

5 Rehearsals of a Wedding is a new film project by visual artist Kray Chen that upends the elaborate and deeply rooted traditions, rituals and cultural clichés of an average Singaporean Chinese wedding. Through five ‘rehearsals’, Kray addresses the underlying anxieties and behaviours closely tied to this occasion, rendering the spectacle and grandeur of a wedding into a bittersweet affair.

A wedding is typically understood as a ceremonial union of two entities – a rite of passage where singular becomes plural, in a merge of beliefs and values, with romance and compassion thrown in for good measure. Kray embodies the role of the groom, the begrudging protagonist who undergoes each ‘rehearsal’ of an actual wedding on his own. Juxtaposed against the singularity of his journey, the banality of the day’s events becomes increasingly pronounced. As he obligingly and stoically goes through the motions, each ceremonial gesture and the absence of symbolism brings to focus the instilled performativity of the day.

Each ‘rehearsal’ mediates between the purpose, intention, and essence of this occasion. The work ultimately reflects our preoccupation with the habits, behaviours, gestures, and social practices imbued in our culture, through Kray’s negotiation of the self within lived experiences.

KIM: *Your works are often a cheeky, satirical, and sometimes painfully honest look at the everyday experiences and gestures – why have you chosen to explore the theme of weddings with this new project?*

KRAY: I have asked myself when did this whole wedding affair begin to affect me. It was probably as I entered into my twenties – I watched people who I grew up with get married. Each time I sat at the wedding table, usually with a bunch of friends who I have not met for some time, I wondered how many of us were there and then contemplating: when would it be our turn? Each time, I would cringe at some of the ceremonies and procedures, it was impossible to imagine myself wanting to be embarrassed that way, or to be able to openly put up such a spectacle to prove my love for someone. Each time I was a hundred dollars poorer and feeling guilty that I could not give a red packet big enough that would supposedly help the couple breakeven with their wedding costs. Each time I wondered how my parents or in-laws would feel if I were to tell them I didn’t like any of these and only wanted a simple, affordable wedding – how much face would they lose? How would my other half feel if I were to take away her chance of a dream wedding?

My twenties have come and gone, and I am now entering the first year of my thirties. As I sit here writing this, my head is still firmly occupied by these thoughts while many of those friends have gone on to have their BTO flats, job promotions, and children. I am still rather poor, non-conformist, chasing dreams, and catching myself casting envious glances at my friends who have gone on with their lives. I am not too sure what this project really is too, I guess it is more of a rant than a satire or commentary.

Would you say age is a catalyst in addressing the concept of marriage?

I don’t know why age keeps coming up. I catch myself absurdly caught up with what a certain age is supposed to imply, like, are the twenties about proving your adulthood? In the art scene, you are a young artist if you are 35 and below, and it almost implies that I have this privilege of being young – that I am not being taken that seriously yet, I still have time to screw up and I qualify for awards and grants and

residencies even if I do. 35 also happens to be the age in Singapore when you are deemed old enough to buy your own flat as a single (unmarried) individual, it implies to me, as if after 35, the government has given up on you getting married and having children, and productively contributing to the social and human capital here. That is my plan for now, if I don't make it as an artist by 35, I will give up and get a full time job to be able to afford my own flat. (laughs)

As the project is aptly titled "5 Rehearsals for a Wedding", how are these rehearsals juxtaposed against your personal ethos, and how did you prepare for these "rehearsals"?

I think the subtext/sub-definition of "rehearsals" here is really interesting. By definition, it is really a series of repetitions for bettering coordination and performances. But I think in Singapore, it also has a hint of "let's not lose face". I feel like it is just as much a rehearsal of values and principles; it is more psychological, we are repeating to ourselves the roles we think we have, and an image we think we have to put up or portray.

Your previous video works were shorter, succinct commentaries, while this film is in a sense, more monumental, requiring a larger and much more singular narrative. Tell us about the filmmaking process, the challenges, and the key ideas behind the work.

I think it was difficult to be part of every process of the film, to write the script, and then to act out a hyper-version of myself, and subsequently to be confronted with these images on-screen. It felt like I was living in the third person sometimes. The macro view forced me to deeply examine some of these beliefs I thought I held dear. I guess it really became a process of balancing between curating who you want to be/what you want others to see, and who you really are/what others have always been seeing.

One of the key ideas I had was this image of cutting the foam wedding cake. I think from a young age, especially being a cake lover, I was always curious as to what it would taste like – this towering cake with all these decorations, it must be fantastically delicious! So when I came to realise that the cake was made of foam, it was such an existential moment for me. While researching for the film, we also found out that the foam cakes have slits for the couple to "cut" their cake. Some even have a big enough cutout to insert a real slice of cake, so that the couple can simulate this ritual more authentically and that the audience can see the cream-stained knife. It was mind blowing! I came up with the punchline "the readymade cake with the readymade slit" and I wrote it into the script but unfortunately it did not make the final cut. I would say this cut sums up the difference in approach, in a way, it was trying not to say too much conceptually, rather, allowing the visual and sound to tell the story.