

## *Jeremy Hiah*

With much playfulness, wit, and skill, Jeremy Hiah produces works that are humorous, thought provoking, and in many ways, fun to play with.

Graduated from the Lassalle SIA College of Art and initially majored in painting, Hiah however, was not confined by two-dimensionality even when he was a student. His creative tactics involved clever parodies of famous masterpieces, adaptation of funny, childlike-images, use of satires and puns, and most importantly, he builds simple mechanisms for his paintings so that they are “not just paintings”. “Renaissance City” is an example. Here, the Mona Lisa painting was appropriated and the backdrop was replaced by a nocturnal cityscape of our city area. The classical icon’s usual integrity however, could not be contained here, as audiences are invited to temper with the mechanical gadgets incorporated into her body. At exactly the positions of her exaggerated nipples, one presses and it would give off a quirky laughter. Press the other and city lights will flash like the busy neon lights of the city.

Very much attracted to “things that moves”, Hiah wanted his audiences to be captivated by his works and have fun in interacting with it. He wanted his painting to “come alive” so that there is no distance between the audiences and the works. “But behind the fun there is always something serious...” according to the artist. In the example of the “Renaissance City” the sarcasm is apparent – the somber atmosphere, flickering light bulbs, and the hilarious laughter together rallies not Da Vinci’s Mona Lisa but the controversial conception of a Renaissance Singapore.

Social issues and social phenomenon are the main subjects of his works, and his strategic humour tends to heighten the often-bitter message hidden behind. In “Papa Syetem”, Hiah set up a group of white stools where suitcases, handbags, and cages are rested on top. These clearly numbered cases made of chicken wires are locked up with random items such as miniature toy animals, traditional Chinese million-year calendar, folded-up artworks, etc. To “activate” the work, one has to follow the artist’s instruction:

“THIS IS MY PAPA SYSTEM. IN ORDER FOR THIS SYSTEM TO WORK, ONE NEEDS TO HAVE PATIENCE TO UNLOCK THE CASES ACCORDING TO THE NUMBER 1 TO 9. ONE WILL FREE AND DISCOVER THE WORKS INSIDE. AFTER ONE HAD FINISHED VIEWING THEM, THE WORKS WILL HAVE TO BE ARRANGED BACK TO THE SAME SYSTEM. ONE MAY **HATE** IT, OR LIKE IT. REMEMBER, PATIENCE, PATIENCE.....” – Jeremy Hiah.

Hiah’s rebellion against restrictions and rigidities of an overly systematized environment is eminent. With a vision to create social and cultural awareness in the publics, and in order to deliver his artistic ideas in a captivating and engaging way, Hiah’s experiments are usually multi-disciplinary. He utilizes technologies such as digital cameras and video recorders, does performances, and collaborates with other artists. Treated as the talented one who “can draw well” during his student days, the “fun-and-free” styles of multi-disciplinary art however, seem to suit Hiah’s somewhat mischievous character better. In “Eat In Your Face”, Hiah literally smeared food over his own face and invited public viewers to eat from his face while he conversed casually with them. The message in this performance?

“If we can’t eat with them with the right position, then we can eat with them in our face. People eat people, I eat me.” Jeremy Hiah.

Other significant works such as “Alienation” was planned as a collaborative work where Hiah perform as a morphing virus with the help of other artists. He also interacts with people from the streets to acquired images of them.

Perhaps it is needless to point out the lineage of Hiah’s works with artists such as the Dadaists, the Fluxus, and the Happenings. But the impact from local artists such as Tang Dawu, who is pioneer in promoting the practice of installation and performance art in Singapore, is of much importance. Traces of ethos linked to conceptualism is clear in his statements:

“Art is about life. Art is about how we see, perceive and are aware of the things around us. To me, everything is art. When you see everything as art, you will eventually understand why a particular material is used – it’s meaning, function, and purpose. Buildings, televisions, bicycles, sand castle, graffiti, posters, writing and even simple junk can be art. We can slowly attribute meaning to things around us and their relationship to our daily lives, personal relationships and social backgrounds.”

When discussing his recent work “Paradise/Terrorise”, where he pretended to be a terrorist wearing funky masks and making “terrorist acts” in an environment decorated with props taken from his show “Angels Paradise”, Hiah explained that it is not his task to provide solutions to social issues. Rather, he raises the awareness of the public through enquiries – “Paradise/Terrorise” questions the credibility of the media, and poked fun on the overwhelming global response that had made the event a somewhat virtual one reminiscent to a child-play.

Hiah’s daring endeavours is meaningful in the usually rigid local art scene. While artists in the West have long since challenged the limitations of museums and galleries, there are new tendencies in the contemporary scene.

Recently a buzzword appeared in the arena of art theory – “Relational Aesthetics” – a term coined by the young European critic and curator Nicolas Bourriaud, in his recognition of the growing number of contemporary artists whose works are dependent upon the viewers through a kind of performative and interactive techniques. “Relational Art” is deemed the new art movement beginning in the 90s. On top of the increasing use of computers and high-tech methods, Bourriaud also attempted to distinguish between these artists from their predecessors of the 60s. Emerged out of the technological, mass-media and cybernetic world of the contemporary era, Bourriaud contends that the “aura” of artworks had changed. The focus and operative mechanic is now essentially within the realm of interpersonal relations so that artworks produced are often social exchanges rather than a representation. With the advancement in computer technology, “Relational artists” can relate across the artificiality of time and space in spheres whether physical, social, or institutional. Artist no longer stands at the center but co-existed with the public to initiate questions, draw borders for consideration of issues, and bring attention to moments in everyday life. “Relational Aesthetics” orientates within "mutual contextual factors" and "networking within the system" as well as "going beyond conceptual and participatory", as the form of visual art is diminished and mutated under the impact of computer technology. Artists are no more the grand creator but a catalyst.<sup>1</sup>

Whether Hiah’s various projects fit into this new category cannot be decided here, but there maybe something worth pondering in the proposal of Bourriaud: while there is a desire to transgress traditional institutions and socially defined spaces, the artists and activities of the 1990s discussed in Bourriaud’s book were after all confined within galleries and specific “art

---

<sup>1</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, Les presses du reel, 2002

centers". Moreover, the "artworks" "exhibited" are still connoted as "aesthetic activities" and possessed an "aura" of some sort... As such these works cannot be fully rid of the remnants of the traditional protocols. It's more than 10 years now since the book was first published, Bourriaud's theory has nevertheless, attracted a great number of young artists who embrace computer technology and the Internet fully for its connecting powers. If Hiah's artistic mission were about connecting people and about establishing genuine dialogues between himself and the society, it would be interesting to see his interpretation on Bourriaud's theory.

<sup>1</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, Les presses du reel, 2002