

Visual art

A bridge between cultures

Heinrich Toh's 'Momentary Longing' uses patterns and color to comment on identity and memory.

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Special to the Star

In the analysis of dreams, it is often asserted that all characters presented by the unconscious mind represent some aspect of the dreamer. I was reminded of this adage as I entered the Leedy-Voulikos Art Center to see "Momentary Longing," an exhibition of new works by Heinrich Toh.

The luminous, layered prints that fill the gallery encompass Toh's experiences moving between his native Singapore and the United States, where he has lived for the past six years. Straddling nations and rituals has been a complex and contradictory experience for Toh, who came to the America to study art.

REVIEW

"We adopt cultures that we are drawn to," Toh said, "but I am still trying to hold onto my own because I realize that the longer I live here, the greater is the probability that I will change into someone else, different from the child I was, who was suffused in Asian culture and the experience of Singapore."

Toh has opted to hang his unframed works on the gallery wall with magnets. As the door to the gallery opens and shuts, they undulate in the breeze like fragile banners. The physical response of the work to its environment supports one of Toh's themes: "We are affected by the most minute fluctuations in our surroundings, and we can never be made separate from them."

While one wall of the gallery presents work that is loosely figurative, the opposite wall presents smaller works with landscape elements. Toh distinguishes between them, asserting that the figures address the theme of time, while the landscapes address the theme of



FROM THE ARTIST

Heinrich Toh's "Water Under The Bridge" (2013) is part of his "Momentary Longing" exhibit of prints at the Leedy-Voulikos Art Center. The exhibit reflects Toh's urge to hold onto the culture of his native Singapore, following his move to the U.S. six years ago.

place. All of them are unified by luminosity of color, an impulse that remains from Toh's days as an apprentice to a stained-glass artist in Singapore.

The artist uses "paper lithogra-

phy" to create his prints, a process that allows the direct transfer of Xeroxed images to a substrate using a mixture of water and gum arabic. The freedom of the process has allowed Toh to juxtapose

seemingly incongruous elements into poignant arrangements.

The titles of his works are poetic and sometimes funny. In "After My Blueberry Pancake," a monoprint and mixed-media piece, an image

On exhibit

"Heinrich Toh: Momentary Longing" continues at the Leedy-Voulikos Art Center, 2012 Baltimore Ave., through Dec. 28. Hours are 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Thursday-Saturday. For more information, call (816) 474-1919 or visit. leedy-voulikos.com/

of a Caucasian family printed in sepia tones is overlaid with more colorful imagery taken from brocade patterns. Hovering above the group are two discs, one filled with concentric circles, the other blank. The images express the artist's experience of assimilating into American culture and feeling both laden and erased, just like those two circles, one so dense with content and the other struggling to be perceived.

Throughout the exhibition, Toh uses patterns that overlap his figures and his landscapes, both obscuring them and rooting them within the diffuse milieu of memory and a yearning for a culturally impermeable identity.

"What I have been trying to do in the last few years is to both expand and to deconstruct the idea of the brocade and to use it as a launching point to create more personal and internal patterns," he said.

He added, "The last time I saw a woman wearing a cheongsam (a traditional Chinese brocade outfit) was in Seattle, on a white woman."

Ultimately, what the artist misses most is "the smell of familiar food and the sound of people speaking familiar languages — Mandarin, Malay, Tamil."

Toh has taken the experience of displacement and disorientation, and made it accessible through visual poetry and a rich, personal alphabet of symbols. The result is both original and familiar, much in the way of all human truth.