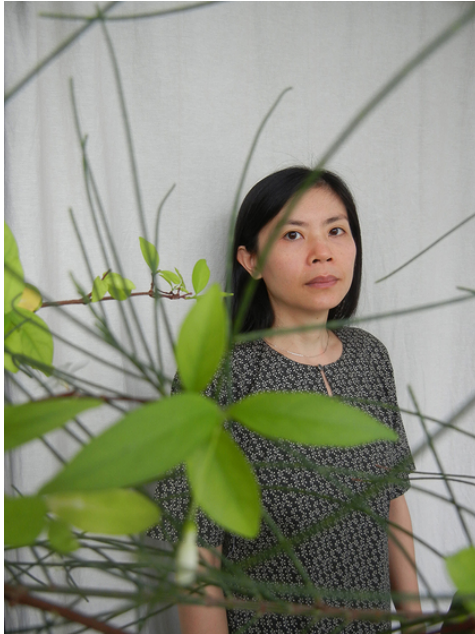


Old Wave Brings Empty Shells: Interview with Minstrel Kuik

by Chloé Wolifson

Link to article <http://artasiapacific.com/Blog/OldWaveBringsEmptyShellsInterviewWithMinstrelKuik>



Kuala Lumpur-based photographer and multimedia artist Minstrel Kuik was born in 1976 to a Chinese migrant family in a Malaysian fishing village. Her father briefly pursued a painting career in Singapore in the 1960s before financial and familial responsibilities brought him back to Malaysia. When he took up his brushes again in the '80s, Kuik was inspired to study painting herself. Attending a Chinese-Malaysian school meant her matriculation was not recognised by the local universities, so instead, Kuik followed in the footsteps of many Chinese Malaysians at the time, moving to Taiwan to study painting, before continuing in France.

Image: Portrait of MINSTREL KUIK. Photo by Liew Kwai Fei. Courtesy the artist.

Kuik is currently in residence at Sydney's Cross Art Projects, where her exhibition "Old Wave Brings Empty Shells," curated by Jasmin Stephens, includes existing and new work, such as a series of textile reliefs based on the flags of Malaysian political parties, and the recently completed documentary photobooks *Kuala Lumpur Trilogy* (2007/17).

ArtAsiaPacific sat down with Kuik to discuss the evolution of her practice, and the use of photography and found objects in her works, which address experiences of politics and identity in Malaysia.



Installation view of MINSTREL KUIK's "Old Wave Brings Empty Shells," at Cross Art Projects, Sydney, 2018. Photo by Minstrel Kuik. Courtesy the artist and Richard Koh Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur.

What sort of painting were you doing during your studies in Taiwan and France?

In Taiwan, there was tension between the students and professors. Many students were interested in contemporary art practices, whereas most of my professors were practicing traditional painting, watercolor or sculpture. I was somewhere in between, because I didn't have a very complete art education like my Taiwanese classmates. When I went to France I felt even more pressure—it was a huge change.

Why France?

I met my boyfriend of the time, who is French, in Taiwan. Then in 1997, the economic crash in Asia hit Malaysia hard. The deputy prime minister was sentenced to prison—the only wrong [the government could] accuse him of was sodomy. I was shocked: when I had arrived in Taiwan in 1995 it was just a few years after the pro-democracy rallies there. People who had been jailed were being released, so there were all kinds of voices, and everything was blooming. In Malaysia, all these things would be considered illegal. So I decided not to go back [to Malaysia], and went to France.

Image below - MINSTREL KUIK, Democratic Action Party, The Decor, 2018, from the series "Concerning the Political Space in Art," flags, pins and cotton thread, 42 × 29.7 × 4 cm. Photo by Minstrel Kuik. Courtesy the artist and Richard Koh Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur.



You continued to study painting in France but then moved to photography—why?

In painting there is a focus on an art historical context, but I am not from a Western culture, so although I've read art history, it's not my history. With photography I feel you can explore your own reality, your own culture.

Tell us about your appropriation of first person sources like election paraphernalia and flags, such as in these new wall reliefs with torn, pleated and stitched banners of Malaysian political parties.

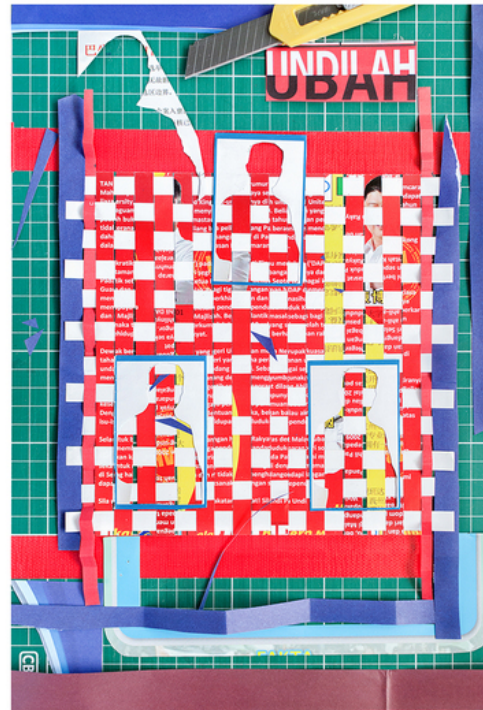
It's a challenge for me to liberate these images and objects from their original context. I have to think about my relationship with them. Let's say the political party flag, I have to look at it not only as paraphernalia, but also as a piece of fabric, and I try to relate the fabric with my body. From there I try to recall my experiences with fabrics and explore domestic gestures like folding and ironing. I think that kind of process gives the material a different

context or possibility. It's a challenge for me to look with fresh eyes. Most of the time that means going away from an art context and looking from a different perspective.

It has become clearer that every political party wants a part of me—not as an individual but as property. My work tries to keep these parts as complete as possible. It's the same when I work with materials. When I work with a medium I need to know its history.



MINSTREL KUIK, Cabinet, 2016, from the series “The Gridded Ghosts,” archival pigment prints, 60 × 46 cm each. Courtesy the artist and Richard Koh Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur.



MINSTREL KUIK, Magic Carpet, 2016, from the series “The Gridded Ghosts,” archival pigment prints, 60 × 46 cm each. Courtesy the artist and Richard Koh Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur.

You photographically documented street protests during the 2013 Malaysian general elections—why are these images important and how do they relate to your practice?

In Malaysia it's illegal to protest. The [2013 election] protests were the first time in Malaysian history that Malaysians of different races came together on the street. There was also conflict—protests create knotty situations. That's why I went to the marches as a citizen, a photographer, a woman—many overlapping identities.

I worked on the [resulting] photographs in Photoshop to change the image into something between positive and negative, and then drew them again. Because I'm not using a projector I have to rely on the grid system [which entails manually duplicating images in gridded sections]. This prolonged the protest within my studio. I had to really look at these people who were sharing space with me.

The grid reappears throughout your practice, such as in the series “The Gridded Ghost” (2016), where it serves as a backdrop for faceless figures. Who are these people? Can you tell us about the work?

They are candidates of the 2013 general election. That year, I was teaching at an art school called New Era University College in Kajang and gave an assignment to my graphics students, asking them to interview friends or relatives about the election. They found it too difficult because at that time most Malaysians refused to talk about politics. So instead, I asked them to collect and analyze election paraphernalia.

When clearing out my office in 2015 I found these objects. I didn't know what to do with them. Many Malaysians felt the election was like a gamble, which we lost. We went through a long period of depression, in a way probably like what some Americans experienced in 2017. So it took me a while to find the courage to look at these objects again. This series was done in 2016. I looked at the faces and gestures of the politicians. No matter which party they are from they had the same poses. I asked myself what happened to all these representatives. I decided to remove their faces because it's not personal. When they pose in front of the camera they are not showing who they are. They are the party.

In cutting out and confining these figures to the space of my gridded cutting mat with stationary, I regain the power to decode these images. Each element reacts to the one before it, and by gradually building a scene I can test a composition before restaging certain images. It's important to show the process of my artmaking and [by using these political materials], the making of the general election.

On the other hand, the photographs in Mer.ily Mer.ily Mer.ily Mer.ily (2008–) seem more emotional and raw.

I started to develop a photographic project one year after my return to Malaysia [in 2007]. At that time, my focus was on the family as the smallest social unit, examining how Chinese families work in Malaysia. I photographed family rituals, some snapshots and some more staged, looking at different bonds, including our link with Chinese culture from Mainland China, the link with Malay culture, the mix of both, and our place in Malaysia.

In 2011, I was asked to select images for the biennial Photoquai. If I'm only going to show, say five, it's very difficult to show context, because they are snapshots that could be random or subtle. In the end, I came up with this diptych composition. Gradually, I

gave the images more defined pairings, and tried to create the perfect pairs from my archive.



MINSTREL KUIK, #30, from the series “Mer.rily, Mer.rily, Mer.rily, Mer.rily,” (2008–12), set of 30 archival pigment prints, 80 × 60 cm each. Courtesy the artist and Richard Koh Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur.

The work *The Rebirth of Nation (2016)* is a physical stitching together of narrative using newspaper, wax and thread. Why is newspaper such a potent material?

All media is controlled in Malaysia. Newspapers have to renew their licence every year. They get clear instructions from the government as to what to do and say. This is a copy of the right wing government’s newspaper, which I bought during independence day, 31 August 2015. At the time we were having another protest. The text portrays the protests as illegal and disrespectful. I don’t read newspapers or listen to radio in Malaysia anymore because everything is so controlled it’s like being constantly brainwashed.



MINSTREL KUIK, The Rebirth of Nation, 2016, newspaper, digital prints, wax and cotton thread, 75 × 120 cm. Photo by Minstrel Kuik. Courtesy the artist and Richard Koh Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur.