

*The boy
with the tiger*

c. 1940
oil on linen
150 x 130 cm



Huang Wei (b.1914 - unknown, Singapore) began painting mostly portraits of children - in the late 1940s, after the war. Most of these paintings are still in the process of restoration by artist-curator, Alan Oei. Critics have tended to describe his paintings as "representing the trauma of war." He attended Anglo-Chinese School and in 1928 received the Lim Boon Keng Gold Medal for Arts. He also won a scholarship to study at Raffles Institution that same year. When he finished school, he worked as a photographer at his father's photographic studio, Southern Star.

ABOUT THE CURATOR

Alan Oei (b.1976, Singapore) is an artist-curator who has exhibited in Singapore, Hong Kong, Melbourne and New York. His works tend to be based on art history and politics. He has also attempted to reconstruct the life and works of the postwar painter, Huang Wei, in collaboration with other artists and academics. Because of his art history background and familiarity with oil painting, he has been the primary restorer and custodian of Huang's works. As a curator, he has initiated public creative projects such as Blackout, a warehouse exhibition in the dark that drew 3000 people to an industrial estate, and OH! Open House, the annual walkabout featuring art inside real life in neighbourhoods like Marine Parade and Tiong Bahru. He has a BA Art History (magna cum laude) from Columbia University (NY) and a Diploma in Fine Arts (distinction) from Lasalle College of the Arts.

EXHIBITION DATES
11 JULY - 4 AUGUST 2012

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valentine willie fine art

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cover

*The boy
with the broken arm*

c. 1950
oil on linen
90 x 60 cm

*The boy
with the emerald sleeve*

c. 1950s
oil on linen
92.5 x 61 cm



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**AFTER
VELÁZQUEZ**

by Huang Wei



The Re-presentation of Huang Wei

An interview between Alan Oei,
Exhibition Curator and Eva McGovern,
Head of Regional Programmes,
Valentine Willie Fine Art.

Eva McGovern: Tell me about Huang Wei. Obviously he is a historical artist, but he doesn't seem to appear at any point in the official narratives of Singaporean art history?

Alan Oei: Huang Wei is a Singaporean artist born in 1914. He worked in his family photography studio even while he was in school. My guess is that his first love was art not photography. He won an art scholarship for instance, and also studied with the famous Richard Walker, art superintendent of Singapore. But his paintings are all heavily influenced by photography.

Compositionally, his works adopt the conventions of a portrait photograph. A shallow and compressed space, deploying a backdrop / painting to create depth with a centralised composition, usually, with a single figure confronting the viewer. It's like the subjects are aware of the viewer's gaze, creating the same kind of self-consciousness you see in old portrait photography. In turn, the viewer is also drawn into the act of looking.

In regards to his absence in art history, Singapore's creative narratives have always been particularly skewed by an ethos of modernity. Therefore, artists who were immortalised were those who were considered 'modern' - people

like Liu Kang and Cheong Soo Pieng. In vogue with the Parisian Post-Impressionist style. It's not surprising to me, that there were painters like Huang who were not recognised.

EM: When did you first discover his work?

AO: In mid 2009, my friend Nora Samosir called me. She said her uncle-contractor had found rolls and rolls of old paintings. At that time, I was deeply interested in the Equator Art Society - a group of Chinese Social Realist painters who were largely forgotten. To come across an outsider artist who didn't even make it into our art history - was an incredible find!

The paintings of strange and maimed children were just completely at odds with everything I knew about Singapore. Me and Nora, and a few others decided to organise a lecture-performance. Nora is a veteran actress so she presented it while I helped with the research about the artist and restoration of the paintings. Part of the attraction was there was so little material about him - one trunk of personal effects - and I'm not exactly an archivist researcher, so there was a fair amount of conjecture. I became obsessed with this romantic archetype of the melancholic artist painting in his own warped universe.

EM: Children feature heavily across Huang Wei's work, like ghosts, almost haunting his canvases. You mentioned that this is about processing the traumas of war?

AO: Huang lost his family - his two children and wife - at the start of the Second World War when the bombs fell. I don't know if he was specifically trying to express or sublimate that trauma onto the canvas, but it certainly feels that way. Look at his children, missing limbs, paint dripping. It's hard not to relate this to the violence of war.

However, I do think there is much more than that. Perhaps it's also the futility of making paintings in a time of photography, of new ways of looking at the world.

EM: This exhibition, the first for Huang Wei in Kuala Lumpur, is centred around the artist's interest in Spanish Old Master, Diego Velasquez's iconic painting *Las Meninas*. Can you explain why this is so important to him and why you are choosing this as a subject matter for the exhibition?

AO: We first presented Huang in Singapore in 2009. People - myself included - were completely caught up in how terribly romantic this story was, of an unknown painter who suffered such traumatic losses in the war. But within this body of work, there are discursive aspects that really challenge painting as a medium, which is an important part of the show.

When I saw Huang's paintings with these bizarre motifs that present the back-of-canvas, I could only think of *Las Meninas*. And true enough, Huang was inspired by that painting. I don't know exactly what inspired him, but he made at least 30 drawings and paintings around this iconic work. That's the obsession I am trying to discuss with this exhibition.

Michel Foucault, the French theorist, suggested that *Las Meninas* was the first history painting to recognise and embody the idea of representation. The world that exists within paintings (and texts) is not the same as reality. Representation organises signs and information within different systems.

Huang's works bring out a similar tension. He didn't read Foucault, but I think in a very intuitive way, and also because of his photography, his works really bring to fore this tension of what painting (or



representation) is. Just look at his children. They're posing, and they know it. They can feel the burning gaze of the painter, the viewer. That self-consciousness pervades the entirety of his paintings.

EM: This feels unusual when compared to Huang Wei's contemporaries such as Georgette Chen and Cheong Soo Pieng, who were working in more straightforward terms. Was Huang Wei ahead of his time?

AO: I wouldn't call Huang Wei ahead of his time. In fact, much of his works were in the traditional vein of painting. Painters copied other painters all the time. What makes him so unusual is his background in photography, and how he worked in isolation. However, there are, in his body of work, some postmodern approaches. It is only postmodern on hindsight though, and I'm sure he wasn't thinking about larger art historical discourse when he was painting.

EM: Are you an art historian now? Validating an artist and writing him into history is a formidable and problematic task.

AO: Not at all, I majored in art history. But I've never had much patience for archival research, so to call myself one would be disgraceful to the discipline! To say that this is about writing Huang into Singapore's history is to miss the mark. It's more about questioning how and why our art history has been written - what's canonised, and what's forgotten. Huang is a metaphor for this huge missing part of our history. Not just artists, but Singapore itself, because for so many years we've had an uncontested and singular narrative from the ruling party, PAP (People's Action Party).

EM: Alright then, so as an artist, how has this project affected your practice, and do you see Huang Wei as an extension of your own creativity, since, you are essentially acting as his voice?

AO: Initially, I focused on learning about restoration from a conservator. At that time, I was rather restrained, and tried to stay faithful to Huang Wei's colour scheme, without touching up the work too much. But what exactly is the 'real' Huang? There are so many layers - history, painting, his diary, his photographs, and so on. I thought forget it, let's just reinvent him and let critically play with his works and history. I'm now more keen to insert my artistic practice into the life and works of Huang. This project is less about archiving, and more about trying to reclaim different aspects of our history - shaping the past from the present. I'm also careful to leave nominal markers of separation - where does Huang Wei end and Alan Oei begin?



*The boy
in the arch*

c.1960
oil on linen
130 x 97 cm

*The boy
with the glacier*

1963
oil on linen
130 x 97 cm

*The girl
with the tiger*

c.1960
oil on linen
130 x 97 cm

*The boy
with the armour*

c.1960s
oil on linen
55.5 x 60.5 cm

*The girl
with the story*

c.1960
oil on linen
92.5 x 61 cm

*The girl
with the sword*

c.1960s
oil on linen
130 x 96.5 cm