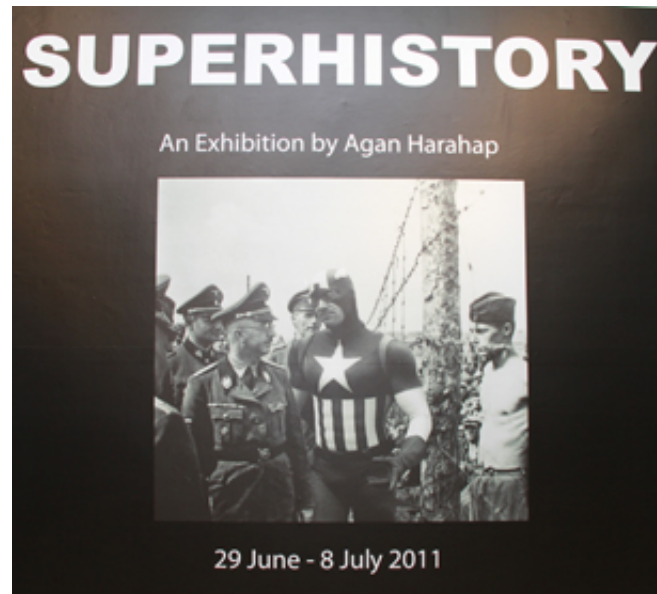


Superhistory by Agan Harahap

by Guang Hui (User) | Jun 30, 2011

Featuring superheroes of the past.



AT ION ART GALLERY (LEVEL 4)

This month, Month of Photography Asia explores the theme of memory, with one of the key highlights of this festival being **Superhistory by Agan Harahap**.

Like the usual exhibition dedicated to retelling history, Superhistory is no different with its grainy black and white photos. Based on aesthetics, each individual photo would not have looked out of place in a history textbook – in fact, some are indeed in our history texts.

But artist Agan Harahap has manipulated these old photos by inserting modern superheroes into different photos that serve as visual recordings of different tumultuous events of the 20th century. The coming of these two different visual languages – one derived from popular culture, the other from reality – gives pause to the typical role we so easily ascribe to the mass media as the purveyor of truth.

MANY PHOTOS OF SIGNIFICANT EVENTS, EACH WITH ITS OWN SUPERHERO.

Neuschwanstein, 1945 features prominently as the cover of the exhibition. With Superman posing heroically alongside Allied soldiers, this photo easily catches the eye. But diving further into the image, the rescued artworks kept by the Nazis at Neuschwanstein Castle acquire similar status as the ubiquitous Superman – easily assimilated into various cultures. Yet why do we so willingly accept Superman? And why do we more often than not uphold Western standards of lifelike verisimilitude as a sign of a good painter?

Yalta Conference, 1945 remains the symbol of the temporal post-war cooperation between the United States, the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union that existed before the Cold War. With the insertion of Darth Vader in the background, it gives new thought to the phrase 'The Empire Strikes Back' – in reference to the Soviet Union joining in the war against Japan – and 'A New Hope' – with the breaking up of the Galactic Empire akin to the carving up of Germany into the four occupational zones.

Remote Post Defense – Moscow, 1941 chronicles the German invasion of the Soviet Union during World War II. The fortifications atop the hotel roof stand testimony to the tensions Moscow faced. The presence of the Joker, however, heightens the ambiguity of the situation: just who exactly is the 'Evil Empire' here? Is the Joker himself the personification of Hitler or Stalin, both remembered as oppressive dictators?

TWO MAN MADE MACHINES, ONE MORE MAJESTIC THAN THE OTHER.

Both the historical photo of the actual event and the superhero imposed within are creations of man. As we move into a new era and become more discerning, public expectation of superheroes and the mass media as protectors of the public, as shields from nefarious villains, should also cease. After all, superheroes were meant as a reflection of public desire for a heroic avenger to protect them from unfair ravages. Yet it is also equally important to recognise how the icon of chivalry easily mutates into a symbol of cultural imperialism in these modern times.

THE RED ARMY AND THE CLONE ARMY: BOTH IN SUPPORT OF THE EMPIRE.

The exhibition is worth visiting for its interplay of cultural icons against a backdrop of past traditions. The juxtaposition of contemporary superheroes against actual historical events may be viewed as sacrilegious to some, but the intention of questioning the status quo is achieved with the insertion of the various iconic characters actually referencing these events. This creates a more varied reading.

Beyond the exhibition's concept, the works presented also exemplify the potential of image manipulation when done appropriately and cleverly. One can experience firsthand the quality printing as well as technical virtuosity.

Superhistory by Agan Harahap is now on at ION Art Gallery (Level 4) till Jul 8. Admission is free. It is one of the highlight exhibitions featured at this year's Month of Photography Asia (MOPAsia).