

## SINGAPORE

Arin Rungjang  
at ShangART Gallery

Construction workers with helmets, work boots, and protective gear were walking around a scaffold two-stories high, outside the ShangART Gallery in Gillman Barracks. They are a common sight in Singapore as opportunities for infrastructure and construction abound. The scaffolding structure belongs to Arin Rungjang and is part of his latest solo exhibition *They Beat Your Father. Specifically*, the Thai artist's sculpture and performance piece was meant to draw our attention to the histories of the traditionally ignored: migrant workers, among others. This first part of a two-part work offers a platform—literally and figuratively—for us to reconsider “the social relations of a community”—Muslim, Indian, Pakistani, and Chinese construction workers living and working in Singapore. Where better to raise the question of the subject of racial and cultural differences than in the case of migrant workers traveling between their places of origin and their new locale in Singapore?

The second part of his work comprises single-channel video showing individual close-up portraits of construction workers in Singapore. The men hold frozen poses: at times eyes blink and hands quiver. Not speaking, their silences



Arin Rungjang's opening performance outdoor. Images: Courtesy of the Artist and ShangART.

are deafening. Rungjang's text for the show introduces the background of each of them—and it soon becomes clear the Hindu worker is a silenced subaltern, the Muslim worker is a silenced subaltern, so is the Chinese worker. His work acknowledges their dire social conditions—the pressures of racism, political conservatism, identity issues in a foreign country: diasporas are everywhere, but they

are always over there: Other.

In another room one might expect to find objects or pictures on the walls, but there is nothing. Only benches with no screen on the opposite wall to look at, but be patient and you will hear soft, intermittent sounds. They are recorded sounds from around Rungjang's childhood home where he lived with his mother and grandmother after his father's death. Water drops

in front of her room, mother getting her nails clipped, the vibration of the washing machine, frogs and insects, and so on. The artist's gentle demeanor becomes clear as we get through the layers of his art.

Moving deeper into the show, Rungjang's other work in a related exhibition *Shooting an Elephant and the Leader* is housed in a separate gallery a stone's throw from ShangART. First presented in *Shanghai Biennale 2018*, the ten-screen video installation traces both personal narratives and social history crossing time periods, cultures, and languages. On entering, five screens hang from the ceiling and confront the viewer with extreme close-up shots of a Myanmar elephant, over white background and from low angles. Two stories unfold, woven together through the shifting reference point of diaspora communities and through narrative links. The artist intertwines a story of a stateless man of Bengali descent born in Myanmar with references taken from George Orwell's famous essay *Shooting an Elephant*.

The ambling bull elephant is imposing. To be up close with this majestic animal in an art gallery was exceptionally special for me. When we walk around to the other end of the long room, another memory or spectacle of Rungjang's imagination is revealed through a four-screen installation where each projection shows, in the order of the back of a head, open palms, murmuring lips, and the lower



Arin Rungjang's opening performance indoor. Images: Courtesy of the Artist and ShangART.



half body of a Muslim man praying. Nearby, white texts run on a black screen to recount the story of Wahduze Ali. Who or what is he—a representative of the postcolonial Diaspora or a devout Muslim betrayed by human traffickers and forced to become a prostitute? What had appeared as fictional improvisation now appears as the painful recollection of lived trauma?

On the other hand, reading Orwell's essay is to encounter Rungjang's way of seeing. Born in Thailand, Arin Rungjang was only two and a half years old when his father was beaten by racists in Germany while he was working with a local company and several months later succumbed to his injuries. "Father said that they were those skin-head racists, thinking that he was a Filipino guy. They hated the Philippines," says Rungjang. "Racism is a problem everywhere, there are these stereotypes about people of color that are not true."

Arin Rungjang's work has provoked thinking about the relationship of Diasporas and cultural politics. With the proliferation of racial and cultural otherness, one of the artist's most pressing concerns is to find ways for dominated subjects to represent themselves. This show was an attempt to reconnect and raise new questions. We can have a new life, but it is up to us to change the ways we see and think.

**Christine Han**

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## THE UNITED STATES

### Atlanta, Georgia

#### Sonya Yong James at Whitespace Gallery

**R**ecently the West has come to understand more fully what Asian mystics have known for millennia: that the natural world is deeply interconnected, exhibiting a kind of non-human consciousness. A salient



**Above left: Sonya Yong James, *Mortal Coil*, hand-dyed horsehair, 28 x 26 x 4 inches. **Above right: Sonya Yong James, *Free Animal*, horsehair, cotton, 67 x 59 x 6 inches.** Images: Courtesy of the Artist and Whitespace Gallery.**

example of this new awareness is the work of the German forester Peter Wohlleben. Observing the German forest under his care, Wohlleben learned that trees feel pain

and retain memories, that they communicate in a complex language involving taste, smell, and electrical impulses, and that they pass on knowledge to their progeny through

seeds. Though sometimes underappreciated by the Western mind, this cognizance can be seen in artists such as Sonya Yong James, who makes art that embodies a deep appreciation for the interrelations among natural phenomena. A Korean-American, James feels a "spiritual connection" to her materials—largely sheep wool, horse hair, and felt—which she fashions into myriad compelling configurations, all mirroring the living web of nature.

One of her prized materials, horsehair, in various hues—white, cream, black, and gray—forms an oversize "necklace," draped like jewelry on the wall. Thought to retain a connection with its owner for centuries, hair has often been incorporated into memorials to the deceased, such as Victorian hair jewelry, an instrument of mourning. In James's piece, therefore, horsehair recalls the rich symbolism of the animal, an image said to carry both life and death. Her colors intensify these associations. As dark, the horse emerges from the chthonian world of death, but as white, it becomes celestial, signifying mastery of instinct and impulse. Titled *Free Animal* (2019), the work embodies the diurnal sublimation of death into life and again into death.

Hand-dyed horsehair—light and dark—appears once more in *Mortal Coil* (2019).



**Sonya Yong James, *Pale Arcana*, horsehair, vintage bed sheets, cotton, paper yarn, bone, 126 x 9 x 9 inches.** Image: Courtesy of the Artist and Whitespace Gallery.