

Art review: Comfort and nostalgia tinge Ron Wong's first Singapore solo show, Homecoming

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SINGAPORE — Coming home after some time away might be a welcome return to all the things you missed, but it's also a reminder of all the things you glossed over when you were homesick. These and other matters are the subject of Homecoming, the latest exhibition by Singaporean artist Ron Wong.

It's Wong's first solo exhibition in Singapore, after a run of shows in Beijing, Yangzhou, and Shanghai. Appropriately enough, the show's subject matter is largely concerned with everyday life in Shanghai and Singapore.

The latter, especially, consists of scenes that should be familiar to most of us: Friends chatting at a kopitiam, crowds at a wet market, and so on. Apart from these largely figurative paintings, the show also includes a series of a different view of everyday life — the Roof series, which places the architectural commonplace on show.

These, in particular, amply demonstrates her command of the medium. Within each canvas, Wong straddles the line between delicate elegance and off-handed assertiveness, readily shifting from thick impasto finishes to thin scratched washes of paint.

The bulk of the work is concerned with everyday encounters of a more interpersonal nature. In addition to kopitiam and market scenes, the works on show also depict domestic hijinks, MRT encounters, and more.

As with the Roof series, there's considerable variation in her technique—as a whole, it tends towards thicker paint, resulting in occasional flatness.

Most of the scenes, however, seem curiously detached and weightless, as if they were artfully composed, context-free set piece. The lighting is muted and flat—doubly so with the paintings' matte finish—with nary a shadow to be seen; sometimes, the subjects float in voids of blank colour, and at other times they meet the viewer's eye, amused.

There's a distinct air of comfort and nostalgia that suggest these scenes to be more like idealised archetypes of everyday life—stories so charming and brightly coloured that they slip over into the absurd, a facade cracked by its own completion. It's as if the picture-based composition exercises from primary school (along with a touch of the Bookworm Club reading programme of the '80s) were successively refined and tempered into fine art.

Written by Bruce Quek