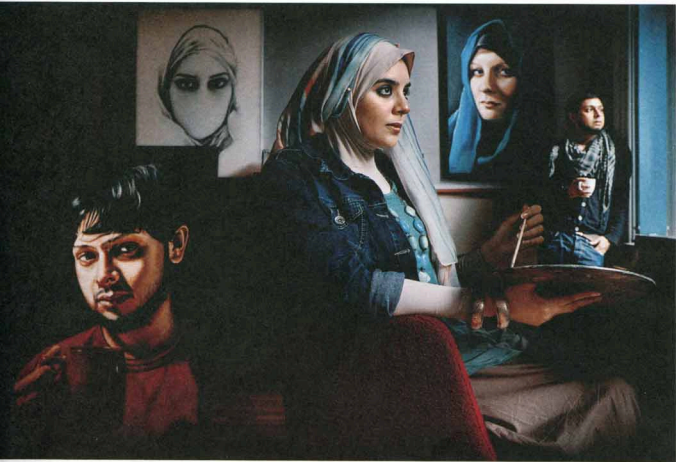




GEORGE TOWN UNOBSCURED
PENANG AS A REGIONAL ART CENTRE



Anant Choudhary, from the series *The Silence of Others*, Image courtesy Obscura Festival of Photography



Ahmad Zakii Amwar,
Orang Cina I, charcoal on paper, 2013. Image courtesy VW Special Projects

Curator Valentine Willie writes in the catalogue introduction for his project at the Whiteaways Arcade, "I have always been a firm believer in the importance of second cities as a hub for arts and culture. Centres outside the capital have the potential to embrace creativity and nurture community in the most unique and meaningful ways." The overlapping of the first-ever Obscura Festival of Photography with the George Town Festival has provided Penang's world heritage area, in the centre of George Town, its best shot yet for recognition as Malaysia's secondary, if not primary, cultural hub. Running from June 7th through July 7th, the George Town Festival incorporated music, dance, and theatre performances, with films, art exhibitions and workshops, while the Obscura Festival of Photography, which ran from the 21st to the 30th of June, hosted no less than eleven photography exhibitions, seven specially selected slide presentations, and a series of talks by renowned photographers and curators. Venues for these events were diverse but uniformly appropriate for what was being presented. A certain lack of well-polished exhibition space actually helped lend the two festivals an edginess that contributed to an ambience of inventive energy and an overall charm of the place.

The Obscura Festival of Photography, largely organized with the energie of Festival Director Vignes Balasingam, opened with the inauguration of Pablo Bartholomew's classic and much-circulated exhibition *Outside-In: A Tale of Three Cities*. Documenting the artist's personal interactions within the milieu of Bombay, New Delhi and Kolkata during the 70s and 80s, the works were grouped in three different grids for display in the upper galleries of the long and sprawling China House. Each grid contained images from all three of the documented cities. A packed-to-the-doorways crowd gathered to listen and view Bartholomew's short but poignant talk illustrating the interweaving visual and social concerns between his work and that of his father, Richard Bartholomew. China House's rambling and somewhat ramshackle structure, and the enthusiastic bohemian crowd, seemed



Cheryl Hoffmann, from the series 'Worshipping the Sky Gods', Image courtesy: the art

the perfect fit for the presentation and opening. Specially curated slide presentations and talks were held by the Obscura Festival of Photography at perhaps what was George Town's most upscale and perfected venue, the Whiteaways Arcade on Lebuh Pantai. These slide presentations included Vignes Balasingham's introductory talk *Art by Asians*, Curating Fukushima by Yumi Goto, and *Contemporary Chinese Photography* by the curator Wangxi.

The same building, the Whiteaways Arcade, housed one of the George Town Festival's art exhibitions which was simply titled *Art @ Whiteaways* and was curated by the well-known promoter of Southeast Asian culture, Valentine Willie. The exhibition which, in effect, gave seven artists seven separate mini-exhibitions within seven distinct upper galleries, still managed to flow in a cohesive and conversational manner. A running dialogue seemed to emerge between the large charcoal works of Malaysian artists Ahmad Zakii Anwar and Jalaini Abu Hassan, both of whom constructed powerful portraits of working-class people removed from any reference to surroundings. Drawn in proud and even defiant postures, in black upon stark white paper, to me, they were reminiscent of Richard Avedon's classic volume of photography, *"In the American West"*. Being able to conceptually tie these drawings to photography, and thus, the ongoing but separate photo festival, was a pleasant if spurious exercise. The Whiteaways' show also exhibited oil on linen paintings of Malaysian artist Kow Leong Kiang, though here, the sensuousness of the male body tended to usurp any portrait-like conveyance of personality, and the viewer was left primarily with a feeling of well-executed but fleshy homoeroticism. Interestingly, as Valentine Willie's catalogue note makes plain, the artist's

