

Write Up for Performance Lecture: Utama – Every Name in History is I at 24HR Art

“The very name ‘Singapura’ was a paradox. For no lion had ever set foot in this Lion City.”

C.M.Turnbull

A History of Singapore 1819 – 1988

Sang Nila Utama is the mythical first king of the Malays, and also the pre-colonial founder of Singapore – the one who had given Singapore its name. ‘Singa’ refers to lion and ‘Pore’ or ‘Pura’ in Malay means City. This name was said to have resulted from Utama’s encounter with the majestic creature upon the shores of Singapore at around 12 or 13th Century, although much uncertainty surrounds this account as the lion such an animal is not indigenous to our shores. In fact, the identity of Utama himself is often an issue of doubt, at least for many modern, ‘rational’ historians.



Sang Nila Utama, *Hunting for the ‘Lion’ of Singapura*, mixed media on canvas 62.31 x 42.92 cm, 2003



Film-still from *Utama – Every Name in History is I*, DVD, 23 mins, 2003

In Singaporean society today, the figure of Sang Nila Utama has been gradually erased from public consciousness and for many Singaporeans, history seems to begin only with the arrival of its British colonial ‘founder’ – Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles, agent of the East India Company. The name of ‘Raffles’ is today used as a sign of class and prestige, just as image of Raffles has become inscribed into public memory, sculptures of Raffles have become landmarks in Singapore.

Utama – Every Name in History is I is, in some sense, an attempt to summon forth the ‘ghost’ of Utama as a way of putting pressure on the existing, dominant discourse of history. This ‘return’ to Utama is not one which brings us to a singular, essentialist, or unified point of origin. There has never been one Utama, but many - an ambiguous multiplicity of possible identities, and a mad

Utama - Every Name in History is I

proliferation of names. It is this very ambiguity at the heart of ontology which this project affirms – as a possibility of self-invention.

This difficult task of giving birth to one's own 'father' is aided by a motley host of characters dispersed across time and cultures. Julius Cesar, the great Chinese eunuch- navigator Admiral Cheng Hoe, Vasco de Gama, Christopher Columbus, King David, King Solomon, Raja Chulan and Raja Shulan of India, Alexander the Great, the mighty Greek hunter Actaeon and Diana, Goddess of the Hunt and of Chastity from Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, are some of the figures appearing at various moments of this tale.



Sir Stamford Raffles, (from 'The Founding Father Series') , mixed media on canvas, 36.69 x 42.92 cm



Film-still from *Utama – Every Name in History is I*, DVD, 23 mins



Vasco da Gama, (from 'The Founding Father Series') , mixed media on canvas, 36.69 x 42.92 cm



Film-still from *Utama – Every Name in History is I*, DVD, 23 mins

Utama - Every Name in History is I

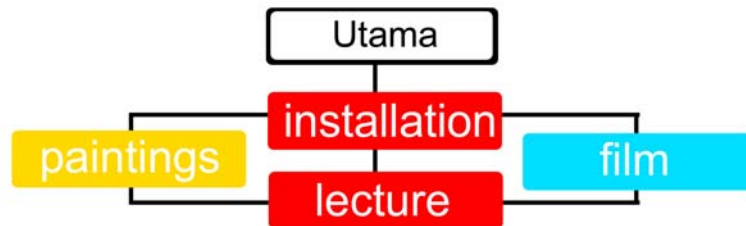


Admiral Zheng He, (from 'The Founding Father Series'), mixed media on canvas, 36.69 x 42.92 cm



Film-still from *Utama – Every Name in History is I*, DVD, 23 mins

Utama – Every Name in History is I which began as an installation containing twenty paintings and a short film of 22 minutes was a meditation on the dialectical relationship between painting and film, the still and the moving image. The installation form of *Utama* has been exhibited at the 26th Sao Paulo Biennale, 2004 and is currently showing at The 3rd Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale, 2005.



However, the artist Ho Tzu Nyen has also taken the step of transforming the entire project into a lecture and film presentation of an hour and a half. In this performative lecture, actual paintings are replaced by projected images, while the spatial experience of the installation is transformed into a conceptual elaboration. Tzu Nyen currently considers the installation form of *Utama* a fossil – an remnant to be resurrected in its lecture form - 'live', immediate, logical and economical. The lecture form of *Utama* has been presented at the ICA, London (2005), Sparwasser HQ, Berlin (2005), as well as in numerous occasions in Singapore.

For this lecture at 24HR Art, Tzu Nyen will attempt specifically to situate this project within the larger context of his engagement with art – both as an artist and as an art historian, as well as within the context of the Singaporean history.