

# STPI

CREATIVE WORKSHOP & GALLERY

Jimmy Ong



Jimmy Ong, Singapore's most coveted artist returned from New York, to see this country where he grew up transforming into something unrecognisable. His exhibition "SGD" at STPI, is a flipside commentary on Singapore's characteristics of material wealth, achievement and good governance. The bold forms and colours of cosmopolitan Singapore in "SGD" is a departure from Ong's last seen monochromatic series "Farquhar Descending", depicting colonial Singapore. "When I arrived at STPI in August with National Day celebrations at its height, my head was filled with grandiose ideas of patriotism, and the excitement of returning home, all of which I was eager to explore in my works" said Ong.

What he eventually created was less adulation than a reckoning of his own personal relationship with the country and the architect of its economic success, Minister Mentor, Lee Kuan Yew. In proposing the use of an alternative iconic face on the dollar bill other than Yusof Ishak, Ong selected an image of Mr Lee before 1965 - the year Singapore gained independence, and the artist "processed" an image of power through the mechanical separation of colours for printing.

STPI Director, Emi Eu said, "Ong's new works offer poignant, personal reflections of home and his residency at STPI opened new doors to unexplored technical and thematic territories. This will mark a milestone in Singapore's visual art history."

Ong looks into Singapore's obsession with money and its iconic representations such as the Tembusu tree printed on the five dollar bill. The tree is symbolic of the double-edged status of an icon, consigned to memory as if extinct when it is still alive and thriving at the botanical gardens. Ong's lithography of the iconic tree brings it back to life from just legal tender note.

In looking for a substitute of the Singapore River scene which used to grace the SGD 50 note, Ong chose a panoramic view of Keppel Harbour – the familiar, bustling engine of Singapore's success that is usually overlooked. A stunning monumental series of paper pulp paintings rolls out of STPI paper mill, spanning up to more than 10 metres. "O SGD" captures Ong's progressive reconciliation with the paper pulp medium as he abandons the initial intent to produce an accurate representative of the wharf with its lights, cranes and containers, resulting in an abstraction of landform in bold execution, in it unveiling the varied textures, intense colours and natural splatters that showcase the expressive potential of paper pulp in its pure form.

Ong is often associated with the charcoal medium, and the thematic depiction of human bonds and relationships in the figurative tradition in the last two decades. In his residency at STPI, the artist stepped out of his familiar genre as he explored the iconic symbols of Singapore and plunged into the watery world of fibre and colour in paper pulp paintings, recovering his blazing palette of grinning, dancing rainbows.