



# Face to face with enigmatic puppets

Artist Iwan Effendi says the most important feature of puppets is the face.  
ST PHOTO: ZHANG XUAN

**Artist Iwan Effendi's show, *Face To Face*, explores the process of producing puppets**

**Ong Sor Fern**  
Senior Culture Correspondent

Indonesian artist Iwan Effendi's new show at Mizuma Gallery is all about faces, but they are the still faces belonging to inanimate puppets.

*Face To Face*, which opens tomorrow, features about 20 puppets and 20 charcoal and pencil drawings of dreamy faces.

The co-founder of Papermoon Puppet Theatre trained in visual arts and this show is his way of exploring the process of making puppets.

The most important feature of puppets, he says, is the face: "That's the first encounter, the element that the audience will recognise as a living thing with the eyes."

His puppets are constructed with wood and rattan and the faces are moulded with papier mache from clay moulds. The finishing touch is washi paper, which he learnt to make during a residency in Japan.

For Iwan, the faces start on paper with sketches, hence the drawings in the show.

Although these drawings are mostly 61cm-by-41cm works, there is a large horizontal piece filled with an array of fantastical faces that look like they belong on animals or fairy-tale creatures.

As puppeteer, director and set designer for Papermoon, the 39-year-old has not had much opportunity recently to explore his visual arts side as he has been busy

touring with the troupe.

He favours charcoal over other media: "It's intense. There's only one thing in your hand and you construct line by line."

The shadowed faces in his drawings are a contrast to the mostly beige coloured puppets, whose rounded, childish faces emanate whimsy and wistfulness.

Iwan says the faces need to be a blank slate so the puppeteers have the freedom to imbue the objects with emotions to suit the stories being told. Yet, the faces can shape an audience's reaction once they are lit and moving through the puppeteer.

"The faces are daydreaming. (A puppet) is more expressive when it moves. When it's still, it's more enigmatic."

Puppets gain life through a three-way dynamic between the puppet, the puppeteer and the audience, who willingly suspend disbelief for

the duration of a performance, Iwan says.

While Papermoon's work is rooted in the Japanese art of bunraku puppetry, the puppeteers are not masked like bunraku puppeteers: "Our performances are non-verbal, so the puppeteers' faces sometimes give visual cues to the audiences."

At the vernissage tomorrow, he plans to "activate" the puppets with a short performance with his wife and Papermoon co-founder, Ria Tri Sulistyani.

It will be a brief performance as there is no story, but the point is simply to bring the objects to life.

He adds mischievously that he believes puppets have a life of their own: "They have to be creepy. Then, the story lasts longer in your memory."

sorfern@sph.com.sg

## BOOK IT / FACE TO FACE

**WHERE:** Mizuma Gallery, 01-34 Gillman Barracks, 22 Lock Road

**WHEN:** Exhibition till July 7; vernissage, 4 to 7pm (tomorrow); opening hours: 11am to 7pm (Tuesdays to Saturdays), 11am to 6pm (Sundays)

**ADMISSION:** Free. For more information, go to [www.mizuma.sg](http://www.mizuma.sg)