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Power of 9 Interview with Sherman Ong: Lyrical Landscapes

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Nine questions. One exhibition. And a loquacious artist. Photographer and filmmaker Sherman Ong talks to Billionaire.com about his latest show, ‘Spurious Stories from the Land and Water’.

“Images conjure up different narratives,” declares a relaxed Sherman Ong, staring out of the gallery window into the sun-drenched Singapore street. “I don’t have titles or captions for my work, just identifiers. I want people to interpret the photographs through their own life story.” He takes me to a picture of a naked man lying in the tall reeds of an open field. “Is the man dead or is he just sun-baking?” asks Ong. I guess the latter. He smiles and continues: “There are no right or wrong answers. My stories are a catalyst for individual interpretation. The intention is to create different strands of narratives from the same image.”

A Singapore-based, although Malaysian-born, photographer and filmmaker with a clear flair for post-modernist theory, Ong usually casts his human subjects in various landscapes — “it’s the façade for man’s struggles, achievements and disappointments.” At the launch of his latest exhibition, ‘Spurious Stories from the Land and Water’ at [Art Plural Gallery](#) in Singapore, we spoke to the amiably loquacious Ong about his craft, the purpose of art and, unexpectedly, the animals he best embodies.

For this exhibition 'Spurious Stories from the Land and Water', I want people to walk away and... feel a sense of awareness that there is a connection between humans and the land. And that this connection in highly urban societies is largely lost. I want them to understand that if you don't have this connection with the land, it's like losing a limb from your body.

The relationship between human beings and the environment fascinates me because... traditional societies were very connected with the land. The way cities have developed today, with everyone packed in tightly, it's putting excessive pressures on the land, something has to give. The inhabitants lose their temper. Resources are stretched. Peace is lost. Is this the end point of the evolution of society? Is this the ideal utopian nirvana? I like to question that ideal and bring people back to the land in a sustainable way.

I fell in love with film and photography when... I started volunteering as an usher at the Singapore International Film Festival when I was still studying law at the National University of Singapore. There wasn't a particular film that grabbed my attention *per se*, but being exposed to such a broad range of world movies, sometimes five films in a day, I started to see how I could compose images and use images to convey a message. It opened my eyes to what I could do with film and a camera. My dad was also a projectionist in Malaysia so I grew up watching a lot of American films and Hong Kong martial arts films too.

I am not interested in... making commercial Hollywood films. The way they make American films is like running a business; it's like McDonald's. For them, a film needs to have big stars, a big promotional budget and simple story lines — the 'good guys' and the 'bad guys' are usually quite distinct. They adopt a formula for success. They try to analyse all the risks in order to run a profit. There is a restriction on creative freedom as a result.

The purpose of art is to... for me, it's to create awareness for the viewer. To take people away from their daily routine or way of life. In any endeavour, bringing new awareness should be the goal. A new perspective. A new paradigm.

I am most inspired by... photographer William Eggleston and Indian landscape and documentary photographer Raghubir Singh. They were seminal in my development. For film, it would be Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky: he makes very dense but hypnotic films. So my influences are quite broad.

I am a photographer and filmmaker, but I want to be remembered for... the stories that I tell. The main thing is the narrative. The common thread is about the human condition. Human frailties. Things that make us human.

You can never have enough of... compassion. The ability to put yourself in somebody's shoes and then be stirred to take action to effect change is vital for a healthy society.

If I had to describe myself in a sentence it would be... difficult. I always look at myself as sharing attributes of different animals: elephant, orang-utan and a whale. In some ways I'm like an elephant with a long memory who wants to teach the new generation truths from the past. I have a soft side for orang-utans because they are from this region and share such a close genetic code to humans; there is humanity in their eyes. And there's something enigmatic about whales. You can't ever really know what they're like. You only get to know them when they are at the surface, but they have a whole life under the surface. For humans, what we show the world, our surface, is only part of the story. There is a whole lot of stuff in the deep that is not revealed. As an artist you are always digging into your depth to express these buried human truths.

'Spurious Stories from the Land and Water' is currently showing at [Art Plural Gallery](#), Singapore, until 31 May 2014.

For more details about the exhibition, click [here](#)