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EXHIBITIONS, SINGAPORE SHOWS • NURUL KAIYISAH (KAI) • FEBRUARY 11, 2025

## Defiance and Disobedience: Artists Reclaim the Self at Sundaram Tagore Gallery



Fleshy outlines of bodies entangled underneath covers. Close by, a stoneware vessel is moving, birthing an iridescent, sleeping peacock. As if anticipating this labour, a pair of hands clasped together lies nearby, enshrouded by an ebony cloth that billows, peppered with the motif of a womb ablaze ...

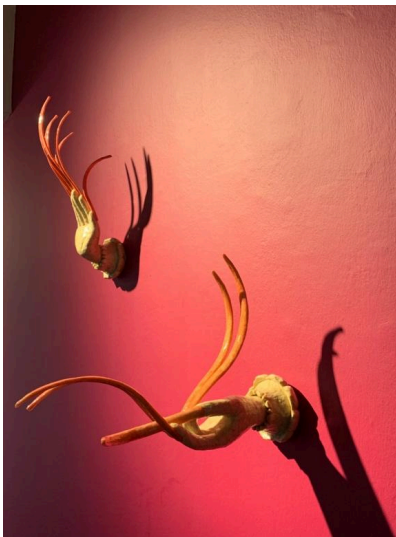
These are images from the world of *Disobedient Bodies: Reclaiming Her*, a recent exhibition by Sundaram Tagore Gallery in Singapore. Launched shortly before [Singapore Art Week](#), *Disobedient Bodies* proposes intriguing sites of resistance to the conventions of patriarchy and heterosexuality. These acts of rebellion — including challenges to masculinist histories and incisive commentaries on gendered violence — are carried out through new and recent works by eight noteworthy artists from seven Asian countries.

In this exhibition curated by independent scholar and curator Loredana Pazzini-Paracciani, the works are connected by the image of the female figure. Her body is present and transformed in many ways: in stitched kisses and elongated pink nails, in the pearlescent regenerating breasts of a Mandalay ogress, and even in a poignant blank screen, upon which a film on queer families would originally have been projected. In showcasing how various artists have visualised this highly

politicised body, the exhibition unveils acts of disobedience that contribute towards what Pazzini-Paracciani calls, in her [curatorial essay](#), “the empowering act of *reclamation* in the face of history.”

### Nebulous identities

At the start of the exhibition, Lê Hiền Minh’s (Vietnam) *Invisible Dragon* (2023) beckons visitors into the space, her poised hands and long, vibrant, coral pink nails made using traditional Dó paper.



Lê Hiền Minh, *Invisible Dragon* (2023), dó paper, wood, and resin. Images by author unless stated otherwise.

Minh’s work is exhibited alongside Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook’s (Thailand) photographic print *Dedicated to Ooy from 1957* (2024). Without strong outlines to delineate distinguishing features, Rasdjarmrearnsook’s portrait escapes recognition — the details of the sitter’s face becoming less important than her steely gaze and cloud of wiry hair. The work suggests a certain ambiguity in defining a gendered body, and refuses to comply with a fixed human identity. But, one thing’s for sure: the figure’s piercing eyes, seemingly bloodshot, remain adamant, unmoving, on the viewer.



Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, *Dedicated to Ooy from 1957* (2024), inkjet print, 29 x 40 cm.

At the end of the corridor leading to the main exhibition space, there hangs another work presenting a nebulous image of the female body: Peihang Benoît's *Let's Go for a Great Hike in the Snow* (2024). Imposing lush, languid sceneries on the bodies of their subjects, Benoît's works in *Disobedient Bodies* combine techniques drawn from Western "masters" with intimate domestic scenes of the Taiwan-born artist and her children. The bodies depicted seem to fade into yet emerge forth from the paintings simultaneously, like illusions blurring the distinction between the mundane and the fantastical.

### Rewriting narratives

Besides creating artworks that resist categorisation, artists can also strategically disobey by intervening in specific historical and cultural narratives. Minh, Rasdjarmrearnsook, Nadiyah Bamadhaj (Malaysia), and Soe Yu Nwe (Myanmar) all act in defiance of conventional images of the female figure. Next to Rasdjarmrearnsook's *Eastern Border Beach of Chaow Lae* (2024) hang Bamadhaj's *Moving Above Realms, Taking No For An Answer*, and *The Flaming Womb* (all 2024). Bamadhaj's series of charcoal drawings features heavily textured hands and feet, cloaked in batik cloths bearing unconventional motifs. These symbols, including winged feet and vaginas aflame, are the Indonesia-based artist's means of representing what she calls "the 'disobedience' of women in patriarchal society."



Nadiyah Bamadhaj, *The Flaming Womb* (2024), charcoal on paper collage, 103 x 98 cm. Image courtesy of Sundaram Tagore Gallery.

Soe's *Rebirth-Green Peafowl* (2024) takes an optimistic tone, positing the female body as a generative vessel and, simultaneously, a landscape. Glistening in her movement, the stylised female figure in the stoneware sculpture undergoes labour, birthing a peacock who appears soundly asleep. Reflecting on the state of Myanmar's political scene, Soe intends to convey a message of hope and new possibilities through the birth of the peacock, the country's national symbol. Additionally, the undulating curves and crevices of the sculpture echo the dunes and cliffs that inspired Soe when she created the work.



Soe Yu Nwe, *Rebirth-Green Peafowl* (2024),  
glazed stoneware, 115 x 130 x 190 cm.

Soe herself points out that her work is in direct dialogue with Minh's *Some Body to Love* (2024) — a relatively small yet powerful statement on gendered violence amidst the tribulations of war. Through the sculptural form of a field knife used in the Vietnam War emerging from between the legs of a female figure, Minh criticises how Asian women are presented as fragile objects in American popular culture.



Lê Hiền Minh, *Some Body to Love* (2024), dó paper, bioplastic, and wood, 8 x 10 x 74 cm. Image courtesy of Sundaram Tagore Gallery.

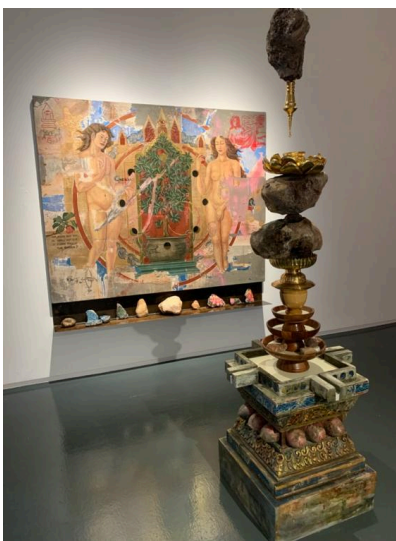
With Minh's *Apocalypse Nail* (2024) — a sculpture of an AK-47 rifle embellished with stark, elongated golden nails — and Maria Madeira's (Timor-Leste/Australia)'s *Kiss and Don't Tell* series (since 2007) and *Silensiu Folin Hira?* (*Silencio a Que Preço; What Price Silence?*) (1996) in close proximity to one another, we can observe how both artists hold space for pain, while also critically intervening in masculinist histories of war and conquest.

The voices of women are embodied in the countless imprinted and woven lip motifs of Madeira's *Mouth Witness 1 and 2* (2007), *Silence* (2023), and *Meat Market (Fan Na'an Fatin)* (2024) — where every single mark is an evocative statement condemning the sexual violence inflicted by Indonesian soldiers on Timorese women during the occupation years of 1975-1999. Madeira draws this imagery from a horrifying discovery she made when she returned to Timor-Leste in the 2000s: that women were forced to apply lipstick and kiss the walls while being systematically raped by Indonesian soldiers. Through her work, which uses the richly symbolic mediums of red earth, betel nut, and traditional Tais weaving, Madeira performs acts of witnessing and "reclamation," amplifying the resilience of Timorese women despite the transgressions against them.



Maria Madeira, *Meat Market (Fan Na'an Fatin)* (2024), mixed media (acrylic, gesso, impasto gel, red earth, lipstick, pencil, charcoal, betel nut, shellac, ink, glue, sealer) on canvas, 65.5 x 96.5 cm. Image courtesy of Sundaram Tagore Gallery.

*Cosmic Mother of the Universe* (2024), an installation by Thai artist Pannaphan Yodmanee, offers a revisionist take on the role of women in Abrahamic, Hindu, and Buddhist cosmologies. The work comprises a fresco-style painting of Adam and Eve flanking an apple tree and surrounded by edgy graffiti and vandalism, as well as a sculpture of *linga* and *yoni* — Hindu symbols of divine masculine and feminine energies. Here, the *linga* is constructed from multiple components, while the *yoni* is represented through tiered wooden trays, seemingly filled with milk. The disobedience enacted in Yodmanee's practice is multi-layered. Not only does she daringly reinterpret religious tales and myths as old as time, but she also, in drawing inspiration from Thai temple painting, participates in a tradition usually reserved for male artists and apprentices.



Pannaphan Yodmanee, *Cosmic Mother of the Universe* (2024), mixed media, 160 x 200 cm (painting), 180 x 50 x 50 cm (sculpture).

## Bodies in transformation

In a corridor adjacent to the main exhibition space, Soe continues her examination of myth and rebirth with *Sandha Mukhi Ogress* and *Sandha Mukhi Ogress Hands* (both 2024). Here, the artist looks into the bodily transgression performed by the female ogress Sandha Mukhi, who sacrifices her breasts to the Buddha, resulting in her reincarnation as Mandalay's founding king. As one of the ogress' serpentine hands offers a breast to the Buddha, slithering botanical forms suggest the blooming joy of regeneration.





Foreground: Soe Yu Nwe, *Sandha Mukhi Ogress Hands* (2024), glazed stoneware.

Background: *Sandha Mukhi Ogress Breast* (2024), glazed stoneware, 50 x 20 x 10 cm.

Along the corridor, we find Minh's *Nail Women* and *Minority Model* (both 2023) as well as Peihsang Benoît's *Sardanapalus Pillow Fight* (2024). The latter transforms the violence of Eugène Delacroix's monumental painting *The Death of Sardanapalus* (1827) into a playful domestic scene. In the warm, earthy hues of bodies strewn across lush, billowy blankets, we discern the abstracted aftermath of a family pillow fight. Presenting these intimate scenes of closeness and genuine, childlike joy, Benoît, in conversation with curator Pazzini-Paracciani, describes the process of her work as a kind of "micro-resistance, a reclaiming of my own identity."



Peihsang Benoît, *Sardanapalus Pillow Fight* (2024), oil, oil stick, and acrylic on linen, 160 x 240 cm. Image courtesy of Sundaram Tagore Gallery.

Finally, tucked behind a wall is a blank grey screen intended to represent Charmaine Poh's (Singapore) film *What's softest in the world rushes and runs over what's hardest in the world* (2024). This would have been the first Singaporean public screening of the Berlin-based artist's film, which featured in the 2024 Venice Biennale. But the film, which covers queer couples and their quests to start families in Singapore, could not be projected in the exhibition, as it was given an R21 rating by the Infocomm Media Development Authority (IMDA).

As both curator and artist navigate Singapore's bureaucratic restrictions on the display of art, the final static grey screen adds another dimension to the exhibition's exploration of the female body. It

draws our attention to the “failures” of representation as a result of a myriad of reasons, especially with regard to queer bodies in the context of Singapore.

While I admire how *Disobedient Bodies: Reclaiming Her* brings these eight artists into conversation in a single space, I can't help but feel perplexed that the show deliberately distances itself, in its [curatorial statement](#), from being a “feminist manifesto.” Considering that the show gathers artists who explicitly resist patriarchal sociocultural conventions and historical narratives in favour of female empowerment, it feels like a missed opportunity. I would argue that the language in which the exhibition speaks, as well as the way it rallies female artists in disobedient dialogue in spite of their differences, *are* feminist in spirit.

As I ponder the monochromatic screen representing Poh's film, I wonder: what is the chasm between these acts of disobedience and “feminism” — the very pursuit of gender equality and female empowerment that the exhibition calls for endlessly? Could *Disobedient Bodies*' refusal to be characterised as a “feminist manifesto” be a generative site for us to think about the “F-word” within our local, as opposed to Western, contexts? And could that be an act of “reclamation” as well? For now, I leave you with these questions, which have no easy answers, to contemplate.


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*Disobedient Bodies: Reclaiming Her* runs at Sundaram Tagore Gallery till 8 March 2025. Visit [sundaramtagore.com](https://sundaramtagore.com) to find out more.

Header image: Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, *still from Eastern Border Beach of Chaow Lee* (2024), video and sound. Image courtesy of Sundaram Tagore Gallery.

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