local art scene he decided to stage an elaborate happening that would form the foundation of *Intimate Collisions* whilst in Indonesia. Kow selected a male and female model and then asked them to interact within a relatively compact (4 x 4 ft) specially created clear plastic box that mimics the square shape of his canvases. Choreographing and collaborating with them he photographed their movements in tightly composed images where flesh filled the entire frame. Selecting the most engaging poses from the session Kow then composed and shifted these figures onto canvas when he returned to Malaysia. The translation of a physical performance to photographic image to painting is a complex one. When the real is choreographed, manipulated, documented photographically it is rooted in a certain tangible reality. However, through a process of removal and addition it is then transformed into something more mysterious, symbolic and otherworldly in painting. Intriguingly in this instance, the details he altered were the specifics of his Indonesian subjects and visual distractions such as tattoos and hair colour. This is purposefully not portraiture. By choosing ambiguity over individuality, these figures act as statements about the body, male/female relationships and technical strategies in composition.

The paintings although stylistically different from another in relation to colour palette, use of brushstroke or attention to detail all have important consistencies. Each portrays curiously sensual and at times embattled nude human forms. Conveying a complex experience of stillness, violence and movement these monumental gladiators are tightly framed with direct and subtle references to their plastic prison. The box although present and absent at the same time is a crucial element to the series adding a formal and modernist influence. This allows for intriguing tableaux that combine expressive realism with abstract and powerful painterly interventions.

Hot Spring was the first in the series. Loose brushstrokes in green and flesh toned hues show the female figure dominating her male counterpart. Is this an act of play, manipulation or desire? Bodies are only just restrained by the canvas as their fleshy contours collide with the edge of the frame, a more subtle reference to the box they were placed within. However, the most compelling detail of the work is the white paint that sensually drips over the legs of the two figures. An allusion to sexual secretions this intervention adds a provocative tension and arousal to the viewing experience. By giving the popular drip technique a specific symbolic underpinning, Kow displays a certain reflexivity of his medium and allows it to have new purpose and potency. The use of paint in this focused manner reoccurs in more aggressive terms throughout the series. In *Geyser* and *Geyser (suddenly)* the effect is much more explosive. Suggesting the moment of orgasmic pleasure it also hints at darker psychological elements. Violent splashes cover the faces in *Geyser* as the male figure kneels on top of the female whose hands grasp his hair in passion and/or fury. This fetishisation of paint to become an object in itself for arousal, the heightened physicality it infers, expresses a psychological disturbance as well as visual excitement. This is reinforced in *Geyser (suddenly)* where the two figures literally crash into each other in one of the most aggressive works in the series. The shock of white paint rises high up into the frame like a physical force of nature, the result of an intense reaction between the two. More brutal in nature this catastrophic intrusion symbolises the passion of human relationships. But rather than tell a specific story, Kow's commentary speaks of the emotional and psychological possibilities of relationships that have the ability to liberate, traumatise and restrict the mind.

This constraint is physically present in the plastic cube that is the silent framework for the entire series. The claustrophobic conditions the models found themselves within and their ability to experiment led to the dynamic and mutated forms presented in the exhibition. Sometimes there are subtle references to this cage with the inclusion of reflection or the joins of the box. At others it has been meticulously repeated in a formal play on lines, and frames within frames such as *Midnight Lava In Pink*. Here the figures have been inverted and painted in cool blue tones with sticky pink trails discharging all over their bodies. The perspective of the cube has been painted, along with reflected forms. The artist has also included a flat black frame around his composition which, like the frames used in *Geyser* and *Geyser (suddenly)* act as distancing devices from the viewer. The even colour of the frame creates a sense of visual movement as well as creating an awareness of the painting as an object, its geometry and rational grid.

Intimate Collisions represents yet another new direction for Kow Leong Kiang. By presenting viewers with the erotic nude, a relatively taboo subject in Malaysian culture, he embarks on an intentionally daring pursuit of creative ambition that looks to more conceptually orientated strategies. In challenging himself and his audience Kow reveals our inner desires and the pleasures of the flesh as a voyeuristic subject and act. This erotic theatre with its exaggerated shapes and sinewy strands, ruptures and elegant uses of paint reveals the complexities of human nature. Although not portraiture in its familiar sense the artist nevertheless creates a recognisable description of human behaviour. The struggles and conflicts created by such passionate needs often lead to a type of obsessive madness that can end in spectacular disaster. Ironically it is this very intensity that has inspired Kow to capture such storms and fires in new and dynamic ways in order to understand ourselves and those we choose to bring closest to us.



GEYSER

2010

OIL ON LINEN

155 X 155 CM



KIM ZEONG HANG 2010

HOT SPRING

2010

OIL ON LINEN

155 X 155 CM





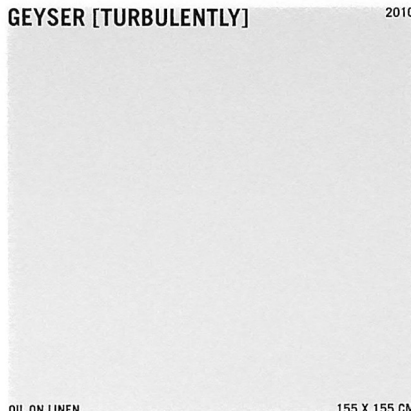


GEYSER [TURBULENTLY]

2010

OIL ON LINEN

155 X 155 CM





KWAN LEONG KIONG 2010

GEYSER [SUDDENLY]

2010

OIL ON LINEN

155 X 155 CM



KOW LEUNG KIANG

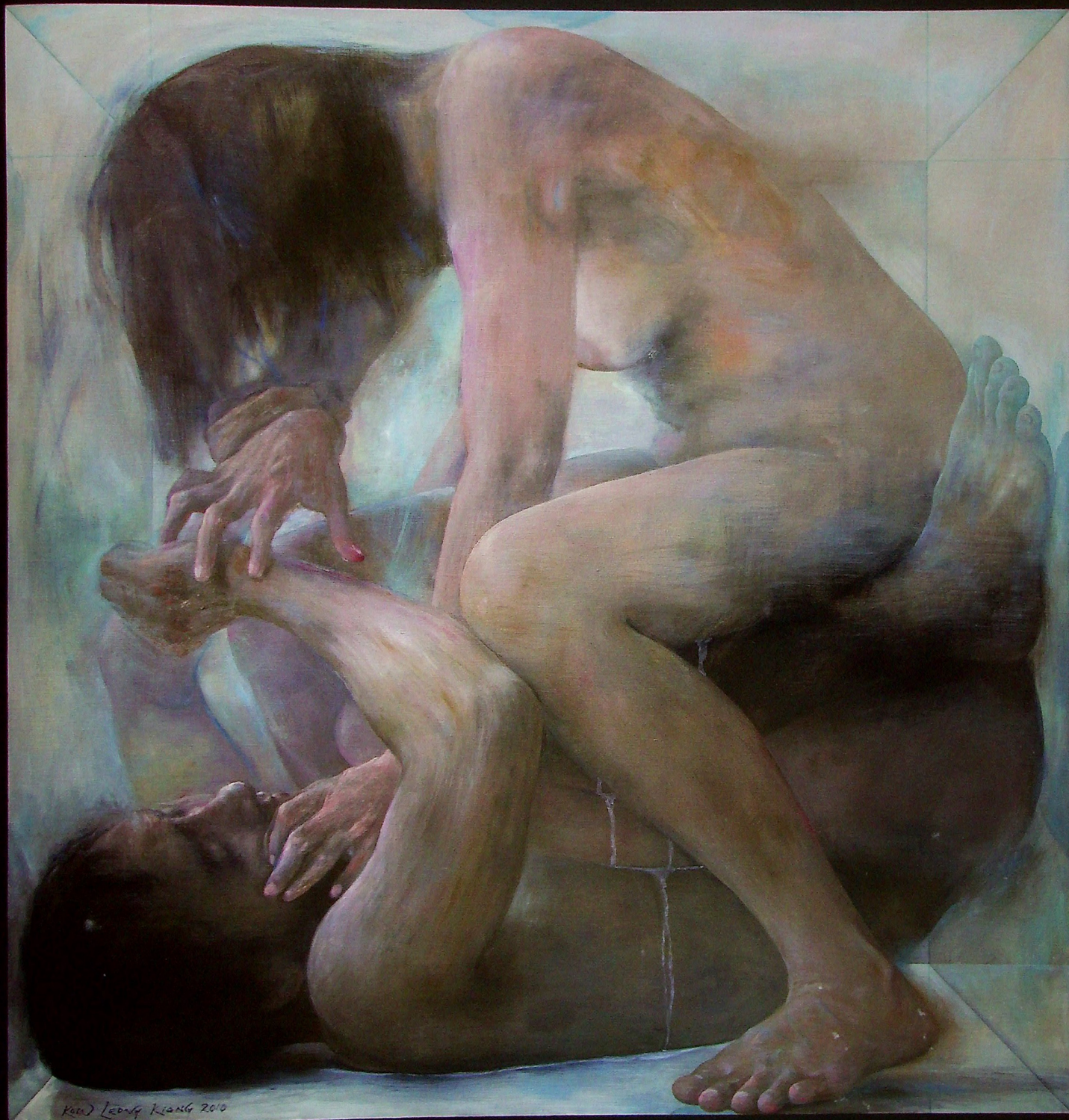
2010

SMALL STREAM

2010

OIL ON LINEN

155 X 155 CM

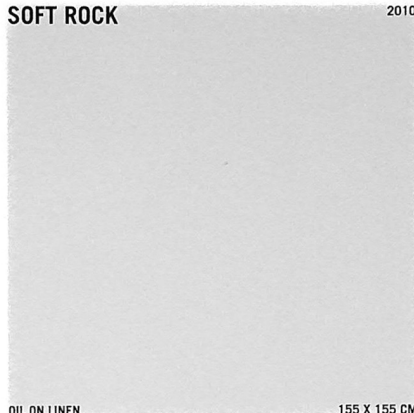


SOFT ROCK


2010

OIL ON LINEN

155 X 155 CM







Kow Leong Kiang (b.1970) has garnered much attention and success since winning the Grand Prize at the Philip Morris ASEAN Art awards in 1998. His depictions of nostalgic rural scenes on the east coast of Malaysia are captured through masterful feather-light rendering. He has held six solo exhibitions to date, notably 'Jogja Constellation' in Tembi Contemporary, Yogyakarta, (2009), 'Other People' in VWFA KL, (2007), 'Silent Conversations' in VWFA KL, (2005), 'Human' in Red Mill Gallery Vermont, USA and 'Floating World' in VWFA KL, (2003). He has also participated in group exhibitions in Malaysia, Indonesia, China and Vietnam which include 'Headlights' in VWFA Singapore (2009), 'Tenggara: Contemporary Paintings from Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines' in the Novus Contemporary Urban Centre, Liverpool, UK (2008), 'Continuities: Contemporary Art of Malaysia at the turn of the 21st Century' in Guangdong Museum of Art, China (2004). In 2008 he completed a residency with VWFA and Tembi Contemporary in Yogyakarta and in 2004, he was awarded the Asian Artist Fellowship by the 11th Annual Freeman Foundation, where he was an artist in residence at the Vermont Studio Centre in the USA.

Acknowledgements:
Sangkring Art Space
Putu Sutawijaya
Jenni Vi Mee Yei
Wayan Andy
Pangky
Tanto
The Artist's Collectors

EXHIBITION DATES: 18 AUGUST – 8 SEPTEMBER 2010

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