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PORTFOLIO GETS PERSONAL

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DESIGN

REWRITING THE SCRIPT

Singaporean artist Ming Wong turns cinema, theatre, and history into a fluid stage where identity is endlessly performed, miscast, and reimagined.

BY Y-JEAN MUN-DELSALLE

Few artists inhabit their work as fully as Ming Wong. Across films, installations and performances, the Berlin-based Singaporean artist routinely casts himself in multiple roles — sometimes male and female, sometimes across languages and nationalities — re-staging world cinema in a kind of cultural remix. The approach has become unmistakably his own over more than two decades of internationally exhibited work, from the operatic sci-fi spectacle *Wayang Spaceship* to the cross-cultural storytelling of *Four Malay Stories* and the geopolitical musical concert-film *Rhapsody in Yellow: A Lecture Performance with Two Pianos*. Underlying it all is a fascination with how identity, culture and gender are constructed, performed, and misread.

Born in Singapore in 1971, Wong was raised during a formative period in the young country's history. "I grew up in a Singapore that was slowly throwing off its colonial layers and trying to develop its own identity as a new nation," he explains. The rapid transformation of the island — physically, culturally, and linguistically — left a deep impression. Wong watched as shopping malls reshaped the city and new arts infrastructure emerged alongside language policy changes.

However, art was not the obvious career path. His extended family worked largely in medicine, but Wong had other plans. "I defied expectations to follow," he admits. "I chose an artistic pathway from 15 years of age. I had always been good at art and decided to pursue it seriously, as I was aware of the country's plans to develop the art

scene." He enrolled at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, studying traditional Chinese painting and calligraphy. The training involved copying classical masters — a discipline that, paradoxically, would later influence his contemporary practice.

While the academy offered technical grounding, Wong's imagination was shaped just as strongly by popular culture. "I grew up watching movies and TV programmes from Asia and the West," he recalls, "rather than looking at art in museums." Cantonese melodramas from Hong Kong, American sitcoms, Bollywood musicals, and Singapore Malay films featuring characters of different cultural backgrounds who spoke in varied languages or accents all fed his fascination with performance. Those early influences remain central to his work today.

After moving to London to study at Slade School of Fine Art in its newly formed fine art media department, Wong began experimenting with film and video just as digital technology was transforming artistic practice. "That's where I started experimenting with analogue film and digital video," he says, "at a time when mobile phones were not so ubiquitous and the Internet was gaining ground as an artistic milieu. I remember dial-up Internet, before YouTube and eBay."

Wong's breakthrough came when he represented Singapore at the 2009 Venice Biennale with *Life of Imitation*. The film re-enacted Douglas Sirk's classic melodrama using Chinese, Malay, and Indian male actors from Singapore playing every role — destabilising





— is a device I have often used in my practice,” he says. By placing himself in roles that seem culturally or historically improbable, he exposes the delicate assumptions behind identity.

Today, Wong lives in Berlin, a city long known for its experimental art scene and openness to hybrid practices. That experience – moving between cultures and languages – sharpened his interest in what he calls the “politics of representation”. Even his newest project reflects those concerns. During a year-long residency at the National Gallery in London, he created a short film installation, *Dance of the Sun on the Water | Saltatio Solis in Aqua*, inspired by the figure of Saint Sebastian and Derek Jarman’s cult 1976 movie *Sebastiane*.

For Wong, the saint is a shape-shifting symbol. “Saint Sebastian is a time and space traveller, appearing in different centuries, countries, settings, rooms of the National Gallery, throughout the history of art, in different poses, guises, costumes, contexts, choreographies, and scenographies,” he states. “A marvellous vision of a human whose gender and age also seem to shift.” Like many of his works, the movie blends art history, cinema, and performance to question how meaning changes across time and culture.

For Wong, the artist’s role ultimately lies in asking questions rather than offering answers. “More than ever before, society needs artists and artistic thinking to question the world at large, provoke reflection and discussion, discover means of communication beyond words and between accepted forms of expression,” he concludes. “Artists can defy logic and reasoning, and dare to go into the unknown state and the unexplored by putting their experience, philosophy, and mark-making to the test.” ^[P]

Hollywood narratives of race and identity. For Wong, imitation itself is an artistic strategy. “I study, copy, and reinterpret cinematic works of art by directors whose vision and accomplishments mean something to me,” he shares. “Layers of meaning slip and slide across time and space. What you thought you knew so well can be fragile and destabilised.”

Many of his works operate like cultural mirrors, reflecting stories through new lenses. In *Four Malay Stories*, he reinvented narratives from the golden age of Malay cinema in Singapore, exploring the island’s overlooked film heritage. In *Next Year / L’Année Prochaine*, he revisited Alain Resnais’ French New Wave movie *Last Year at Marienbad*, inserting himself into the enigmatic characters.

More recently, *Wayang Spaceship* blended Cantonese street opera with science fiction aesthetics – a flamboyant travelling theatrical universe that activated at sunset, where traditional Chinese culture collided with futuristic speculation. Another project, *Rhapsody in Yellow: A Lecture Performance with Two Pianos*, drew on music, politics, and history to examine shifting relationships between China and the US. Across these works, Wong frequently appeared on screen himself. “The strategy of casting —, or rather, miscasting

