

SOFT

Malaysian artist Kow Leong Kiang exhibits his latest series: *SOFT* at Sangking Art Space, introducing stacked and tangled human figures, to observe what occurs when certain limits are imposed upon the body. Dynamic movements and positions are constructed out of groups of nude male and female forms inside a purpose-built acrylic box. They wrestle and intertwine whilst piled on top of each other to become physically crowded, formally observed and lyrically nuanced. Compared to Kow's previous exhibition *Intimate Collisions* (WKA, KL, 2010), where bodies were pinned in pairs and as symbols of desire and eroticism, his current works show gestures that randomly intertwine communal relationships to become primordial, expressive and wild.

The human body has continually fascinated artists, whether based on the body as phenomenon or as a metaphor to question religious, moral, socio-political and cultural values. The body as a prison of the human soul is a border of which value is continuously commodified by desire. The poet

Coenawan Mohamad once said: "body", not "corpus". By "body" he means that which is not a single entity but that which would later be explained and mapped in anatomical and physiological sciences. "Corpus" on the other hand may be regarded as a machine or tool that is obedient to what the brain says or what the conscience manages, cleans, and counts—but "body" does not. Kow captures the human form through combined elements of the *Body* and *Corpus* to present a perimeter of desire that is complex and layered.

In addition, three important elements emerge in the production of his paintings centred around his use of photography. First is his use of staging devices. Kow arranges the size of the transparent acrylic box and various numbers of models to pose in different actions and positions. A few cameras are then placed in different corners, to record these movements from different angles. In this type of staged photography, subjects are fabricated, styled and directed, not to create new or fictional events,

but to highlight and produce dramatic elements. Second is Kow's use of performative photography, where he creates an event which is dissimilar to reality, forming a certain fiction or metaphor as a vehicle for the ideas he wishes to convey. This emphasises the power of the artist to manipulate and control the objects within the photographic frame. The third is how he then transfers the photographic image into his paintings, through an awareness of anatomical forms, draftsmanship, colours and brushstroke to evoke emotional impact.

In his previous series, he seemed to have been preoccupied with the erotica of the structured male and female body. This continues in *SOFT FIGURES 1*. Here two naked bodies are positioned on top of each other wrestling, as if they were fighting one another, radiating a nuance of desire that is beastly in nature, with undertones of violence. There is no romantic ambience, only an emission of libido that is both raw and primitive. Although not devoid of desire, it feels peculiar and tense. Kow seems to be borrowing the moves of an exotic dancer, or a sexual performance, but for a different aim altogether. Not to express the most basic sexual desires, but to represent the limitations of the body, and suggest that it is only the soul that is free.

In the early part of his career Kow worked primarily in portraiture, and was influenced by world masters. He also confesses inspiration from European artists Antonio Bruni (1912–1990) and Milton Gerard Hoffer (1902–1981), who were living in Bali at the time. The eroticism and eroticism found in their portraits of eastern women greatly influenced Kow's treatment of the female form and ideas around sensuality. He would later produce many poetic portraits of Malay women on the beach that speak of a nostalgia and longing for motherland and identity.

In *SOFT FIGURES 2* we see four naked bodies winding through each other, pushing and folding into each other as if competing for space or freedom. Here survival instincts take over intellect. However it is not animalistic, but instead like a dance, beautiful and enticing and full of aesthetic awareness. It could be said that dancing is the body embracing form – although the second movement begins the form may not yet be present, or is on the verge of revelation, vague and temporary.

For each of his works Kow builds a stage with a certain dimension, that then becomes a life-space metaphor on movement and limitation. Paradoxically this provides each figure more energy to fight and reveal themselves to audiences. *SOFT FIGURES 3* shows this aspect of communal



Soft Figures 1 • 2011 • oil on linen • 120 X 220 cm

movement where bodies pull each other from all directions, hands slightly grip heads to keep their balance, whilst multiple limbs weave in and out of each other. This interdependence then produces interesting compositional arrangements. Although the frame secures his figures, their state of disarray and chaotic energy is emphasised by his use of brush strokes and disorganized splatter where details become less important.

SOFT FIGURES 4, displays this shifting of preoccupation where particularities are dimmed and replaced with wild brush strokes over closely linked bodies that appear more dense when photographed from above. Here erotica becomes a tempest. In this painting, we no longer see the body as a union of flesh and bones, or a figure. The body is a molasses of the soul, which flows through differing tones. Perhaps Kow is heading towards a lyrical abstraction, where physical energies slowly change, as if running into an emotional tornado. This is where desire and libido unite in a magnetic area between the borders of moral and spiritual spaces.

The body as a conduit for powerful sensation parallels



Soft Figures 2 • 2011 • oil on linen • 130 X 170 cm

the actual realisations of the works themselves and how Kow freed himself from the limits of his own local cultural space. He admitted that his desire to depict naked bodies only became possible in Yogyakarta and later in Bandung. Because opportunities to work with nude models are very limited in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, where he faces cultural questions around the human body and ideas of nakedness and nudity. The socio-cultural space in Indonesia, therefore provided him with the flexibility needed to explore the creative possibilities of the human body. Although in reality, the perception of the human body and nudity within Indonesia, is also a matter of questioning and taboo, that can still limit and restrain expression. Of course this has become a concern among artists and intellectuals who are more democratic. The matter of "limas" is then connected to Kow's position in the social cultural formation of the people in Southeast Asia and global society. The notion of limitation then acts as a powerful catalyst melting in the middle of constraints to become paradoxical.

In his next work, *SOFT FIGURES 5*, the bodies in Kow's box structure are even more packed, with eleven naked men and women, represented from the side. Here he uses a

slightly different technique highlighting the "flesh", and not the bodies as mere forms and shapes by using fresh and vibrant colours. Kow also makes direct reference to the box itself rather than simply suggesting it through the frame of the canvas. Brush strokes are constantly repeated, layered, rough and filled with emotion. But in *SOFT FIGURES 6*, he returns to the composition of more formal human forms, that are calmer, a performance that is flexible and organized, amidst a flat background.

The bodies in Kow Leong Kiang's paintings, brings us to the main issue of the interrelationship between humans in a bodily scope with borders limited by both physical and psychological spaces. The body becomes an economical element compared to the matter of human cultural values. Here figures return to ground zero, naked primordial and primitive. (Wilky Effendy)

Notes:
1. Coenawan Mohamad, *Tari, Tempo Magazine* Medan Edition, 02 May 2011. <http://saping.wordpress.com/> Accessed in November 2011.
2. Interview with Kow Leong Kiang, November 2011, Yogyakarta.

Soft Figures 5 • 2011 • oil on linen • 255 X 170 cm

