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Reviews /

Fyerool Darma: Another Day in Paradise?



BY WONG BING HAO

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At Singapore's Yeo Workshop, the artist unsettles the image of Southeast Asia as a tropical getaway



A self-professed jester, Fyerool Darma is quick to embrace amusing mishaps in his practice. He also takes in his stride any misinterpretations of his work, demonstrating not only an objective awareness of its impact but also, by extension, of how his artistic identity is perceived by audiences. Darma's sensitivity and self-reflexivity are particularly apparent in 'Sunny, your smile ease the pain', his second solo exhibition at Yeo Workshop, a commercial gallery in Singapore's arts enclave, Gillman Barracks. A single installation of reformulated artistic debris from Darma's works and exhibitions since 2017, 'Sunny' offers a consolidated overview of the artist's preoccupations through an array of his textiles, canvases and works on paper.



Fyerool Darma, *Sunny, your smile ease the pain (After Gergasi)*, 2017-19, installation view, 3 × 3.6 m. Courtesy: the artist and Yeo Workshop

On a single gallery wall, garish colours comeingle and compete for attention. Textiles of differing hue, pattern and origin are knotted together to form literal assemblages of the artist's previous projects: Darma's tongue-in-cheek arbitration of gaudiness-as-taste. At the installation's apex sits a red-neon rendering of 'Surya' – the Sanskrit spelling of the Malay word for sun. This kitschy, artificial life-source feels at home in Darma's intentionally tacky conglomeration. The neon also references homophones that confused the artist in his childhood: 'Sunny', a popular 1976 song by Euro-Caribbean band Boney M., which was a favourite of the artist's parents, and *seni*, a Malay word for art or aesthetic pursuits.



Fyeroool Darma, *Those who linger by the berth savour your silence (Gersang)*, 2017-19, bleached polyester canvas and thread, artist frame (chrome vinyl on wood with aquatint and mirror acrylic, 1.3 x 1m. Courtesy: the artist and Yeo Workshop

Given all this, it would not be unreasonable to assume that, for Darma, art-making is an optimistic affair. After all, palm trees are a prevalent motif in many of his canvases, evoking the cliché of Singapore, and Southeast Asia more broadly, as an idyllic tropical getaway. However, Darma treats these verdant canvases with bleach, washing out their bright colours and rendering them radioactive and alien; displayed alongside are Darma's 'failed' experiments in this vein: a section of canvas, for instance, that was irrevocably browned due to excessive bleach exposure.

That Surya is also an Indonesian brand of cigarettes is an unexpected congruence made known to viewers through an exhibited poem, which the artist penned in the guise of his alter ego, Fyelol Dana – a pseudonym that references a gross misspelling of his name by an arts journalist. In

aligning the transcendental symbol of the sun with consumer commodities, Darma alludes to the other textile-based pieces on display whose components he either purchased or produced as artworks to be sold. By evacuating these pristine tropical symbols of their feel-good breeziness, Darma hints at the region's underlying complexities.

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Fyerool Darma, *Sunny, your smile ease the pain (After Gergasi)*, 2017-19, installation view, 3 × 3.6 m. Courtesy: the artist and Yeo Workshop

'Sunny, your smile ease the pain' is arguably Darma's most astute showing to date. It encapsulates key tenets of his practice – from anxieties around artistic sustainability in geographically decentred contexts to the tension of being both hyper-visible and invisible as an artist. While Darma is himself a skilled technician, he frequently diffuses his individual artistic agency by outsourcing creative production and inviting other artists and artisans to fabricate components of his works, such as the ornate custom frames. 'Sunny' is not, therefore, simply a pastiche of Darma's previous works, but also a gathering of the various talents that contributed

to their fruition. By parodying the retrospective genre, the show unravels the false binaries of success and failure, and comments on the coveted and contested ownership of creative capital.

Main image: Fyeroool Darma, Light of my Life (Orleng), 2019, coloured light emitting diode with folded artist textile, 24 x 70 cm.

Courtesy: the artist and Yeo Workshop

WONG BING HAO

Wong Bing Hao is a writer and curator based in Singapore.

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REVIEW

WONG BING HAO

London

1 Surrey Street
London
WC2R 2ND, UK
+44 (0)203 372 6111

New York

247 Centre St
5th Floor
New York, NY 10013
+1 212 463 7488

Berlin

Zehdenicker Str. 28
D-10119 Berlin
Germany
+49 30 2362 6506