



## Review: Propositions for a Stage: 24 Frames of a Beautiful Heaven

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Category: Review



*Propositions for a stage: 24 frames of a beautiful heaven, installation view, Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore, LASALLE College*

of the Arts, 2017 © Courtesy the artist. Photo: Weizhong Deng.

There was an element of necrophilia present in this exhibition focused on film and video. It is, as Paul Willemen has noted, “something that is dead, past, but alive in memory”, relating to a love for cinema that goes on forever. Upon entering *Propositions for a Stage: 24 Frames of a Beautiful Heaven*, the visitor encountered the moving images of a ruined Chinese cinema in Malaysia, a meeting between a Russian cosmonaut and his seven-years dead wife from science fiction film *Solaris*, and wafting Chinese opera music *Princess Zhaojun* lending an air of nostalgic ethereality. On another small screen hanging from the ceiling, Singapore artist Ming Wong appears in space garb and leads viewers through an endless silver tunnel. The display of Chinese opera costumes and painted faces, alongside makeshift wooden stage, props, and storyboards in Wong’s cinephilic work *The Bamboo Spaceship* (2017) leads one to relive the atmosphere of films and reinvigorate the death-of-theatre troupe and what has been destroyed by time.



Ming Wong, *Scenography for a Chinese science fiction opera*, 2015, mixed media installation featuring a hand painted theatre stage set (synthetic polymer paint on canvas, wood, steel, motors). © Courtesy the artist.



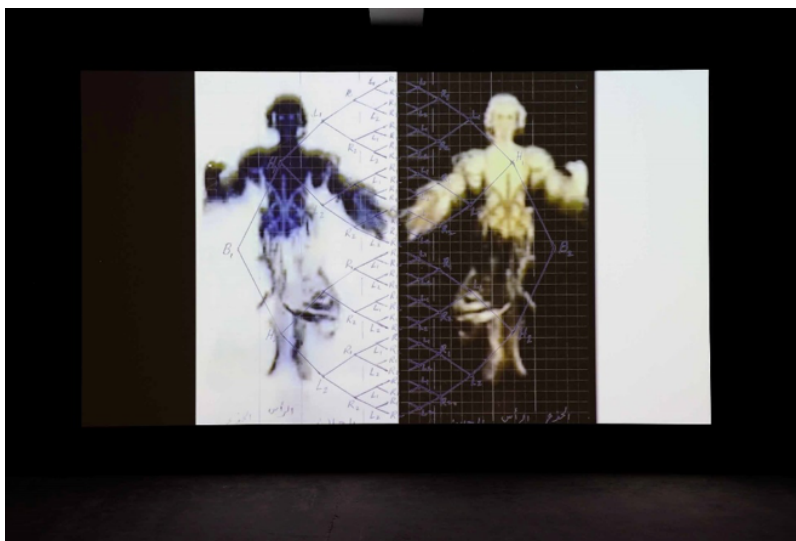
Ming Wong, *The Bamboo Spaceship*, 2017, installation view, *Propositions for a stage: 24 frames of a beautiful heaven*, Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore, LASALLE College of the Arts, 2017 © Courtesy the artist. Photo: Weizhong Deng.

Held at the Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore (at the LASALLE College of the Arts), *Propositions for a Stage* featured five international artists who dealt with the turbulence of temporalities, locations, mediations, identities. Among these themes, time was probably the one that preoccupied these artists the most. The show's curator Bridget Crone noted that "The exhibition demands that we consider the different possibilities for time beyond chronological or 'clock' time." For instance, *The Bamboo Spaceship* (2017) combines two conceptions of time: the objective time that is linked to China's

modernity and the subjective time of memory as elaborated separately by Andrei Tarkovsky and Ming Wong. And somewhere between them lies the time of film and video.



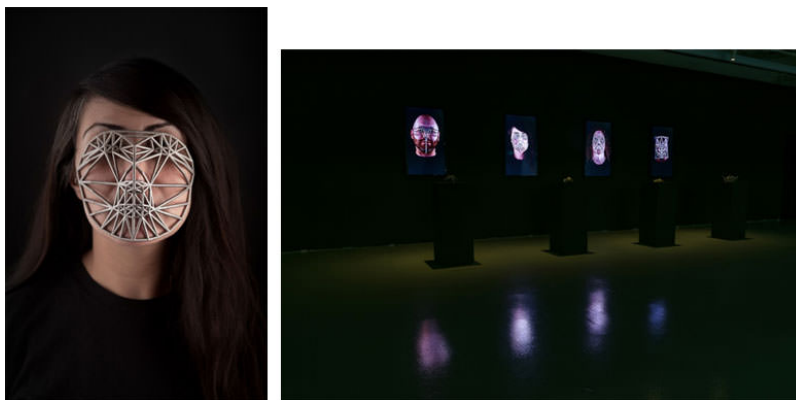
Exhibition view of three installations in foreground, midground and background; *Propositions for a stage: 24 frames of a beautiful heaven*, Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore, LASALLE College of the Arts, 2017.



Rabih Mroué, *Duo for Two Missing Persons* (video still), 2013, high-definition digital video, colour, sound, 8:33 minutes. © Courtesy the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Hamburg / Beirut.



As I pondered about cinematic temporality and storytelling, the mood of necrophilia-in-cinema continued to hover and just then a voice-over delivered in a low-pitched tone cut through the clutter. It is Lebanese artist Rabih Mrouè speaking through a single-channel projection. Another story begins. Or rather, three mini-stories unfold, woven together through narratives of fiction and reality. In *Duo for Two Missing Persons* (2013), Mrouè intertwines a story of his own research interest in possible reconfigurations of the human body with that of mathematical formulae, choreography of Baroque dance, and then a personal tale (and collective memory) of a haunting at B018, a Beirut nightclub that was supposedly situated on the site of a mass grave in the aftermath of Lebanon's civil war. The dominating sensation, for me, was that which one would experience inside a cinema: the contrast of light and dark, and the movement of things, places, and time—revolving around me. However, *Duo for Two Missing Persons* belongs not to the cinema, but to an art gallery.



(L) Zach Blas, *Face Cages*, 2014–16, high-definition digital video of endurance performance with Elle Mehrmand, 16:9 aspect

ratio, colour, sound, 10:02 minutes. © Courtesy the artist. Photo: Christopher O’Leary.

(R) Zach Blas, *Face Cages*, 2014–16, installation view, *Propositions for a stage: 24 frames of a beautiful heaven*, Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore, LASALLE College of the Arts, 2017 © Courtesy the artist. Photo: Weizhong Deng.

Besides narratives and memory, what also stood out in these works were the introduction of body, action, and performance, from Rabih Mrouè’s play between presence and absence, to Ming Wong’s theatre and spectacle, to Amanda Beech’s action paintings, to Uriel Orlow’s historical events and happenings, and finally, the enactments of identity by Zach Blas. In the latter’s performance video *Face Cages* (2014–16), Blas’s face is masked by a “face cage” alongside three queer artists presenting the same.

Retaliating against the crude identification and discriminatory ideologies provided by biometric systems, the American artist juxtaposes the human face with the ill-fitting, cold metal of the medieval looking face cage. Nearby, the abstract patterned, Gothic-styled physical masks sit on four plinths and mystically import into the room an aura of a time past, as well as the imagined pain and suffering from these works dealing with bodily experiences. Blas’ performance oscillates between presence and absence as attention is called to the face on the one hand while “the lacking” articulates in the lifeless mask displayed as object, on the other. Looking on, there is a kind of theatricality in slow motion (as the performers each wear their cage for as long as they can endure it) – the kind we find in operation in the theatre. At this point for me,

meaning—all meaning—has seemingly vanished.



Amanda Beech, *Cause and Effect series 1* (detail), 2016, print, paint, craft paper, wood and spray paint on paper with cut-outs, 157.5 x 97.8 x 2 cm  
© Courtesy the artist.



Amanda Beech, *Cause and Effect series*, 2016, installation view, *Propositions for a stage: 24 frames of a beautiful heaven*, Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore, LASALLE College of the Arts, 2017 © Courtesy the artist. Photo: Weizhong Deng.

Moving through the show, the questions one might ask of what contemporary life is and what it means to live in the present recurred. The artists redefine and give new meanings to the complexity of "present" time in their works. British-born artist Amanda Beech makes abstract art that engages with the world in a philosophical way. Titles such as *No Horizon does not equal Progressive Future*, *Self Conception does not equal Self Transformation*, and *Capital does not explain Culture* point to the conceptual language behind the mechanism of painting. Intuitive as well, Beech sees her painting as a stage for the performative display of brush marks, strokes, and the exploration of texture. Part chance and part controlled process of marking, these drips, splotches, and cut-outs juxtapose with other elements, like empty spaces, grids, cellular forms, or computer-chip diagrams. Looking at Beech's paintings—entitled *Cause and Effect series* (2016)—a sense of intensity that derived the colours and shapes prevails, the abstraction a means to express the human condition and society.





Uriel Orlow, *The Reconnaissance (with Paused Prospect and Paused Retrospect)*, from the project *Unmade Film 2012–13*, installation view, *Propositions for a stage: 24 frames of a beautiful heaven*, Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore, LASALLE College of the Arts, 2017 © Courtesy the artist. Photo: Weizhong Deng.



Uriel Orlow, *The Fairest Heritage*, from the project *Theatrum Botanicum*, 2016–17, installation view, *Propositions for a stage: 24 frames of a beautiful heaven*, Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore, LASALLE College of the Arts, 2017 © Courtesy the artist. Photo: Weizhong Deng.

The concern with time, place, medium, and mood was also evident in Swiss artist Uriel Orlow's works. One of his two installations, *The Reconnaissance* (2012–13), encompasses cinematic tropes such as mise-en-scène, narrative, illusionism, and projection. Comprising sound, a backdrop and photographs as props, a box of sand and running slides, the work points to the still-in-making or unfinished business of a film. Deploying the notions of ruins and ghosts, Orlow introduces as well, a fractured temporality as he references the past state of exile and abandoned homes in Israel/Palestine while remaining clearly anchored in the present. Melding fiction and reality, the artist explores the new aesthetic possibilities of cinema in a gallery space in the contemporary moment while remaining engaged to the social and political. For example, the all-important issue of race and identity is investigated in his second work, *The Fairest Heritage* (2016–17), as Uriel Orlow rewrites in it the documentary narratives of archival films based on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Kirstenbosch, the national botanical gardens of South Africa in Cape Town.

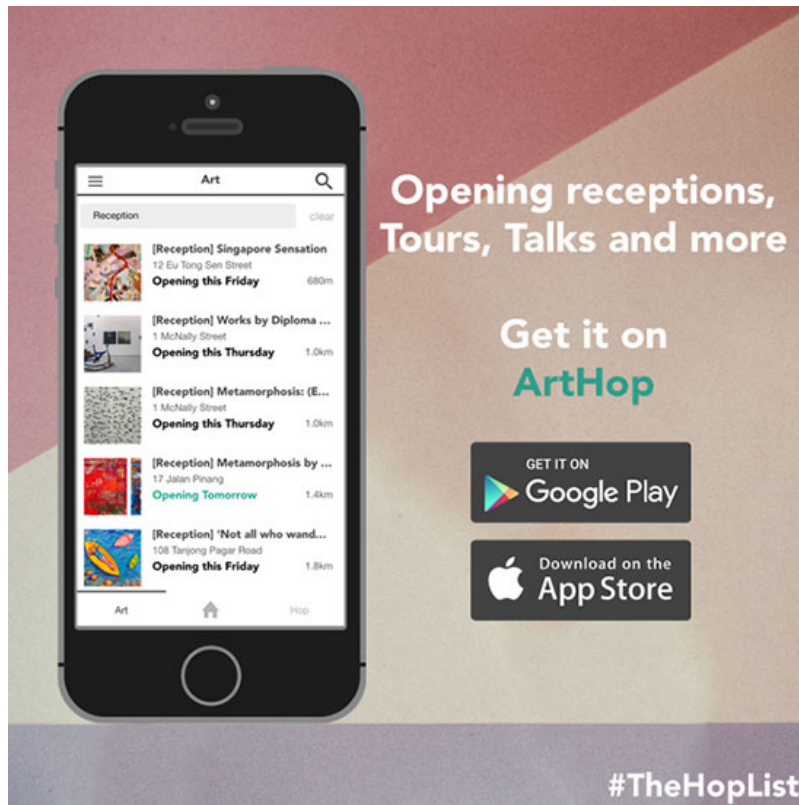
History and memory lingered in these works at *Propositions for a Stage: 24 Frames of a Beautiful Heaven*. Criticality, combined with fantasy, was how the five artists chose to rewrite the dominant narratives of history and cinema and to provide new forms of mediations for easing conflicts and tensions in the world.

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*Propositions for a Stage: 24 Frames of a Beautiful Heaven* was on show from 29 July to 22 October 2017. Click [here](#) for more about the exhibition.

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