

mapping the homeland:  
we are proud of you (?\_?)

**PHUAN THAI MENG**





3 - 23 december 2011

Valentine Willie Fine Art Singapore

*Wesley*  
2011





# your country needs you

by eva mcgovern

The homeland is a complex idea riddled with contradiction. On one level, it is the point of origin and return that validates cultural identity. More of an abstract space than a clearly defined reality, it is closely associated with the concept of countries and nationhood, weaving together ethnicity, language, history, politics and culture. As a belief system, it infers a shared sense of belonging and community, of pride and sentimentality. Within geo-political terms, it is the locus of patriotic nationalism in need of preservation and protection from outside threats. However, the homeland/nation is not a fixed concept but as Benedict Anderson states in his seminal text *Imagined Communities*, a social construct as imagined by the people who are part of it, and therefore in a constant state of expansion and contraction around the shifting nature of politics, cultures and economies. Inevitably, human failure by those in governance, also sow the seeds of doubt for this idealistic construct. When politicians mislead their people or when communities dissolve due to economic manipulation, the perception of the homeland or nation becomes bitter sweet and filled with doubt.

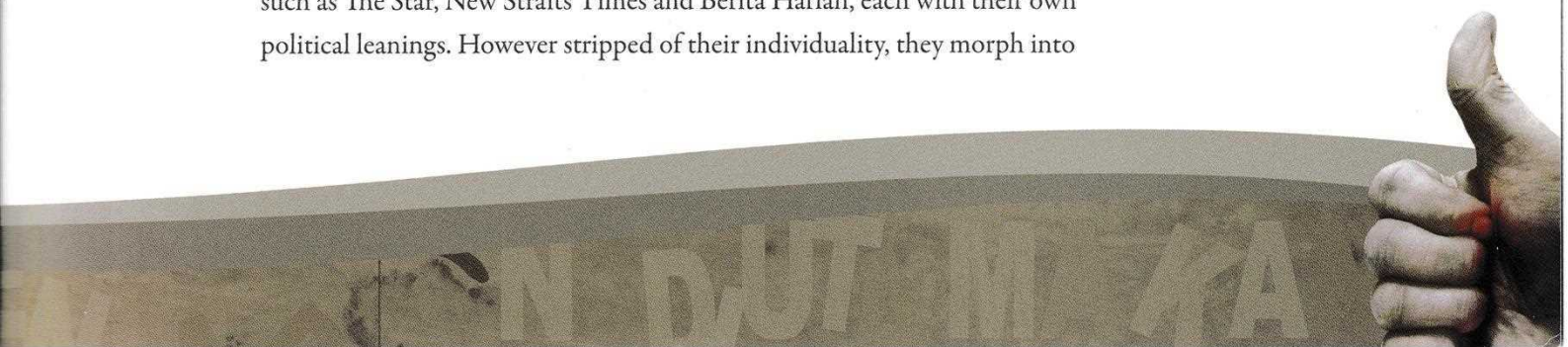
Malaysian artist Phuan Thai Meng explores the construct of the homeland and Malaysia through his signature brand of photorealist painting laced with local socio-political commentaries in *Mapping the Homeland: We Are Proud of You (?\_?)*. Highly conceptual in nature, his skilful illusions purposefully articulate the artifice and cracks of nationalism propagated by cultural campaigns and political gesturing. Texturing his observations with installation and performance, he reveals the constantly changing game of Malaysian politics whose outcomes sometimes lead to less than glorious results. Rejecting the enduring Malaysian dilemma of race, class and religion, Thai Meng instead looks at a more abstracted version of the Malaysian nation and ideas of Government bound by a responsibility towards its people but riddled with weakness and contradiction. For the exhibition, he lifts and translates images from the media: state run newspapers, social marketing campaigns as well as national unity schemes



such as the prevalent but vaguely defined 1Malaysia scheme to develop entry points into the Malaysian condition.

Already established within the Malaysian art world as an artist, educator and founding member of artist collective Rumah Air Panas, Phuan Thai Meng is known for painting an unsettling picture of our contemporary experience. His photorealistic paintings of objects and everyday spaces communicate notions of consumerism, urban decay and the impotence of politics with the Malaysian landscape. Executed over a period of weeks and months, his painstakingly slick, flat and gleaming surfaces are an exhaustive exercise in mimesis. However, audiences are always aware of the mirage, which quickly shifts into a brittle imitation on the verge of collapse. This highly contrived 'fakeness' thus serves to put into sharp focus the illusion of politics and the potential failure of the Malaysian dream. By removing all forms of articulated physical gesture and brush stroke, he stretches the potential of painting beyond the personal and romantic connotations of the artist in the studio to produce a searing social commentary on the world around him.

His network of images bring together faceless politicians gesturing during tokenistic publicity appearances for social regeneration campaigns, designed posters for cleaning up water supply systems and monumental billboards that reveal goals of national aspirations and prosperity. Epic in both scale and aesthetic treatment, Thai Meng highlights the formulaic nature of these forms of social and political marketing through various media outlets. In this way, he echoes Anderson's belief that community/nation is a result of media communication and capitalism extolling a common but nevertheless imagined discourse for people to put their faith into. His politicians are from all races and lifted from various newspapers such as The Star, New Straits Times and Berita Harian, each with their own political leanings. However stripped of their individuality, they morph into





the generic official, dressed in dull and inspiring uniforms of white shirts and dark trousers. Categorised into actions, each monochromatic man squats, stoops, stands, spreads their hands or pinch their noses to illustrate hollow gestures of engagement during various publicity outings to lobby support for political parties or show commitment to the needs of various communities. Brought to life during a performance on opening night, Thai Meng further develops his critique into a curious game of football. In *Blue's Game*, a cast of uniformed officials play the beautiful game as governed by a constantly changing set of rules dictated by the referee. It is a cynical take on the puppets of politics who compete for public popularity. But who benefits from such exercises in the end? Who is controlling who and what of the passive/active spectators/citizens? Where is the pride in the homeland now?

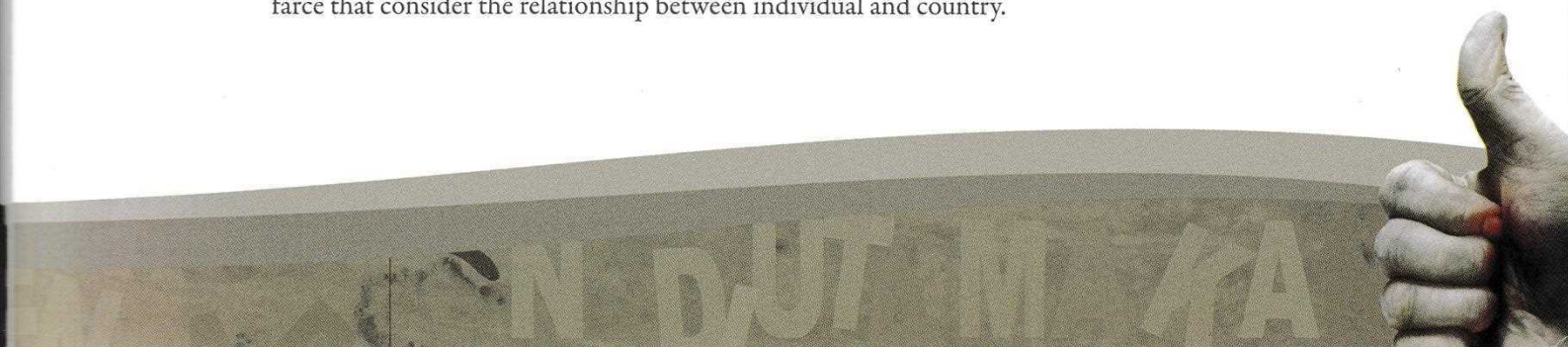
Thai Meng's curious exhibition title is repeated in *We Are Proud of You* (?\_?) a large scale four panel work depicting a decaying collage of lesser known Malaysian landmarks bound together by glittering fireworks, kitsch rainbows, and a ominous hand in a thumbs up gesture. Footnoting the painting is the phrase *Rakyat Didahulukan, Pencapaian Diutamakan* (People First, Performance Now) a slogan from Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak's 1Malaysia campaign that began in 2010. Designed to encourage greater racial harmony through a series of marketing strategies and efficient governance, the campaign has received mixed responses. Although 1Malaysia health clinics and grocery stores for lower income groups and NGO's supporting youth projects in line with the scheme appear positive, a solid defence of their implementation and further clarification has been less than forthcoming. The emoticon at the end of Thai Meng's four panel piece and exhibition title, expresses this sense of confusion by the rakyat (people) with two question marks acting as perplexed eyes reacting to such ambiguity. The Eye on Malaysia Ferris wheel -- relocated from Kuala Lumpur to Melaka and Malaysia's version of the Singapore Eye -- the locally manufactured Proton car and government



building in Putrajaya all convey a mixture of secondary success and/or decay. The glittering pomp and circumstance erupting around this moulding collage injects an uncomfortable tension heightened by a raw and bruised hand forced to endorse this parody of national success.

So who are the bearers of pride in Thai Meng's exhibition? Who is the 'We' in this menagerie of signs, slogans and images? Constantly preoccupied with community on a grass roots level, Thai Meng is often concerned that the public has an incomplete set of knowledge on current political strategies due to a type of government deception/manipulation. *Fact and Factor*, a hyper realistic depiction of a wrapped water filter poster calling for clean water supplies subtly provokes the monopoly on infrastructure by specific companies who make such basic human needs more difficult. These social problems are compounded by the inability of local government and politicians to improve these situations. This emphasises his belief that no matter the race or political loyalties all politicians are the same, nameless and faceless tokens to a larger game that does not take into account the needs of community as its main priority. In this light, perhaps the 'We' is not the Government or the people but the symbolic voice of universal corruption, that pride is not a positive sentiment but a negative vice that leads to avarice and blind progress.

As a whole, *Mapping the Homeland: We Are Proud of You (?\_?)* is more a mapping of ideology than physical landscapes, Phuan Thai Meng nevertheless creates a visual representation of Malaysia through a series of loaded signs and symbols that reflect his personal vision on the status of the country or homeland. Although his photorealist surfaces are laden with the weight of social commentary importantly, his work is not without humour or light-hearted kitsch. Through his use of wry and knowing titles, text and language he presents a Malaysian comedy of errors filled with tragedy and farce that consider the relationship between individual and country.







Action 1 - Stand, 2011, oil on linen, 244 x 150 cm





Action 2 – Stoop, 2011, oil on linen, 244 x 150 cm



Action 3 - Squat, 2011, oil on linen, 244 x 150 cm





Action 4 – Pinch the Nose, 2011, oil on linen, 244 x 150 cm



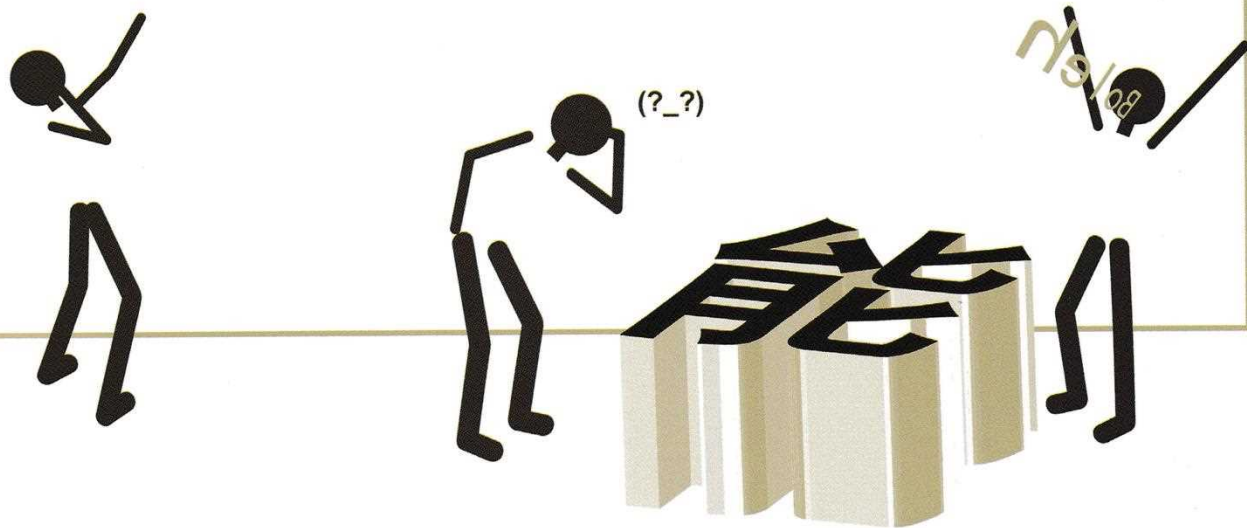




Action 5 – Spread out the Hands  
2011, oil on linen, 244 x 150 cm



首先，人们现在性



Attitude and Vision

2011, installation: plywood, gold leaf, polyfoam, cement,  
dimension variable

(a sketch of the artwork)





RAKYAT DIDAHUKUKAN, PENCAP



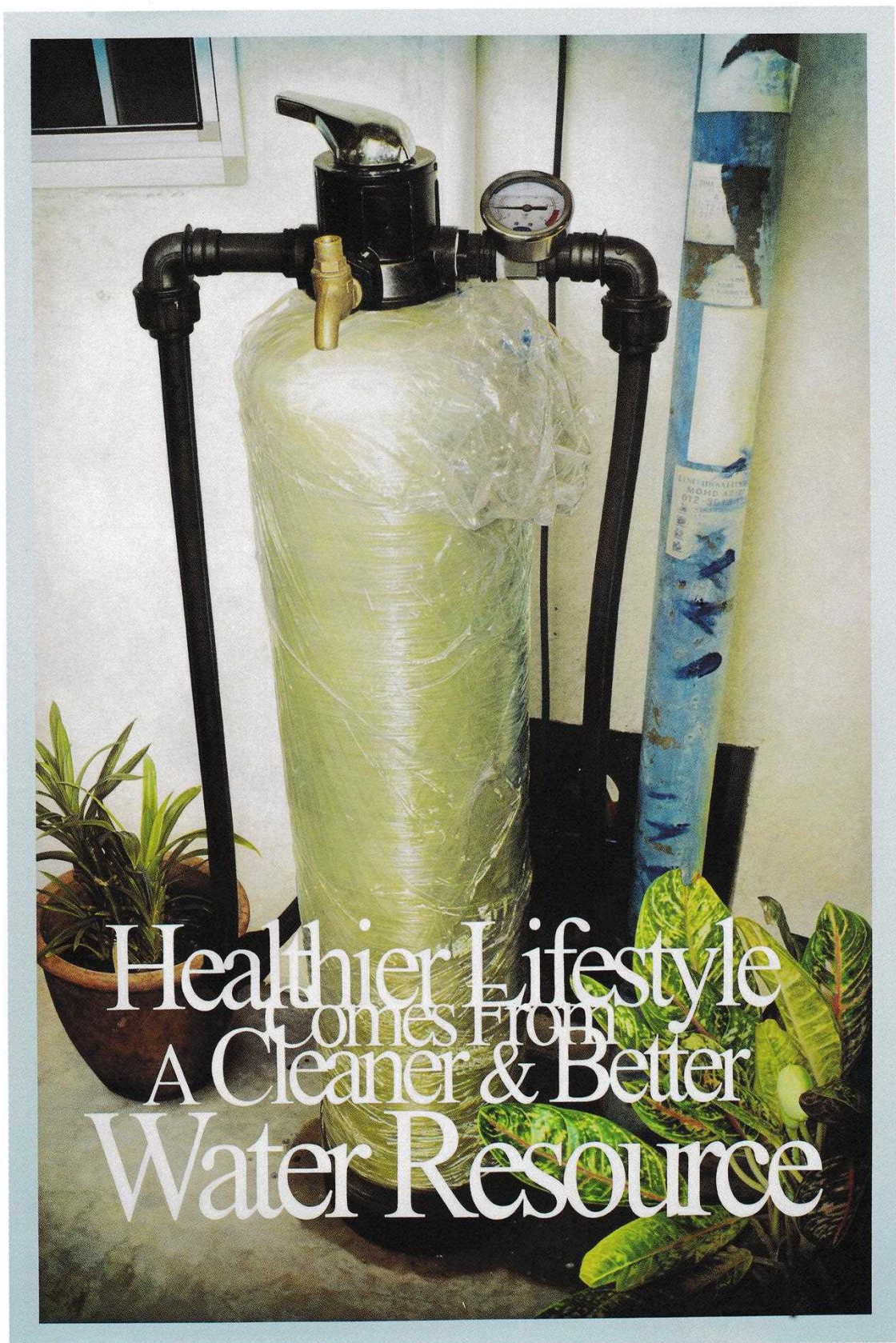


We Are Proud of You (?\_?)

2011, acrylic on canvas, 244 x 544 cm (tetrptych)

right and left panels: 244 x 122 cm each, middle panels: 244 x 150 cm each





Fact and Factor, 2011, oil on canvas, 183 x 122 cm



# phuan thai meng

b. 1974, Batu Pahat, Malaysia

## solo exhibitions

- 2010 *The WE Project*, Richard Koh Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2009 *Made In Malaysia*, Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2004 *PTM0001020304...*, Rumah Air Panas (RAP), Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

## selected group exhibitions

- 2010 *Al-Kesab/Once Upon A Time In Malaysia*, MAP (White Box), Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
*The Tiger Show*, Wei-Ling Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
*Contemporary Rhetoric*, Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
*A Meter Perspective*, House Of Matahati (HOM), Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2009 *Headlights 2009*, Valentine Willie Fine Art, Singapore, and;  
Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.
- 2008 *Tenggara; Southeast Asian Contemporary Art*, Novas Contemporary Urban Centre (CUC),  
Liverpool, United Kingdom  
*Tikar Ganti: New Malaysian Painting*, Valentine Willie Fine Art, Singapore  
*Arttriganle*, Soka Gakkai Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
*The Painting Show*, The Annexe Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2007 *Antara Merdeka*, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2006 *18@8 Kuala Lumpur*, Amin Gulgee Gallery, Karachi, Pakistan  
*Y.C.A. Group Show*, 153 Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
*Kata di Kota: A Malaysian Exhibition of Contemporary Art in Cuba*, in conjunction with  
the 9<sup>th</sup> Havana Biennale 2006, Galeria de arte Boyeros, Havana, Cuba
- 2005 *Man & God; A travelling show by arts4souls*, Stuttgart Design Center, Stuttgart, Germany
- 2004 *3 Young Contemporaries*, Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2003 *Space(s)- Dialogue + Exhibition*, Rumah Air Panas (RAP), Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
Philip Morris Malaysia Art Awards 2003, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2002 *Open Studio*, Rumah Air Panas (RAP), Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2001 *Ctrl.alt.del Three-Man Drawing Art Exhibition*, Rumah Air Panas (RAP), Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2000 *Philip Morris ASEAN Art Awards 2000*, Singapore Art Museum, Singapore  
*Philip Morris Malaysia Art Awards 2000*, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

## projects & activities

- 2008 Exhibition Manager, Contemporary Art in School, Stella Maris, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2007 Production Manager, Let Arts Move You, a public art project at KTM station & commuter trains,  
Klang Valley, Malaysia  
Curatorial team, RAP project- Walk In or Walk Out, Notthatbalai Art Festival 2007,  
Lost Generation Art Space, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2006 Curatorial team, Y.C.A. Group Show, 153 Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2003 Organising committee & Presenter, [Space(s)- Dialogue + Art Exhibition],  
Rumah Air Panas (RAP), Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

## awards

- 2006 The 2006 Sovereign Asian Art Prize, Top 30, Hong Kong, China
- 2003 Philip Morris Malaysian ASEAN Art Award 2003, Honorable Mention, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2000 Philip Morris Malaysian ASEAN Art Awards 2000, Juror's Choice Award, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

## residencies

- 2005 CONVERSATION: MALAYSIA, Artist-in-Residence, organized by P10, sponsored by ANA, Singapore



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