



Zen Teh

## INTERVIEW WITH ZEN TEH

*'Vestiges: Tracing Urban-nature' is a solo exhibition by the environmental artist and educator Zen Teh. Presented at La Galerie of Alliance Française de Singapour from 7 September to 7 October 2017, the exhibition features two bodies of work, 'Garden State Palimpsest' and 'The Imperative Landscape'.*

***You have chosen an interesting title "Vestiges: Tracing urban-nature" for your upcoming solo exhibition at Alliance Française de Singapour. How did this come about?***

Vestige: a trace or remnant of something that is disappearing or no longer exists; (biology) a part or organ of an organism which has become reduced or functionless in the course of evolution.

In both definitions of vestige, we see something disappearing or being reduced. In both cities where the two series of artworks featured in this exhibition are based, nature has been manipulated and compromised. Man's relationship with the land and nature has hence been inevitably moulded.

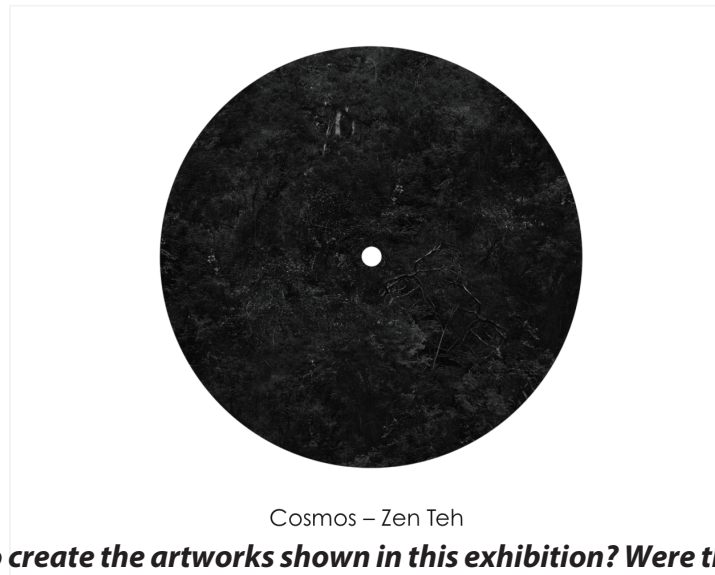
Chiang Rai, where *The Imperative Landscape* is based, is a city surrounded by mountain ranges. Being an urban dweller living in Singapore, I was particularly in awe of the grandeur of the mountains. From the town centre, the façade of its mountainous range seemed intact; but as I moved closer to the outskirts, the destruction to the hills became apparent. This was a shock to me, and it led me to be aware of the extent that human activities alter the environment and of our endless consumption at the expense of nature. I [then] travelled around the suburban areas, where nature was at the precipice of urban development, to document and collage its remaining lush greenery into confined geometric shapes to depict my experience with the land. The *Imperative Landscape* series is thus a response to such an experience and acts as a call for change in our behaviour towards nature.

In the case of Singapore, nature is increasingly manipulated and tamed like a garden; wildlife and wild vegetation are reduced from its original function as a contributor to the health of the ecosystem in the course of rapid urban development. Vestige seems to have a resounding relevance to our state of nature, from the quality of greenery and amount of wilderness to our understanding and intimacy with nature. What we are experiencing is a shifting baseline in our definition of nature.

As of 2015, the United Nation's Statistics Division declared Singapore to be a 100 per cent urban city. Yet, the changes of our land remain rapid and constant until today. The continuous effort to green our city – as the campaign named City in a Garden suggests and with every reminder when we step foot at Changi airport feeling safe and at home – continues to define and fortify our trajectory to become increasingly green yet alienated from wild nature. From the late Mr Lee Kuan Yew's The Tree Planting Campaign in 1963 to today's existing green plans governing parks and promoting vertical and rooftop greenery, we have continuously urbanised and shaped the kind of relationship we can have with nature. Tracing urban-nature is therefore particularly apt in the case of Singapore and [in] how I and my collaborator Nicole Teh study and map our interaction with

***What will you present in this exhibition?***

I will present 2 series of works: The Imperative Landscape, the winning piece of France-Singapore Photographic Arts Award, and Garden State Palimpsest, my current investigation in response to rapidly changing landscape of Singapore. I will be showing three works from The Imperative Landscape series as well as two installation works comprising of sculptural photographic pieces and a series of drawn maps. These two bodies of work reflect my on-going interest and research on Anthropocene and our relationship with nature.



***What inspired you to create the artworks shown in this exhibition? Were there any challenges in producing them?***

My experience of living in Chiang Rai City for two months at Angkrit Gallery under the artist residency programme of The Art Incubator by Objectifs Singapore allowed me to create a more intimate relationship with the landscape. My interaction with the locals living in the space and the conversations we had triggered me to develop my research on nature and rethink about our intrinsic relationship with the natural world. In particular, Pi Angkrit Ajchariyasophon, artist, curator and director of Angkrit gallery in Chiang Rai and ARTIST+RUN gallery in Bangkok, helped me reflect on and deepen my understanding of nature. One particular encounter with him struck me deeply: He mentioned that men are like cancer cells [in the sense that] we continuously consume the body that hosts and sustains our survival, yet we remain unaware of (or perhaps we choose to turn a blind eye to) [that fact]. During my conversation with ceramic artist and architect Pi Somluk Pantiboon, he was bewildered to be asked about his relationship with nature, [because he believed] that we are part of nature and that there is no need for this question that defines nature and us as separate entities. His response was a surprise to me and I questioned the reasons behind these differences in viewpoints. Such experiences inspired me to produce the series of photographic works [titled] The Imperative Landscape to raise awareness about our attitude towards nature in Singapore.

Garden State Palimpsest was inspired by my conversation with my mother about her kampong days. I was deeply fascinated by her accounts of how she used to live in an attap house, catch little fishes in the river stream in Bukit Timah Hill and climb rambutan trees to pluck fruits for leisure. This kind of lifestyle is something that I can imagine but can never truly relate to, as I have no prior experiences to fall back on. Singapore was already almost fully urbanised when I was born in 1988. Between 1960, the year my mother was born, to 1988, Singapore had completely transformed its landscape, leaving almost no traces of the past kampong life. That made me question the rate of our urban development and how memories got displaced simply across one

***What is your next step after the exhibition at Alliance Française de Singapour?***

I will be working on a residency project in Jakarta with researcher and writer Hera, in which there will be a shift of focus to urbanity and physical trajectory. I will also maintain my research thread on human's relationship with nature, which will [be manifested] in my residencies in Bandung and Bangkok. I will not reveal too much yet, but will definitely keep you posted through social media and my website!

***Your new series "Garden State Palimpsest" is a collaboration with Nicole Teh, architectural researcher at The Bartlett School of Architecture. Could you share about this collaboration and its visual outcome?***

This collaboration began from my regular Skype conversations with my sister Nicole Teh – an architectural researcher at The Bartlett School of Architecture in London and my collaborator in this project – about changes in Singapore. From our countless conversations touching on Singapore's rapid change and our aligned interest in investigating the history of our built environment, Nicole and I decided to collaborate and develop our research together. Her background in architecture and her five-year stay in London allowed her to reflect on the necessity of Singapore's constant and rapid change in the built environment. Her approach in architecture on how people interact and experience the environment drives her to question how Singapore has developed and what the future entails. My experience of living in and observing Singapore's environment and our relationship with nature brings me to question and reflect on the current Singapore and what we have lost in the process of development. As an artist, I have always constantly imagined what nature could be and the lushness of greenery in the wilderness. As such, our perspectives and approaches are complementary and would value-add both our research on Singapore.

As a photographic artist, I will recreate images of various natural landscapes based on the interview accounts of older generation's description of their kampong days. As I have never experienced such a lifestyle as a young generation, I will have to base these images partly on my imagination and travel experiences to more rural areas in other parts of the world. Through the research of Singapore's development plans, Nicole will explore and speculate the future built environment that will be manifested as a series of drawn axonometric perspectival maps.

***In your opinion, how can artists play a role in preserving natural landscapes in land-scarce and development-focused Singapore?***

"Humans may be the most highly adaptive species. Constant climate change may have given Homo sapiens their flexibility." (Nathanael Massey, ClimateWire, Scientific American, 2015). This flexibility has enabled our species' survival over millions of years but what does this mean in the context of Singapore? This flexibility has been evident in rapid transformations of the land as well as in complete and constant changes of environmental landmarks and attitude towards nature over less than 30 years. As [a member of] the younger generation, I have been oblivious to these rapid changes and to our heritage for many years. Memories of the older generation seem to become obsolete and few young Singaporeans are familiar with the details of Singapore's built environment history. Why is this so? How many of us have slowed down our footsteps to recall, think and consider how we relate to this space? How many have actually questioned our relationship with this land which we live in? Has the development been so rapid that we have exceeded human threshold and capacity to not only comprehend mentally but also relate emotionally?

These are questions that runs through my mind as an individual and artist living in this space. As an artist, I feel the social responsibility for critical questioning that helps us reflect on what we are experiencing and reconsider seemingly intangible aspects of our lives and environment, which are all worthwhile pursuits. All artists have different approaches to raising questions through their art-making. In response to environmental issues arising from human destruction, some choose to display the devastation of nature, whilst others work in a more subtle and poetic manner. For me, I have been inspired by the poetic and alluring works by various artists, such as Danish-Icelandic artist Olafur Eliasson. Eliasson's works are inspired by the natural elements that he studies and recreates in immersive installations using scientific and mechanical means.

The act of taking 'nature' out of context and juxtaposing it in different social contexts raises our interest in and attention to how we engage with these natural elements. For instance, The Weather Project, presented in 2003 at Tate Modern in the United Kingdom, was an installation that functioned as representations of the sun and sky in the Turbine Hall. Fine mists, which reminded us of the atmosphere during dawn, were released into the hall; at the far end of the hall, there was a giant semi-circular form made up of hundreds of mono-frequency lamps that seemingly resembled the sunset. Eliasson said: "I'm not interested in weather as a matter of science.

I'm not a meteorologist or a botanist. I'm interested in people: how people engage sensually with the qualities of weather – rain, mist, ice, snow, humidity – so that through their engagement they may understand how much of our lives are cultural constructions". His approach to art-making lures us to be mesmerised by and immersed in his works, changing them from objects of art to memories. Such an engagement builds sustained remembrance of his work and engages us to connect the elements presented to our own personal experience with nature.

Similarly, my practice seeks to engage audience in an aestheticised imagination of natural elements, whilst presenting a critical and open outcome for our personal experience to play a part in building deeper connections with the artworks. Such an engagement, I hope, will remind us of our innate relationship with nature as well as prompt one to question and perhaps contribute to the environment in our own ways.