From the curator

For those of us who dare to desire differently, who seek to look away from the conventional ways of seeing [...] representation is not just a question of critiquing the status quo. It is also about transforming the image, creating alternatives, asking ourselves questions about what types of images subvert, pose critical alternatives, and transform our worldviews and move us away from dualistic thinking about good and bad.

- Black Looks: Race and Representation[1]

The group exhibition *How to Desire Differently* imagines complex representations of bodies of difference in relation to existing imaging practices in Singapore. The title is adapted from the statement by bell hooks, which was written with a focus on Blackness and Black subjectivity but undergirded by a theoretical framework that encompasses alternative thinking towards representation. In the context of this exhibition, a "choreography" of race, gender, and sexuality is actively assembled and reframed as a way to reimagine difference. Through diverse artworks from photography, video and painting, the exhibition engages and addresses prevailing issues of simplification and binary-seeing implicated in approaching diverse bodies and their minor[2] positions, paying attention to Singapore's complex yet often reduced landscape.

Following an invitation from Dr. Bridget Tracy Tan, I began the process of courting artists to be a part of the group exhibition. I recall speaking to artist Jason Wee and how he suggested an alternative title upon hearing my initial one, "How to *move* differently". In hindsight, I found this serendipitous as it reminded me of hooks' calling.

Wee's series in the exhibition imagines poet Arthur Yap's 'gaudy turnout' as choreographies of sexualised movement.[3] In his work, a series of tenebrous "mise en scene" is abstracted on paperboards - puzzle pieces that are composed yet disaggregated for its resistance to pictorial closure. In comparison to its initial iteration, these abstractions began from pictures "plotting" cruisers in their perambulation.

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[1] hooks 4.
[2] In a theoretical sense, the term "minority" is one that is structured around asymmetrical power relations (often via numbers) whereas "minor" refers to other possible formations that bypass conventional groupings.
[3] Wee.

While Wee's initial pictures suggest the need for (in)visibility through their foggy quality, the broader issue of representing bodies of difference has received its fair share of criticism, often contended to be doing more "harm" than good. These bodies are often subjected to erroneous engagements based on differing worldviews of those engaging with them, and there is a tendency for the latter to attain cognitive closure when confronted with discomforting differences, instead of a kind of imaginative empathy of others. How can ways of seeing be *relooked*? While it is worth noting that representation has its inherent limitations where minor bodies risk becoming unintentional (prop)ositions for visual spectacle, we must propose ways to address such conundrums, at least in the arts. Where there are avenues to cultivate ways of engaging *differently*, it should be *desirous*.

In the work of the eminent sociologist Syed Hussein Alatas, he introduces the term "captive mind" to address the postcolonial dilemma of intellectual captivity. For example, he identifies a case of Asian scholars extending the use of Western thought without appropriate adaptations.[4] While he does not call for a total rejection of Western lenses, Alatas is wary of uncritical transmissions through imitation. While the text from hooks focuses on the livelihoods of the Black community in America, she offers creative leads that enable a shift in the way we understand difference. What "conventional way of seeing" do we experience here? What can "transforming the image" entail? Importantly, how can such transformation also take place beyond the image?

To return to Alatas' critique of imitation, specifically in the field of development planning, we can consider how multiculturalism (or plural monoculturalism) bears uncanny resemblances to the colonial concept of a "plural society", where groups are segmented and atomised based on their functions. This overlooks the increasing complexity of identities in an ever-changing and globalised world or excesses that have been relegated to private spheres. Our simplified ways of engaging with identities contribute to collective thought structures that appear "normal", leaving complex bodies as homogeneous and bounded.

The captive mindset can also fester in those already sidelined. Azhar Ibrahim elucidates the possibilities of Malay artists who are in favor of "universality" as opposed to being informed by Malayness in their art-making.[5] While the former may be motivated by the desire to embrace one's multiplicity, some still harbour conflicted feelings towards Malay communal

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[4] Alatas, *The Captive Mind In Development Studies* 10.
[5] Ibrahim.

identity because of issues surrounding the myth of racial hierarchy and "parochialism". Such self-reinforcing phenomena can be linked to constant contradistinctions made against segmented identities, and the pressures of making it into the better binary. Here, Alatas warns that everyone is susceptible to such intellectual captivity and that it can be found amongst officials and civilians alike.[6] Thus, in this instance, variables like race, when perceived through the lens of the one held "captive", limits the multiplicity of difference.

The prevalence of racial compartmentalisation and its simplified engagements eclipses lived narratives of heterogeneity. Such divisions are translated into racial "commonsense" and influence the way we arrive at formulating complicated social issues. This familiarisation structures the way we engage with each other (even with ourselves as shown by Azhar Ibrahim), and evidently so, limits the way our bodies move and interact. In a hypervisual world today, these primed engagements are also articulated through visuality where ways of seeing are entangled with a set of relations that produces specific visions. Here, through the ordering of difference, images produce various hierarchies that are often seen as "natural" where they can become "dominant" and discounting other ways of seeing. Perhaps, one might ask: How can we become "difference-conscious" without resorting to frameworks that are linear?

We can begin by inflecting our discussions with a complexity that aligns with authentic lived realities. This involves bringing to the fore intersectional qualities that consider differences through overlapping variables like race, gender, and sexuality. We can try complicating superficial constructs and becoming aware of abstract impressions. All bodies have complicated realities and desires. How can one de-territorialise the way identities are structured by strategically slipping "into molar confrontations and passes under or through them"?[7]

Following the lead of researcher Eve Tuck, it will be useful to introduce desire-based research as a framework to understand bodies of difference. Tuck considers the desire-led as an antidote to damage-inclined processes. If we take this as a methodology for engaging with diverse bodies, damage is understood as pathologising. This regards certain attributes as abnormal while simultaneously frames bodies as singular and defined by failure. In contrast, desire takes complexity (contradictions alike) and lived experiences as a basis of

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[6] Alatas, *Intellectual imperialism* 32.
[7] Stivale 103.

understanding. While certain bodies may be positioned as marginal for various material and social factors, desire moves beyond them by capturing hope and wisdom. Here, bodies are addressed as embodiments of complex experiences that are dynamic which also means they are not always "understandable" on face value. It is critical to acknowledge that experiences include contradictions that may be antagonistic, which reflects inherent humanness and the contingency of experiences. When this is made complicated, we begin to override easy binaries of good and bad. If so, how can the image transform and mobilise "critical alternatives"?

In Rizman Putra's photographic series, a fictitious superstar performed by the artist defies expectations of the perceived one-dimensional Malay man. He experiments with different sub-identities mostly to parodic effect, presenting ensembles that echo styles of musical genres ranging from a *Folk Sontol* (2006) (referring to Folk music) to *Glam Sontol* (2006) (a take on Glam rock). They take shape as magazine covers, seemingly bounded by the frame yet traversing it, when viewed collectively. Here, it is also evident that there is an element of risibility with imitation and emulation if we consider Rizman's parody. Do these iterations imagine and "invent" a self-actualised individual, or ever, does so by reinterpreting ascribed sub-identities through continuous choreography of self-fashioning?

In the work of Adeline Kueh and Susie Wong, dance is foregrounded. In Kueh's *Don't you see, baby, this is perfection* (2019), a found video-still captures KTV dancing girls dressed in luau costumes. The still is from a performance of Shakira's *Hips Don't Lie,* and where the performers ebb through multiple agencies as women, Chinese, "Hawaiian" and nightlife performers. Kueh highlights theorist Trinh T. Minh-Ha's idea of "speaking nearby", where her process of engagement with these women makes space for narratives that do not "claim". She celebrates their status by revealing intersectional realities while not being privy to their lives, which suggests representational secrets that can never be fully "visible" or known.

In Wong's video *Dancing Alone (Don't Leave Me)* (2020), dancing is solitary: female bodies are choreographed based on their own will and inspired by dance halls of the past. These women reimagine the pleasure of movement (the joget, ronggeng and rumba), actively reaching a heightened state of emancipation from their desired corporeality. Here, Wong's choreography, or rather, her collaborators' dance, is propositional in the way they simultaneously indulge and refuse. There is a successive logic to both Kueh's and Wong's pursuit of female visual representation when seen together; they reveal but displace blatant

"exposure". But perhaps, resisting "exposure" is never the same as being fully private. The image always depends on other overlapping factors. Here, it is inevitably tied to visuality, or understood as power relation entangled in images.

For example, in Fitri Ya'akob's *To Mother* (2019), a mother and child seek privacy in nature as a temporary respite from societal expectations and imposed notions of the female role as perfect. Her work attempts to complicate motherhood by eliciting issues of intergenerational traumas inherited by mothers; "hauntings" that are not perceivable to the naked eye, yet linger. At the same time, these surreptitious propositions and its lush respite are already "exposed" by the pervasiveness of visuality. By this, coded components like nature (for example, beaches) set against racialised bodies serve as indirect messages of marginality as relayed by the media. Instances like these call for a reconfiguration as a way to argue in meaning-making. How do we remind ourselves of our complex personhood when imposed with insistent forces of visuality?

In Vimal Kumar's *Transcendental Water Bodies* (2019), he challenges normalised orientations of goddesses and deities. The work pays homage to revered figures of seas and rivers through the forms of Mazu, Nyai Roro Kidul and Ganga. In invoking these unseen entities, the devotees manifest and (trans)form into female goddesses; becoming *woman* and becoming *goddess*. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari discuss at length about becoming and how, for instance, becoming woman is not an imitation of form, but propositionally affective through feminine "reverberations".[8] Likewise, the devotees depicted synchronously summon and become; embodying the resonances of these goddesses while complicating their minor positions through reverence and self-deification.

If proximity enables transmission of said "reverberations", Yeo Tze Yang's paintings depict a reorganisation of familiar arrangements in gatherings. Painted from photographic references, he harnesses such "resonances" as a way of imaging: bodies becoming other; horizontally arranged and rendered simultaneously. Here, to become other is to inflect oneself with multiplicity by undertaking a different frame of reference. In *Getting Back* (2017), we see a crowd doused by streetlights. Their entitative qualities from markers like different skin colour are blurred, but also heightened by the painting's murky tone. They are rendered with a singular brush, yet in a distinctive enough way as to be different. Here, when we think of

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[8] Stivale 102.

transmissions, invoking both Alatas, and Deleuze & Guattari, we see a formal illustration in the painting: hues of pink infect one another. Beginning with the man off-centered, and triangulating between the woman facing away (her pink blouse), and another in a *tudung* (a headscarf worn by Muslim women) — face blushed. Tze Yang likened this to a saying by Malaysian artist Lat: *"Bila saya melukis, saya lukis semua orang"* ("When I draw, I draw everyone"). Yet we should not mistake this for colour blindness, but moreso, of "colour-consciousness".

In Farizi Noorfauzi's *Internalised conversations* (2020), the artist scrutinises repetitive sameness for the hope of difference. He gathers disembodied sequences from old classic Malay films and their filmic Malay tropes as a way to reconstruct new narratives. Framing these sequences are CRT television sets facing each other, mimicking a "conversation". While they speak in manners disparate, they articulate a looping of similar narratives. While such self-reinforcing nature alludes to an internalisation that makes up a "Malay social imaginary", Farizi attempts an escape - in his experimental attempt, he seemingly waits for a "rhizomatic" possibility; arbitrary lines that go beyond binaries of dialogues. This is akin to what Deleuze and Guattari mention as "small talk", one that is possibly illogical or even destructive, but potentially throws one into new becomings.[9]

In my work, I begin with the painting *Malay Boy with Bird* (1953) by artist Cheong Soo Pieng as a point of departure. As a form of photographic reinterpretation, I transpose familiar visions of the *Mat Motor*[10] or *Abang Melayu* (directly translated as "Malay brother" which alludes to the trope of a Malay man revered for his masculinity) as a creative exercise in seeking other formulations of the Malay male. Specifically, the *Abang motor* (now hybridised and rearranged!) in my work also represent the "unrepresentable" or the "unbeknownst", where "queer" adaptations of works by Cheong push for an expanding in possibilities. Within the body of this Malay man lies other multiplicities, where the heterosexual male performs other possible iterations, alluding to a "yet-to-come" or "yet-to-be-known".

How to Desire Differently is an exhibitionary proposition that hopes to compel other ways of looking. It does not necessarily contend in equivalent retaliation through visual representation, but attempts to untangle habits and rituals that have normalised certain established modes of engagement as "normal". Such normalcy has in many ways, prevented

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[9] Stivale 105.
[10] Mat Motor can be understood as a racialised term referring to Malay males whose identity is bound by his motorcycle.

some bodies from a full range of complexities to specific frames of reference. At the same time, the exhibition in its realisation, addresses communicative inequities, where exhibitionising acts as a way to participate in existing communicative structures. In some way, the exhibition has attempted to make some things more representative than before.

Zulkhairi Zulkiflee, July 2020

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