LONGING

by chi too

A friend and colleague recently asked chi too, during a long conversation, 'chi too, are you for real?' On the surface such a question might appear insulting or critical, but then again, chi too is a curious figure. As a filmmaker, his work has focused on environmental and political activism within Malaysia. However, rather than suffer the activist hangover and produce politically-saturated work, his recent entry into the art world has taken an entirely opposite direction. Rejecting the solemnity of his political past, chi too instead creates a carefully blended experience of amusement, comedy and absurdity. This is often about himself. Choosing a humorous form of navel-gazing, he is clearly in need of some light-hearted introspection after years spent absorbing the gravitas of deforestation and the plight of the Orang Asli. The release from such a responsibility has created a promiscuous delight in different media; from poetry, performance, alternative music and interactive public art projects, through to painting, installation, video, photography and sculpture. He collaborates with a number of individuals; whether his loose partners in crime such as the Wonderboys (a type of band with revolving members) or the Best Art Show in Univers (a sometimes artist collective with Dill Malik and Munkao). He also participates in numerous events such as the 2011 Buka Jalan performance festival at the Balai Seni Lukis and exhibits painstakingly perfected objects and moving image work in group shows in KL and abroad. chi too, therefore, is obviously enjoying his time as a visual artist. But is he having too much fun? More importantly, should we take him seriously?

Produced with obsessive regularity from 2009 to 2011, the Longing series, presented in its entirety for the first time at Black Box Map @ Publika, and supported by Valentine Willie Fine Art, is chi too's first major solo that allows for a focused interpretation of his practice to date. This playful constellation of ridiculous and meticulously produced work may seem like humorous visual one-liners lampooning the pretention of high art and the figure of the angst-ridden artist. But, this is a characteristic double fake of an individual deeply driven by his emotional insecurities, laid bare through a form of ambiguous poetry. So chi too is very serious and very funny, gravely so at times. By providing a comic entrance into his practice, viewers can choose to merely laugh at the sheer bravado of an artist extrapolating the language of conceptualism for nihilist effect or, delve head first into his various melancholies.

chi too's use of humour, his peculiar materials and obsessively intense processes mimic the language and strategies of Conceptualism. His collaging of the visual and textual, with titles and images, echo the jokes of Bruce Nauman and Erwin Wurm as well as the wry and banal comedy of David Shrigley who push the boundaries of acceptability in Art through comic statements and crude processes. chi too's work therefore, has the appearance of the artist as prankster who reveals both the absurdity of life and art all in one. Longing #3 a.k.a. Longing is a Motherfucker depicts a video of the artist pulling a never-ending piece of ribbon that physically spews from a white structure into a large pile onto the gallery floor. This repetition is echoed in Longing #6 a.k.a. Main Kejar-Kejar Dengan Rakyat where a highly crafted electronic motor spins incessantly but drives nothing. Upon further inspection the artist's voice can be heard emerging from within the sculpture. He softly hums a monotonous tune that descends into a maddening chant. Both represent many human acts from the inconsequential to the profound that result in never ending unfulfillment. Or it simply appears as a very pointless piece of art. Either interpretation is fine with chi too. Longing #5 a.k.a. Siapa Menang Dia Dapat depicts Fairuz Sulaiman, a friend and collaborator, who is videoed playing against chi too the well-known Malaysian childhood game of Lat Ta Li Lat. However, the game requires more than two players in order for a winner to be proclaimed. The two are therefore locked in a continuous state of contest. As friends, this pursuit highlights the tensions of young artists competing for recognition in their professional field.

But wait, this is actually not a self-reflective act that criticises the nature of art. It just appears like one. Ah, another double fake. Unlike Conceptualism, chi too is not questioning the meaning or purpose of art itself, nor is he rebelling against the restraints of Modernist formalism as the Conceptualists were. Rather than dematerialising the validity of objects, he aims to create an amplified aura around them. Uninterested in the ubiquitous forms of the readymade, he embarks on long periods of self-involved prototyping and experimentation for his chosen medium in order to create the perfect finish to express his ideology. Despite his parodies and clichés of art and life, chi too is an artist in love with the act of making, albeit in a humorous manner. However, it must be said that there is a cast of participants in his processes, from the artist himself to numerous suppliers who assist in labour-intensive acts (with numerous failed attempts), whether casting a block of plaster for his crystal mappings in Longing #7 or a block of jelly for Longing #10. Although not claiming to be a master craftsman, he expresses another type of longing; but in this case for the ideal form, texture and surface.

His ideas are not exclusively personal or banal however, since chi too has not rejected his political edge completely. His commentaries about the state of the country or the art world are painfully clear. Veiled with humour and sarcasm, he is able to escape the burden of didactism through his light-hearted visual vernacular. Longing #9 a.k.a. Aku Nak Migrate, when viewed in light of the recent rallies in Kuala Lumpur



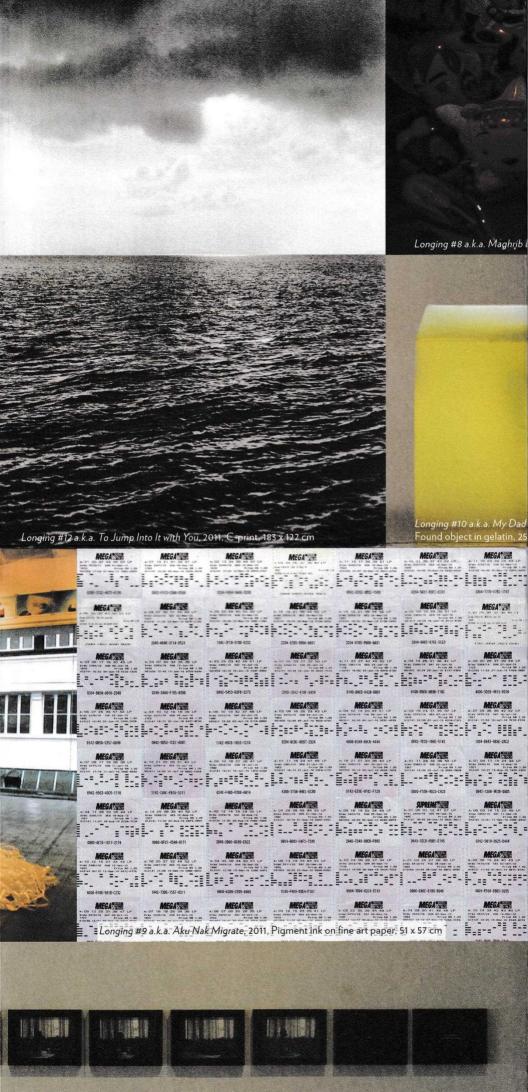
to call for free and fair elections and the continual flight from the country by talented individuals, is the direct desire to be elsewhere. The facilitator for this are multiple lottery tickets installed in a grid-like formation. Signifying a potential monetary windfall, this could be the answer to the financial problems of migration and the sustainability of future possibilities. Longing #13 presents photographic documentation of chi too's performance at the Buka Jalan performance festival. Here, the artist systematically contemplated and 'sold' all the artworks in the National Art Gallery by placing orange dots on their captions- a gesture done by commercial galleries to communicate when work has been bought and is no longer available for sale. Another light-hearted gesture, it nevertheless discusses the desires and commodification of art in cultural economies, a game that implicates all the players in the art world including non-profit institutions such as museums.

However, despite all of chi too's irreverence and cynicism that tease and ridicule society, at the heart of his work is real human feeling and experience. Longing is the desire and inevitable pain experienced for

a person, place or object that is absent, gone or unobtainable. A sentiment best expressed through language; longing has inspired many iconic lovers, warriors and other literary characters who have waited, ached and obsessively plotted to achieve their various needs. Sometimes ending in happiness, tragedy or a mixture of both, longing is often at the heart of epic human stories. chi too exploits the various clichés associated with this emotion to present a variety of visual and textual clues to express the unnamed ghosts of his own longing that emerge and vanish throughout the exhibition. Longing #4 a.k.a. A Photo Installation That Was Supposed To Be A Film That's Really Just A Photo-Essay manipulates the strategies of art house films to present a vague narrative that fluctuates between film and photography. The important use of language in the title satires the perceived pretentiousness in creative practices that are both admired and criticized by the artist. However, if the title and text sequences are disregarded, the intimate black and white images of a young woman sitting on a bed during moments of presence and absence act as iconic signifiers of lost love. This sentiment continues in Longing #7 a.k.a. I Wish There Was More Green. A white plaster slab hangs on the gallery wall encrusted with red, green, orange and silver crystals. This glittering display of minimal kitsch obscures more obsessive concerns of unrequited love. Monitoring the online status of a mysterious individual, each crystal represents moments of activity, dormancy, invisibility and unavailability on Google Mail chat. Charted over a period of four months, each crystal symbolizes a moment of hope and frustration as the object of the artist's interest appears and disappears. Longing #10 a.k.a. My Dad was a True Hipster is a textual pun on the objects brought together to make up this work. Suspended in a large volume of edible jelly molded into the shape of a semi-opaque cube is a human hip replacement. chi too's father passed away recently. This is one of the few physical traces of him that remains. The term hipster, a positive and negative term for contrived quirky 'coolness', which chi too is a knowing victim and critic of, then takes on a double meaning. Referring to the notion that parents are often viewed as uncool by their children, it is also a comic but heartfelt lament for the loss of the artist's father.

The range of desires across chi too's diverse system of sign and symbols reveal that longing is a complex and universal human emotion. However, our unrequited passions are often kept hidden, safe from scrutiny and ridicule. chi too purposefully exposes his vulnerabilities, but behind the façade of staged farce, satire and irony. Diffusing the awkwardness of his own intimate confessions, audiences are then allowed to laugh or feel empathy for the artist's reflections on his own life. But seriously, "are you for real chi too, or not?". Oscillating between yes and no answers, perhaps this statement is best left unresolved like Longing #1; a monumental projection of the artist's lips, not speaking but in repetitive motion. Its intent remains unclear, even to chi too. The uncanniness of this work reawakens distant memories in all of us through nostalgia or cliché. These ambiguously imagine and reveal the story of chi too, an unfolding drama of love and loss, art and society, albeit with a whoopee cushion thrown in for comedic effect.







chi too, b. 1981, MALAYSIA

Currently lives and works in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

chi too has recently shifted his focus from filmmaking to fine art practice using humour, satire and visual poetics to create a diverse system of objects that reveal his own never-ending emotional struggles. Working in video, installation and sculpture, his practice rejects socio-political statements for personal reflections and frustrations. His experimental music, poetry reading and playful self-organised public art projects such as Main Dengan Rakyat, Everything's Going to Be Alright and Lepark display a genuine need to engage with space and audiences that form part of his complex multifaceted approach to practice.

Graduating with a Diploma in Mass Communications, from KDU College, Kuala Lumpur in 2003, chi too has worked on numerous film and sound engineering projects. Membaca Kafka Di Amerika, a film he directed, wrote and edited was screened as part of the Bombay Sapphire Art Projects and at the 5^{1st} Oberhasen Short Film Festival, Germany in 2008. Since then, as a self-taught artist outsider, he has been developing his fine art practice and has participated in exhibitions and performance events. chi too is part of The Best Art Show in the Univers and CIPAN (a sometimes artist collective). The Best Art Show in the Univers have exhibited work in Al Kesah, Once Upon a Time in Malaysia, MAP KL, 2010 and have organised their own group show of the same name at 67 tempinis satu in 2009. chi too also participated in the International Documentary Fellowship, George Washington University, USA, 2008 and has been accepted as a Fellow in the Asian Public Intellectual Fellowship Programme for 2010/2011 in Tokyo.

Special Thanks

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For my father and the many people whose names I cannot reveal. Whose presence and existence have been my wellsprings of inspiration...the sources of my longings.

Designs and collaterals by Lainie Yeoh

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