

INTERSECTION

THE DIGITAL QUARTER OF GALLERY & STUDIO MAGAZINE

ART AND COLLABORATION

We often imagine artists working alone in their dark, paint-filled studios, their lives getting shorter with each breath of toxic turpentine or thinner laced air. Skinny, pale and haters of the world and other people, the stereotypical artist would never been seen working with someone else in their work.

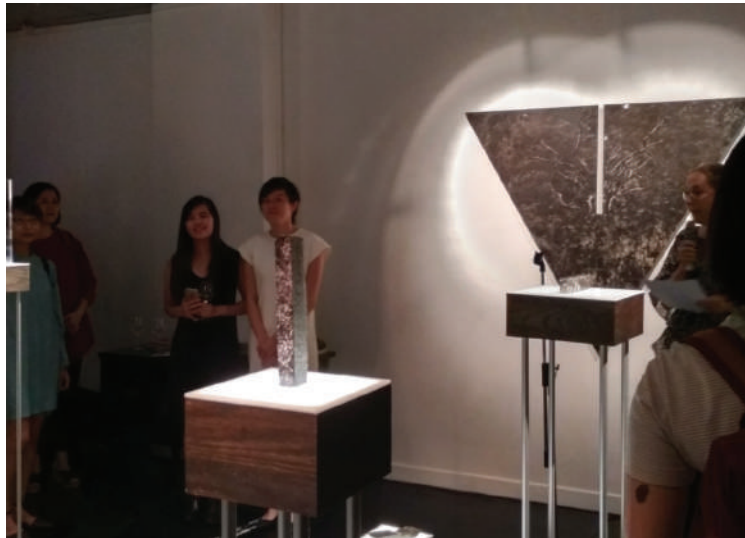
Fortunately, we now live in the twenty first century and the daily routine of a professional artist is radically different. For a photographic artist like Zen Teh, the story of the stereotypical artist almost seems like a story of her alter ego. The nature of her medium means that her studio is basically the laptop, and the world seen through the camera lens. Outside of the gallery, she is also interested in raising awareness for the environment and building a more harmonious relationship for herself with nature. This is clearly reflected in her works: images of green, trees, forestry inundate the surface. In November 2016, prints from a series of her work, *The Imperative Landscape*, captured the imagination of Alliance française de Singapour and Teh was recognised as the winner for the 7th France + Singapore Photographic Arts Award.

Part of the award is a solo exhibition at Alliance française de Singapour's Société Générale Gallery in this year, almost a year after the award. And so with the support of Alliance française, Teh opened her 3rd solo exhibition, *Vestiges: Tracing urban-nature* on Wednesday, 6 September 2017.



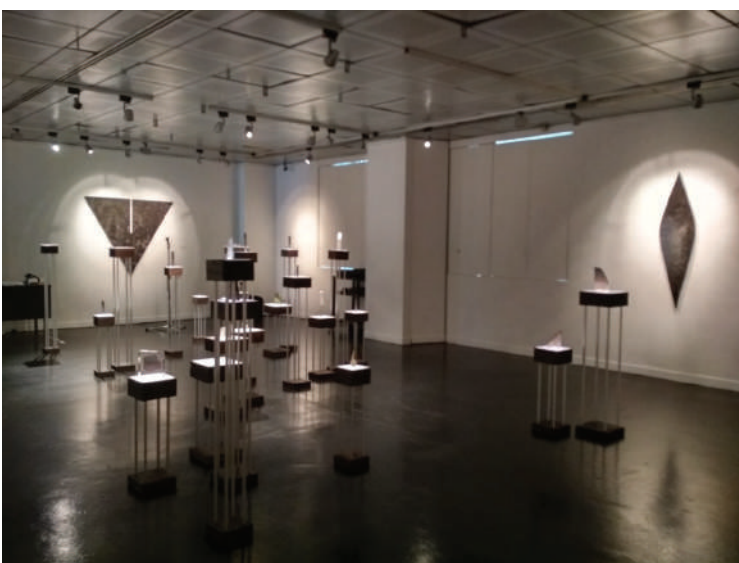
Installation view of *Vestiges: Tracing urban-nature*.

Following on a string of collaborations, the new series of work for Vestiges, Garden State Palimpsest, is produced through a partnership with architectural researcher Nicole Teh. Zen's practice is notable for the varied yet highly successful collaborations that she had accomplished with scientist Professor Ching Jianhong, product and UIUX designer Sharifah Nasser, the Community Health Assessment Team at Institute of Medical Health and ex-classmates Hera (art researcher) and Ong Fangzheng (conservator). Each collaboration has expressed the strengths, interests and style of the collaborators involved. Garden State Palimpsest is no different, reflecting the personality of both Nicole and Zen.



Nicole and Zen Teh.

Some background on Nicole: a graduate of the BSc Architecture program from the Bartlett School of Architecture in University College London, her work was exhibited in the summer show in the Royal Academy of Arts in 2016. She is also a recipient of a scholarship from DesignSingapore, with which she will be embarking on the Masters in Architecture program in Bartlett.

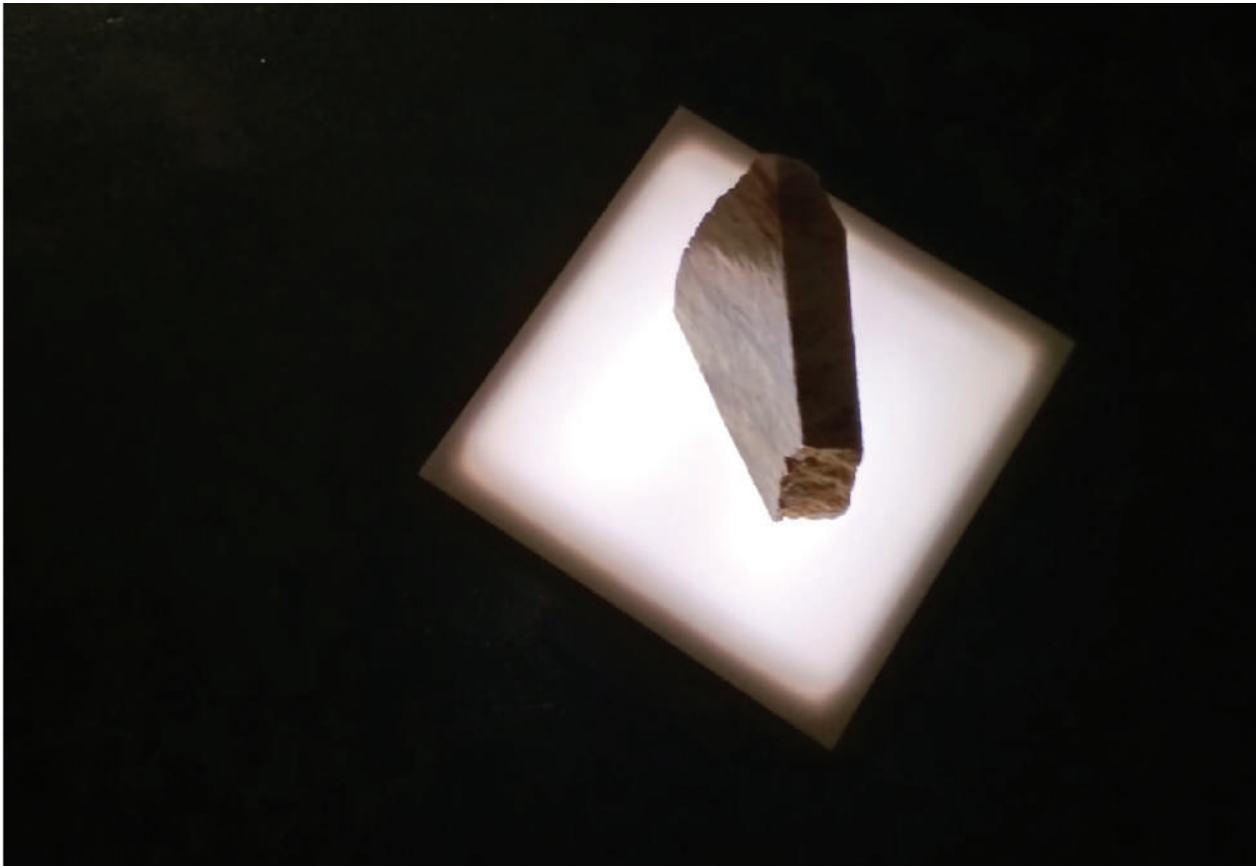


Installation view of Vestiges: Tracing urban-nature.



In-between Spaces. Exhibited at In Silence. Courtesy of the artist and Pearl Lam Galleries.

Following on the concerns also expressed in *In-Between Spaces* (2016), Zen thematises the loss that comes when nature is overtaken by urban development her new collaborative work. *In-Between Spaces* was produced in collaboration with Sharifah and was a reaction toward the loss of the Green Corridor. The concrete buildup manicures the space that nature is allowed to be in, merely a tiny sliver in the shape of a hallway or corridor. Yet even that is being lost: by stacking the triptych on the wall, the work takes on the metaphor of a high rise building, possibly one of our HDBs. We are left only with tiny slivers of space chosen by the state for a small urban garden. The plinths of *Garden State Palimpsest* can be similarly read as a rising up from the huts of the kampong to the skyscrapers of contemporary Singapore. Four bars make up the structure of each plinth, their grey tones echoing the grey of *In-between Spaces* and the facade of the generic high-rise building.



Installation view of Vestiges: Tracing urban-nature.

Each cluster of plinth-scrappers come in varying heights, creating a dynamic visuality that also suffuses the LED daylight white light installed on the surface of each plinth. At the same time, it provides a different viewpoint for the visitor: from the side. If each plinth is a skyscraper, then the side view is akin to a city scape, akin to the ones taken by tourists at Marina Bay Sands or used to represent us as a city in major newspapers. To run through this metaphor to its end is disquieting: by emphasising the skyline of the city, or creating that ideal city skyline, we have broken down the kampongs, the communities that have had a different and cleaner relationship with nature. All we are left with are tiny square spaces on the top of the plinth-scraper where we might begin to create our urban garden.



Installation view of Vestiges: Tracing urban-nature.

So what have the artist-architect duo grown in their garden state? Fragments of marble and concrete, apparently. Zen explains that these fragments are salvaged from construction sites or where concrete Singapore is fragmenting in its find to control nature. This could be the break on the sidewalk or where the roots of a tree bursts through from under the roads. Photographs are taken around the site where the fragment is salvaged and imprinted upon the fragment through a chemical transfer before being treated. Each piece is carefully chosen and arranged according to the reimagined kampong site by her interviewees.

With her architectural expertise, Nicole also produced speculative drawings about plans for future development in Singapore on acrylic blocks. They stand among the marble and concrete fragments. Taken together, each cluster is a deliberate confusion of looking back at kampong life and looking forward at even greater urbanisation. It is unclear what we are supposed to understand about the situation at this point: do we support heritage and conservation, even in its fragmented form, or do we abandon the desire to reminiscence and look forward to greater efficiency in the city?

Zen's work does not actually provide any kind of solutions to the environmental issues that she observes and thematises in her work. Rather, through careful research and visual impact, she presents the problems that she sees to her viewers. It is up to us viewers to think and to make our own decisions on whether or not to activate ourselves into changing the way we lead our lives. Do we ignore what is happening in our country and to our environment now that we know about it? Can we remain guiltless in our passivity? Through her work, Zen softly raises this conundrum that has no right or easy answer.

Exhibition runs until 7 October 2017.

Vestiges: Tracing urban-nature

Solo exhibition by Zen Teh in collaboration with Nicole Teh

7 September to 7 October 2017

Société Générale Gallery

Alliance française de Singapour