



#09-1464

Johann Fauzi

Curated by Louis Ho

Acknowledgments

by Johann Fauzi

Journeys are always made more endurable when you have the faith of loved ones, friends and collaborators. I would like to thank everyone who made this first solo exhibition with Richard Koh Fine Art possible:

My interns from LASALLE College of the Arts — Myo Thet Hnin, Pearlsi Tan, Sarah Lin, Masuri Mazlan and Stephanie Leonardi — for their patience and perseverance in helping to transform my ideas into reality.

Louis, for the in-depth research and writing, turning my thoughts into words, and for the valuable feedback and critique, which I appreciate very much.

Richard, for giving me the opportunity to show in the gallery; the confidence is humbling. Thanks also to Christiaan, Gloria and Jack at RKFA Singapore, and the RKFA team in Kuala Lumpur, for the patience and support.

My LASALLE lecturers — Adeline, Ian, Hazel, Jeremy, Susie, Giles, Ezzam, Ruobing and Sai — for the guidance and advice through the years, even after graduation. Thank you too to Steve Dixon, for the encouragement.

My lecturers from NAFA — Mr. Tay, Mr. Yeo, Raymond, Terrence and Clayton — for introducing me to the idioms of Western academic painting, sculpture and abstraction.

My family, for being there for me when I needed them.

And, last but certainly not least, my partner, who is always there with unwavering support, come hurricane or shine.



Detail of Meja Dinding Puteri (Princess Console), 2020 - 2022

Hash zero nine dash one four six four

by Louis Ho

In 1992, Fred Wilson's exhibition, "Mining the Museum", opened at the Maryland Historical Society in Baltimore (now the Maryland Center for History and Culture). It was, in the words of a recent retrospective assessment, "seminal."

¹Wilson, who was born to parents of African-American and Caribbean descent, put together objects from the institution's collection in ways that excavated the sedimented layers of omissions, blind spots and systemic amnesia embedded in linearly plotted historical narratives, a deconstruction of entrenched – and, yes, racist – methodologies of acquisition, categorization, display, knowledge production. *Metalwork 1793-1880*, for one, featuring silver repoussé vessels juxtaposed against iron slave shackles from the same era, brought into the focus the vicious exploitation of human labour that underlay material excess. Other exhibits included a Ku Klux Klan mask posed in a baby carriage, and a set of antique parlour chairs facing a whipping post once used in a jail.

Wilson's act of radical intervention was, and indeed continues to be, a seminal point of reference – even half a world away, in a starkly divergent socio-cultural context. His act of historical interrogation through the canny interlacing of artifacts, foregrounding acts of erasure and marginalization, informs Singaporean artist Johann Fauzi's practice of

reflexively appropriating European art history as channels of critical counter-colonization, usurping the visual and material cultures of the Western universe as a means of reflecting the realities of Malay-speaking Southeast Asia, and ultimately destabilizing the hegemony represented by these idioms in former colonial entities. The present exhibition, #09-1464, takes its title from the unit number of the artist's apartment in a public housing estate, located in the east of Singapore. There, in the confines of a HDB block, Johann created an intimate, idiosyncratic Shangri-La². The lushly appointed interior of the space is home to the artist's personal collection of antique objects and furnishings, assembled over more than three decades, as well as the products of his own practice as an artist, ranging from large-scale history paintings to diminutive ceramic sculptures. The aesthetic debt, it is immediately apparent, is owed to the dramatic opulence and sumptuous adornment of the Baroque and Rococo periods; their spirit of ostentatious excess lingers over Johann's personal sensibility like a theatrical, flamboyant specter, bordering on the kitschy. Here, the interior of unit 09-1464 has been recreated in the gallery as an immersive installation – in the manner of the gesamtkunstwerk, an aesthetically coherent environment, that incorporates into its ontology the gesture of criticality. The walls of the

1 Kerr Houston, "How Mining the Museum Changed the Art World", *Bmore Art*, May 3, 2017. Retrieved from <<https://bmoreart.com/2017/05/how-mining-the-museum-changed-the-art-world.html>>.

2 The acronym, "HDB", refers, of course, to the Housing and Development Board, the government body responsible for the island-state's internationally lauded public housing efforts, which house some three-quarters of the population.

space, rendered a distinctive shade of red commonly referred to as “ox blood”, or sang de boeuf in French, evokes, for the artist, the least desirable associations of the colour red, including violence, blood and death, a hue that both emphasizes the material opulence of the objects and alludes to the trauma of the colonial experience for much of Southeast Asia.

Johann was born in the 1960s to a Muslim family in Singapore of mixed Javanese and Malay lineage. He began working life at a young age, and, in his late twenties, took a break from the rat race to return to university in Adelaide, Australia. Despite the subsequent resumption of a globe-trotting corporate career – he has lived in the U.S.A., Canada, Indonesia and Vietnam – art was never really far from his mind. He had always been a collector of antiques, but began painting classes in the 2010s after he returned to Singapore, eventually leaving full-time work for the M.A. Fine Arts program at LASALLE College of the Arts, from which he graduated in 2019. Coming of age in the 1960s and '70s, and into his young adulthood, the marginalization he encountered was twinned: both as a member of an ethno-religious minority in Sino-centric Singapore, and, within this community, for his cultural interests and stylistic inclinations (among other facets of his personal life). Johann remarks that, hailing from a

“conservative Javanese-Muslim” background, he at times “faced difficulties within my community, which felt that I am too Westernized in my thinking, my dressing and the way I portray myself in public.” He traces his wanderlust in later life to these early feelings of difference, when “living in foreign countries eclipses just travel, instead ... being an immersion in my own otherness.”³

His affinity for a visual vocabulary distinctly distant from immediate social realities, then, dovetails with biographical experiences marked by alterity; here, aesthetic distance corresponds to personal alienation, the second engendering the first. While Johann’s practice pivots on the appropriation of a moment in Western art history that is imbricated with the expansion of European imperialism around the world, the primary gambit in his conceptual arsenal is the inflection, and fundamental transformation, of signifiers of exploitation and domination. The appropriationist complex in the art of the twentieth century is traced by John Welchman to two waves: the first represented by the neo-Dadaists and Pop artists of the 1950s and '60s, and the “intervention of rehabilitated photographic practice” with the likes of Robert Rauschenberg and Andy Warhol; the next in the work of artists such as Sherrie Levine, Richard Prince and Cindy Sherman in the

1970s and after, predicated on reproduction and repetition.⁴ Welchman notes that it is the idea of deconstruction that is key, predicated on “the relationship between deconstruction, institutional critique and appropriation, and issues of the social and political effectiveness of gestures exchanged between them.”⁵ The cross-historical, transcultural mode of copy and citation that undergirds Johann’s practice, utilizing an imperialist idiom as a vehicle for interrogating its own presumptions, is in line with this genealogy of critical deconstruction, of the appropriationist gesture as “anti-hegemonic cultural affirmation.”⁶

The range of works and objects in #09-1464 fall into several categories. The first is comprised of the artist’s paintings, which simultaneously ventriloquize and inflect the iconography of Western academic genres, chiefly the landscape and still-life. This is followed by those works that are replicas of existing artifacts, produced through commission, and finally by two groups of artifacts from Johann’s own collection: those intact as found objects, and those that he intervened in, collapsing his roles as artist and as collector. Put together into the semblance of a *gesamtkunstwerk*, these pieces embody the deconstructive, anti-hegemonic priorities of postmodernist appropriation. In the first group, the still-life panting titled *Manggis, jambu*

3 Both quotes, with slight paraphrases, are taken from the artist’s M.A. thesis, titled “A Conversation between Saleh and Johann” (2018).

4 John C. Welchman, *Art After Appropriation: Essays on Art in the 1990s* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), p. 9.

5 Ibid. 14.

6 Ibid. 1.



Detail of *Tembika Ming* (Ming Kraakware plate with crest of arms polychromatic), c. Wanli era 1563 - 1621



Detail of Cermin a la Chippendale (Chippendale-style mirror), early 200

ayer, jambu batu, bunga kenanga, cempaka, sundal malam, kemboja dan telang. Kupu-kupu bangsawan, tembi kar Ming dan kaca bunga. (Mangosteen, water apple, guava, ylang ylang, magnolia, tuber rose and blue pea flower. Malay baron butterfly, Ming porcelain and crystal vase.), for one, assumes a compositional backdrop of horizontal and vertical surfaces common to the work of Spanish painter Juan van der Hamen y León, but depicts instead the titular litany of flora and fauna. Many of the fruits and flowers seen here also appear in other works in the current exhibition, and bear particular significance in the artist's personal iconographic code. The mangosteen, native to Southeast Asia, is a punning reference to being black on the outside and white on the inside, a tongue-in-cheek acknowledgement of a brown man's love for Baroque and Rococo kitsch. Johann also enacts a subtle shift in the vanitas trope, proffering Malay folklore and superstition as memento mori. Here, the presence of the frangipani – known as the graveyard flower (*bunga kubur*) for its presence around cemeteries, and famed for its sweet-smelling scent that is associated with the pontianak, a vampiric female ghoul – allude to supernatural lore and mortuary reality, both oriented around the fact of death. *Dari Singapura ke Adelaide* pays tribute to the Australian city of Adelaide, where the artist spent his university

days. Characteristically, he has inserted into the terrain botanical species endemic to Southeast Asia, including the ylang-ylang flower. Prized for its fragrance, it often features in *bunga rampai* at Malay weddings, a potpourri of various petals and leaves. What is of especial prominence is the broad expanse of sky and cloud. Johann, an admirer of John Constable, has written of storm clouds in the English painter's work as symbolizing the difficulties the Anglican church faced during the period; here, the clear, cerulean firmament is a coded reference to his own religious beliefs, the calm heavens overhead an allusion to his firm, lifelong reliance on God and the Islamic faith.⁷

The second category of works encompass commissioned replicas, based on existing objects that circulate through museums, auction houses and private dealerships. While many of these reflect Johann's personal predilection for historic Western decorative styles, he almost always collaborates with an Indonesian furniture-making company, Kinatama, in their manufacture. Kinatama is located in the town of Jepara in the province of Central Java, renowned for its teak furniture industry, and, as a nod to generations of unacknowledged labour by indigenous craftsmen during the era of the Dutch East Indies, he credits the artisans of Kinatama as co-creators in these works.

One such is the *Meja Dinding Puteri* (Princess Console), a console table based on a design by André-Charles Boulle, who produced many pieces for Louis XIV. Identity politics are central to Johann's reframing of the feminine figure: in this schema, she is a manifestation of the mythic Puteri Gunung Ledang, a fairy princess who inhabited Mt. Ledang in Johor. The remaining varieties of objects in the exhibition are actual artifacts from the artist's collection, presented both in their original states and otherwise. An example of the former is an ebony stool that was acquired from a Dutch family in Java, and likely dates to the late 19th or early 20th century. The piece is emblematic of the exploitation of human and ecological resources by the Dutch colonial powers: the Dutch East India Company (VOC) was engaged in the large-scale trade and harvesting of exotic woods, including Sulawesi ebony, and the raw materials that contributed to a flourishing culture of luxury in Europe, unsurprisingly, bore a cost. The VOC was also involved in the enslavement of native peoples; not only were the Dutch complicit in the cross-Atlantic slave trade, they also contributed to similar practices in Java and elsewhere. Also included in the show are found objects that Johann intervened in. *Menara Bunga Tulip* (*Tulipiere*), a tulip vase, speaks to the market realities of the Dutch Golden Age, as well as contemporary economics. At the height of

7 Johann has written of John Constable as a source of artistic reference in his M.A. thesis. The presence of coded signifiers of religious faith, in his own work, was discussed with this author in conversation.

the so-called Tulip Mania in the 1630s in the Netherlands, tulip bulbs became the subject of speculative trading, creating one of the first futures markets in history. Johann has painted onto the vessel the logos of Bitcoin and the now bankrupt cryptocurrency exchange, FTX, drawing a link between a pair of economic bubbles: the historical context of object's emergence, and the fortunes of cryptocurrency in the twenty-first century.

One final note is perhaps necessary. The immediate impression of Johann's preferred visual language is one of luxury and extravagance – the appearance of moneyed status and class. Anna Chave has referred to the "look of absolute, or "plain power" in the hard, unyielding forms of Minimalism, e.g. Frank Stella's black paintings or Donald Judd's gleaming boxes. "By manufacturing objects with common industrial and commercial materials in a restricted vocabulary of geometric shapes", she writes, "Judd and the other Minimalist artists availed themselves of the cultural authority of the markers of industry and technology ... the authority implicit in the identity of the materials and shapes the artists used, as well as in the scale and often the weight of their objects, has been crucial to Minimalism's associative values from the outset."⁸ The associative values of Johann's

richly ornamented interiors, glimmering with gilt accents and punctuated with plush materials, are those of capitalism and commodification, and, by extension, the historical reality of Western colonialism, its imperialist blindness and extractive greed. That the point of Johann's work is the critique of these very facets is little alleviated by the necessity of reinscribing the processes of capitalism in its production; to recreate these objects, even in a critical capacity, entails the operation of significant capital. Yet, what is essential in this exhibition is not the mere complexion of superfluous indulgence, but the conceptual two-step of shifting these objects into the space of the domestic, and back again. In other words, key to the project is the disclosure of its own origins: in the zone of the everyday, the realm of #09-1464. The transplantation of a visual vernacular, otherwise emblematic of the high culture of a colonizing force, into the middle-class environs of local public housing, suggests a deracination of its own classist prerogatives, while the restoration of this aesthetic syntax to the site of the contemporary white cube signifies less a resuscitation of those value systems, but, rather, a collapse of the divide between art and life – an art that, in its move back into the realm of art, retains the ethos of lifeworlds beyond those parameters.

Detail of *Timbunan Buah-Buahan Tempatan (Tropical Fruit Pyramid)*, 2019



Cermin a la Chippendale (Chippendale-style mirror)

early 2000

Gilded wood and plate glass, work in collaboration with artisans of Kinatama
140 x 80 cm

Commissioned from Kinatama, this mirror is modeled on an original Chippendale-style piece, dating from the 1760s, in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. (The original functions as a girandole, with sconces for candles.) The elaborate Rococo frame is derived from Thomas Chippendale's book, *The Gentleman and Cabinet-Maker's Director*, first published in 1754 and considered then the most important repository of furniture designs in England. This frame appears in plates 167 and 168 of the third edition. Of particular note are the birds mounted at the top: sometimes acknowledged as cranes, they are also referred to Hōō birds, modelled on the Hōō of Japanese mythology, i.e. the phoenix. The Hōō was a popular motif in the repertoire of European chinoiserie.



Cermin Belandar (Dutch Mirror)

2020

Gilded wood and glass mirror, work in collaboration with artisans of Kinatama
173 x 112 cm

This mirror is modelled on an original from the early 18th century. The gilt foliate motifs suggest a Venetian origin, but the frame features waveform moldings, referred to as a 'ripple' pattern. The ripple frame is generally associated with Dutch woodworking traditions, but was actually more common in Germany and Spain. It was developed in Germany in the early 17th century, with scholarship attributing its creation to one Johann Schwanhardt. The original mirror came from the estate of the Duke Guido Borea D'Olmo, whose family was first recorded in Venice. Johann – the present artist, not Schwanhardt – commissioned this mirror in sonokeling wood, a dense hardwood found in the forests of central and eastern Java.



Meja Dinding Puteri (Princess Console)

2020 - 2022

Gilded wood and marble table top, work in collaboration with artisans of Kinatama
85 x 70 x 32 cm



This console table boasts the chief characteristic of Baroque furniture: detailed, luxuriant ornamentation that produces an impression of refined grandeur. The female form that adorns its single leg is based on the design of a now famous commode by French furniture maker, André-Charles Boulle, whose workshop produced many pieces for Louis XIV, the Sun King. The commode, currently in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, features winged female torsos on its legs. Despite the overtly Baroque aesthetic, the feminine iconography of Johann's console is a reference to the legend of Puteri Gunung Ledang, a fairy princess who inhabited Mt. Ledang in Johor. According to the Malay Annals, she set seven impossible conditions for the Sultan of Malacca, who desired her hand in marriage, including requests for him to build bridges of gold and silver to Malacca from her mountainous abode, as well as a cup of his son's blood. The console was commissioned from a furniture-making company, Kinatama, located in the town of Jepara in the province of Central Java, Indonesia, renowned for its teak furniture industry. Most of the commissioned pieces in the present exhibition were crafted by artisans employed by Kinatama.



Meja Tulis (Writing Desk)

early 20th century - 2022

Painted and japanned wood

102 x 70 x 40 cm

This secretaire desk, acquired by Johann from an antique shop in Singapore, features a drop-down writing tray with inner drawers and compartments. Little is known about its provenance. The artist repainted the desk and its contents in starkly contrasting black and vermilion hues, and adorned its surfaces with images patterned on those by French designer Jean-Baptiste Pillement, best remembered for his rococo Chinoiserie designs that were informed by an imaginative spirit rather than actual knowledge of the Orient. These tableaux, involving everyday activities such as fishing and music-making, were created using the japanning technique, a European imitation of Asian lacquering that arose in the 17th century. In his characteristic manner, Johann introduced localized elements into the images, including the Malay phrase, "Tuntuhlah ilmu sampai ke negeri cina", which translates to "Seek knowledge as far as China." The saying is derived from the Hadith, the recorded corpus of the words and deeds of the prophet Muhammad. (There is a lack of consensus among Islamic scholars regarding the veracity of this particular saying.) Its inclusion here echoes the faux Oriental motifs, and, ultimately, the inauthenticity of stereotypes that have come to define binary oppositions shaped by cultural and geo-political difference.



Pair of Meja Dinding Badang (Badang Console)

2020 - 2023

Glided wood, faux tortoise shell inlays and marble, artist's work, in collaboration with

artisans of Kinatama

80 x 90 x 50 cm

This pair of cabinet stands are based on original designs attributed to the Flemish cabinet-maker, Hendrick van Soest, and commissioned from Kinatama. The cabinets were commissioned as a group of four for King Philip V of Spain, grandson of Louis XIV, to honour the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713. The originals accompanied cabinets that featured tableaux celebrating Philip's military successes. The stands, which also function as console tables here, feature faux tortoise shell inlays and a marble table-top. Its most distinctive features are the figures that serve as anterior table legs, referred to as telamon or atlantids, the masculine version of the caryatid column, architectural supports sculpted in the form of female figures. The posterior legs are of a design that resemble upturned flowers. Not unlike the *Meja Dinding Puteri* (*Princess Console*), Johann recontextualizes the rococo motifs of the piece as allusions to indigenous Malay myth. The atlantid figures have been named instead for Badang, the legendary Malay strongman who, among other feats, is reputed to have lifted up and thrown the slab of rock that landed at the mouth of the Singapore River, and is today known as the Singapore Stone.

Pair of rabbits



Unknown year
Ebony wood
22 x 10 x 13 cm (each)

The pair of ebony statues of rabbits was acquired by Johan several decades ago from a local antique store, the owner of which informed him that the sculptures had been carved in China. Their origins and subject matter reminded the artist of the myth of the Rabbit God, the patron deity of homosexual men and women in the Sinospheric world. The cult of the Rabbit God is traced to a collection of tales by Qing-dynasty poet and iconoclast, Yuan Mei, titled *Zi Bu Yu*, which literally translates to “that of which Confucius did not speak.” In it, Yuan relates the story of the leporine immortal, an early example of homophobia in Chinese literature. A man in the 18th century, named Hu Tianbao, was enamoured of an official in Fujian province. One fateful day, Hu was caught peeping at his beloved while the latter was using the bathroom. Upon learning of his romantic feelings, the outraged official had him beaten to death. Hu was transformed into the Rabbit God when the ruler of the underworld decided that his sin of passion warranted reprieve from death; today, a shrine to the deity is located in New Taipei City. In vernacular Mandarin, queer men are also commonly referred to as “rabbits”, or *tu zi*.

Anjing Buang Sial (Guardian Dog Gets Rid of Bad Luck)



2019 - 2022
Ceramic
29 x 23 x 11 cm (each)

Numerous examples of foo dog candlesticks, produced as Chinese export ceramics for the Western market during the Qing dynasty, are extant. These objects often portray the creatures seated on all fours, bearing striking facial expression and sporting candle holders on their backs. The reference to “foo dogs” in English may be due to a misunderstanding of the nature of guardian lions in China, statues that are located at gates and doorways. These leonine sculptures, almost always found in pairs, are gendered: the male depicted with a brocade ball, the female with a young cub. Here, Johann has given these animals a Southeast Asian makeover. The male holds a mangosteen, and the female a piece of *kueh lapis*, with a hibiscus bloom tucked behind one ear. The mangosteen fruit, of course, is native to the region. As part of the artist’s personal iconographic code, it signifies a punning reference to being black on the outside and white on the inside—a tongue-in-cheek acknowledgement of a Malay man’s love for Baroque and Rococo aesthetics. The *kueh lapis*, or layered cake, is a stalwart of the kueh traditions of the Malay and Indonesian peoples, while the flower-behind-the-ear look is an almost comically typical trope of femininity in the tropics. Suggesting cultural essentialization, it dovetails with the fate of the foo dog, a (mistranslated) symbol of Chinese-ness in the West.



Menara Bunga Tulip (Tulipiere)

c. late 20th century - 2022

Ceramic and oil paint

99 x 29 x 29 cm

The tulip was introduced to Europe from Turkey in the 16th century. The flower achieved such popularity in the Netherlands that, at the height of the so-called Tulip Mania in the 1630s, tulip bulbs became the subject of speculative trading, creating one of the first futures markets in history. When the bubble burst, entire fortunes were lost. The tulipiere or tulip vase is an elaborate ceramic vessel that features numerous spouts to hold individual flower stalks. Here, the vase assumes a commonly seen pyramidal style that resembles a pagoda, with separate, stackable layers arranged on a pedestal at the bottom. The pedestal is divided into six panels, each framed by an arch and a pair of columns and topped by a dog that functions as a mount for the first layer above. It rests on ball-and-claw feet. Examples of square and hexagonal pedestals from the 17th century—featuring a similar template of architectural elements, animal motifs and ball-ed feet, and crafted from Delftware—exist in the Royal Collection in the U.K., and in the Devonshire Collection at Chatsworth House in Derbyshire. Johann acquired this tulip vase from an American collector. It is believed to date from the 1970s, with a partially legible stamp on the bottom that reads “Valentino”. In the pedestal’s panels that typically boast hand-painted scenes, he has instead depicted his personal coat of arms, as well as the logos of Bitcoin and the now bankrupt cryptocurrency exchange, FTX. The interventionist gesture draws a link between a pair of economic bubbles: the historical context of the vessel’s emergence during the Dutch Golden Age and the rise (and fall) of cryptocurrency in the twenty-first century.

Antique Dutch Stool

c. late 19th or early 20th century

Ebony wood

42 x 37 x 30 cm

This stool is carved from ebony, many species of which are considered endangered today. The artist acquired the object from a local antique store, according to which it ultimately derived from a Dutch family in Java, and likely dates to the late 19th or early 20th century.

During the colonial era, the Dutch East India Company (VOC) engaged in the large-scale trade and harvesting of exotic woods, including Sulawesi ebony (*Diospyros celebica*), also commonly known as black ebony or Makassar ebony, endemic to the island of Sulawesi. The raw materials that contributed to a flourishing culture of luxury in Europe, unsurprisingly, bore a high human and environmental cost. The VOC was also involved in the enslavement of native peoples: not only were the Dutch complicit in the cross-Atlantic slave trade, they also contributed to similar practices in Java and elsewhere. Large areas of land in the Dutch East Indies were also subject to mass deforestation, the effects of which are still felt today. Objects of luxury and indulgence, in other words, emerged from the inhumane, extractive foundations of colonial commerce; through incorporating these fraught histories in his exhibition, Johann complicates his own tactics of replication and appropriation.





Detail of Tembika Ming (Ming Kraakware plate with crest of arms, poly chromatic, c. Wanli era. 1563 - 1621)



Tembika Ming (Ming Kraakware plate with crest of arms, blue and white)

c. Wanli era. 1563 - 1620
Kraak porcelain
36 cm (diameter)



Tembika Ming (Ming Kraakware plate with crest of arms, polychromatic)

c. Wanli era. 1563 - 1621
Kraak porcelain
38 cm (diameter)

Chinese export porcelain, manufactured almost exclusively for the European market, took off in the 16th century with the expansion of trade routes between China and the West, with one of the major players being the Dutch East India Company. Kraakware, so named for the cargo ships, carracks, that carried them, refers to a characteristic blue and white underglaze ceramic objects; the term also sometimes encompasses coloured porcelain varieties. They date from the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, and are sometimes featured in Dutch still life paintings of the Golden Age. Kraakware originated from the famous historic city of Jingdezhen in Jiangxi province, and tends to be recognizable from the pictorial components broken up into panels on the rim of plates and bowls. Painted onto this pair of plates from the Wanli era, one of the penultimate Ming emperors, is Johann's personal coat of arms; see the description of *Pasu Bunga Qianlong* (*Qianlong* vase).



Pasu Bunga Qianlong (Qianlong vase)

c. 1700s

Ceramic

41 x 20.5 cm (diameter)

This object is a blue and white *fengwei zun*, or phoenix-tail vase, which are also referred to as *yen-yen* vases. The phoenix-tail is derived from the shape of bronze ritual implements originating during the Shang Dynasty, known as *gu*. Here, Johann has painted onto the object his personal coat of arms, an image that is equal parts playful fantasy and anti-colonial commentary. The crest is based on an actual one: that of the influential Dutch clan of Valckenier, the most prominent member of which was Adriaan Valckenier, Governor General of the Dutch East Indies from 1737 to 1741. He is remembered today primarily for his role in the 1740 Batavia massacre, in which Dutch East India Company soldiers killed thousands of ethnic Chinese residents of the city, present-day Jakarta. Johann has adapted the arms of the Valckenier family into his personal crest, emphasizing symbolic elements of faith and ethical behaviour, and Southeast Asia as a region. The eagle in the Valckenier arms has been replaced by a dove, a harbinger of peace, while the green crescent moon signifies Islam; stylized hibiscus blooms are a reference to Malaysia, of which it is the national flower, or *bunga raya*. The artist has also included his monogram, consisting of his initials, as well as the Malay saying, "kata itu kota", the translation of which is, literally, "a word is a city" – an exhortation to keep one's promises.



Guci Keramik (Ceramic Vase with male figures)

Early 20th century - 2022

Painted ceramic and stand

43 x 41 cm diameter (vase); 45 x 48 x 48 cm stand

Guci Keramik (Ceramic Vase with female figures)

Early 20th century - 2023

Painted ceramic and stand

43 x 41 cm diameter (vase); 45 x 48 x 48 cm stand

These large Chinese vases were acquired by Johann from a local antique store, and probably date from the 20th century. They form a pair, with scenes involving male characters on one vessel, and female on the other. The Chinese phrase included in the tableaux on both vases translates to "Manufactured in the era of Kangxi of the Great Qing" – a reference to the third emperor of the Qing dynasty – and is more typically rendered on the base of vessels from the period as two vertical columns, reading in an up-down orientation in the traditional Chinese manner. Its inclusion here in the pictorial elements on the body of the vases, reading horizontally in a single line (in the style of European scripts), suggests that these objects were produced as kitschy replicas in the twentieth century. The male-centric vase features a palette common to *famille verte* and *famille noire* vessels, which boast shades of green and black respectively, with its female counterpart incorporating *famille rose*, or pink, as well. Johann has painted his personal crest of arms onto them; refer to *Pasu Bunga Qianlong* (*Qianlong* vase) for a description. The commissioned stands were designed in the rococo style, and include tropical iconography such as mangosteens.

**Timbunan Buah-Buahan
Tempatan (Tropical Fruit
Pyramid)**

2019

Cold-painted ceramic
Various dimensions



This ceramic sculpture borrows from the fruit topiary form popular in the decorative arts in the West, which conventionally features a pyramid of produce sitting atop a bowl. Johann has characteristically replaced the conventional repertoire of apples, grapes and lemons with botanical species common to Southeast Asia. His fruits include water apples and guavas, and flowers depicted include the butterfly pea, the marigold and the periwinkle. The latter, referred to in this part of the world as *kemunting cina*, is known to modern medicine for producing alkaloid compounds that are used in cancer drugs; it has also featured in traditional Malay remedies. The tower of fruits and flowers also feature an insect visitor. As in the still-life painting elsewhere in the present exhibition, *Manggis, jambu ayer...*, the Malay Baron butterfly, depicted here in its parasitical caterpillar form, functions as a memento mori, a reminder of the brevity of life.



Detail of Rumah Ku Dunia Ku (My Residence My World), 2019 - 2023

Kebebasan Naomi (*The Assumption of Naomi*) & Antique canopy altarpiece

2016 and late 18th to early 19th century
Terracotta and bronze
96 x 31 x 41 cm



Naomi Di-taman Syurga (*Naomi in the Garden of Eden*)

2016
Ceramic
38 x 20 x 44 cm

The central figure in these works is the artist's pet cat, Naomi, which died of pneumonia when she was little more than a year old. A flat-face Persian, she was the daughter of Moujik and Garcon; refer to the write-up for *Rumah Ku Dunia Ku (My Residence My World)*. She was a spirited creature, and named for the popular '90s model, Naomi Campbell. *Naomi Di-taman Syurga (Naomi in the Garden of Eden)* depicts the feline in the titular utopia, resting on a bed of roses, sporting a human visage in the manner of the Sphinx. Her personification reflects Johann's paternal feelings for her, and his desire for communication with his furred child from beyond the grave – one of God's creatures to another. *Kebebasan Naomi (*The Assumption of Naomi*)* is a terracotta sculpture. The work is bifurcated in its significance: its medium derives from the earth, and recalls the mortuary practice of returning our bodies to the soil after death, in burial, while its iconography is based on that of the Assumption of Mary, held by Catholic theology to have been taken up into heaven by God after her mortal death. Here, the cherub to whom Naomi clings is Johann himself, his angelic form based on commonly seen putti sculptures. The bronze altarpiece is a ciborium, or canopy, that generally stands over an altar in a church, but is also seen as a smaller structure over icons and reliquaries; its spiral columns recall the twisted ones of the monumental Baroque baldachin in St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican City, created by Bernini.



Kebebasan (*The Emancipation*)

2020

Oil on copper in gilded wooden frame
91 x 77 x 11 cm (framed)

Kebebasan (The Emancipation), as the title suggests, tells an autobiographical tale of liberty. As the artist puts it, "The emancipation here is a reflection of freedom from any restraint, controlling influences, or traditional mores or beliefs. This was only achieved in the later part of my life due, to culture, family and religion." Here, he has chosen a depiction of martyrdom as self-portraiture, recreating Dutch painter Joachim Wtewael's *The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian* (1600) and inflecting the tableau with distinctly Southeast Asian motifs. The protagonist is tied to a mangosteen tree, native to the Malay peninsula (the seeds of which are self-propagating, involving no sexual fertilization); his tormentors have on red *tanjak* or *tengkolok*, traditional Malay headdress; a cherub, descending to ennoble his imminent death, bears in one hand a red hibiscus, the national flower or *bunga raya* of Malaysia; visible in the background are a mouse deer and a young boy on the beach with swordfish, referring to the myths of Sang Kecil and Hang Nadim. The painting is set in a gilt tabernacle frame modeled exactly after that which Leonardo da Vinci's later version of *The Virgin of the Rocks* (c. early 1490s) is currently set in; was carved by an artisan in Jepara, Indonesia.



Manggis, jambu ayer, jambu batu, bunga kenanga, cempaka, sundal malam, kemboja dan telang. Kupu-kupu bangsawan, tembikar Ming dan kaca bunga. (Mangosteen, water apple, guava, ylang ylang, magnolia, tuber rose and blue pea flower. Malay baron butterfly, Ming porcelain and crystal vase.)

2021

Oil on canvas in antique wooden frame

100 x 108 cm (framed)

The spatial composition of this still life painting is based on the work of Spanish painter Juan van der Hamen y León, who often depicts stepped ledges of differing heights as a dramatic stage on which to position his objects. Johann has replicated the play of horizontal and vertical planes, but in place of van der Hamen's peaches and pears, he has included instead a variety of fruits and flowers—and an insect—endemic to Southeast Asia, and that appear in other works elsewhere in this exhibition. The mangosteen, one of his most commonly seen motifs, is featured in *Kebebasan (The Emancipation)* and with the male half of the *Anjing Buang Sial (Guardian Dog Gets Rid of Bad Luck)*, while the guava and water apple are prominently portrayed in *Tembikai, jambu ayer, jambu batu (Watermelon, water apple, guava)*. The floral arrangement likewise boasts a host of native blooms, or those that enjoy some visibility in Malay culture: the tuberose, ylang ylang, hibiscus, frangipani. The trope of vanitas so often witnessed in the still life genre, a reminder of the transience of worldly existence, also informs the spirit of the painting. The mixture of ripe and unripe guavas, including several that are on the verge of spoilage, suggests the brevity of life, and the inclusion of the Malay Baron butterfly, found across the region, channels the symbolism of insects in *nature morte* pictures. With their short life spans, insects embodied mortality, and, for butterflies in particular, the simultaneous promise of resurrection. What is especially significant is the recontextualization of Malay folklore and superstition as vanitas. The frangipani is known as the graveyard flower, or *bunga kubur*, for its presence around cemeteries. Its sweet-smelling scent is also associated with the pontianak, a vampiric female ghoul, and both supernatural lore and mortuary reality, in the manner of *memento mori*, point to the certainty of death.



Rumah Ku Dunia Ku (My Residence My World)

2019 - 2023

Oil on linen in gilded mahogany

183 x 148 cm (framed)

Rumah Ku Dunia Ku (My Residence My World) is a dual portrait of the artist and his partner set in a realistic recreation of their domestic space, into which has also been painted two of their pet cats, a feline couple that produced most of the litter they now rear. The work is a loving paean to a shared life, a shared home, and a shared brood of furry children. The pair of cats in the painting are Moujik (the Russian word for “peasant”), a female doll-face Persian, and her late partner, Garcon (French for “boy”), a male flat-face Persian; the latter is shrouded in shadow. (They are the parents of Naomi, whose life and early death are memorialized in other works in this exhibition, including *The Assumption of Naomi*). The furniture and home accessories are depicted faithfully. These include a Meissen candelabra that has been transformed into a lamp stand, and a mirror that is based on an original design in the manner of Thomas Johnson, an 18th century English wood carver and furniture maker remembered for his promulgation of rococo aesthetics. The mirror features a seated man flanked by a pair of Hoho birds, along with a fox and two hounds. The artist and his partner are represented by a pair of Bert and Ernie dolls, part of the KAWS X SESAME STREET line for the Uniqlo label. In a gesture of self-conscious reflexivity, the actual plush toys are included in the present exhibition – further cementing the autobiographical resonance of Johann’s work, extending the realm of representation into existent domains.



Lukisan Burung-burung Mati (Painting of Dead Birds)

2020 - 2023

Oil on copper in gilded mahogany frame

146 x 124 cm (framed)

Here, two still life paintings of dead birds are paired: one by Flemish painter Adriaen de Gryeff, and Johann's own rendering of similar subject matter. So-called Dutch and Flemish 'game pieces', typically featuring hunting dogs and lifeless game as trophies, functioned as pictorial reminders of aristocratic privilege; the hunt was a sport restricted to the nobility. The presence of death in these images was, of course, an extension of the vanitas trope, a reminder of the transience of earthly existence. Little is known of de Gryeff today, who was born in the 1650s, and specialized in the sub-genre of hunting scenes, often rendered at diminutive scale. *Still-life of Dead Game Birds including Green Woodpecker, Jay, Bluetit and Chaffinch*, attributed to him and dated c. 1700, was acquired by Johann in the U.K. Johann's own composition is modelled after a work by Dutch painter, Jan Weenix, and currently in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, titled *Dead Birds and Hunting Equipment in a Landscape*. Johann has replaced Weenix's subjects with avian species closer to home – save the two largest, which are displayed as spoils of the hunt. Lying on the ground are birds familiar to Singapore: from left to right are the black-crowned night heron; crimson sunbird; black-naped oriole; pink-necked green pigeon (the female of the breed is entirely coloured green); laced woodpecker. Johann has also substituted the original objects in Weenix's painting with local fruits, such as the soursop, and the duku or *langsat*. Also pictured in the background is the village in Serangoon, Batu Enam, where the artist lived as a child; refer to *Tembikai, jambu ayer, jambu batu* (*Watermelon, water apple, guava*). The frame for the painting is similar to the one commissioned for *Kebebasan (The Emancipation)*.



Still-life of Dead Game Birds including Green Woodpecker, Jay, Bluetit and Chaffinch

c. 17th century
Oil on canvas by Adriaen de Gryeff
101.5 x 84 cm

Tembikai, jambu ayer, jambu batu (Watermelon, water apple, guava)

2021

Oil on copper in antique ebony wood frame with tortoiseshell insets

49 x 59 cm (framed)



This painting is based on Spanish painter Luis Meléndez's *Still Life with Watermelons and Apples in a Landscape* (1771), which is in the collection of the Museo Nacional del Prado in Madrid. Meléndez's piece is unusual for its choice of an outdoor landscape as backdrop to the titular subject matter. Here, Johann has employed his characteristic gesture of replicating academic European paintings with iconographic substitutes that evoke, instead, the lifeworld of Malay-speaking Southeast Asia. The apples have been replaced by guavas (*jambu batu*) and water apples (*jambu ayer*). The term "jambu", in vernacular Malay, involves a linguistic pun: it is widely used in Singapore and Malaysia as a term for being physically attractive. The painting also has deep autobiographical resonance for Johann. Depicted in the far distance is the village, located in Upper Serangoon, where he grew up in the 1960s and '70s. Its name, Kampong Batu Enam, or Sixth Stone Village, is a reference to the colonial-era practice of locating neighbourhoods in Singapore by their distance from ground zero, which was the General Post Office building at the mouth of the Singapore River (today, of course, home to the Fullerton Hotel). Stones were placed on major roads at the mile-long point, and used as markers by postmen, bus drivers and trishaw riders. Watermelons and guavas, fruit that are grown in this region, were cheap options that the artist consumed much of in his early years, hence their juxtaposition against his childhood home. The 18th century ebonized frame features ripple molding and faux tortoiseshell insets; the artist acquired it in Turin.

Dari Singapura ke Adelaide (From Singapore to Adelaide)

2019 - 2023

Oil on linen in ebonized wood frame

143 x 177 cm (framed)



Like a number of paintings in the present exhibition, *Dari Singapura ke Adelaide* depicts an imaginary tableau that imbricates landscapes and ecosystems across distance and difference, collapsing physical and temporal separation as well as cultural and ecological specificities. Here, the backdrop is that of the South Australian terrain, and, in particular, the expanse of lush green vineyards that surrounds Port Willunga, where Johann had spent time while an university student in Adelaide. (Willunga is considered a suburb of the city.) Also indicative of Australia is the prominently pictured yucca shrub: *Yucca Filamentosa*, otherwise known as Adam's Needle, sports a halo of sharp, sword-like leaves, with its hardy nature making it popular in ornamental gardens down under. The artist, however, has inserted into the landscape species of plants that are common to Southeast Asia, or bear significance for the region's Malay-Muslim people – an eco-cultural portrait of his own community. The bright blue flowers of the butterfly pea, for instance, an endemic species, are used to colour the *pulut tai tai*, a dessert made from rice steamed in coconut milk. Wild ferns are referred to as *pucuk pakis* in Malay, and used in a variety of dishes from salads to curries. *Misai kucing*, or cat's whiskers, is used as a herb in traditional Malay medicine; here, its presence is also a floriographical reference to Johann's feline children. The spidery, yellow ylang-ylang flowers are prized for their fragrance, and often included in *bunga rampai* at Malay weddings. The latter is a potpourri of various petals and leaves, typically ylang-ylang, jasmine, rose and pandan, which are sprinkled with rose-scented water and then wrapped in the leaves of the betel nut, called *sireh*, and given to guests. The commissioned frame is made from ebonized wood, treated to resemble ebony, and features the 'ripple' pattern as well as the artist's personal monogram, a stylized "JF".

Perpustakaan dan Muzium Raffles (Raffles Library and Museum)

2017 - 2023

Oil on linen in gilded wood frame

65 x 85 cm (framed)



The National Museum of Singapore began life as the Raffles Library and Museum in 1849. Its main building, with a distinctive dome and rotunda, was designed in the Neo-Palladian style and opened in 1887; the rear annex was added in the 2000s. By the early twentieth century, its collection had grown to include a broad range of objects from across Malaya, from ethnographic artefacts to natural specimens. The power of empire, promulgated through the enterprise of colonial knowledge-building, is represented by the monolithic structure. (The pristine colour of its walls also suggests another, more contemporary, power dynamic: that of particular entities in post-independence Singapore's political landscape.) The compositional space of the painting is bifurcated. In contrast to the dominating presence of the building, with its rational order of architectural elements and neatly appointed gardens, is a border of indigenous flora and fauna in the foreground, signifiers of the asymmetrical relations between the authority of the colonizers and the subjugation of the colonized; the artist has included personal icons in the latter zone, symbolically located on the periphery of the compound. The mousedeer recalls the fables of Sang Kancil, which are popular in Indonesia and Malaysia, and tell of the small and comparatively weak creature which is yet quick of wit, managing to outsmart bigger, stronger beasts. The black swan is a reference to Johann's time in Australia. These animals also appear in other paintings in the present exhibition, including *Kebebasan (The Emancipation)*.



Detail of Perpustakaan dan Muzium Raffles (Raffles Library and Museum, 2017 - 2023)

Johann Fauzi

b.1962, Singapore



Johann Fauzi is a Singapore-based artist who works across the mediums of painting, print, sculpture, and space-making. Trained in classical Western oil painting, he often incorporates these various formats into large-scale, immersive interior installations in the tradition of gesamtkunstwerk, aesthetically integrated environments. One of the primary pivots of his practice is the appropriation and transformation of various Western art historical idioms, inflecting their ideological and iconographic predispositions to reflect the lifeworld of Malay-speaking Southeast Asia.

Johann came to art later in life, having first built a corporate career. He is a graduate of the University of South Australia and the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, Singapore, and received his M.A. Fine Arts degree in 2019 from a joint program with LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore, and Goldsmiths, University of London.

He has participated in various group exhibitions, including "2219: Futures Imagined" (2019) at the ArtScience Museum, Singapore, and "The Foot Beneath the Flower: Camp. Kitsch. Art. Southeast Asia." (2020) at the ADM Gallery, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He has also staged several solo exhibitions; his most recent is "#09-1464" at Richard Koh Fine Art, Singapore.

Education

- | | | | |
|------|--|------|---|
| 2019 | Master of Arts, Fine Arts, LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore and Goldsmiths, University of London | 2020 | <i>The Foot Beneath the Flower: Camp. Kitsch. Art. Southeast Asia</i> , ADM Gallery, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. Curated by Louis Ho |
| 2016 | Certificate in Print Making, Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, Singapore | 2019 | <i>2219: Futures Imagined</i> , ArtScience Museum, Singapore |
| 2015 | Advanced Certificate in Western Fine Art, Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, Singapore
Certificate in Sculpture, Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, Singapore | 2018 | <i>Outside My Eye</i> , MA Fine Arts Graduation Showcase, Institute of Contemporary Arts, Singapore |
| 2014 | Certificate in Western Fine Art, Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, Singapore | 2015 | <i>Without Formality</i> , MA Fine Arts: Work In Progress, Institute of Contemporary Arts, Singapore |
| 1994 | Bachelor of Management, University of South Australia, Australia | 2015 | <i>Artist Emergent</i> , The Print Gallery, The Arts House at Old Parliament Building, Singapore
<i>SPACES, Singapore Landscape and Architecture from 1800s to the 21st Century</i> , The Arts House at Old Parliament Building, Singapore |

Solo Exhibitions

- | | | | |
|------|--|------|---|
| 2023 | #09-1464, Richard Koh Fine Art, Gillman Barracks, Singapore | 2014 | <i>Common Ground</i> , The Print Gallery, The Arts House at Old Parliament Building, Singapore
<i>SPACES – Contemporary Art Reimagined</i> , The Print Gallery, The Arts House at Old Parliament Building, Singapore |
| 2020 | <i>Jemputan</i> , Comma Art Space, Singapore | 2019 | <i>TEN PLUS - Sculpture, Ceramic and Fine Art Exhibition</i> , The Print Gallery, The Arts House at Old Parliament Building, Singapore |
| 2019 | <i>Pride of the Mangosteen</i> , Clifford Chance, Marina Bay Financial Centre, Singapore | | |

Group Exhibitions

- | | | | |
|------|---|--|--|
| 2022 | <i>Somewhere In Bedok</i> , Singapore Art Week, Bedok Reservoir Road, Singapore | | |
| | <i>Emak Kata Jangan Jadi Seniman</i> , Art Porters Gallery, Singapore | | |
| 2021 | <i>Artist as Collector</i> , Singapore Art Week, Gillman Barracks, Singapore | | |

Talks

- | | |
|------|---|
| 2018 | MA Fine Arts Postgraduate Symposium, LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore |
|------|---|

Louis Ho



Louis Ho is an independent curator and critic. He has lectured at the National Institute of Education, and is a contributor to various journals and publications, such as Modern Chinese Literature and Culture and ArtAsiaPacific. He was trained in art history, and his research interests include Southeast Asian visual culture and the intersections between art and the social. He was previously a curator at the Singapore Art Museum, where his first exhibition was the permanent collection show, After Utopia: Revisiting the Ideal in Asia Contemporary Art; other exhibitions included the Asia Pacific Breweries Foundation Signature Art Prize 2018 show. He was also a co-curator of the Singapore Biennale 2016, An Atlas of Mirrors.



🌐 www.rkfineart.com
✉ info@rkfineart.com

RICHARD KOH FINE ART

SINGAPORE

Blk 47 Malan Road,
#01-26 Gillman Barracks,
Singapore 109444

Open Tuesday – Saturday: 11 am – 7 pm

📞 +65 6513 2640

THAILAND

Peterson Building,
712/1, 9th Floor Sukhumvit Rd,
Khlong Tan, Khlong Toei,
Bangkok 10110, Thailand

Open Tuesday – Saturday: 11 am – 7 pm

📞 +66 2037 6944

📞 +66 95952 9427

MALAYSIA

229, Jalan Maarof,
Bukit Bandaraya, Bangsar,
59100 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Open by appointment only

📞 +603 2095 3300

📞 +6019 330 5112

Copyright © 2023
Richard Koh Fine Art Pte Ltd

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronically, including photocopy, recording or any information storage and retrieval system, without the prior consent from the artist and gallery.

All artwork images are courtesy of Richard Koh Fine Art and the artist
Artist portrait image is courtesy of the artist
Curator portrait image is courtesy of Singapore Art Museum

A digital catalogue for "#09-1464"
A solo exhibition by Johann Fauzi
Curated by Louis Ho
Essay by Louis Ho

Design by Pei Wen
Image edited by Pei Wen, Nor Harith & Wei Fung

Richard Koh Fine Art,
Blk 47 Malan Road, #01-26 Gillman Barracks, Singapore 109444

11 February - 4 March 2023

Cover page front: Detail of *Timbunan Buah-Buahan Tempatan (Tropical Fruit Pyramid)*, 2019
Cover page back: Detail of *Tembikai, jambu ayer, jambu batu* (Watermelon, water apple, guava), 2021

Supported by:

Sponsorship by:





RICHARD KOH
FINE ART

www.rkfineart.com