

This is the first time Chicago-based artist Leonard Suryajaya is formally exhibiting work in the country and we are thrilled to usher in his work for our Winnipeg audience. Suryajaya was born and spent his formative years in Indonesia to Chinese parents. He is a second-generation child of immigrants who, like his parents, carry backgrounds that are deeply inflicted by conflict, displacement, assimilation, the attendant trauma, and to a great extent self-erasure as part of their process of survival. Within the predominantly conservative Islamic Indonesia the artist grew up in, he discovered his own queerness and subsequently had to suppress it from anyone including himself. Suryajaya’s photographic practice began and developed after relocating to the United States after stints in theatre programs. Over the course of discovering the medium and shaping his artistic voice through it, his work became an instrument by which he cultivated and nurtured a self away from personal histories of trauma, a self surrounded by newfound family outside a biological one, and a self that felt weightless within the fantastical environments he designed for his photographs.

One of his formidable series, False Idol, surveys a long trajectory of Suryajaya evolving over years, as a person and artist moving through the various complex circumstances he began and continues to traverse. The series has served as a respite for creativity for the artist and as a container to sustain opposing perspectives, identities and states of mind. Aspects of False Idol will be assembled for this exhibition. It is a series that upon viewing charms with its elaborately detailed selection of patterns, textures, objects and rushes of colour competing for your sight. It is indicative of the grand enveloping splendour Suryajaya’s photo environments have become known for. A number of the pieces in this exhibition feature a mix of friends and loved ones including his biological family and the family he has made along the way. The artist has been lucky to participate in several artist residency programs which have connected him to various communities all over. This past winter Suryajaya, continued to build upon the relationships he’s made through his work by offering free studio portrait sessions to members of the public when he visited Winnipeg for the first time. The result of this portrait session has been amalgamated into an interwoven collage that becomes part of his characteristic visually rich installation. The installation models after airport newsstands and gift shops for travelers on their way to or leaving home. The sculptural elements of the exhibition extend the immersive set designs of his photographs to make that even more vivid. Suryajaya sees these gift stands as an invitation to audiences to ‘find a sense of familiarity in the photographs of the ‘other’, the foreigners.’ The exhibition also features his video work, Lesser Than Three, a playful, surreal, theatrical work that features as its main protagonist, Suryajaya’s long-time partner, Peter.

Suryajaya’s work has circulated across the United States and overseas in various exhibitions and publications. He continues to create uncompromisingly maximalist images and installations that never feel overkill or boring and it is our very pleasure to have him in here for our local audiences.

“FAMILIES DO NOT HAVE BORDERS” a bright orange ribbon announces in red serif letters, alongside a Kelly green one that reads “WOMEN DON’T OWE YOU SHIT.” The ribbons belong to Andrea Bowers’s work *Political Ribbons* (2016) and used to hang from my old bed frame. I think about these ribbons often, their statements which possess the resolute spirit of a Jenny Holzer Truism and which require no further clarification. Broadly defined, “family” is a social or cultural group that stems from an ancestral line, though it need not be biological. Synonymous to “kin,” the meanings of both words have been tossed back and forth in contemporary usage, but in recent years, kinship has regained currency as an open and expanded idea of interconnectedness and relations beyond blood or the boundaries of species.

Leonard Suryajaya’s exhibition *False Idol x North Kin* considers the overlapping of family with kinship, and the knotty relationship between home and diaspora spanning from Indonesia and United States to the land now called Canada. His baroque, tableau vivant-style individual and group portraits are works of love, if humorous takes on relations and their thorny proclivities. They record the social aspect of posing for the camera and gathering to commemorate an occasion, a communal moment in time. And as Suryajaya’s large format photographs suggest, they also show just how far the collective will go to support a loved one; the answer is very far if the works *Kinfalk Lipsync* (2017) and the hilarity of *Dad Duck* (2020) are any examples. In the former, the artist stuffed his family’s mouths with rose apples, the fruits’ bottoms facing outwards in a sly and subversive image. Whether they knew it or not, the family members were made to acknowledge Suryajaya’s queerness, which was a secret to some at the time. The latter photograph captures an irreverent portrait of the artist’s father dressed in a sarong, beaded necklaces and robe open down the front. Sporting colourful periwinkle and aqua makeup that echoes the fervent backdrop, he grasps a Peking duck by its neck, sprigs of parsley obscuring its sex, while his daughter Novi (Suryajaya’s younger sister) holds two glass cupping devices atop his head like horns.

Suryajaya’s works play not only with his family’s image, but also their language. The photograph Letter from *Daddy* (2017) composes reproductions of letters from his father with a family snapshot and running margin of scanned passport pages and immigration documents. A meditation on cultural and textual translation, the work records the grey zone of understanding generated between the elder Suryajaya—as an Indonesian person of Chinese descent—in handwritten letters to his then eighteen-year-old son, and the words’ subsequent slippage from broken Indonesian to translation into English. Despite grammatical gaps, there’s no mistaking the message; all sentiment, instructions and parental guidance remain clear as ever. In parallel, while the modern nation state of Indonesia aimed to crush perceived pro-Communist sympathies in the late 1960s by eradicating Chinese culture—Chinese Indonesians did not receive status until 2000 after social policy reforms—they could not extinguish the flame of Chineseness forever.

Undoing intergenerational trauma is already a feat, never mind when it’s something undone from afar. But maybe it’s just that. We see ourselves more clearly when we’re not in our homeland, surrounded by loved ones who attempt—maybe unintentionally, maybe forcefully—to smooth over our bumpy edges and glitchy selves. But a homeland is neither necessarily community nor citizenship in a broader sense; it represents only unchanging truths about where we are born or where our ancestors originate, that’s if the latter can even be traced. In this way, the understanding of “homeland” as physically fixed or politically oriented within geographical borders may not always jive with an interior feeling of belonging in flux. With Chinese diaspora sprinkled throughout the world, home becomes a difficult thing to pin down. Beyond a simple notion of hybridity, culture, race, faith and citizenship endlessly entangle in a web of relations, such that we can simultaneously be of many places, or none at all. At times, home seems impossible or unreachable, an ever-floating point on the geopolitical map. And yet, we somehow find comfort and understanding in the in-between, flitting between places that satiate the mind or body, if only for a moment.

Must our diasporic bodies ping pong back and forth in a constant mode of displacement, always rootless? How might we instead construct a home for our hearts? In her book *All About Love* (2001) bell hooks speaks of healing family trauma as a pathway to love and liberation:

Whenever we heal family wounds, we strengthen community. Doing this, we engage in loving practice. That love lays the foundation for the constructive building of community with strangers. The love we make in community stays with us wherever we go. With this knowledge as our guide, we make any place we go a place where we return to love. (p. 144).

Kin are our immaterial home; be they family, friends or lovers, we are “at home” in our psyche, comfy and still. Let our communities rise up around us to share and support our versions of home, however many there may be, wherever they are.

| Charlene K. Lau

Leonard Suryajaya holds a BA in Theatre Arts and BFA, California State University, Fullerton; MFA, 2015, School of the Art Institute of Chicago; 2017, Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. He has exhibited in Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago; Museum of Contemporary Photography Chicago; Benaki Museum, Greece; Photoforum Pasquart, Switzerland; National Library, Singapore; Wrightwood 659, Chicago; Aperture Gallery, NY; Barney Savage Gallery, NYC; Shane Campbell Gallery, Chicago; Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago. His work is included in collections such as the Art Institute of Chicago, Museum of Contemporary Photography, The Block Museum, Vontobel Art Collection, Joan Flasch Artist Book Collection, Mana Contemporary and Center for Photography at Woodstock. Awards: Aaron Siskind Foundation Award, Artadia Awards, Robert Giard Foundation Fellowship, CENTER Excellence in Multimedia Award, New Artist Society Award, James Weinstein Memorial Fellowship, Claire Rosen and Samuel Edes Prize for Emerging Artist, The Santo Foundation Fellowship.

Charlene K. Lau is an art historian, critic and Curator of Public Art at Evergreen Brick Works. She has held fellowships at the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity; Parsons School of Design, The New School; and Performa Biennial. Charlene has also held teaching positions at Parsons School of Design, OCAD University, Toronto Metropolitan University, Western University and York University. Her writing has been published in Artforum, TheAtlantic.com, The Brooklyn Rail, Canadian Art, frieze, Critical Studies in Fashion & Beauty, Fashion Theory and Journal of Curatorial Studies, among others.

**Exhibition opens
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