

Art in America



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CURRENTLY
ON VIEW
Ming Wong's
work in the Lyon
Biennale, through
Jan. 5, 2014. A solo
show will appear
at earlier|gebauer,
Berlin, March-
April 2014.

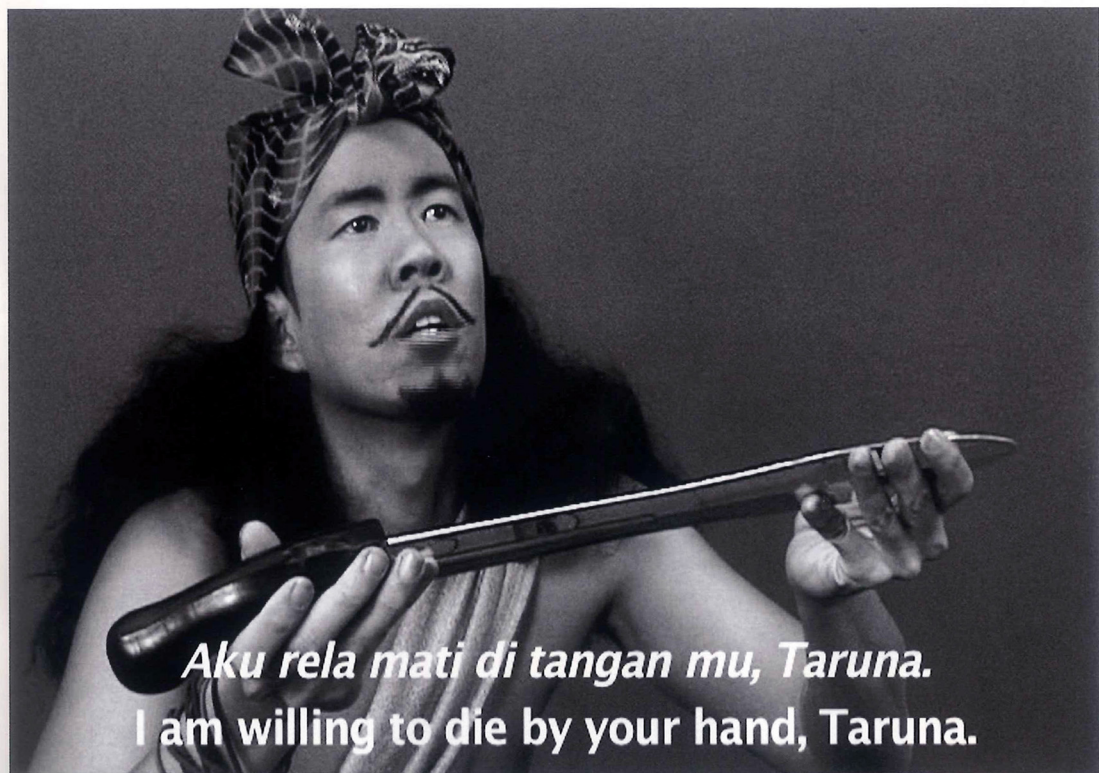
MING WONG

Interview by Travis Jeppesen
Studio photography by Anja Teske

IN THE STUDIO

TRAVIS
JEPPESEN is a
writer and critic,
living in Berlin
and London, who
recently published
the novel *The
Suicides*.





Aku rela mati di tangan mu, Taruna.
I am willing to die by your hand, Taruna.



I'm white. White!

PETRA VON KANT, Gustav von Aschenbach, Jake Gittes, Evelyn Mulwray: These cinematic heroes and heroines have little in common except for having all been re-depicted by the Singaporean artist Ming Wong, who takes what the writer Kathy Acker dubbed “pla(y)giarism” to new levels of hilarity and provocation in his videos. Usually playing all the roles, male and female, Wong performs a “yellowing” of the Western cinematic canon that is as much a critical tool as it is an excuse for dressing up and acting out.

My first encounter with Wong’s work took place in 2010 at a group exhibition in Berlin that featured *Angst Essen* (Eat Fear), 2008, his hysterical and moving remake of Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s 1974 film *Angst essen Seele auf* (known in English as *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*). Shot ironically in the melodramatic style of Hollywood director Douglas Sirk, Fassbinder’s film depicts the courtship and eventual marriage of an aging German woman and a young Arab guest worker. In Wong’s version the artist plays both roles—and all the others in the film—with straight-faced solemnity and faithfulness to the original script in a 27-minute transduction.

Of course, a disconnect emerges between the language being spoken—rife with the racist epithets and humiliations regularly directed toward Arab guest workers in Germany in the 1970s—and Wong’s inclusion of himself, an East Asian, in a scenario in which he is totally other. Non-German, non-black, non-white, non-Arab: the invisible man is suddenly reflected everywhere.

Before reading Wong’s work as a theater of absurdity, which in many ways it is, credit must first be given to what is ultimately the artist’s most disruptive gesture: through what he calls “impostoring,” his insertion of people traditionally excluded from cinematic representation into cinema’s traditional tropes, he endows those devices with new and often unsettling meanings.

Amid a hectic traveling schedule that frequently has the 42-year-old artist jetting between Los Angeles, Europe and East Asia, Wong met with me in his Berlin studio this past June, as he was making final preparations for a major solo exhibition at Shiseido Gallery in Tokyo (July 6–Sept. 22). His studio is situated in the predominantly Turkish neighborhood of Kreuzberg, which initially inspired him to turn his attention to Fassbinder. Since I had just returned from the Venice Biennale, our conversation began with a discussion of Wong’s project for the Singapore Pavilion in 2009.

TRAVIS JEPPESEN Tell me about the *Life of Imitation* project.

MING WONG *Life of Imitation* was about Singapore’s cinematic heritage. Singapore was really the capital of filmmaking in Southeast Asia during the ’50s and ’60s. This unique chapter was started by Chinese producers, who owned the movie theaters in the early 20th century. They started making movies for their region, which meant Malay language movies (for Malaysia and Indonesia).

They went to India to invite directors and cameramen to live and work in Singapore. Then you had Malay and Indonesian performers. So there was this situation with everybody trying to negotiate their way around each other and make cinema. You can imagine that they’d speak some sort of English mixed with other languages. The crew would probably speak in some Chinese dialects, so there was a cultural milieu that was very dynamic. Everyone would watch these movies when they were screened in Singapore. As a child, I remember seeing reruns on television. In those early days, in the single-screen cinema halls, you’d just watch everything, whatever language it was in.

JEPPESEN Were there subtitles?

WONG Maybe in English. But it is a heritage that no one really knows about now.

JEPPESEN Some of these films were based on Hollywood models. Would they take actual films and rewrite the scripts, adapting them to a local context?

WONG Totally. The influences were Hollywood as well as British movies, but the filmmakers also followed the traditions of Bollywood musicals and Japanese movies.

JEPPESEN In Venice, the three multiscreen videos shown in what resembled a Singaporean movie house were *Life of Imitation* (based on Douglas Sirk’s *Imitation of Life* [1959]), *In Love for the Mood* (from Wong Kar-Wai’s *In the Mood for Love* [2000]) and *Four Malay Stories*, which I know the least about. Can you tell me more about that one?

WONG I picked four movies to make reenactments of. The originals were all films by P. Ramlee [1929–1973], the Malay wunderkind of Singaporean cinema. He directed, starred, produced, composed music—everything, really.

Four Malay Stories was my take on four of his most popular movies, and I play all of the characters, 16 of them in total, speaking my bad Malay—I know only a few words. My assistants told me that lines from P. Ramlee’s films have filtered down and become idioms in the Malay community, even though these days no one in the younger generation has seen his movies. They still use these phrases and sayings but don’t know where they came from.

JEPPESEN It’s amazing how cinema can affect the vernacular.

WONG Sadly, though, a lot of these movies are taboo today, especially in Malaysia. In Singapore, also. Women are more covered up now—they’ve sort of gone more Muslim style.

JEPPESEN Did you have formal training as an actor?

WONG No. I did some amateur drama in school, but I prefer writing. So I was writing plays in school. I went to the art academy in Singapore and did traditional Chinese painting. At the same time, I started writing plays for the English-language theater in Singapore. This was when I started playing with language. The characters always spoke different variants of English. So you’d have an educated guy who went to a good school and spoke

Ming Wong:
Four Malay Stories,
2005, four-channel
video installation.
All images courtesy
Vitamin Creative
Space, Guangzhou,
and earlier|gebauer,
Berlin.

Life of Imitation,
2009, two-channel
video installation,
13-minute loop.

good English, and then there'd be a character speaking Singlish, which is the local, bastardized English. Then there were other characters who could only speak Malay or Chinese dialects, and they'd have to communicate using nonverbal language.

JEPPESEN I guess that's something that shaped your evolving sensibility and is characteristic of Singapore—this tension between the different languages.

WONG Tensions, but also joys. The mix of languages has become such a big part of life there that people take it for granted. It was also my foundation for looking at how audiences react to an artwork. They have a sense of humor that strikes you here, in the solar plexus. Not a British wit, which is more intellectual, or slapstick, which is baser, but the kind of humor where you identify with something. A lot of stand-up comedy is like that, you know, about things in your backyard.

JEPPESEN Was cinema also an early obsession?

WONG Well, my influence is cinema, not art history. In Singapore, we don't go to museums to see masterpieces—there aren't any. I mean, there are, but it's more sort of local stuff. My early references were always movies. They were a big influence and they still are. Much more so than art history, like Western painting. I did Chinese art, which comes from a completely different perspective.

JEPPESEN When did you come to Berlin?

WONG After the art academy, I went to London to do my masters in fine art media at the Slade. That was in 1997. I stayed there for 10 years, and then I moved to Berlin in 2007 for the Künstlerhaus Bethanien residency. That's when I did the two Fassbinder videos, as a way to acclimatize to my new home.

JEPPESEN And to learn German!

WONG *Learn German with Petra von Kant* [2007] was made in London just before I came to Berlin. It's the scene where it's her birthday. She gets drunk on gin, her lover has just left her, and she screams at her daughter, her mother and her rich best friend. Petra is almost like a clown figure to me: a tragic clown.

2008 was *Angst Essen*, from Fassbinder's *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*. The next year, I did *Life of Imitation* for the Venice Biennale. You've seen Douglas Sirk's *Imitation of Life*?

JEPPESEN Yes, as a teenager.

WONG I did that scene where the mixed-race daughter, who is passing as white, is telling her black mother not to recognize her when they pass in the street. You know, it's a real tearjerker.

I made a two-screen installation, but both screens were reflected in mirrors opposite, which were part of the palace in Venice. So it looked like four screens. And in each take, the actors swap roles. The actors are Chinese, Malay and Indian, representing the three main ethnic blocs of Singapore. So then there's that great part where she says, "I'm somebody else." She turns to the mirror and screams, "I'm white!" over and over

again. [*Laughs.*] So as in all my work, the actors become impostors.

JEPPESEN Many of your most recent projects revolve around the movie *Chinatown* [1974].

WONG There's a heritage of film noir from the '40s and '50s, when *Chinatown* in L.A. was associated with evil, danger, opium dens, dragon ladies. By the '70s, with neo-noir films, *Chinatown* was more of a symbol. The place never really figured in the script of *Chinatown*. You just hear that Jake, the detective, had this past there—something happened to him in *Chinatown*. They're always talking about it, and then it figures in the famous last line of the film. So in *Making Chinatown* [2012], I picked out all the scenes where *Chinatown* is used as a reference. I also chose that scene in the beginning, that first scene where we see Faye Dunaway. Jake is telling a racist joke to his colleagues about screwing like a Chinaman. Everything is very close to the original.

JEPPESEN Unlike your approach in many other videos, you don't play all the parts in *Making Chinatown*—just the main roles.

WONG The other actors were cast to resemble the original ones. The backdrop in my video is composed of several stills from the original that I stitched together digitally.

For the exhibition at REDCAT [in Los Angeles], we changed the gallery into a studio lot. It's like you're entering a film studio. The first set, for example, is for the office scene. There are seven scenes, and you go from set to set. So it's almost like a theatrical backdrop—like a scenic painting. Entering the different sets kind of remixes your memory of the film. We did all of this in a month—that's only possible in L.A., with all the professionals out there. That was quite an eye-opener, as well, to work like that. The costumes and props came from Warner Brothers.

JEPPESEN Is that what you're showing in Berlin at Carlier Gebauer?

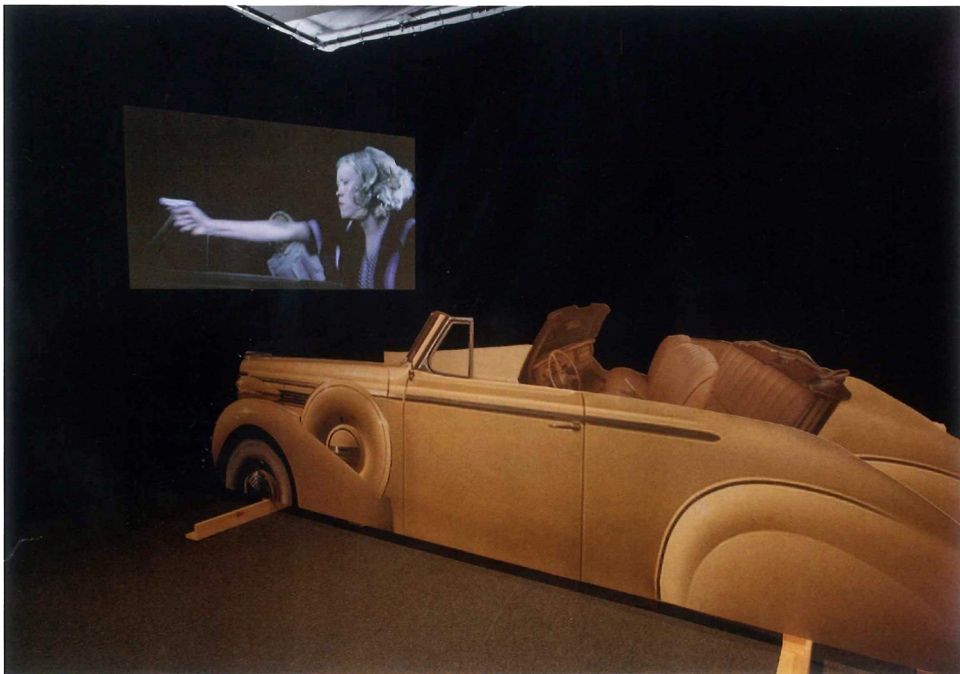
WONG I am, but also subsequent works that came out of it. *After Chinatown* [2012] is in the style of a film noir, black and white, and it's about what happens after *Chinatown*. There are these ghosts hanging around. There's a femme fatale character and a detective. There are no lines, they're just running around these places: *Chinatown* in L.A., *Chinatown* in San Francisco, and Hong Kong—another cinematic city and the port for emigration when *Chinatown* took place. Everyone went through the harbor in Hong Kong to get to the West Coast in America. This is also the travel route I took last year when I went to shoot. The landscape in the video schizophrenically shifts between these three locales.

JEPPESEN Is there sound?

WONG Film noir music played backwards. I tried screening the video, but now it exists as a sculpture. It is played on an old TV that I found in San Francisco that's modeled on an old Chinese television. It kind of has a



Production still from
After Chinatown,
2012, video,
approx. 7¼
minutes. Photo
Carlos Vasquez.



View of Ming
Wong's exhibition
"Making Chinatown,"
2012, at REDCAT,
Los Angeles. Photo
Scott Groller.



Chinoiserie antique feel to it, in gold and lacquer. So it's an object as well—a fake Chinese antique.

The other piece [that spun off the *Chinatown* project] is *The Chinese Detective* [2012], my collection of film noir posters that have Chinatown or Asia as a visual or titular reference.

JEPPESEN Fu Manchu?

WONG Fu Manchu, sure, but more the detective movies. The posters typically feature some film noir scene with an evil Asian guy in the background, leering, with a gun. You know, you have the beautiful Asian girl in Hong Kong on the dragon boat, but she has a knife in her hand. Or films like *The Lady from Shanghai* [1947], where the actors are in yellow face. Taglines like, “Nothing good comes out of Shanghai!”

JEPPESEN What about the exhibition “Me in Me,” at the Shiseido Gallery? You had been going to Japan quite often, hadn't you?

WONG I went there for two research trips: in November 2012 and January 2013. And I returned in March for pre-production and the shoot. But I've known about this show for two years, so there was a lot of lead time.

They wanted me to do something inspired by Japanese cinema. That was fine—I love Japanese cinema. I watched all these films, and I came up with three trailers that reference three different genres.

The first, *jidaigeki*, represents the classical world. *Jidaigeki* looks hand-painted, so I have painterly aesthetics and highly stylized acting.

The second trailer is the world of the '50s, the so-called modern world, where you have filmmakers like Yasujiro Ozu and stories about people caught between tradition and modernity. I combined two or three stories to make this one. There is a typical Ozu story about a father and a daughter in a traditional house mixed with another film called *When a Woman Ascends the Stairs* [1960] by Mikio Naruse, who made a lot of new realist movies about working-class women, such as struggling geishas, at a time when they were being eradicated. Women caught between modernity and tradition. So the daughter from the Ozu story also happens to work as a *mama-san* in a bar in Ginza. Her father is trying to get her married while she's trying to be an independent woman. This is *gendai-geki*. The aesthetic is photographic, thus naturalistic.

Finally, there's anime. This is the digital world. I combine several sci-fi anime movies. A bit of *Metropolis* [2001], *Ghost in the Shell* [1995]. My trailer is about a female android in a laboratory with a professor who is trying to change her memory. Future, past, everything is mixed up in her head. So she's completely green screen, digitized. The acting is stiff, like a character in a manga.

There are the three trailers, each with a highly individuated style and aesthetic. But then there's something else going on, and here's where it gets interesting. I had a second camera crew capture the making-of. I have yet to

sort it out—this is actually what I'm working on editing today. The documentary will show the becoming process in three different ways. There will be the language transformation—you'll see the mistakes I'm making, because I work with an all-Japanese team. Watching the documentary, you'll see that I'm a non-Japanese speaker trying to act and say all these lines in Japanese.

The second is the physical transformation. They convert my look with costumes and makeup into archetypal Japanese characters—very recognizable in Japan. Kabuki makeup.

The third transformation is working with a Japanese crew, which was totally alien to me. They are meticulous to the nth degree. I had a crew of 30 people!

JEPPESEN So they spoke only Japanese?

WONG Yes.

JEPPESEN So you weren't able to communicate with them directly?

WONG No. I had one interpreter, but he was overworked. The documentary captures the team effort. We had one lady whose job was just to make a traditional kimono. She stands on the side the entire time, and whenever I do a shot she'll come and tidy it up again. Only she knows how to do it. There was a scene with snow, and I thought I'd do it in post-production with a filter. They said, “No, no! That's not Japanese!” To do it Japanese style, they got a girl, they spent 100 euros on paper, and she sat in the corner cutting it into triangles. That was her job. This is the result. [*Shows the resulting scene on his editing monitor.*]

JEPPESEN It's beautiful.

WONG It is beautiful. But it's crazy! And I was happy to do green screen for the backdrops for the Ozu scene, but the cameraman said no way—Ozu has a certain depth of field that you have to do properly. So although we shot this scene in one room where the father and daughter sit, to get the depth of field they built a set behind it with a second room with a table. Behind that room were a set of glass sliding doors, behind that was a wooden corridor, behind that was another set of sliding doors, and behind that was a garden. Behind the garden fence was the sky. It was all constructed—not a location.

JEPPESEN This must have had a massive budget.

WONG I wasn't in charge of the budget. But I kept asking the curator, “Are you sure? I can just use green screen and drop the photo in!” But they said no, it had to be Japanese style. I don't think I'll ever again make something so stylistically elaborate!

I am showing the same work in the Lyon Biennale [through Jan. 5, 2014], though it is a different edit. The Japanese version mainly focuses on the language, since that is the most noticeable aspect for a Japanese audience. In the Lyon version, it is less important, because there are more things going on than just the language. It's actually about three heroines who are very much ahead of their time: a sisterhood, really. ○

Opposite, two production stills from *Me in Me*, 2013, video, approx. 23¾ minutes. Photos Masumi Kawamura.