

1. Curatorial Proposal: *Meditating the Landscape*

*Meditating the Landscape* is an exhibition that invites its viewers to examine the constant physical changes made to Singapore's topography in the pursuit of economic and urban development. The exhibition showcases local contemporary artists' relationships with and considerations towards Singapore's constant state of urban development. Shifting away from visual immediacy, the exhibition incorporates short films, a series of photographs, and multi-media sculptures and installations. This invites the audience to contemplate each artwork beyond the confines of its medium and to consider the social conditions in which each work was made.

Since gaining its independence 1965, Singapore has grown into a highly urbanised and industrialised city-state, gaining renown for its tropical climate, clean and green environment, and efficient infrastructure. As a small country with limited natural resources, Singapore has had to systematically redevelop districts and reclaim land in order to construct infrastructure and improve its residents' quality of living. Throughout the '60s, the Housing Development Board developed high-rise flats (now known as HDB flats) for the public to access low-cost state housing. Today, there are over 1 million flats spread across 23 towns and 3 estates, with an estimate of 80% of Singapore's 5.6 million population residing in them. The HDB public housing programme has since been considered a success, and even the 'best public housing system' in the world.<sup>1</sup>

The country's astute urban development is intrinsically tied to the constructed image of Singapore that is frequently sold to investors and tourists. In more recent decades, urban development has been geared towards turning the country into a prime tourist destination, promoting itself as a "cosmopolitan metropolis [imbued] with world class attractions."<sup>2</sup>

Emblematic of such development is Marina Bay Sands, an integrated resort comprising of a luxury hotel, a casino, a shopping mall boasting designer boutiques ('The Shoppes') and the ArtScience Museum. The resort is frequently promoted as "destination for those who appreciate luxury"<sup>3</sup> and constantly used to represent Singapore in international publications and media. Singapore's association with opulence was further compounded by the 2018 Hollywood film 'Crazy Rich Asians,' which followed the extravagant lifestyles of wealthy, fictional Singaporean Chinese families. Singapore is frequently recognised as a prime tourist destination, becoming one of the 8th most visited country in 2017.

While there are few unwelcome consequences in a country's strategic development, there is no doubt a schism between the lived environments of Singapore's residents and tourist attractions that have been rapidly integrated into the country's narrative of economic progress. In this light, *Meditating the Landscape* investigates how Singapore's redevelopment and reclamation of land permanently alters one's relationships with the country's physical environment. The works of artists in this exhibition engage with a variety of terrains that have either been overlooked or erased in the course of Singapore's development, such as abandoned swimming pools now overrun by nature, fragments of roads, soundscapes of large-scale urban development, and locations that no longer exist.

For example, Melissa Tan sculpture series 'Back to Where We've Never Been', Min Wei Ting's video installation 'You're Dead to Me,' and Zul Mahmod's installation 'VIBRATE Vibration' hold an archival quality that allows the works to function as time capsules for vastly different moments of Singapore's urban development.

Filmed in Bukit Brown cemetery, Ting's video installation is especially poignant in light of its exhumation in 2015, which was decided upon by the Land Transport Authority to further develop a new, dual

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<sup>1</sup> Singapore's public housing system is frequently praised by international media companies in articles such as 'Luxury Hotel? No, Singapore's new generation public housing' and 'Singapore's Successful long-term Public Housing Strategies' by the CNN and the International Federation for Housing and Planning (IFHP). <https://edition.cnn.com/2015/10/29/asia/singapore-public-housing/index.html>  
<https://www.ifhp.org/ifhp-blog/singapore%E2%80%99s-successful-long-term-public-housing-strategies>

<sup>2</sup> "Passion Made Possible," Visit Singapore, 2018, accessed 27 December, 2018. <https://www.visitsingapore.com/about-passion-made-possible/>

<sup>3</sup> "Marina Bay Sands," Visit Singapore, 2018, accessed 27 December, 2018. <https://www.visitsingapore.com/see-do-singapore/recreation-leisure/resorts/marina-bay-sands/>

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four-land road. The video installation begins with a sole character resting on a headstone against a backdrop of a lush tropical forest, immediately creating a sense of vulnerability that seems at once both peaceful and ominous. The natural light darkens throughout the course of the video, and the video then charts the individual's lone path through the cemetery, wandering as if in search of something. His journey remains interspersed with tranquil shots of dense treetops and smoke billowing from joss sticks burning at graves, engaging in what the artist calls a "final communion with the forest and dead before they vanish."<sup>4</sup>

In 1993, Singaporean art historian T.K. Sabathy spoke of "the toll on the human psyche and identity [in light of] newly created urbanism"<sup>5</sup> as expressed by local art from the 1970s and 1980s. Over twenty years later, this phenomenon still remains foregrounded as an ideological concern for art-practitioners in post-independence Singapore. Concern with the effect of ongoing urbanisation on people in Singapore is not limited to practitioners of visual arts, and remains foregrounded in local literature publications such as 'No Other City: The Ethos Anthology of Urban Poetry.' As the epigraph of the anthology's first chapter reads: "City of New, / bring forth sentinels who sing praises / for the demolition of what we / were."<sup>6</sup> In this light, the exhibition hopes to re-ignite the audience's sense of locality in a country that has undergone so many cycles of physical and narrative changes. (812 words)

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<sup>4</sup> "You're Dead to Me," Tiger Awards Competition for Short Films, accessed 7 January, 2019. <https://iffr.com/en/2015/films/youre-dead-to-me>

<sup>5</sup> T.K. Sabapathy, *Writing the Modern: Selected Texts on Art & Art History in Singapore, Malaysia & Southeast Asia 1973-2015* (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2018), 85.

<sup>6</sup> Luo Qining, "Epigraph - an extract from Scrapyard." *No Other City: The Ethos Anthology of Urban Poetry*, ed. by Alvin Pang and Aaron Lee (Singapore: Ethos Press, 2000) lines 1-4.

## 2. Wall Text

Melissa Tan

Singaporean, b.1989

**Back to Where We've Never Been, 2018**

15 sculptures, mixed media (found road fragment, stainless steel, plasters and asphalt lacquer)

Tan is a mixed media practitioner whose sculptures examine the physicality of Singapore's man-made landscape. In her series *Back to Where We've Never Been*, Tan breathes new life into materials commonly associated with construction and urbanisation through transposing them into visually striking sculptures.

The titular sculptures comprise of found road fragments, stainless steel, and plaster. These materials were sourced from road construction sites in Woodlands, Bukit Timah, and Geylang, so the artist's usage of found road fragments not only references the textures of roads, bridges, and highways, but also alludes to what has been discarded during the process of maintaining the country's roads and in turn, its physical appearance.

Repurposed into individual objects, these quotidian materials take on a new form and now bear a stark contrast in texture and colour. For Tan, the rock's rough texture recalls its extensive formation through state-imposed construction and being treaded on, thus tracing a "passage of time" that can no longer be returned to. This sentiment is echoed in the title of the series, which refers only the ability to speculate, rather than pinpoint, the material's origin and place in the landscape prior to human intervention.

Chua Chye Teck

Singaporean, b. 1974

**Paradise**

34 photographs, digital photograph

Chua is a Singaporean photographers whose work examines the presence of personal memory across a variety of local environments. The 'Paradise' series depicts the district of Punggol through lenses of reminiscence and dilapidation. Once a rural but thriving farming sector, Punggol has had its land cleared and built on in recent decades. Chua also spent her teenage years in the area, meaning that the present landscape is drastically different from that in her memory. Punggol is currently a vibrant residential neighbourhood boasting waterfront views, with over 100,000 residents living in government-built Housing Development Board (HDB) flat units.

Depicting the moments in between the start of construction wide-scale development, the subject matter of Chua's series include beaches and pockets of greenery now littered with debris from construction sites, makeshift altars (as used by foreign construction workers), and fallen tree trunks. The series not only portrays a rare moment of limbo in the development of Singapore's residential neighbourhoods, but also underscores the dissipation of personal history in a country whose landscape remains in constant flux.

Charles Lim

Singaporean, b.1973

**It's Not That I Forgot But I Chose Not To Mention, 2008**

Single-channel HD Video

Having been an Olympic sailor in his youth, it is almost no surprise that the oeuvre of Charles Lim Li Yong examines his relationship with Singapore's waterbodies and her surrounding seas. The video installation *It's Not That I Forgot But I Chose Not To Mention* features a character swimming through an algae-infested pool from a bird's eye view. Lim's choice of setting — a neglected yet tranquil manmade environment — is a stark and unexpected contrast to Singapore's constructed image as a bustling, 'clean and green' city-state.

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The process of swimming through the algae and revealing the white pool tiles at the bottom elucidates the cyclical relationship manmade environments have with nature: nature will one day recover the settings that have intruded on it, and then man will subsequently attempt to reclaim it. In spite of this constant movement, the algae never dissipates, and lingers in the water as a cloud of green even when the character has swum through the entire pool - only further reinforcing a sense of erasure alongside that of renewal.

Zul Mahmud

Singaporean, b.1975

**VIBRATEvibration**, 2017

Mixed media installation (Stainless steel pipes, tweeters, amplifiers and computer)

One of Singapore's most prominent sound artists, Mahmud integrates 3D forms with 'sound constructions' to communicate the relationship between sound and space in contemporary urban space.

Combining sculpture, architecture, drawing and sound, *VIBRATEvibration* is a multi sensory experience that the sights and sounds of urban construction. The sprawling, grid-like arrangements of steel pipes echo the complex infrastructure present in construction sites. Accompanied by the rattling clamour of drilling and recorded sounds of highways, the ambient quality of *VIBRATEvibration* reflects the inescapable quality of ongoing development in modern day Singapore.

Min Wei Ting

Singaporean, b. 1976

**You're Dead to Me**, 2014

Single Channel HD Video, 14'50"

Set amongst the abundant greenery, unpaved tracks and sprawling graves of Bukit Brown Cemetery, Ting's 2014 video installation "You're Dead to Me" charts a lone individual's almost-spiritual experiences with the landscape and its history. Owing to the artist's deliberate use of visual pacing, the video communicates a sense of introspection and slowing down in a site that has managed to remain so untouched by industrialisation.

Sounds such as the buzzing of cicadas and the crunching of leaves under feet can be heard alongside the soft hum of drones and man-made sounds, potentially foreshadowing the loss of the cemetery to the creation of roads and highways. Once home to over 100,000 graves, Bukit Brown cemetery was one of the largest Chinese cemeteries outside of China prior to its exhumation in 2015. Presenting a landscape that no longer exists, the installation is undeniably charged with a sense of loss as it opens up the dialogue about what cultural and environmental heritages are sacrificed in the pursuit of metropolitan life.

**3. Checklist**



Images: <http://rkfineart.com/artist/melissa-tan/>

Melissa Tan (b. 1989, Singapore), *Back to Where We've Never Been*, 2018, 15 mixed media sculptures (found road fragment, stainless steel, plasters and asphalt lacquer), Richard Koh Fine Art



Images: <http://www.chyeteckchua.com/paradise.php>

Chua Chye Teck, (b. 1974, Singapore), *Paradise*, 33 photographs, digital photograph, Collection of the artist.

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Image from: <https://www.charleslimiyong.com/0>

Video Link: <https://www.charleslimiyong.com/0>

Charles Lim, (b.1973, Singapore), *It's Not That I Forgot But I Chose Not To Mention*, 2008  
Single-channel HD Video, Future Perfect.



Image from: <https://vimeo.com/224461158>

Video Link: <https://vimeo.com/224461158>

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Zul Mahmud, (b.1975, Singapore), *VIBRATEvibration*, 2017, Mixed media installation (Stainless steel pipes, tweeters, amplifiers and computer), Mori Art Museum, Tokyo.



Image from: <http://www.mwting.com/albums/youre-dead-to-me/>

Video Excerpt: <https://vimeo.com/124619979>

Min Wei Ting, (b.1976, Singaporean), *You're Dead to Me*, 2014, Single Channel HD Video, 14'50", Collection of the Artist.

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