

FACING EAST

RECENT WORKS FROM CHINA, INDIA AND JAPAN

FROM THE FRANK COHEN COLLECTION

Until 11 April at the Manchester City Art Gallery, Princess Street, Manchester M1, www.manchestergalleries.org

By Rajesh Punj

WITH CONTEMPORARY art from China, India and Japan being a byword for a swelling curiosity for things different, there is an promising new show of works that has opened in Manchester from the collection of philanthropist Frank Cohen. A bold, be-spectacled man fidgeting for attention, Cohen has decided his own destiny by acquiring leading works and then presenting them for public consumption outside London. Regarded as the Charles Saatchi of the North, Cohen has quietly and effectively been collecting many significant works from China and India under the stewardship of curator David Thorp. Owning works by some of the leading protagonists of contemporary art from Asia, Cohen has taken on a significance all his own in his ability to collect and lay claim to our new cultural interests before they are laid bare. Given to discussing his interests Cohen is open to explain his position among the profiteers of contemporary art. He adheres to the notion of buying works that he likes which then become the basis for his collection. Initially acquiring works by British artists, he quickly altered his footing when this interest became too expensive and, like Saatchi, he looked further afield – America, Italy, France, Germany and then, when it suited him, across Asia to China, Japan and India, where he claims he was the first to



The Big Kiss (2007) by Chen Lei, mixed media, 37 x 110 x 120 cm, Cohen Collection

purposefully buy works from artists and galleries that were still emerging upon the international art scene. Curiosity has turned Cohen into a well-versed acquisitions man with a greater awareness of what is currently coming out of these new economic super-powers.

For Cohen, Manchester was a long-time discussed idea which allowed him and his curator David Thorp to unpack a small part of the collection for a display in part of the new galleries at the city's art gallery. It is interesting and courageous to attempt such a thing in light

of the volume of activity currently in London with the Whitechapel exhibition of photography from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, the new Saatchi show of contemporary Indian art, solo shows of the works of leading artists Jitish Kallat and Bharti Kher and TV Santhosh to come. Reflecting upon this show and the works included, Cohen is utterly assured of the timing of this and its location. Suggesting with great vigour 'the reason for selecting these specific works for the exhibition was that despite their diverse cultural backgrounds, all artists represented in *Facing East* draw upon common subject matters including youth culture, popular culture and the mass media to express significant conditions in their unique cultures. The works on display share a similar dynamism that responds to the global nature of consumerism and the huge changes that are taking place in modern Asian cultures. Some similar concerns emerge to do with cultural history, contemporary society and politics'. Returning to his city of birth Cohen is almost jubilant at the opportunity to show these works to his audiences.

Highlights of this personal collection exhibition include Chen Lei's work *The Big Kiss* (2007), which is a wondrous work of the relationship of a literal balancing act between human beings and nature. A dishevelled schoolboy appears to be reaching up to kiss a polar bear that rests entirely upon the boy's mouth. A impossible and improbable sight it makes for an utterly engaging work. The collaborative work of little



Coming Soon At Your Neighbourhood (2008) by Thukral and Tagra, Cohen Collection



London Mayfair House (2006) by Yoshitomo Nara, mixed media installation, dimensions variable, Cohen Collection

known Jiten Thukral and Sumir Tagra, *Coming Soon at Your Neighbourhood* (2008) is a vast landscape painting of what appears to be two dinosaurs wrestling for cultural supremacy; made up of hundreds, if not thousands of hand painted leading brand bottles that shape the contour of these terrestrial vertebrates. Thukral and Tagra appear to be promising commentators for the changing fortunes of their country.

Leading contemporary Indian artist Bharti Kher's

seminal work *The Skin Speaks a Language Not its Own* (2006) is of a reclining elephant covering from head to toe in silver *bindis* that appear to elevate this creature from its predicament, as Kher draws on the ambiguities that are central to her practice.

Also included is Kher's contemporary, Ravinder Reddy, with *Gilded Head* (2007), a staggering fibreglass head that is gilded in a rich skin of gold that illuminates this work across the gallery, a heavy weight bust that appears



Army of Mushrooms (2003) by Takashi Murakami, Cohen Collection

to draw as much on Reddy's interest in Hindu traditional religious imagery as it does on contemporary pop culture. Reddy was originally going to be shown more than once, but for Thorp her work proves greater for its absence and in these open plan galleries he may have been proved right. Besides a considered selection of paintings and sculpture, there is an installation, a gem amongst these works that appears child-like for its insensibilities.

Yoshitomo Nara's work *London Mayfair House* (2006) is an installation that both Nara and Thorp discuss as a new work modified for the space and influenced as much by the artists desire to experiment with an existing work as it is the wish of the exhibition for something new.

FX HARSONO

TESTIMONIES

Until 9 May at Singapore Art Museum, 71 Bras Basah Road, Singapore, www.singart.com

THE SINGAPORE ART MUSEUM (SAM), as part of its initiative to support the development of living artists in Singapore and the region, has created the first of four solo exhibitions for the year – *FX Harsono: Testimonies*. Considered one of Indonesia's foremost contemporary artists, this exhibition marks the first time that a survey of Harsono's artwork, created between 1975 and up to as recently as 2009, are on show.

Harsono, known for playing a pivotal role in the development of contemporary art in Indonesia, continues to be actively involved in the art scene up till today.

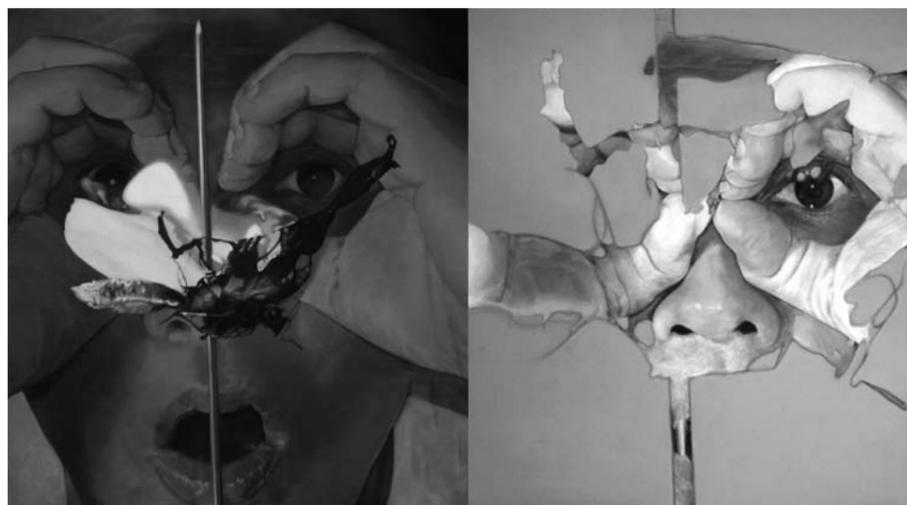


Preserving Life by FX Harsono

FX Harsono: *Testimonies* traces the shifts in the artist's strategies of representation: from the ground-breaking conceptual works that re-defined art making during the *Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru* (New Art Movement) of the 1970s, to the politically-charged installations of the

1990s and to the artist's recent investigations into issues of self, identity and personal histories.

Visitors to the exhibition will witness the transition from Harsono's earlier political works that critique the regime of power and oppression in Indonesia, to the



Kuteropong (Watching The Wound) by FX Harsono

more personal pieces of post-1998 where Harsono began to look inward and examine the position of minorities and disenfranchised in Indonesia. His most recent body of works draws on his family history, in an investigative journey that reveals the intersection of the personal

with the political.

Included in this survey are seminal works drawn from the Singapore Art Museum's permanent collection, as well as work from other art institutions and private collections, such as *Paling Top '75* (1975) and *Voice Without A Voice* (1994). Through these

various 'testimonies', the exhibition offers a glimpse of the political, social and cultural changes that have shaped Indonesian society from the artist's point of view, and the artist's constant re-evaluation and repositioning of his role throughout this recent history.