

VESTIGES: TRACING URBAN-NATURE

Vestiges: tracing urban-nature is an edited publication for a solo exhibition by Zen Teh by the same name. A link for pdf digital version can be found [here](#) for viewing only and not for distribution. Read preface below.



image credit: Zen Teh

Preface

Vestiges: tracing urban-nature is a solo exhibition by Zen Teh in La Galerie of Alliance Française de Singapour which runs from the 5th September 2017 to the 5th October 2017, featuring two series of work—*Garden State Palimpsest* and *The Imperative Landscape*. *The Imperative Landscape* was presented for the 7th France+Singapore Photographic Arts Award competition and became the winning work, while *Garden State Palimpsest* is the artist's latest series and is still considered to be in progress; Teh considers that there are still opportunities to expand the conceptual possibility and expression of the material she has collected for *Garden State Palimpsest*.

As a companion to the exhibition, this publication seeks to extend the artistic encounter through text and images; Artworks exhibited are presented as image plates that have been photographed against plain white background, taking the works out of the context of a gallery environment that consists of the atmospheric lighting and custom displays. These images provide a different viewing experience than exhibition-going—allowing a close scrutiny of each artwork as a thing in itself.

The image plates are followed by *Contemplating Forests in Singapore*, an essay by ecologist Chua Siew Chin and *Garden Cities – A Comparative Study on the Model of its Past, Present and Future* by urban and estate planner Mei Lin Yeo. Both essays are an inquiry into the utopian concept of “Garden City” in Singapore which was introduced by the post-independence prime minister Lee Kuan Yew. Yeo examines the conceptual origin of the Garden City as an urban planning solution introduced by Ebenezer Howard in early 19th century England, as well as comparing its various adapted models in France and Singapore. On the other hand, Chua considers Singapore’s greening policies—that despite an increase in parks and rooftop gardens, forests are still irreplaceable because of their ecological functions. Urban planning and ecology are two bodies of knowledge that provide distinct frameworks to think about human-environment relationships, and in many ways they have informed various art-making decisions in *Vestiges*.

The next section is a text by Zen Teh on her interview methodology and transcript that was carried out to collect oral sources to create the centerpiece of *Garden State Palimpsest*, which the artist terms “photographic sculptures”. These photographic sculptures are made up of images transfers printed on construction finishing materials, which are mostly a variety of granite or marble. All of them have a facet that has been shaped or flattened mechanically, but on another side is chipped or broken off irregularly along the stone’s cleavage plane. A reverberation of the notions “man-made”, “constructed”, “natural”, occurs in the selection of material and image-making. The images on the photographic sculptures are based on accounts of kampong living—at times the interviewees’ memories such as little streams or patches of forests are featured on the photographic sculpture as close as possible according to the descriptions. Otherwise the artist creates an interpretation of the recounts that is interweaved with her personal experience and understanding. The interviews are also featured in the exhibition space as printed transcripts from interviewees such as Jean Chua and Teh’s respected colleague and renowned artist Vincent Leow. In addition, Vincent Leow’s interview transcript is also reproduced in this publication. Historian Allesandro Portelli argues for the uniqueness of oral history as follows:

“The first thing that makes oral history different, therefore, is that it tells us less about events than about their meaning. This does not imply that oral history has no actual validity”.
(Portelli 1991, 67)

Often, within the interviewees accounts there are dissimilar views and ironies. An interviewee Oh Ah Yin recounts the following anecdote with regards to Singapore Government's efforts to modernise the kampongs that they deemed unsanitary and overcrowded:

"... At that time, during Lee Kuan Yew's governance, we were told to maintain our hygiene standards... And you know, the kampong residents who were uneducated, through word of mouth, spread the news that we have to be clean, if (our houses are) not clean, we will be caught by the police! When my mother told me about it, I was very scared, I wonder if mother will be caught before I get home, and I will not be able to find her."

(Oh, 2017)

The excerpt illustrates how oral sources may be miscommunicated when transferred from one person to another, but it also interestingly reflects on the anxiety of the kampong dwellers towards the government's sentiments on the "squatters' colony" and their unsanitary living conditions. Despite the volume of information derived from the interview exercise, Teh's work does not set out to systematically investigate the actual events that occur during the years of modernising Singapore's housing policies. Rather it is a reconciliation, or the making sense of modernisation's aftermath, both from the point of view of the interviewees and the artist herself. The incongruities of memories, the ironies of differing viewpoints and contestations reflect an intrinsic reality—that a society does not always agree on a dominant overarching narrative. Thus Singapore's success story is inherently not singular, but a palimpsest of contestations, erasures and emergent narratives.

In Teh's second writing, *The poetics of time*, the artist elaborates on her art-making process. Central to her argument is the need to take time, even as we live in a high capitalist society where time is a commodity. Teh often likens her photographic processes to painting. Even though she writes specifically for the making process of *Garden State Palimpsest* in this publication, there is a continuity of certain technical and thematic grappling from her older work, *The Imperative Landscape*. Teh often refers to the compositional devices of Song dynasty landscape painting, in which grand mountain scapes that extend beyond the frame seemingly lead viewers on a visual journey. Her source images are often photographed as underexposed, especially so in *The Imperative Landscape*; this makes shapes and contours less obvious but allows for more details to be captured by camera sensors or film, then subsequently printed. As the eyes take time to get used to the darkness of the image, subtle tonal differences begin to materialise and become perceivable—an initiation into the visual journey.

Of this particular technique, Teh often speaks of learning it from her teacher and mentor Paul Kohl whose photographic prints yield extraordinary tonal richness and atmospheric sensitivity. From him Teh learns about workflow, thinking of photography as artistic image-making, as well as Ansel Adams's zone systems—a technique of determining exposure and creating intention for the image's eventual dynamic tonal range. (Adams 1971, 19)

The last section A state of becoming written by Nicole Teh is a combination of text and diagrams that reveal the background work that goes into the future speculation component of Garden State Palimpsest. The final outcome shown in the exhibition is made up of eight pieces of exquisite architectural drawings printed on cut acrylic and gently lit from the stand below. The work is meant to be more than a fine spectacle, nor is it a definitive prediction of the future. Prominent critical design practitioners Dunne and Raby set out the roles of speculative design as follows:

“..when it comes to new technology, future predictions have been proven wrong again and again. In our view, it is a pointless activity. What we are interested in, though, is the idea of possible futures and using them as tools to better understand the present and discuss the kind of future people want, and, of course, ones people do not want.”

(Dunne, A. and Raby, F. 2013, pp. 2-3)

The issues of urbanisation and the marginalisation of nature is a wicked problem that do not just require immediate workable solution, but also a constant redefining of relationships between us as a society and our environment. In the face of the complexity of her subject matter, this constant redefinition has always been an oeuvre of Zen Teh’s artistic practice. The enquiry is never exhausted, even as artworks are regarded as “complete” so exhibiting could begin, the artistic creation continues when exchanges occur between viewers, art objects and space. Through this publication, we invite you on a journey that parallels Vestiges the exhibition, to outline the thematic and conceptual constellation that surrounds Teh’s body of work.

References

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