

SHANGHAI

Heman Chong

ROCKBUND ART MUSEUM

A light box installed on the Rockbund Art Museum's exterior, featuring the neon text ONE THOUSAND AND ONE NIGHTS in Arabic, English, and Chinese (all works 2016), serves as a prelude to Heman Chong's exhibition "Ifs, Ands, or Buts." Prior to entering the museum, the viewer may also notice a disclaimer written on a nearby billboard: THE STORY, ALL NAMES, CHARACTERS AND INCIDENTS PORTRAYED IN THIS EXHIBITION ARE FICTITIOUS. This is, perhaps, a tribute to Samuel Beckett; I was reminded of the playwright's note that opens his 1965 film *Film*: NO TRUTH VALUE ATTACHES TO THE ABOVE, REGARDED AS OF MERELY STRUCTURAL AND DRAMATIC CONVENIENCE. Similarly befuddling is the show's e-flux announcement, an elusive and nonsensical story about a gossip column called "Papaya Daily." Chong's exhibition plays up the ambiguities between reality and fiction, offering seven newly commissioned and genre-spanning works, each seemingly representing the pursuit of an unattainable utopia.

Escapism may be a passive approach to dealing with the tedious and sometimes dystopic aspects of everyday life, but who isn't guilty of seeking the nearest exit for a moment of liberation? *Re-Re-Re-Run* is a two-channel video installation that pairs two looping videos—one that plays the entire television series *Mr. Bean* and another that screens Wile E. Coyote and Road Runner cartoons—on a wall-size LCD screen, along with a deafening sound track. The juxtaposition of these examples of British and American pop culture has little relevance beyond emphasizing the homogenously mind-numbing effect of entertainment—utopia as distraction. *The Mysterious Island* shares a title with Jules Verne's 1874 sci-fi classic, in which a group of castaways navigate a dangerous uncharted island. Chong translated Verne's landscape into an installation of plastic peach trees in blossom, a reference to the reclusive Han-dynasty poet Tao Yuanming, who wrote "*Taohuayuan ji*" (The Record of Peach Blossom Spring, 421 CE). The titular term has become a



Heman Chong, *The Mysterious Island*, 2016, wood, plastic, iron wire, silk, paint. Installation view.

synonym for *utopia*. The orchard is backdropped by walls painted the chroma-key blue of film sets, such that this utopia might be superimposed over another. This fabricated scene—a cultural intersection—encourages the viewer to assume a role in an unwritten script, but the portentousness of Chong's title suggests there is also a dark side to stealing away.

In the installation *Endless (Nights)*, ten thousand blank sheets of newsprint cut to the dimensions of the *Straits Times*, the most popular newspaper in the artist's native Singapore, form a fortresslike stack in

the museum's dimly lit atrium. Chong allows the viewer to deconstruct this sculptural pile, so that the viewer might symbolically dismantle the ubiquitous and propagandistic white noise of the media. For the work *Legal Bookshop (Shanghai)*, Chong similarly relinquished his authorial control. He hired Kenneth Liu, an intellectual property litigator and sci-fi writer, to draft a list of books related to the legal system in China. Assembled without any input from the artist, curator, or institution, Liu's compilation, exhibited in a pop-up bookshop that replaces the museum gift shop, comprises a significant selection of fiction and textbooks exploring, specifically, the contingency of law. Another work exploring contingency is the performance *Everything Baike*, for which the artist asked a group of individuals to read the fifth link posted on the website Baidu Baike (Encyclopedia), which functions like Wikipedia, on each day of the exhibition's run. The website is censored by the state, a condition that brings to the fore tensions between power and truth—here, omissions contribute to fictions that are often disseminated as truths. The readers' voices, amplified as they reverberate through the museum's atrium, assert subjectivity as a critical aspect of knowledge.

"Ifs, Ands, or Buts" is a series of grammatical conjunctions. Chong's works likewise serve as points of connection and postulations. He offers paradoxical scenarios, situations, and fabrications through which one can discover his or her own truth.

—Fiona He

NEW DELHI

Asim Waqif

NATURE MORTE

For those of us who call New Delhi home, dystopia can be a lived rather than imagined condition; societal ills range from constant attacks on civil liberties under the current right-wing Hindu nationalist government to disease-inducing levels of air and water pollution. Many artists respond to this toxic state of affairs through politics—organizing and attending protests, writing petitions and opinion pieces like their fellow citizens. Though their work often engages with political content, these artists rarely employ overt activist methodologies. Particularly among the younger generation, experimentation mainly takes the form of the incorporation of the processes and vocabularies of disciplines such as architecture, science, and philosophy. Asim Waqif typifies this trend. Trained as an architect, and with a devoted interest in ecology and technology, Waqif explores the interstices of the city—its neglected spaces and marginalized peoples—through a range of underground interventions.

Waqif's penchant for orchestrating urban encounters emerged once again in his recent exhibition "Autolysis," held by Nature Morte in one of Delhi's semiderelict historical sites. As Waqif often works with degradable and found materials, I anticipated the artist's usual probing of commerce, artifice, and value—especially since the show was scheduled against the heady background of the India Art Fair. And though neither the building's history nor its context was referred to in any obvious way, "Autolysis" developed notions of worth and worthlessness through a range of impermanent and site-responsive pieces installed under dimly lit crevices filled with cobwebs and hidden under the rocky, dusty ground beneath our feet. The works—most of which, though for sale, were designed to partly decay—ranged from abstract photographic prints on aluminum panels, smashed in by hammers, dragged through dirt, and coated with semi-stable preservatives (*Collapsed Roof*, 2016); to eerie-looking plastic jars full of neon-lit specimens of crumpled artworks and organic objects, covered with interactive electrical components that beeped if you came close to them (*Archival Prints Ka Achaar*, 2015–16). A mock-archaeological installation at the

Asim Waqif, *Puzzle for a Future Archaeologist*, 2015–16, personal and found objects, polyurethane foam. Installation view. Photo: Chandan Ahuja.



center of the show (*Puzzle for a Future Archaeologist*, 2015–16) contained Waqif's father's motorbike and a 1960s auto rickshaw bound together by polyurethane foam, muddling artifact, fiction, and history.

The real surprise, however, was the untitled performance in collaboration with sound artist Hemant Sreekumar, staged at the exhibition's opening. For this piece, the artist, sporting an orange jumpsuit and a lengthy beard, was brought to the site by ambulance. Accompanied by a recording of a devotional song by the Pakistani "King of Ghazal" Mehdi Hassan, Waqif recited a passionate speech about the senselessness of violence in the name of Islam, after which his beard was ceremoniously trimmed. As a finale, an actor planted in the crowd punched the artist, who was then abducted into the darkness.

The performance, in tandem with an untitled video, 2016, of spliced-together testimonials from family and friends, contrives to suggest that Waqif—or perhaps anyone—could be a terrorist, or accused as such. True enough, but this disparate set of gestures failed to transpire as a fully resolved whole, not quite coming off as either artistic or political—they did not seem to speak beyond themselves. The exhibition began with an engaging inquiry into the economies of objects and facts, but the performance and video felt tangential, individualistic, and demonstrative of well-circumscribed positions and perceptions. If Waqif continues reacting to and reflecting on the current moment—with its persecution of Muslims and distortions of truth—one hopes that these concerns will be highlighted in more coherent and thought-through ways, challenging hierarchies within the art world and the wider world alike.

—Jyoti Dhar

AUCKLAND

Luke Willis Thompson

HOPKINSON MOSSMAN

The colonial period in the South Pacific may notionally be over, but its legacies are ever present, particularly in the way island nations struggle to survive in the global economy. Market forces well beyond the people's control shape the economic life of the islands—whether that means growing niche commodities like vanilla in Tonga or allowing ecologically destructive mining in Papua New Guinea. Luke Willis Thompson's *Sucu Mate/Born Dead*, 2016, offered a complicated picture of these intersections of colonialism, labor, death, and global trade. And it does so with a minimal gesture: a single line of nine anonymous and age-worn gravestones, taken from a colonial-era cemetery in Lautoka, Fiji, where indentured laborers from a nearby sugar plantation—many of them Chinese—had been buried.

The stones' potency as narrative objects is determined by whether viewers know they are in fact part of a wider project about the cemetery, aspects of which were concurrently presented at the Eighth Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT8) in Brisbane. That the cemetery had been segregated along ethnic lines, for example, was a detail made clear at APT8 but not here. It was also relevant that Thompson had borrowed the stones for a fixed period, rather than permanently acquiring them. And there is the important detail that Thompson's father, who died in 2009, was Fijian. None of this was spelled out in the exhibition itself, emphasizing the confrontational ambiguity of the artist's practice. In 2014, Thompson won New Zealand's most important art award, the Walters Prize, with *inthisholeonthisislandwhereiam*, 2012/2014: a taxi ride across Auckland to the artist's childhood home. Once there, visitors were left to explore on their own—without being explicitly told it was where Thompson had grown up and where his mother still lived (though Lauren Cornell addressed this in the Walters Prize catalogue). And in 2012, he made an untitled piece from three garage roller doors that had been vandalized by an Auckland teenager who was subsequently stabbed to death by their incensed owner.

Thompson, then, makes a habit of walking a fine line between excavation and exploitation: mining objects and situations loaded with personal and cultural history and redeploying them in partially obscured situations that nonetheless leave him in complete, if absent, control. Far from being an abdication of responsibility, Thompson's incommunicativeness (in the sense that he doesn't speak for the objects or situations he sets up) is deeply informed by contemporary museological and anthropological debates about collecting, displaying, and defining cultures—particularly those that suffered under colonialism. Paramount within this is the question of repatriation, which, as David Joselit has suggested in his book *After Art* (2012), is a thorny issue in an Internet age, when the circulation of images seems to defeat old assumptions about an object's inherent aura and site-specificity. But while it's easy to apply Joselit's argument to the Elgin Marbles, it's much more difficult when dealing with the immense amount of human remains taken from the Pacific, which languish in the storerooms of European and American museums that now (quite rightly) feel squeamish about having collected them in the first place.

It is against this backdrop that Thompson's appropriation of the gravestones, which marked the passing of migrant workers miles from their homeland, became so complex. Yes, he is of Pacific heritage himself. Yes, the anonymity of the stones acted as a powerful statement about the histories of economic slavery in Fiji. But the work also monumentalizes death and its traces—a dangerous ethnological game, particularly when those deaths have embedded within them systemic power imbalances. This ambivalence, it seems, is precisely Thompson's point.



Luke Willis Thompson, *Sucu Mate/Born Dead*, 2016, concrete headstones. Installation view. Photo: Alex North.