

# Lost city



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# Preface

The exhibition, *Lost City*, was preceded by a series of features on art in the magazine, *Singapore Architect* (which is part of the professional body, Singapore Institute of Architects) between 2003 and 2004.

At the time, I was editor of the magazine and I was hoping to introduce a different perspective to the somewhat tired discourse on local architecture by looking at architecture through the eyes of artists. The artists, Hong Sek Chern, Francis Ng, Tang Ling Nah, Ahmad Abu Bakar and CK Kum were all featured in *Singapore Architect* because their work possessed a discernible architectural quality. But what later struck me as being more poignant was that each had certain assertions about urban space to voice. This relationship is explored further in *Lost City*.

It would be disingenuous to say that there are no foregone conclusions about these assertions. Indeed, architectural critics like Rem Koolhaas often cite Singapore as a negative example of the global city. Recently, in his book *Preserving The World's Great Cities – The Destruction And Renewal Of The Historic Metropolis*, Anthony M Tung goes as far as to say, “What Singapore acted too late to save was the piece of the urban puzzle that tied the cityscape together: the material architectural product of a creative cultural explosion that once had made it a place unlike anyplace else.”

Where it might have been possible to say that these were just the opinions of an elite few, one cannot now deny that its own residents are beginning wonder about the efficacy of our urban planning guidelines. Unfortunately, the voices of artists tend not to be as loud as those of developers. Architects, on the other hand, seem to have lost their voices altogether.

The work of the five artists is critical. It is, however, also optimistic. And just as there is poetry in the flyovers and void decks, there is also a way out of the Lost City. Cultural critic, Frederic Jameson, points the way in his book, *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, in which he writes:

*This is not then, clearly, a call for a return to some older kind of machinery, some older and more transparent national space, or some more traditional and reassuring perspectival or mimetic enclave: the new political art (if it is possible at all) will have to hold to the truth of postmodernism, that is to say, to its fundamental object – the world space of multinational capital – at the same time at which it achieves a breakthrough to some as yet unimaginable new mode of representing this last, in which we may again begin to grasp our positioning as individual and collective subjects and regain a capacity to act and struggle which is at present neutralised by our spatial as well as our social confusion.*

*Arthur Sim/Curator*

# Introduction

A GROUP EXHIBITION FEATURING NEW WORK BY HONG SEK CHERN,  
FRANCIS NG, TANG LING NAH, AHMAD ABU BAKAR AND C K KUM

There is an implicit relationship between art and architecture. The evolution of modern art and architecture has its roots in the Cartesian sensibility, which defined Classical space and the art that inhabited it. Later, during the Renaissance, the device of the perspective helped set free the essentially two-dimensional dynamics of art and space. This dynamic was taken to an extreme in Modern Art (Cubism) and Architecture (De Stijl etc).

This is not to say that it occurred without opposition. The German philosopher, Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), who locates the beginnings of a crisis in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, (with the emergence of the Age of Enlightenment, the precursor to Modernism as we know it), argued that the sublime relationship between how one lived (apropos architecture) and what one thought (apropos art) was slowly being eroded. For him, “To dwell authentically, [was] to dwell poetically, since poetry is a manifestation of truth restored to its artistic dimension.”<sup>1</sup>

Heidegger was reacting to the disenchantment of the utopian ideal brought on by the Enlightenment, first expressed in the fantasies of French architects like Etienne-Louis Boullée and Claude-Nicolas Ledoux, and later manifested in the socialist architecture of the Bauhaus and Le Corbusier. (Realist artists of the same period, like Gustave Courbet, were equally influential in the evolution of the Modern Art movement.)

Heidegger argued that the alienation of contemporary existence was based on the separation of thought from living, a conditioned epitomised by the privileging of technology and calculative thinking in the modern world.<sup>2</sup>

This Heideggerian view of art (Being) and space (Dwelling) is perhaps what ties the artists

of the group exhibition, *Lost City*, together. That all the artists choose to make poignant references to life in our modern environment is significant not only because it affirms the duality of Being and Dwelling, but also more importantly, it contributes to the discourse on rapid urbanisation in the globalised world.

However, where Heidegger might have been overly concerned with aesthetics, *Lost City* is about unravelling and understanding our urban environment (and architecture) by looking at the city through the eyes of the artist. Through them, it may yet be possible to recognise and engage certain ‘truths’ about our urban environment that, in the haste towards attaining the goals of globalisation, perhaps most have ignored.

It must be said, however, that the effects of globalisation on the city are not a primary concern of the artists. Mostly under 40-years-old and brought up in the era of the PAP which encouraged migration to new HDB housing estates, one can safely assume that the artists have been raised to accept rapid urbanisation for the sake of development as *a fait accompli*. In conversations with all the artists, none will say with any conviction that their work is in any way a reaction to the rigours of high density living in a public housing estate. Yet, all the work produced is engrossed with defining spaces within a familiar context.

What is also intriguing is a sense of loss pervasive in all the work. Of the five artists, it is probably Hong Sek Chern who is most emphatic about the representation of the large structures in her work. By way of explaining her preoccupation with flyovers and MRT stations, she has likened these to our modern monuments and as such, also our architectural heritage. She also possesses

a near-morbid fascination with what future generations will think of the city that the present generation leaves behind, and perhaps portentously, if future generations will be able to locate monuments in the way that Angkor Wat, a touchstone for her, is considered a monument today.

It is in this way that Hong's work seems to suggest a crisis in Modernism here. In an interview in 2001, she said, "Though my paintings refer to the calculated and rationalised – qualities exemplified by the Modern person – the use of Chinese ink allows for an element of *tianyi* [heaven's interest] or chance." By "calculated and rationalised", Hong alludes not only to her dextrous mode of painting (via elaborate perspective sketches) but also to the subject matter – the Modern City.

There is a name for this kind of modernism. In his book, *All That is Solid Melts into Air*, cultural critic Marshall Berman called it, "the modernism of underdevelopment"<sup>3</sup>. Although he was referring to Petersburg in Russia, the epithet, "the most abstract and premeditated city in world", could just as easily apply to Singapore as it did to Petersburg in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The parallels are uncanny: the pride of Petersburg was the Nevsky Prospect, one of three radial streets that gave the city its shape. Similarly, as Hong shows through her work, Singapore's infrastructure of bridges, roads and train stations represent the city's most impressive monuments. Indeed, when prominent British architect Sir Norman Foster was in the city to attend the ceremonial foundation stone laying for the new Supreme Court building in 2003, he explained that he was so impressed by the city's efficient network of infrastructure that he based the design of the new Supreme Court building on the notion that the "street" would continue into the heart of the new building and allow "infrastructure" to define the design.<sup>4</sup>

Berman also writes that the 'Modernism of underdevelopment' is "forced to build on fantasies and dreams of modernity... [But] it turns on itself and tortures itself for its inability to single-handedly make history – or else throws itself into extravagant attempts to take on itself the whole burden of history."<sup>5</sup>

Hong's new work for *Lost City* takes her preoccupation with monument-making to a much grander scale. Turning her attention away from

void decks and flyovers, she looks at whole urban blocks for inspiration. Although her distinctive technique of moody Chinese brushwork and the forced fragmentation and tearing-up of her canvas remains, her new cityscapes reaffirm the destruction/construction paradigm, articulated once again through her distinctive technique.

Moving in the opposite direction – from macro to micro – is Francis Ng. The artist created one of Singaporean contemporary art's most memorable images when he captured a flyover in mid-construction – *Constructing Construction #1*. Unlike Hong, however, Ng's work is not about monumentalising the existing urban condition. Nor is there a hint of nostalgia for the past or future either (symptomatic of the alienating effects of Modernism). Instead, Ng is concerned with the very process of construction as a means towards understanding the environment around him. "I wish to look at both existing and re-constructed spaces from their integrity as independent spaces and investigate the tensions there, as well as study how the body, as a separate entity, interacts and communicates with such tensions and spaces," he explains.

This approach is particularly relevant as there are parallels that can be drawn with exponents from the popular field of architectural theory concerned with 'tectonics'. In his book, *Studies in Tectonic Cultures*, the architecture critic and academic, Kenneth Frampton, argues that the experience of space – with its emphasis on spatial displacement of the subject in time – might be enriched by a reconsideration of the constructional and structural modes by which it has been achieved: in short, a poetics of construction.<sup>6</sup>

This "poetics of construction" is perhaps best expressed in Ng's *Constructing Construction #1*. The concrete box trusses that span each pylon of a new flyover, frozen in space and captured in all its glory, is like a modern *Winged Victory of Samothrace* – a celebration of the victory of globalisation perhaps?

For *Lost City*, Ng continues to explore, through a combination of photography and installation, the tectonic, tactile and topographic on a more personal scale. Ng hopes to reinstate the "essence of space" not only as way of offering an alternative expression of the process of art, but perhaps more significantly to the urbanistic premise of *Lost City*,

to understand how interaction and intervention with specific spaces reveals layers of a specific site's socio-cultural and historical context.

Where Ng's archaeological approach hints at a post-structuralist method, Tang Ling Nah clearly prefers the territory of her sub-conscious. Despite a strong representational quality, there is a discernible vein of surrealism that runs through her paintings. This is perhaps not surprising in the context of *Lost City* because Surrealism was a direct reaction to (and rejection of) Modernism. It is not without reason that Tang's work is often compared to the etchings of prisons by 18<sup>th</sup> century Neo-Classical, Giovanni Battista Piranesi, and more recently, Giorgio de Chirico.

Like Hong and Ng, Tang is drawn to leftover urban spaces. It might be a stairwell or a dead-end on an MRT platform. Unlike the former two artists, however, Tang does not dwell on monumentality or spatial tensions. Instead, her works, including her new work for *Lost City*, hints at a parallel spiritual plane. She often speaks of a sense of 'hope' when describing her paintings and one has to infer that this hope refers to a way out of whatever she sees as oppressive about the city. Interestingly, for this exhibition, she uses the wall as her canvas, in much the same way that quintessential abstract expressionist, Mark Rothko's paintings take over the walls of a space, seen best at the Rothko Chapel in Houston, Texas.

The idea that art can define a physical space and perhaps even be read as architecture is explored by Ahmad Abu Bakar. The ceramicist is well known for his immaculate sculptures from his *Journey of a Point to Geometry* series. At first assessment, there seems to be nothing urban or architectural about his work, which as he has often explained, is based on the origins of the *alif* and Arabic alphabet. But the *alif*, of course, is intrinsically bound to geometry, which in turn is supremely manifested in Islamic art and architecture.

Of the graphic arts, it is sculpture, which by nature requires a three-dimensional demarcation of space, that is most closely related to architecture. In Ahmad's ceramic sculptures, a special character of space is captured in the mystical and highly symbolic nature of Islamic geometry. It has been suggested that in Ahmad's work, a pure form of space has been defined.<sup>7</sup>

This exhibition suggests that artists are privy to a particular experience of the city that, although available to everyone, is rarely engaged with by its inhabitants. What then do architects experience? C K Kum is a unique combination of both artist and architect. But it is his art that tackles the issues of urbanism and the city. It is not without a sense of irony that the definitive Modernist architect, Le Corbusier, is one of Kum's heroes. It is Le Corbusier, one hastens to add, who has inspired much of Singapore's HDB urban landscape. It is this same landscape, born from the utopian condition of the *tabula rasa*, that excites the reactions in the artists of *Lost City*.

There are apparently no easy answers to the problems associated with rapid urbanisation of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In a recent interview, Kum said, "It is our modern fate to live in uncertainty and ambiguity, in a world that needs constant negotiations".<sup>8</sup> For *Lost City*, he leaves his easel in favour of an installation that, he explains, will express "... a more fluid distinction or relation with the enclosure, between the inside and outside and balances on the edge between order and chaos. It seeks to link the passing moment, the temporariness of form, to the eternal cycle of the *Genus Loc*".

Searching the city for something not immediately apparent, or even lost, is the conceptual thread that ties the work of the five artists together. It may be as Kum says, our "modern fate" to have to deal with this condition. For Berman, the vision of modern life is split into the "material and spiritual planes". This dualism, pervasive in contemporary culture, he says, cuts us off from one of the most pervasive facts of modern life: "...the interfusion of its material and spiritual forces, the intimate unity of the modern self and the modern environment".<sup>9</sup> With the artists of *Lost City*, this "interfusion" may be already be taking place. But beyond just creating art, one must ask, what, if any, is the political dimension in the work being exhibited.

By Daphne Tan's definition – a writer who contributes an incisive essay on the relationship between art and the city for this exhibition – art that effects change is political art. "Imagining the city, with an eye to making it real or altering people's perceptions of it, is in itself a political act," she says.

In this sense, the art in *Lost City* is to varying degrees political. The unifying factor being that each artist offers a reading of the city that opposes the existing urban condition. It might be the call for a more discernible architectural identity as in Hong Sek Chern's paintings. Francis Ng's archaeological musings certainly foments the urgent need to reassess our understanding of the politics of space and indirectly, also our architectural heritage. Tang Ling Nah's melancholic lament of the anonymity of it all may perhaps be perceived as too fatalistic to warrant a reactionary response, but her process, being almost subconscious, hints at a gradual breakdown of the urban and social fabric in high density areas. And to deny that it will happen may be sheer arrogance because such problems have blighted cities much greater and with more resources than ours.

CK Kum's reflection on urban detritus suggests that the act of reclaiming the city has already begun. How else can one explain the return of messy street hawkers and the pasar malam to Orchard Road? It is exactly what one might describe as a balance between "order and chaos" Yet being sanctioned by the government authorities, it is probably not what Kum had in mind. After all, isn't art linked to any governing body merely propaganda? This may be why the sculptures of Ahmad Abu Bakar have a special place in *Lost City*. The work is least about architecture and yet speaks most about space in its purest form.

*Lost City* is thus not so much an exhibition about art as it is about architecture and urbanism. Like the art of American artist, Nancy Wolf, whom Daphne Tan, in her essay, makes reference to, these five artists "resensitize us to the loss of our cities".

Artists (painters, poets, musicians), have not lost the ability to function within the cultural realm in quite the way architects have and this is why *Lost City* looks at the urban condition without looking at its architecture per se. This is of course a sad state of affairs, as cultural theorist, Frederic Jameson, points out: "Architecture is a privileged aesthetic language and the distorting and fragmenting reflections of one enormous glass surface to the other can be taken as paradigmatic of the central role of process and reproduction in postmodernist culture."<sup>10</sup>

All artists (even architects!) are subject to what Jameson refers to as the "semiautonomy of the cultural realm", which leads "its ghostly, yet Utopian, existence, for good or for ill, above the practical world of the existent, whose mirror image it throws back in forms which vary from the legitimations of flattering resemblance to the contestatory indictments of critical satire or Utopian pain."<sup>11</sup> He does however go on to add that perhaps it is too late for some, and that this drive to create within a cultural sphere may already be "destroyed by the logic of late capitalism".<sup>12</sup>

The fate of Culture in the globalised city hangs in the balance. These five artists contribute to the *Lost City* by providing its inhabitants with the beginnings of what Jameson refers to as a "cognitive mapping – a pedagogical political culture which seeks to endow the individual subject with some new heightened sense of its place in the global system"<sup>14</sup> Ultimately, however, it will be up to the people of the *Lost City* to find a way out.

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<sup>1</sup> Neil Lech, "Rethinking Architecture" (Routledge, 1977) p. 98

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>3</sup> Marshal Berman, "All That Is Solid Melts Into Air – The Experience Of Modernity" (Simon and Schuster, New York, 1982) p. 183

<sup>4</sup> "Lord Norman Foster Takes A Stand" (Singapore Architect 217, 2003) p.24

<sup>5</sup> Marshal Berman, "All That Is Solid Melts Into Air – The Experience Of Modernity" (Simon and Schuster, New York, 1982) p. 232

<sup>6</sup> Kenneth Frampton, "Studies in Tectonic Cultures – The Poetics of Construction in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century Architecture" (The MIT Press) p. 2

<sup>7</sup> "Unity and Source" (Singapore Architect 222, 2004) p. 42

<sup>8</sup> "Negotiating Ambiguities" (Singapore Architect 220, 2004) p. 58

<sup>9</sup> Marshal Berman, "All That Is Solid Melts Into Air – The Experience Of Modernity" (Simon and Schuster, New York, 1982)

<sup>10</sup> Frederic Jameson, "Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" (London: Verson, 1991) p. 196

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*

# Narratives of the City: Intersections Between Art and Urbanism

by Daphne H.Y. Tan

## IMAGINING THE CITY, DREAMING OF COMMUNITY

THAT WHICH CHANGES OUR WAY OF SEEING THE STREETS IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN WHAT CHANGES OUR WAY OF SEEING PAINTING.

– GUY DEBORD, “REPORT ON THE CONSTRUCTION OF SITUATIONS” (1957)

Writing in 1955, the French Situationist and cultural theorist Guy Debord articulated his vision of the cross-fertilization of art and architecture:

Certain of Chirico’s paintings, which are clearly provoked by architecturally originated sensations, exert in turn an effect on their objective base to the point of transforming it: they tend themselves to become blueprints or models. Disquieting neighborhoods of arcades could one day carry on and fulfil the allure of these works.

Debord wasn’t so much stating a fact as voicing the desire for a comparably evocative architecture to be incorporated within future Situationist cities. De Chirico’s imaginary cityscapes, with their uninhabited streets and plazas, occasional mysterious figures and theatrical lighting, have the character of stage sets, and as befits this quality the paintings present an anticipatory air. They are *sites*; something is going to happen, some narrative is about to unfold. This is in large measure why De Chirico’s work was so often cited by the Situationists and also why he was so influential among the Surrealists, a

movement he did not, surprisingly, consider himself a member of.

In the Surrealist imagination the streets of the city resonated with infinite possibilities of erotic encounter – one only has to look at Paul Delvaux’s paintings – and the chance meeting is a recurring trope in Surrealist literature. For the Situationists the city was viewed as the site for radical social transformation, beginning at the level of the individual’s emotional response to her built environment. They envisioned a “new architecture” inspired by “the atmospheric effects of rooms, hallways, streets, atmospheres linked to the gestures they contain.” Little wonder then that De Chirico’s conjurings provided such exemplary visual aids: their elongated vistas and sharply angled shadows are saturated with atmosphere, pulsate with the expectation of drama.

Imagining the city, with an eye to making it real or altering people’s perceptions of it, is in itself a political act. And for as long as there have been cities it has been impossible to think of art, which

takes as its subject the city and the life of the city, without also recognizing the social and political value of some of that art. But human beings have a notoriously short historical memory, and the cultural artefacts we store in it tend to come from the last one hundred years or so, if that.

Fritz Lang's visions of a futuristic city in *Metropolis* (1927) took the form of a dramatically lit, awe-inspiring, sublime megalopolis that, once you plunge beneath its impressive exterior, parasitically exists through the programmatic dehumanization of its workforce. (If you look closely, Lang includes a visual reference to the German architect Walter Gropius's 1922 monument to massacred workers.)

The film was irrefutably a product of its cultural *Zeitgeist* at the same time that it also resisted it: it embodied a powerful critique of High Modernism's valorization of technology, the new capacity for mass production, and tyrannical individualism. Its architectural sets, reminiscent of Hugh Ferriss's fantasies from the same period, were also an indictment of the tendency of Modernist planning schemes to lose all sense of human proportion in their celebration of vast spaces and monolithic slabs.

The film adaptation of Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* was likewise very much a cultural artefact of its time, although it too in its articulation of a ruined future was unlike anything else that had come before. Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) was, above and beyond the narrative action, a sustained meditation on the city. It tracked the downside of a seductive overreliance on science and technology in a post-apocalyptic urban landscape saturated with debris. In an age of nuclear warheads and space weaponry, utopian representations of tomorrow's cities, in the arts at any rate, have themselves been annihilated. Those of us with post-Disney sensibilities may identify, with the appropriate shock of recognition, a pastiche of architectural allusions in the wasted cityscape of *Blade Runner*: fragmented forms from Frank Lloyd Wright, William Hogarth's London engravings, the Los Angeles Bradbury Building.

The Situationists dreamed their new cities based on the emotional responses and participation of the individuals who inhabited them. However impractical, even wacky, some of their urban schemes may seem, at least they saw

the social value of a sensory architecture that *engaged* people. But they reckoned without the grotesque extent to which corporate money and interests have grown to dictate the shape of many cities' downtowns. Nancy Wolf is an American artist who explicitly tackles this problem in her work. Though not formally trained as an architect, she is a brilliant draughtswoman who has made the visual critique of trends and movements in architecture and urban planning her life's work. Her drawings, paintings and etchings over the past thirty years have also confronted problems of homelessness, social alienation, and an increasingly consumerist culture.

There is a great deal of architectural specificity in Wolf's art: not just on the level of technique and representation, but in an allusive, referential sense, and this is one quality that makes her work so pleasurable. *The Past Has No Future* (1990) is a pencil drawing of the Smith Barney building in Lower Manhattan, designed by Kohn Pederson and Fox in the 1980s. But in Wolf's version only the architectural façade exists, a monumental yet wafer-thin slice of skyscraper whose decorative gridwork of steel and glass is echoed in the Euclidean grid that forms the drawing's ground.

Propping up the tilting façade of the Smith Barney building are a discarded heap of more façades, but they belong to old residences in the Palladian style that used to be in the area, and nineteenth-century ornate cast iron buildings that once housed small, independently-owned businesses. Development means, of course, the destruction of natural areas or the condemnation of existing older buildings. We in Singapore are all too familiar with that particular law of modernization, and have come, sadly, almost to accept it, albeit with a sense of our own powerlessness. What Nancy Wolf does is to *resensitize* us to the loss of our cities to the speculators and large corporations.

Her work contains allusions to Robert Venturi's ideas about the American vernacular landscape in *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, but puts a very different spin on them. While Venturi celebrated "the dumb and ordinary," the advertising and neon that increasingly littered the landscape in the 1950s and '60s, Wolf uses the same signs as another tactic of critiquing the way corporate power has come to dominate not just

the downtown skylines of cities around the world, but in rural and suburban districts as well. Springing jauntily forth from the wreckage of freeways and ruined environments of her drawings are McDonald's colonizing yellow arches ("billions served"), and signs that read "Mobil," "Exxon," "Gulf," "Texaco"—all oil companies—like movie villains that just will not die.

Fritz Lang's criticism of the excesses of Modernist ideology and architecture in *Metropolis* is taken up and echoed in Wolf's projects, also in gloriously visual fashion but with twists and leaps all her own. Her early drawings of Washington, DC, with their stark, vast plazas and indistinguishable human figures as devoid of expression as the slabs of architecture confronting them, show the results of rationalist, utilitarian ideology taken to its logical extreme. Indeed, the majority of Wolf's paintings and drawings finger the tyrannical grid as at least complicit in, if not wholly responsible for, the alienating and soulless qualities of modern urban development. In a 1995 interview the artist remarked: "It gives the urban planner an efficient, rational form to work with and it gives the architect a convenient device to translate precast modular forms into monumental towers... A limitless version of the grid can, and often does, fill the vast American horizon but it cannot fulfill the smallest and most pleasing details of everyday life. The grid becomes a tangible expression of the modern way of thinking about our environment."

Gridwork frequently maps out the entire ground of a drawing, from foreground to vanishing point. In *Prisoner to a Grid* (1973) an old Victorian house in a rundown Washington, DC neighbourhood is entirely encased in a three-dimensional grid structure. *Lost City* (1988) presents a receding vista of modernist and postmodernist skyscrapers rendered in the style of computer-generated drawings, grandly flanking a grid-patterned avenue. Grid layered upon skeletal grid; you can identify the outlines of the Chrysler building, and one designed by Arquitectonica. But incarcerated within these spectral shells are the solid, three-dimensional forms of smaller, much older buildings—but buildings conceived on a human scale, now derelict ruins, crumbling masonry.

As a corollary to her incisive, cogent critiques of our built landscapes, does Nancy Wolf offer

any correctives? Like a good social critic, she does—or has begun to. In the 1990s, following trips to Nigeria, India and Nepal, she started experimenting with more ancient, primitive architectural types and forms—Nepalese temples, *stupas*, mandalas, calabash patterns—that were for her powerful symbolic expressions of cultural community. She also draws, in her "remedial" visions of the city, on a lot of early *quattrocento* Italian painting which uses the journey or pilgrimage as a trope.

In *Implosion* (1994) highrise buildings are rendered as computer simulations against a black background. Embedded within these hollow forms a "real" (i.e., three-dimensional) highrise is being demolished, in a manner that recalls Pruitt-Igoe or any number of various oversized public housing projects which failed to meet the needs of their users. The structure caves in on itself, shooting clouds of dust and debris into a blue sky. Meanwhile, around the base of the impersonal buildings, a social community is forming—a little United Nations of a community with men in robes, turbans, suits, women in *saris* and white wedding dresses. They are in the process of building and using their own houses and meeting places. Here and in other works—for example, *Mythic Longings* (1994) and *Models in Time and Space* (1995)—there is a kaleidoscopic jamming up of disparate cultural elements and architectural forms, and it is clear that Wolf's idea of the good city is one inseparable from a culturally diverse community, and based on closing the distance between the acts of building and dwelling.

Voices in the City: Artists Creating Community. *Revolution is not "showing" life to people, but making them live.*—Guy Debord, "For a Revolutionary Judgment of Art" (1961)

Where public art, urban art, has spoken with a political voice it has historically most often been in the form of murals and graffiti. This is true at least in the Western hemisphere, including Latin America. In the San Francisco Bay Area alone, almost a thousand neighbourhood murals were painted between the early 1970s and the present day, though the most famous muralists were working during the Depression and New Deal periods—Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo spent many months in San Francisco on paintings in the social-realist style. But as community mural

activist Timothy Drescher points out, the most political element of a mural often lies in its making: “Always what was most subversive in community murals was their process. The physical reality of people getting together to make their own decisions for their own reasons about what would appear on their own community walls was a genuinely democratic experience... After all, these muralists were beginning to build a coherent community, and their models derived from political groups that began by hammering out ‘principles of unity’ to which all participants could agree.”

Now, millennial technology has both inspired and breathed tangible life into the dreams and schemes of architects and artists who want ordinary people to be engaged with their physical environment and to have an effect on it. Advances in communications technology have facilitated new models of “public art,” or art in public spaces, so that what was until recently a mostly static category—comprising murals, sculpture, graffiti and installations of various kinds—can now achieve a kinetic quality and invite an unprecedented level of viewer/audience participation. No longer, in this age of mobile phones, the Internet and Global Positioning Systems, does the man or woman in the street have to be content with being a passive consumer of public art. People can actually begin using art created by others as avenues for their own expression!

The English architect and designer Nigel Coates, whose formulations of a “narrative architecture” draw heavily from Situationist models of the city, has seized on the idea of wireless technology as a tool enabling people to interact with their built environment—to inscribe their space, albeit in a fairly limited way. What he calls his “Hypologies” project is a natural extension of his basic design philosophy, which is that architecture should be a *sensory* experience and that there should exist a reciprocal relationship between it and its user or inhabitant. His “hypologies” are conceived as “giant projected forms floating above the city. These would function as collective talismans or pets for the communities that live below them. Anyone could affect them by sending a text message, which could alter their colour, form or position in the sky. Although they have no traditional architectural use, they could

be important devices for generating identity especially if the environment on the ground has little chance of achieving this.”

The project is actually a component of a much larger work, or idea: Coates’s *Ecstacy* has been in the making—and mutating—for over a decade. It is a metamorphic blueprint for the city that is one big creative culture jam, as solid a celebration of diversity as Nancy Wolf’s later work, but infinitely more riotous. What’s political or subversive about Coates’s position is that his design philosophy has always been about real interplay between people and built spaces; instead of passively passing through them to *use* the surrounding architecture to create narratives of their own, spontaneous theatre.

While the “Hypologies” scheme remains firmly in the realm of grand ideas, some artists have recently succeeded in realizing projects that generate new urban perceptions and experiences, and create new avenues for social interaction. *Spectropolis: Mobile Media, Art and the City* was a three-day event (October 1-3, 2004) in Lower Manhattan that showcased an impressive array of projects by artists, political activists and technical innovators, made workable through the use of mobile phones, laptops, wireless Internet, radio, PDAs and Geographical Information Systems. The idea was to create community while at the same time informing the public about these new forms of electronic culture, their impact on our lives and environments. People were also encouraged to play with these different technologies through a series of free hands-on workshops, one of which taught local community members how to build their own wireless Internet hotspots.

*Urballoon* was a Spectropolis exhibit created by Carlos J. Gómez de Llerena which is similar in concept and intent to Coates’s *Hypologies*. In formal terms, however, it is a very different work, and while not as flamboyantly pretty as Coates’s sky shapes it is, importantly, an achieved work. De Llerena, whose background is in Architecture and Interactive Media, created *Urballoon* as an urban media space: he equipped a large balloon with a projector and wireless Internet connection so that people could submit content online and have it displayed in a public space. This is moveable art; *Urballoon* can be relocated in

different spaces around the city—ideally, open spaces with pedestrian traffic (plazas, parks) during sunset and nighttime. Dim light is crucial because the tethered balloon, suspended at a height of about four storeys, projects the texts and images it receives on the ground immediately beneath. This is interactive art that succeeds in politicizing the local environment in a very innovative way, offering citizens a type of urban broadcasting channel to exercise free and uncensored speech.

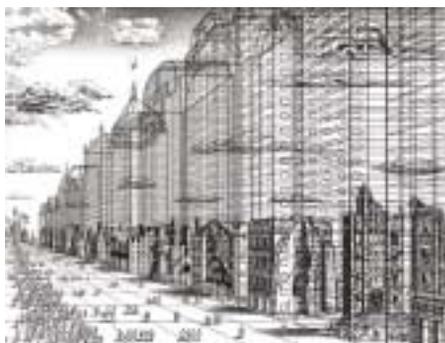
The interactive element in another Spectropolis project, *InterUrban*, is very different. In this project by Jeff Knowlton and Naomi Spellman, the key is listening in order to become more aware of your surroundings and local events. What the artists hope to accomplish is a shift in consciousness in the listener through exposure, via the *InterUrban* setup, of a presence that is always there but invisible: not God, but the wireless network.

The idea of narrative, and of making narratives out of our environment, finds another articulation in the work of Spellman and Knowlton. They refer to *InterUrban* also as the Interpretive Engine, because what it does is to create a mythology of the city, incorporating present-time local and user-specific details using the available telecommunication infrastructure. Online information is collected for each listener experience, then fed into a continuous narrative. Story elements might include, variously, local weather, live news feed, moon phases and tide tables, seismic activity or images from space. But *InterUrban* is not about being a passive listener or consumer. Its creators hope people will be prompted to question just who controls and has access to information databases in this age of growing corporate influence and governmental power.

With these new techno-art/architecture hybrids, the question of how the artist situates herself in relation to the work becomes, at least from an aesthetic perspective, all but irrelevant. Because what is foregrounded is the viewer, the audience, you and me. But not as mere observers: this is art that invites us to use it, and without our active participation it fails, becomes meaningless. We have entered the frame as it were, and the city—its streets and open spaces, the air above them, no longer bound to more traditional modes

of representation, has become, literally, an infinite canvas. These are dark times we live in, but the possibilities for better change are within our reach. As Nancy Wolf said:

*I realize now that what I have been measuring and searching for is not what makes good architecture but what makes good community... Community is fragile. It has a voice but sometimes it loses that voice. Much that I have drawn and painted over the last twenty-five years portrays that loss. Where we have lost our voice, others have imposed their voices upon us. We must do the defining and creating for ourselves. How we define our community is how we will live.*



Lost City by Nancy Wolf, 1988

Daphne Tan grew up in Singapore but now lives in Palo Alto, California. Her research interests include literature, politics, culture and architecture.

- <sup>1</sup> Guy Debord, "Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography." In *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. Ken Knabb (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981), p. 7.
- <sup>2</sup> Guy Debord, "Report on the Construction of Situations and on the International Situationist Tendency's Conditions of Organization and Action." In Knabb, p. 23.
- <sup>3</sup> Nancy Wolf, "Modernism," interview with Karen Franck. In Karen A. Franck, Nancy Wolf: *Hidden Cities, Hidden Longings* (London: Academy Editions, 1996), p. 43.
- <sup>4</sup> Timothy W. Drescher, "Street Subversion: The Political Geography of Murals and Graffiti." In *Reclaiming San Francisco: History, Politics, Culture*, eds. James Brook, Chris Carlsson & Nancy J. Peters (San Francisco: City Lights, 1998), p. 234.
- <sup>5</sup> See the website for Branson Coates Architecture, [www.ecstacty.com](http://www.ecstacty.com).
- <sup>6</sup> Nancy Wolf, "Suspended Dreams," interview with Karen Franck. In Franck, p. 125.

# Hong Sek Chern

## Poetics of Ruination

by Michael Lee

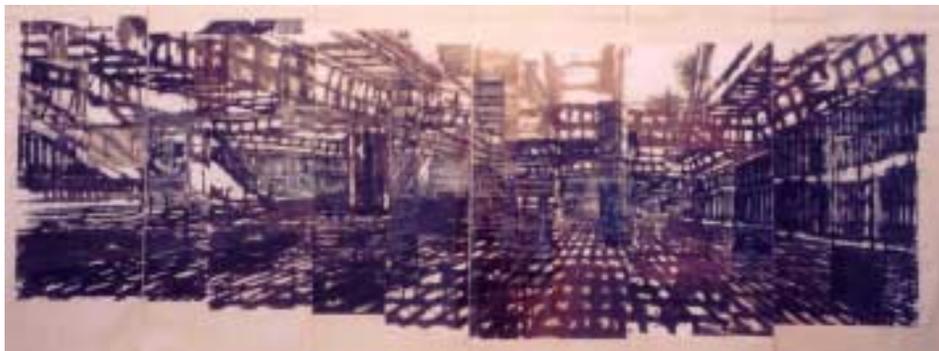
Architecture and urban space are major motifs in Hong Sek Chern's paintings, but the artist is shy to comment on them: "I know nothing about these topics to offer any insight." Nonetheless she has interesting views about urban structures and spaces in Singapore. She laments the lack of huge and monumental artworks in Singapore and has said: "To me, big structures like flyovers are like modern monuments, and I find them very beautiful." She often wonders if people in the future will perceive our existing architectures with a sense of awe or apathy. Perhaps, like Hong, it will be a combination of both. She is an artist who embraces her modern environment, yet also wishes "to roam around more places, to get away from traffic noises and modern innovations, to use more solar power, to use less air-con, to see more of the sea...." Hong handles her paradoxical sentiments towards the urban condition by abstaining from clichéd criticisms of Singapore and offering instead, "another way of looking at the concrete jungle." This involves looking into existing buildings and civic structures, beneath the familiar facades, beyond present time.

In this way, Hong's paintings manifest a poetics of ruin. To understand this, it is necessary to elaborate three aspects about the artist, namely: Her diverse educational background and artistic achievements; her creative process; and the notions of "ruin" and "poetics" in her works with respect to the broader comparative contexts of Europe, China, and Singapore.

Hong has diplomas in education and in fine art, a science degree, a master's degree in fine art, and is currently pursuing a Master of South-east Asian Studies. The artist has received critical acclaim with her particular style of painting, which

features architectural structures and spaces rendered in traditional Chinese ink. A recipient of numerous top honours and notable mentions in major art competitions, she was also the winner of National Arts Council's Young Artist Award (2000), one of 10 participants in President's Young Talents Exhibition (2001) and Singapore's only representative in Brazil's São Paulo Biennale (2002). In Hong's academic and artistic accomplishments, one sees a relentless desire to upgrade and, more importantly, a readiness to embrace, and establish dialogues between the seeming opposite: Science and art, old and new, the East and West.

The artist's "ruins" emerge through a study of order and disorder, or, more precisely, order and then disorder. She begins her creative process by painstakingly mapping out the perspective line works. Proceeding to add grid lines, she further emphasises the western perspective and vanishing point in her images. Havoc reigns next, as the artist effectively ruins what she has done earlier, through *bimo* (brush lines and ink washes). Hong favours Chinese ink paintings, which tend to have a sense of lyricism, ambiguity, and implicitness. Indeed the artist shows that she has remained true to her formative art training in traditional Chinese painting, as she articulates the revered qualities of *xieyi* (writing poetic conception) even in the context of perspective-defined space. Expressive brushstrokes and spontaneous ink splashes pervade what might otherwise have been rather literal translations of physical architecture. Hong describes her strategy succinctly: "Though my paintings refer to the calculated and rationalised - qualities exemplified by the Modern person - the use of Chinese ink



Void Deck, 2002, Ink collage on paper

allows for an element of *tianyi* (heaven's interest) or chance."

Chaos further mediates the inherent order through the sparing use of colours on the largely monochromatic picture plane, random texts, and collage techniques. Yet no matter how disjointed the fragments are, the artist manages to string them all up with a persistent undercurrent of perspective lines. This is especially evident in *Void Deck* (2002), a collage of six panels that have been strategically misaligned.

The collusion of chance and control lends a visual paradox to the artist's works, inviting varied readings. For a start, the paintings have a recognisably cinematic quality reminiscent of German Expressionist films like *Metropolis* (1926). Her expressive grids may initially appear as reinforcement steel rods, but quickly melt into sealants oozing out from gaps, which then turn into scaffoldings, before reappearing collectively as described as one commentator: "An open net, the unbarred cage, predicating an ineluctable self-induced incarceration." Such allusions to gloom are not surprising, given the artist's fascination with images of post-World War II ruins by the German artist Anselm Kiefer. Still, it is hard to see Hong's structures as destroyed or depressive without noticing that they appear rather intact too. Away from apocalyptic interpretations, therefore, one could regard her white panels as stained-glass windows through which the light of hope shines, and which render the structures "both Gothic and Bauhaus-ian." Standing before her works, one begins to understand what the artist means by

her rather paradoxical remark, "There is beauty in sadness." "Infiniteness and elusiveness," one is reminded, "are key interests in her works as she makes clear the vastness of the environment and vain attempts to explain them meaningfully." The splendour of forms, rather than any reasonable meaning, is enough to gratify. In *Interior* (1999), for instance, one confronts the frameworks of an empty warehouse without worrying where it is or what social significance the painting has, just marvelling at the inexplicable beauty of lines, especially the dazzling ways that ink, water, and paper have collaboratively ruined the meticulously mapped-out space.

In Europe, especially since the Romantic Age, the ruin has long been a poetic subject for artists, affording them "an escape to a tangibly picturesque, bittersweet state of being." In China, the history of the ruin is rather more erratic. Pre-modern China banned the portrayal of architectural ruins in the arts. In modern China, under the Mao regime, images of war ruins were used to stir up nationalistic sentiments. Contemporary Chinese artists have employed the "ruin" aesthetic variously to protest against political events like the Cultural Revolution and Tiananmen incident.

In Singapore, architectural ruins are less common. We access them mostly through the media. We are occasionally presented with images of burnt-down or derelict buildings, but they exist, at best, briefly, due to an efficient system of urban redevelopment. When one does encounter such damaged and disused architecture, the response



Expressway Reconstructed, 1995, Mixed Media on paper 120 x 150

is more likely to be repulsion, helplessness, or indifference. When Hong transforms existing, and familiar, architecture into images of “ruin,” as she has with the interior of Kembangan MRT station titled, *Element of Asphyxia* (2002), there is, however, a strange sense of relief. It is as though one is suddenly allowed to feel dejection and delight all at the same time.

Although “ruin” and “poetry” are not primary concerns in Hong’s practice, both exist in her works in intricate and related ways. The poetics in her art is derived from her capacity to embrace paradox as an aesthetic strategy, thereby issuing a terse reminder that neither control nor chance alone can sustain life and, by extension, great art.

In the same way that she washes her lines with ink and water, she smears the line dividing order and disorder, suggesting instead that both are always and already constituents of each other. Just as the artist wonders if people in the future will regard the buildings of today as monumental or mundane, viewers of her work are allowed to wander around the “ruined” spaces in her paintings, to reassess and perhaps think about Singapore’s existing environment. They become tourists in places that have become all too familiar, ghosts in a different time zone.

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# Artist's Statement

This series was inspired by a similar one by British Artist Peter Doig's "Hundred Years Ago". As an extrapolation of the present, what it tries to do is to conjure a notion of present as past, the future as current.

Various architectural motifs have been considered for this series. This serves as an extension of the earlier "Monuments". For this show, only the façade of Singapore's public housing flats were used. There was a conscious effort to create them as relics, part of a larger city in ruins like old cities of Pompeii, Rome, etc. They were thus constructed in ways that perhaps later generations were to view them: as pages from the history of humanity. *Hong Sek Chern*



Millennia Ago, Choa Chu Kang #1, 2004, Ink on paper, 150 x 150



Millennia Ago, Choa Chu Kang #2, 2004, Ink on paper, 150 x 150



Millennia Ago, Choa Chu Kang #3, 2004, Ink on paper, 100 x 140

## HONG SEK CHERN

### EDUCATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS

- 2001 to 2004 / National University of Singapore
  - MA South East Asian Studies
- 1997 to 1998 / Goldsmiths College: University of London (Under the Chen Chong Swee Overseas Art Scholarship)
  - Masters in Fine Art
- 1992 to 1995 / Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts
  - Diploma in Fine Art
- 1989 to 1990 / Institute of Education (Singapore)
  - Diploma in Education
- 1986 to 1989 / National University of Singapore
  - Bachelor of Science
- 1984 to 1986 / National Junior College - 'A' Level
- 1980 to 1983 / Methodist Girls' School - 'O' Level

### PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS

- 2001 to current / National Youth Council Youth Award (Art and Culture) Advisory Committee
- 2001 to current / Sculpture Society Singapore
- 2000 to 2001 / Telok Kurau Studios
- 1998 to current / Modern Art Society (Singapore)

### ACADEMIC AND ADMINISTRATIVE EXPERIENCE

- 2004/ Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts
  - Head Fine Art Diploma Program
- 2002 to 2003 / Modern Art Society – Public Relations
- 2001 to 2002 / Sculpture Society Singapore – Secretary
- 2000 to 2001 / Telok Kurau Studios Management Committee – Secretary
- 2000 to 2002 / Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts
  - Deputy Head Fine Art
- 1998 to current / Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts – Lecturer
- 1990 – 1992 / Ministry of Education – Education Officer

### TEACHING AND RESEARCH INTERESTS

- Contemporary Painting and Drawing; South East Asian Art, Culture and History

### RESEARCH AND SELECT PUBLICATIONS

- Lee, M, 2002 "Poetics of the Ruin" Singapore Architect Issue 217 p 48 – 50
- Sim, A, 2002 "Singapore a Concrete Jungle? No Say's Artist Hong Sek Chern" The Strait's Times, Life! 29<sup>th</sup> April 2002, p 4 – 5
- Mashadi, A, 2001 "Interview with Hong Sek Chern" President Young Talent, p 38 – 43

### SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2003

- 11<sup>th</sup> International Biennial Print and Drawing Exhibit 1995 / ROC - Taipei Fine Art Museum (ROC)

2002

- 25<sup>th</sup> Sao Paolo Biennial - Sao Paolo (Brazil)

2000

- Different Eye Different View - Artfolio Gallery (Singapore)
- 15<sup>th</sup> Asian International Arts Exhibition - Tainan Country Cultural Affairs Bureau (ROC)

1999

- ASEAN Art Awards 99 - National Art Gallery (Kuala Lumpur)
- Hexagon – Drawing Exhibition - Telok Kurau Studios Gallery
- Nokia Singapore Art 1999 - Orchard Point Gallery (Singapore)
- TKS 2000 - Telok Kurau Studios Gallery (Singapore)

1998

- Goldsmiths MA Exhibition 1998 - Goldsmiths College (London)
- ASEAN Art Awards 98 - Opera House (Hanoi)
- Tomorrow's Realism - Telok Kurau Studios (Singapore)

1997

- 9 Men Show - Goldsmiths College (London)

1996

- ASEAN Art Awards 96 - National Gallery (Bangkok)
- Untitled: 2 Persons Show - NAFA Art Gallery (Singapore)

1995

- New Rhythms in Ink - Chinese Painting and Calligraphy Exhibition / NAFA Art Gallery (Singapore)
- 7<sup>th</sup> International Biennial Print and Drawing Exhibit 1995 ROC - Taipei Fine Art Museum (ROC)

1995

- Young Contemporaries - The Substation (Singapore)

### SOLO EXHIBITION

2003

- Portrait Sayang - Utterly Art (Singapore)
- 2000
- Modern Monuments - Telok Kurau Studios Gallery (Singapore)

### SELECTED ART AWARDS

- 2000 / Young Artist Award by the National Arts Council (Singapore)
- 1999 / 1<sup>st</sup> Prize (Representational Category): 18<sup>th</sup> Painting of the Year Competition by the United Overseas Bank Group
- 1999 / Juror's Choice: Singapore Art Awards 99 by the Philip Morris Group of Companies
- 1999 / Honourable Mention (2 awards) "1999 Singapore Turf Club Art Competition"
- 1998 / Juror's Prize: Singapore Art Awards 98 by the Philip Morris Group of Companies
- 1996 / Top Prize: Philippe Charriol Foundation Contemporary Art Competition 1995/6
- 1996 / Juror's Choice: Singapore Art Awards 96 by the Philip Morris Group of Companies
- 1996 / Chen Chong Swee Overseas Art Scholarship by Chen Chong Swee Foundation and National Arts Council (Singapore)
- 1995 / Honourable Mention: Singapore Art Awards 95 by the Philip Morris Group of Companies
- 1995 / 1<sup>st</sup> Prize (Representational Category): Expression in Art by Singapore Telecoms

# Francis Ng

## Truth of the Matter

by Jason Hahn

As social animals, humans are pre-conditioned to accept certain realities and, if that proves to be too difficult, to reject that which makes us uncomfortable and co-opt what's left behind. We do this on a daily basis, engaging in a prolix discourse with increasing fluency, rationalizing with ease, filtering with practised single-mindedness. But reality can never be denied for long. In the long run, the consequences are dire as micro-cracks in the structure of society, of perception (if not personal balance) begin to spread, resulting in schisms.

But every so often – though not nearly often enough – along comes someone who gathers up this tidy way of looking at the world and throws it all out the window, patching up the cracks and inviting us to revisit our past, present and future. In short, to look at the entire spectrum of reality afresh.

Such a person is Francis Ng. Fresh from his showing at the recent Venice Biennale, the 27-year old LASALLE-SIA graduate has, in a very short time, managed to challenge our symbiotic relationship with progress, a concept often reflected in his work by abstract renderings of the urban environment. Both through his photographic work and large-scale installations, Ng demands we confront nothing less than the weighty issues of 'What is reality? Who are we? Where do we fit into this world? How are we changing the world? How is it changing us?'

Probably Ng's most thoughtful expression of these dilemmas is captured in 'Constructing Construction #1'. The 183 x 183 cm C-type (conventional colour) photo-print of a partially completed overhead highway made such an impact at last year's Philip Morris Group of

Companies ASEAN Art Awards that it captured the grand prize.

It is a brooding piece, a cross-section of an urban monstrosity, a moment in time flash-frozen. Rearing with titanic presence from the earth amid a mess of girders, dust and construction debris, the image of the bridge thrusts itself forward, both sides of uncompleted lanes and trussed concrete extended like pincers, bearing down on the viewer.



In Transition II, 2000, Dimension variable/Site specific installation, Mixed media

Ng first noticed the bridge on Upper Serangoon Road during his daily trip to LASALLE on the bus (he dislikes the underground train because “there’s nothing to see” down there).

“I was overwhelmed by the size of it. I felt it was crushing down,” he recalls. “There were a lot of things going on around it, a lot of energy. I was also intrigued by the spatial relationship with the speeding traffic.”

The resulting image compels on so many levels. For one, its size freezes the viewer to the spot – the eventual buyer of the work reportedly stood in front of it for hours. For another, there’s a palpable sense of nudity about the piece, not in a banal sense, but rather in the sense of honesty and, though one hesitates to use such a term about a picture of a bridge, of a deeply felt truth.

“There’s something halfway about the bridge,” Ng says. “It’s half complete, this in-between-ness of space, between a beginning and an end. Yes, it almost sounds Buddhist. But there’s a balance here, a symmetry, a sense of where I am.”

And this truth of ‘where I am’ translates into a somewhat bleak and lonely representation of the human condition. The fact that Ng has chosen such a starkly impersonal urban construction for this representation is even more disconcerting.

Yet, this oeuvre is evident in most, if not all, of Ng’s work to date. While most of us are pre-conditioned to accept that the home, or any interior for that matter, is a space where the outside world (with all its attendant ugliness and chaos) remains exactly that, Ng’s predisposition is to pierce through that pre-condition, tearing apart the very fabric of consciousness between security (inside) and danger (outside).

And so, it is entirely unexpected when one pushes open the double doors to his installation, ‘Delocating Margins’, to find that the floor is covered with chunks of asphalt road. In other parts of the house, pitch dark except for lone bulbs (either hanging from the ceiling or, in one room, on the floor) casting deep, uncomfortable shadows against the wooden scaffolding. Even the back-toilet is blocked up with road debris.

The impact of ‘Delocating Margins’ is unnerving, if not downright haunting: the spectre of the invading urban exterior fully realised. “I was trying to establish a statement that things are not always normal in spaces,” Ng says. “Things are

always changing. This was a good example of how spaces expands and contracts. The ground is not flat, constant and stable [as most people choose to believe]. It’s always shifting, not in the pure geological sense, but in the sense of the urban environment.”

If you had to play amateur psychologist, you would trace the source of Ng’s sense of the world back to his childhood. When he was young, Ng would follow his father, who was in the construction business, to the building sites. The child would play amid the heap of rubble, climb through pipes, build sandcastles out of cement. In fact, when Ng was putting together ‘Delocating Margins’, he consulted his father. “He’s my mentor.”

When Ng wasn’t messing around building sites, he would be wandering around the old warehouses in Kim Yam Road. “I liked to look at them. I still do,” Ng now says. “Part of it is nostalgia, but beyond that, their presence helps me see other things, bigger truths.”

Part of that truth, and that which informs so much of his work, is the deceptively simple notion that without old things, “everything would be new”. And in the world according to Francis Ng, unless you know the past, you cannot know the future. It’s the idealism of conservation in its purest form.

This absorption in the past is ever present. It’s almost an irreconcilable dichotomy – between his enormous installation works (which by their nature are temporary and will be dismantled after a time) and studied references to the past. “My primary concern is with space, not so much with its conservation. But through the process of putting up the work, I discover many layers in terms of the history of the site, memory and geographical changes which I try to bring to the surface.”

In a recent installation ‘Shifting...Parameters’, Ng set up scaffolding in Empress Place – surely an icon to the past if ever there was one – and wrapped it all up in white safety netting. “I wanted to mimic the façade of Empress Place,” Ng says. Blocks of ice were inserted around the perimeter to anchor the metaphor for time and emotion. “After a few hours, the ice is gone and all you have left is space.” In this way, past (represented by the solidity of the buildings), present (the amorphous texture of melting ice) and future (the



Constructing Construction #1, C-Type print colour photograph, 183 x 183



Shifting Parameters #2, 2002, Dimensions variable/Site specific installation, Mixed Media

empty space left behind by the present) collide where everything exists at once but only for a moment in time. Which, of course, raises the unanswered – no, unanswerable – question: what is the end result of conservation? Can we ever really conserve anything?

For Ng, his childhood experiences have resulted in a body of work that are about responsibility as much as it is about the human context. While the former is pure and rigorous (“The artist must make his work informed. It should have a formal quality that engages the audience.”), the latter is, like the urban setting, always changing, shifting. Which explains the exclusive use of raw materials in his work. His installation, ‘Palpable Intersection II’, for instance, consists entirely of horizontal slotted glass windows through which is speared a pack of wooden planks; while “Perimeter Resisted I” features an enormous irregular concrete block leaning against a wall, apparently supported by two long slender timber strips.

“I use a lot of raw materials in my work,” Ng offers simply. “Why clad it? Why add something to it? Let the flesh be flesh, the body be the body.”

Is it any wonder that two of Ng’s favourite artists are Andrea Gursky and Thomas Struth? “Their style is blunt, straightforward. They don’t enhance the subject.”

Another truth: At what point does the urban environment end and the interior landscape begin? Is there, in fact, an alpha and an omega? And do we need these false twins? We’d like to think so, but Ng is having none of that. As a global society, we have progressed to a point when these demarcations mean little. He rages against this sense of false security and this rage may go some way to explaining the harrowing, vividly disturbing quality of his work

And in the end, Ng’s refusal to compromise reality, to gloss over life’s imperfections – this absolute standard may well turn out to be greatest truth.

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# Artist's Statement

I am interested in concepts of “space” and other related issues such as “body” and “time”. Through my education and other geographical, social and cultural experiences, I constantly seek to further explore and understand these concepts physically, metaphorically and symbolically and from a variety of different perspectives. Through my works, I seek to examine more closely the in-betweenness of space, the non-places, the transitional aspects of the once-existing and the once-present. In addition, I wish to look at both existing and re-constructed spaces from their integrity as independent spaces and investigate the tensions amongst them, as well as how the body, as a separate entity, interact and communicate with such tensions and spaces.

This investigation offers one the opportunity to create a platform to think about the necessities of constant changes to spaces and how this will in turn affect people and ultimately, alters the fabrics of society. In light of the changes that have taken place in the society, and those that will eventually take place in it, the silence of affected sites appropriates the need to comment. The aim of such a research area is therefore important to firstly raise the awareness of, and to reinstate the essence of spaces, at present and once in the past, to highlight the significance of spaces in transition and to open up boundaries and offer alternative ways of art processes in terms of making, conceptualising, presenting and receiving art. In addition, it is also necessary to explore relevant sites for the above purposes and in doing so, come to a better understanding of how to interact and intervene with the specific site based on its socio-cultural and historical contexts. *Francis Ng*



Vertical Equilibrium, Body #1, 2004, C-Type print colour photograph, 120 x 150



Vertical Equilibrium, Body #2, 2004, C-Type print colour photograph, 120x 150



Vertical Equilibrium #3, 2004, C-Type print colour photograph, 120 x 150

# NG TECK YONG, FRANCIS

Date of Birth - 27<sup>th</sup> December 1975

## EDUCATION

- 2003 – 2004 / Master of Fine Art - Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology University, Australia and LASALLE-SIA College of the Arts, Singapore
- 2000 – 2001 / Bachelor of Arts (Fine Art), Painting (High Distinction) Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology University, Australia and LASALLE-SIA College of the Arts, Singapore
- 1997 – 2000 / Diploma in Fine Art, Painting (Distinction) LASALLE-SIA College of the Arts, Singapore

## SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2002

- Displaced, Jendela Gallery, Esplanade  
-Theatres on the Bay, Singapore

2001

- Delocating margins, No. 8, Loke Yew Street, Singapore

## SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2004

- 5<sup>th</sup> Gwangju Biennale - Gwangju, South Korea
- The 23<sup>rd</sup> UOB Painting of the Year Exhibition - Jendela Gallery, Esplanade-Theatres on the Bay, Singapore
- THE LASALLE SCHOOL - 20 Years of Fine Arts From LASALLE-SIA College of the Arts, Earl Lu Gallery, Singapore
- Identities versus Globalisation? - Chiang Mai Art Museum, Chiang Mai, Thailand, National Gallery, Bangkok, Thailand, Dahlem Museum, Berlin, Germany

2003

- Interfusion - Art Seasons Beijing, Beijing, China
- Bilateral Bonds - Taksu KL, Singapore
- The 22<sup>nd</sup> UOB Painting of the Year Exhibition - Jendela Gallery, Esplanade-Theatres on the Bay, Singapore
- Biennale di Venezia - 50<sup>th</sup> International Art Exhibition, Venice, Italy
- President's Young Talent Exhibition - Singapore Art Museum, Singapore

2002

- Made In Singapore - Art Seasons, Singapore
- Asian Comments - Copenhagen, Denmark
- Site + Sight: Translating Cultures  
- Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore
- Fascination - Singapore Art Museum, Singapore
- Philip Morris Group of Companies Asean Art Awards 2001/2002  
- Bali International Convention Centre, Bali, Indonesia
- Anthology of Art, initiated by Jochen Gerz - organized by the Academy of Visual Arts of Braunschweig (Germany) and the University of Rennes (France)
- First Steps; Philip Morris Group of Companies Singapore Art Awards 2001/2002 - The Gallery @ Paragon, Singapore

2001

- aseanARToday 2001 Singapore - Earl Lu Gallery, Singapore
- Young Artists-Exhibition 2001  
- Plastique Kinetic Worms, Singapore
- Asean Youth Camp - National Art Gallery, Gallery 3A, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

- Infinity - Earl Lu Gallery, Singapore
- 14<sup>th</sup> Singapore International Film Festival: Fields of Electronic Desire  
- collaboration with Susie Lingham & Adam Collins,

Great World City, Singapore

2000

- Cacophony - Australian National University, Canberra School of Arts, Canberra, Australia
- Art in Alternative Space - Raffles City Window C1, Singapore
- No Dead Space, No Wasted Motion - Lasalle Gallery, Singapore
- 5<sup>th</sup> Ericsson Scholarship - Wetterling Teo Gallery, Singapore
- Project1: Between - collaboration with Mr S. Chandrasekaran, Earl Lu Gallery, Singapore

1999

- Surface - Lasalle Gallery, Singapore

1998

- History of Arts - Lasalle Gallery, Singapore

## SCHOLARSHIPS & BURSARY

- 2003 / NAC Arts Bursary, The National Arts Council
- 2000 / 5<sup>th</sup> Ericsson Scholarship, Singapore
- 1998 – 2000 / Georgette Chen Scholarship, The National Arts Council Residences / Institutional Affiliations
- 2000 / Student Exchange Programme, Sculpture Department, Canberra School of Arts, Australian National University, Canberra, Australia

## AWARDS

- 2004 / Category Winner, Photography Medium, The 23<sup>rd</sup> UOB Painting of the Year Competition 2004
- 2004 / Certificate of Commendation, 66<sup>th</sup> Founder's Day, NANYANG ACADEMY OF FINE ARTS
- 2003 / Certificate of Distinction, Open Section, The 22<sup>nd</sup> UOB Painting of the Year Competition 2003
- 2003 / JCCI Arts Award, JCCI (Japanese Chamber of Commerce and Industry) Singapore Foundation Arts Award 2003, Singapore
- 2002 / Grand Prize Award, Philip Morris Group of Companies Asean Art Awards 2001/2002
- 2002 / Juror's Choice, Philip Morris Group of Companies Singapore Art Awards 2001/2002
- 2000 / Outstanding Student Award – Bachelor of Arts (Fine Art), Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology University, Australia

## GRANTS & BURSARIES

- 2002 / SIA-NAC Travel Grant, The National Arts Council, Singapore
- 2001 / Emerging Artist Grant, The National Arts Council, Singapore
- 2001 / Project Grant, Lee Foundation, Singapore

## PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIP

- 1999 – Present / Photographic Society of America (PSA), Member
- 1999 – Present / Photographic Society of Singapore (PSS), Member

# Tang Ling Nah

## A House is not a Home

by Arthur Sim

Architecture features heavily in the work of artist, Tang Ling Nah. A recent recipient of the Juror's Choice at the Philip Morris Singapore-ASEAN Art Awards 2003, she began her career in art by exploring the relationship of the 'figure in space' during her days at Lasalle-SIA College of the Arts (1997-2000), and later at Australia's Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (2000-2001). Interestingly, the figures in her urban landscapes have slowly disappeared. "Architecture suggests many things. It suggests its inhabitants," she says by way of explaining the disappearance of figures. "The people are now there in the marks that they leave behind," she adds.

Working exclusively in charcoal, it is not exactly clear if the marks she means are those made by the inhabitants (like graffiti) or the ones she makes with charcoal on the paper. No more elucidative, she adds that "charcoal represents the figure", inferring pointedly that all organic matter can be reduced to carbon. That she was once a qualified pharmacist does not help to explain her work either. If anything, it makes it seem more macabre.

Tang Ling Nah was born in 1971. She studied pharmacy at NUS and worked as a pharmacist for about 3-years before giving it up to pursue art. Initially, she was interested in exploring the human figure in motion. This required a kind of voyeurism and was aided by photographs taken of her subjects unawares. Context was often abstracted. It was only when she started to work in charcoal that the context superceded the subject. In reassessing the context through a different medium, Tang had discovered latent energies in space. To architecture, Tang cedes a certain power and authority. "Architecture is very dominating. It directs the way you move," she explains.

This sense of authority that she relinquishes to her urban environment seems to be the key to understanding and appreciating her work. Her drawings are dark, cloaked in shadow and almost oppressive, yet she says she sees hope and optimism in them. What seems more pertinent is that Tang chooses to respond to her urban environment at all, especially as she does not claim to be particularly interested in architecture.

But architecture, especially modern architecture has this effect on people. Almost a century ago, the French writer and critic, Georges



Cascading, 2004, Charcoal on paper 160 x 120



Mass Lifting, 2003, Charcoal on paper, 70 x 180

Bataille wrote: “The great monuments are raised up like dams, pitting the logic of majesty and authority against all the shady elements: it is in the form of cathedrals and palaces that Church and State speak to impose silence on the multitudes.” Sometimes described as a theorist against architecture, Bataille, like Tang, believed that architecture had the ability to condition social behaviour and also welded the authority to “command and prohibit”.

Tang, however, is not into Bataille. Nor is she consciously anti-architecture. A product of modern Singapore, she has been an HDB dweller most of her life. In a slightly perverse way, she seems instead to be trying to identify personal monuments for herself. These, she finds mostly in public spaces and attributes to them hidden qualities, a bit like an architectural apologist. But her spaces of choice are MRT stations, void decks and alleys, leaving one to ask: Is our urban landscape so impoverished?

It is the artist that society generally turns to for insights into the collective psyche.

Tang does not say much to explain her work but she does concede that she uses architecture as a metaphor for the human body. Interestingly, Bataille also wrote: “Architecture is the expression of the very being of societies, in the same way that human physiognomy is the expression of the being of individuals.” As in Tang’s paintings, architecture and the human spirit are one.

The presence of a human spirit raises her work to a metaphysical, dreamlike realm. Her recurring architectural elements like staircases, windows and doorways beg for psychological interpretation. These archetypal ‘dream’ symbols seem to suggest notions of ‘escape’ and ‘insecurity’. “I don’t know why I am drawn to these places,” she says, immediately suggesting the subconscious at play. And in some respect, Tang’s work does display a certain affinity with Surrealism. Coincidentally, the writer Dalibor Veselý once wrote that Surrealism was, “a subterranean world of the whole modern culture.” This was true of the work of artists like Giorgio de Chirico and Salvador Dalí. It also seems true of



Meeting at Columnnata, 2003, Charcoal on paper, 122 x 122



Slitting, 2004, Charcoal on paper, 128 x 120

Tang's labyrinthine escalators and air wells. Her charcoal drawings of corridors, odd structural nodes, void spaces (or in architecture speak, interstitial, transitional, left over or unresolved spaces) are redolent of a melancholy not unlike the dreamscapes of Giorgio de Chirico who incidentally denounced Modernism later in life.

Tang will not be drawn into any discussion about the architectural or urbanistic aspect so redolent in her work, which is a little frustrating as her work seems the perfect counterpoint to Modernism in Singapore. But then, the beauty of her charcoal drawings does lie in the mystery of the spaces and to say more would probably divest the architecture of its hold on the subconscious.

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# Artist's Statement

My works are essentially a response to city living, particularly the Singapore urban environment. Through my charcoal drawings of darkened local architectural spaces, I seek to question the over-orderliness of the modern city and the dearth of intimate interpersonal relationships in it. I believe that architectural spaces can provide powerful backdrops to explore and dissect human life. Buildings can act as a metaphor for human interaction, and possess the narrative potential to express human experiences.

The strong contrasting light and shadows, canted angles and compositional tension featured in my drawings are reminiscent of American *film noir*. Through the apparent darkness, pessimism and risks, my work enacts a sense of fear that lurks in urban spaces, but also offers glimmers of life and hope through possible routes of escape. Viewers should question about 'presence' and 'absence'; 'the overt and the hidden'; what is 'before' and 'after'; 'there and not there'. Is there a fear of living in urban space, and is it about escaping from something?

By working with charcoal on paper, I would also like to re-examine charcoal as a medium in contemporary art. The marks (especially the accidental ones) charcoal creates provide many interesting surprises. The impermanent nature of the charcoal helps in the staging of the 'absence/presence' that is constantly occurring in my work. In a way, it represents the ever-changing nature of things in life.

For *Lost City*, I would be presenting a series of charcoal drawings on paper of varying sizes to be mounted on the gallery wall like *trompe l'œil* murals. I would also draw certain sections directly on the wall. These series would take reference from the architectural elements of Singapore's Housing and Development Board (HDB) void decks and corridors. One of the important elements that I will be looking out for will be pillars, and how they frame the space. Void decks and corridors are transitory public spaces in which people inhabit temporarily. I would leave it to the viewers' imagination to narrate stories within this space. Perhaps, they could question about whether it represents a place that is lost (or even found)—where things are going to happen, or have happened, and will be gone forever. *Tang Ling Nah*



Ophelia's Morgue, Charcoal on wall, 2004, 150 x 228



Admiralty Ziggig, 2004, Charcoal on paper, 214 x 150

# TANG LING NAH

Date of Birth - 25 July 1971, Singapore

## EDUCATION

- Currently pursuing / Master of Arts (Fine Art) LASALLE-SIA College of the Arts, Singapore
- Jul 2000–Jun 2001 / Bachelor of Arts (Fine Art) with Distinction. Conferred by Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) University, Australia
- Jul 1997–Jun 2000 / Diploma in Fine Art (Painting) LASALLE-SIA College of the Arts, Singapore
- Jul 1990–May 1993 / Bachelor of Science (Pharmacy) Degree - Faculty of Science (Pharmacy), National University of Singapore, Singapore
- Feb–Apr 2003 / Certificate (Creative Writing) LASALLE-SIA College of the Arts, Singapore
- Sep–Nov 1995 / Certificate (Art Creativity & Caricature Course) LASALLE-SIA College of the Arts, Singapore

## SOLO EXHIBITION

2002

- activated C—An Exhibition of Charcoal Drawings by Tang Ling Nah - SociÉTÉ GÉNÉrale Gallery, Alliance Française de Singapour, Singapore

## SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2004

- Ancient Roots: Modern Bridges - ASEAN Arts Awards 2004 Philip Morris Asia Limited The National Gallery, Bangkok, Thailand
- X-Ray: Spatial Approaches and Processes - A Visual Arts Exhibition concerned with the various processes and approaches through which local artists engage with space and spatiality Earl Lu Gallery I, LASALLE-SIA College of the Arts, Singapore
- MADE IN SINGAPORE - A Visual Arts Exhibition of Singapore Artists (Part of the Gallery's annual *MADE IN SINGAPORE Festival* which explores the different dimensions of design) Art Seasons Gallery, Singapore

2003

- Singapore-ASEAN Art Awards 2003 Exhibition - ARTrium, Ministry for Information and the Arts (MITA) Building, Singapore
- The 6<sup>th</sup> Annual National Teochew Art & Chinese Calligraphy cum Overseas Teochew Artists Exhibition - Ngee Ann Cultural Centre, Teochew Building, Singapore
- Potluck - An Artists Exchange Exhibition - Joan Sutherland Performing Arts Centre, Penrith, and Con-Temporary Arts Access Centre, Parramatta, Sydney, Australia
- Cineopolitans: Inhabitants of a Filmic City - An Exhibition on Art, Film and the City Jendela, Esplanade-Theatres on the Bay, Singapore
- BOXED ii - An Exhibition on the Idea of Work Within a Box - Plastique Kinetic Worms, Singapore
- 10:10 - Artists Exchange Exhibition co-hosted by The Substation Ltd and Plastique Kinetic Worms - Plastique Kinetic Worms, Singapore

2002

- The 5<sup>th</sup> Teochew People Art Exhibition - Ngee Ann Cultural Centre, Teochew Building, Singapore
- ARTSingapore 2002 - The Contemporary Asian Art Fair, Suntec City, Singapore

- First Steps: Images of ASEAN - Singapore Art Awards 2001/2002 - A Travelling Exhibition by Philip Morris Group of Companies: Paragon Gallery, Tanjong Pagar Community Club, Bukit Batok East Community Club, Changi Simei Community Club, Ulu Pandan Community Club, Bishan Community Club, Singapore

2001

- The 4<sup>th</sup> Teochew People Art Exhibition - Ngee Ann Cultural Centre, Teochew Building, Singapore
- The 20<sup>th</sup> UOB Painting of the Year Exhibition - United Overseas Bank Plaza 1, Singapore
- Infinity - 8<sup>th</sup> RMIT University Bachelor of Arts (Fine Art) Exhibition, Earl Lu Gallery, LASALLE-SIA College of the Arts, Singapore

2000

- Practice - Work-in-Progress Exhibition, RMIT University Bachelor of Arts (Fine Art), LASALLE-SIA Gallery, LASALLE-SIA College of the Arts, Singapore
- Contemporary Art Exhibition - Marine Parade Community Library, Singapore
- No Dead Space / No Wasted Motion - 24<sup>th</sup> Diploma in Fine Art Exhibition, LASALLE-SIA Gallery, LASALLE-SIA College of the Arts, Singapore

1998

- History of Art Exhibition - LASALLE-SIA Gallery, LASALLE-SIA College of the Arts, Singapore

## ARTIST-IN-RESIDENCY

Apr–May 2004

- Artist-in-Residency Programme at Studio 106 - One-month Visual Arts Residency, Dr. Ng Eng Teng Studio 106, Singapore

## AWARDS

- 2004 / Young Artist Award by the National Arts Council (Singapore)
- 2003 / Juror's Choice - Singapore-ASEAN Art Awards 2003 - Philip Morris Asia Ltd, Singapore
- 2002 / Honourable Mention - Singapore Art Awards 2001/2002 - Philip Morris Group of Companies, Singapore
- 2001 / Highly Commended Works - "Sandwiched" and "Descending/Ascending" Representational Medium, Open Section - The 20<sup>th</sup> UOB Painting of the Year Competition 2001, Singapore
- 2000 / Winner - The Della Butcher Award 2000 - The Rotary Club of Orchard, Singapore

# Ahmad Abu Baker

## Perfect Form

by Arthur Sim

Followers of the Islamic religion must forswear idolatry. This eradication of representation of anthropomorphic forms has led to the substantially non-figurative nature of its art and in some aspects, its architecture. The essence of God is instead enshrined in a more subtle way – in extreme contrast to Baroque art and architecture for example – which has to make one wonder if Mies van der Rohe was referring to Islam when he famously proclaimed that “God is the details”.

It is in this light that the ceramic sculptures of artist Ahmad Abu Bakar are particularly poignant as each work is a symbol of the struggle to find a perfect balance of art and religion, form and symbolism, and perhaps even heaven and hell, at a time when nothing seems to exist outside the current state of flux.

Islamic architecture in particular is characteristically simple. Figurative decoration was forbidden sometime in the 8<sup>th</sup> century and

geometric precision almost seemed to become standard by default. Islamic architecture inevitably developed, like its rituals, directly from the everyday life of its believers and has even been described by some historians as the “architecture of the oasis”. In its simplest form, the architecture consists of a high walled compound for protection against the sun and enemies, shady arcades and halls for prayer and contemplation, and a water-source for ablutions, often in the centre of a courtyard.

Finding a spiritual ‘centre’ may not be exclusive to Islam but in Ahmad’s work, it is imperative, and not only for its symbolic implications either. Ahmad, who graduated with a Master of Fine Art degree from RMIT in Melbourne, Australia (2001), and who is now teaching at his alma mater, LASALLE SIA College of the Arts, dates his study into Islamic art to the period when he was studying overseas. Spurred by homesickness, he began to look at his art as a way of confronting issues of cultural identity. Fully aware of the limitations in anthropomorphic representation, an earlier interest in the use of text in his work developed into a more meaningful study of Arabic calligraphy, perhaps the highest form of Islamic art.

At about the same time, Ahmad had begun to grow disenchanted with his “artistic language” and was ready to reconstruct a new context for his work. The idea that Arabic calligraphy was constructed from a geometric order appealed to him. He had always been attracted by the laws of structural dynamics. “I was always fascinated by the way beams came together to become forms”, he says, referring to architecture. Interestingly, architecture is in essence, the result of a perfect balance of structural forces.



Journey Of A Point To Geometry, Series 6, 2003

Islamic calligraphy obeys its own set of laws. Concentrating on the first letter of the alphabet, Ahmad explains that the *alif* forms the module - a circle defined by the *alif* as its diameter - from which the other letters follow. Giving the *alif* a third dimension, a spatial dimension, Ahmad has since divined several series of sculptures based on the extrapolated on the first letter of the Arabic alphabet. In these sculptures, he invest huge significance on the writing of the *alif*, which starts and ends with a point. The point is a symbol of "unity and source" and also represents that illusive 'centre'.

The conceptual leap that Ahmad's work makes is reinforced by the eventual materialization of his sculptures which are usually made of porcelain or terracotta. Unlike figurative art, Bottechelli's Birth of Venus for example, which only represents perfect beauty, Ahmad's sculptures have to be perfectly balanced in form (and distribution of weight) or they would simply not exist - the basic laws of centrifugal forces working on a potter's wheel, his tool of choice, sees to this. The sculptures begin life as a huge lump of clay weighing as much as 8kg. Physical strength and nimble fingers alone are not enough to ensure perfection. The drying, firing and glazing process reveal further imperfections like air bubbles and cracks. His success rate is only about 20%.

That Ahmad's work has a spatial dimension is without a doubt. The various series of sculptures, broadly titled, Journey of a Point to Geometry, allude to a space, or as Ahmad prefers, "a domain", as defined by the line that travels from the start point to the end point. The notion that his work could take on a particular architectural quality was nearly realized when leaders of the Muslim community here approached him to create a minaret for a new mosque. Architect Tan Kok Hiang of Forum Architects, who were the architects for the mosque, explains that it was a happy coincidence that architect and artist together as he had also been interested in the

symbolism of the *alif*. It was in fact Tan, who suggested that the minaret design be undertaken by an artist as he feels art has an important role in architecture. "I feel that we have to be constantly reminded that architecture is in the artistic realm as much as it is in the world of commerce," he adds. Unfortunately, Ahmad's design for the minaret was never built because the client's were uncomfortable with its expression.

In Ahmad's latest works, the realms of art and architecture seem inextricably bound. The work harks back to an earlier exploration of the relationship of form and structure. Like early studies for the minaret that suggested a system of disks which formed the spine of the tower, the sculptures look at structural balance as a way of defining form. Although the artist professes no intention of creating architectural space, the work does possess a structural and geometric purity that exceeds many architectural offerings today. Better yet, it resonates with a sense of his cultural identity.

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Scale model study for a minaret



Journey of A Point To Geometry, Series 1, 2001

# Artist's statement

In geometry, the point represents the centre which is elusive controlling point of all forms. The circle is the symbol for par excellence for the origin and end of both geometry and biomorphic Form. It is the primary cosmological symbol where it represents the wholeness and unity. I use the circle as a metaphor for my journey which is a process which I hope to discover. *Ahmad*



Journey Of A Point To Geometry, Series 10, 2004

# AHMAD ABU BAKAR

Date of Birth - 14 October 1963

## ACADEMIC QUALIFICATIONS

- 1989 / LaSalle College of Fine Arts  
- Diploma in Fine Arts (Ceramics)
- 1995 / University of Tasmania  
- Graduate in Bachelor of Fine Arts (Sculpture)
- 2001 / (RMIT) - (LaSalle-SIA of the Arts, Singapore)  
Master of Fine Art

## WORKING EXPERIENCE

- 1996 / Lecturer - LaSalle SIA College of the Arts

## SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

### 2003

- WAHANA - Collaboration between Singapore and Malaysia artists Balai Seni Lukis Negara, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- Discovery Phase - Organise by Art Two Gallery, Singapore
- Singapore Contemporary Ceramics - Organise by Art Season Gallery, Singapore
- Bilateral Bonds - Organise by Taksu Gallery, Kuala Lumpur Malaysia
- Sculpture Biennale Symposium - Organise by: Plastic Kinetic Worms Gallery and NIE/NTU Gallery, Singapore
- Power Show - Work in Progress - Organise by: Sculpture Society Singapore - Substation, Singapore

### 2002

- BadEvilAwfulUglyTerribleYucky - Organise by: The Artist Village. Utterly Art, Singapore
- PAST, PRESENT, BEYOND - Re-nascence of an Art Collection. Inaugural of the South and Southeast Asian Gallery NUS Museum, Singapore
- The Alumni Exhibition - University Gallery, Invermay /University of Tasmania, Launceston - Tasmania, Australia
- New Sculpture Millennium - The First International Miniature Sculpture Exhibition, Taiwan / National Museum of History Taipei - Pier-2 Art District Kaohsiung, Taiwan
- Portrait Reassess - Earl Lu Gallery, Singapore

### 2001

- Nokia Singapore Art 2001 - Singapore Art Museum, Singapore
- Contemporary 2001- APAD - Calligraphy Centre, Singapore
- Too<sup>2</sup> - Earl Lu Gallery, Singapore

### 2000

- Nokia Art - Singapore Art Museum, Singapore

### 1999

- Provocative Things - A 3-Dimensional Experience in Singapore Official Opening & Inaugural Biennial Exhibition - Sculpture Square, Singapore
- Carblanche - Alliance Francais' Gallery, Singapore
- Praxis - Group Exhibition, Earl Lu Gallery, LaSalle-SIA College of the Arts, Singapore

### 1998

- Drawing and Diagram: Ideas Personified (Singapore Art Festival) - Group Exhibition - Caldwell House, Chirmes, Singapore
- Everything Must Go Group Exhibition - Substation Gallery, Singapore
- erak Arts Festival, Malaysia - Perak, Malaysia

### 1997

- Singapore Art '97 - Suntec City Convention Centre, Singapore
- Look Exhibition - Earl Lu Gallery, LaSalle SIA College, Singapore
- F.O.R.M. (*Fundamental, Observation, Reflex, Movement*) -Bari Museum, Bandung, Indonesia

### 1996

- Inaugural Exhibition - Modernity and Beyond. Singapore Art Museum, Singapore

### 1995

- From Another Place - University Gallery / University of Tasmania, Launceston - Tasmania, Australia

### 1994

- Prefx Point Travelling Show - Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts Gallery, Singapore / Creative Centre, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

### 1993

- Art in Asia (Singapore Art Fair) - World Trade Centre, Singapore

### 1992

- Metropoll! (*September Art Festival*) -The Substation, Singapore
- Vision IV - National Museum Art Gallery, Singapore
- The Space (*Singapore Festival of Arts Fringe Programme*) - Hong Bee Warehouse, Singapore
- Bread and Butter Exhibition - National Museum Art Gallery, Singapore

### 1991

- National Sculpture Seminar - Group Exhibition, National Museum Art Gallery, Singapore

### 1990

- Chrysalis (*Singapore Art Festival Fringe Programme*) - Marina Room, Singapore
- Best of LaSalle - Arts Affairs Gallery, Singapore
- The Arts for Nature - The Exhibition Gallery, Empress Place, Singapore
- Vision III - The Substation Gallery, Singapore
- Australian Art Award - National Museum Art Gallery, Singapore
- Gateway of Malaysia - Dato' Jaffar Building - Johor Bahru, Malaysia

## AWARDS & COMMISSION

- 2000 / Singapore Turf Club Commissioned Sculpture / School Project - Co-ordinator and Lecturer in charge
- 1999 / Singapore Turf Club Art Competition For outstanding Artistic Creativity
- 1998 / Awarded the Arts Award of Japanese Chamber of Commerce and Industry (JCCI)
- Project by Staff & Students of LaSalle-SIA College of the Arts (CDC & National Arts Council)
- 1997 / Life-size human replica - National Museum, Elizabeth Choy exhibition (A man and a woman)
- 1996 / Miniature of Tin-mine site - National Museum, The Hakkas's exhibition
- 1996 / Outdoor mural - Maris-Stella Kindergarten. Financial Club, Penthouse, Restaurant Niaga Tower, Jakarta, Indonesia (Group, 3 X 12 meters Multi-Panel Paintings)
- 1996 / Commissioned to sculpt the Asian Village's front gateway logo in Sentosa, Singapore (2 X 2 meters wood carving)
- 1990 / Design Miniatures of Singapore Historical Buildings and Peranakan Houses for "Little Islands"
- 1990 / Merit Award - IBM Art Award - Commissioned to design the Australian Art Award Trophy (1 foot Ceramic Sculpture)
- 1990 / Teater Remaja - Kemuning (Stage design for the play. "This time 12 O'clock comes later than its schedule")

## GRANTS & SCHOLARSHIPS

- 1999 / National Arts Council Study Grant (RMIT)
- 1993 / National Arts Council Study Grant (University Of Tasmania)

## Text and the City

by Jason Hahn

Looking at a CK Kum painting is a little like spending a thoroughly enjoyable afternoon lying in a field and staring up at the sky, trying to identify unicorns, castles and ogres in the shapes of the clouds. We say “a little” because Kum’s images are far from being fluffy fairy tales, but the analogy works.

Usually finished as immense set pieces, Kum’s landscapes tend to reference a dank metropolis that’s part Matrix and part Gotham City. On first viewing, the canvas reveals nothing more than a jumbled series of horizontal and vertical lines, intersecting slashes that seem to pivot around a perspective point. Then like the castle in a sky of clouds, something shifts in the chaos and impressions begin to impinge. Windows morph out of the lines, balconies waver into view, bare steps leap into focus, bamboo trellises emerge. Suddenly, we find ourselves looking at a cityscape that’s achingly bleached of humans, as if we’ve just tuned into a surveillance image of a city in the grips of a nocturnal slumber. And just as quickly, move the eye ever so slightly and like an Escher-illusion, the city shifts and becomes another creature altogether – another city, another time.

Kum himself is the first to acknowledge that his work is a product of architecture, counting among his heroes local artist Goh Beng Kwan, Le Corbusier (in particular, the iconic L’Habitation) and Daniel Libeskind, the architect for New York’s new World Trade Towers. It’s not surprising to learn that Kum is an accomplished architect himself, trained at NUS and currently consulting architect with Atelier Oasis.

Somewhat fittingly, given the influences of these particular architects, the 41-year old Kum says that his paintings are very linear. “My

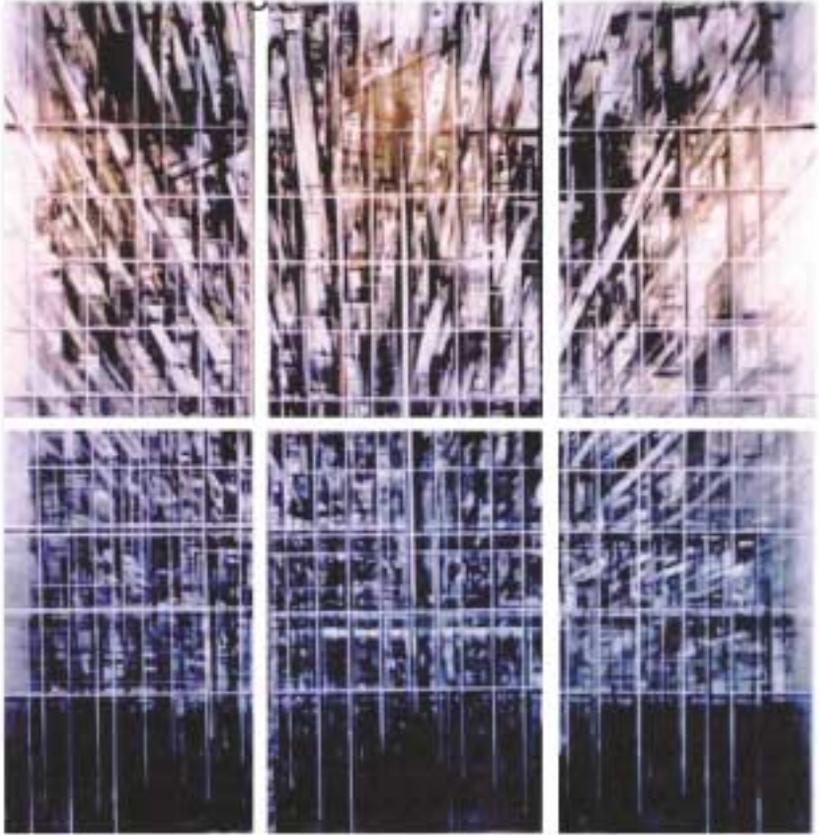
experience as an artist has been very much influenced by architecture. My work deals with issues of architecture, the world today, and living in a world of weapons of mass destruction and finite resources.”

It’s probably this finiteness that tends to most inform Kum’s paintings. An unbroken impression is one of claustrophobia, a narrowness of space, something that’s more than a little reminiscent of Hong Kong’s vibrant upward thrust of concrete and bamboo scaffolding. And like Hong Kong, there is a constant sense of movement, of shifting boundaries and changing perspectives. But there is seldom any sense of destruction.

And every so often, the eye is drawn away from the seething centre to the edges of a Kum painting, such as the five-panelled *Uncertain Universe – Search for Objectives 2001*. Here, the jumble of lines give way, breaking apart to a bit of blank canvas, not much, but enough to pique the interest a bit more. The positioning of the smaller square panels themselves, precisely apart from the main panel, accentuates the impression of space.

The immediate effect is one of hope. As constricted as the core subject matters may be, the sense is usually one of a struggle for growth, amidst the overlapping grids and blocks, of reaching up for a potential source of light. And there at the edges, just when you least expect it, there is this palpable sense of hope, even if it’s an uncertain one.

“Open space has a liberating effect in my presentation,” says Kum. “This format does not convey a closed message or composition, but rather provides possibilities for interpretation by the viewer. This openness is an expression of our time; the world founded on ambiguity is replaced



Uncertain Universe - Search for Objectives, 2002

by one based on general laws, be it in the negative sense of a lack of orientation and centres, or in the positive sense of an abiding capacity to assess values and certainties.”

Kum makes ample use of the certainty symbolism. He notes that “a recurring theme in my work revolves around the subject of uncertainty. In the West, art and architecture have traditionally relied on philosophically derived concepts such as fundamental oppositions and metaphors to provide the underlying structure for all human thought and action. Today, no one can tell you how to act, to think, or what to be. Everyone must struggle to find his or her own goal and way to deal with reality through a direct experience of conditions. It is our modern fate to live in uncertainty and ambiguity, in a world that needs constant negotiation.”

These are weighty issues and that Kum manages to reduce them to a complex yet accessible semaphore of lines is no mean feat. In particular, the viewer is invited to engage in a dialogue that takes place on several planes at the same time. On a more general level, Kum wants the viewer to look at the painted surface, to examine the strategic arrangement of the work. The next level involves a mental reconstruction by the viewer of his or her own abstract space.

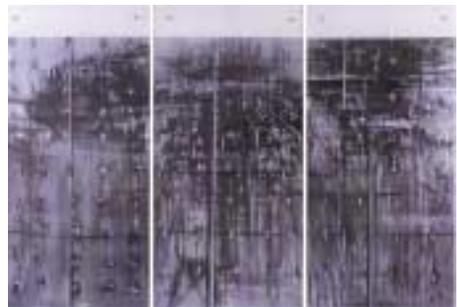
It’s deconstructivism in its most atavistic, not to mention, unsettling form. Deconstructing space is a tricky business at the best of times. Expecting the viewer to *reconstruct* it is a big ask of anyone. In that sense, Kum is careful not to impose any directives on the viewer. See what you will, he invites. Make your own conclusion. Like the mirror, the paintings only raise questions. They do not provide answers – to Life or otherwise.

“All my works are made up of a setting with an action taking place,” Kum clarifies. “The setting is influenced by my environment [in this case, Singapore] and the actions become new metaphors. In discovering more flexible interpretations, different strands of memories and forms, both urban and architectural, are woven into the text of the city.”

In the bold slashes and the predilection for abstract forms, there is a strong element of the Oriental running through Kum’s paintings. There is a vitality and rhythm here that is uniquely Asian, which isn’t so surprising given the enormous

regard he has for Goh Beng Kwan. The artist is also at pains to acknowledge Tan Oe Pang’s black and white work. “I learnt from him that it’s important to keep the visual imagery without losing the nuances of the medium.”

The ambiguity and the rigorous discipline of Kum’s oeuvre have bowled over more than its fair share of admirers. He has won many competitions including the first prize in the Abstract Category (2002) in the UOB Painting of the Year competition as well as Juror’s Choice in the Philip Morris Group of Companies Singapore Art Awards (2002).



Turbulence Mirror - Tropical Monsoon City, Oil on canvas, 2003

Still, in spite of it all, architecture remains his primary focus for now, as well as the inspiration for his art. One suspects that part of this has to do with the fact that Kum is loathe to close off any avenues and perspectives that may inform his work. As he points out, the most direct way for architects to communicate is through a building, but there are, of course, other means of dialogue. And in the world according to CK Kum, what really matters most is the energy of this dialogue. The viewer’s challenge is whether to engage. Kum’s hope is that we do.

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# Artist's statement



THST - With The Best Intentions, 2004, Series of acrylic boxes, 600 x 600 x 200, with recycled remains of last Hopea Sangal tree, Variable

My work investigates the relationship of space and its many related issues in the lived environment, often narrating situations that constitute our modern urban condition. Currently I am concerned with the conflicts between man, technology and nature. I see these as a metaphor for the conflict in man, between his rational and irrational self.

One of the roles of art is to confront these issues – it can speak about the particulars of the culture in such a way that they become universal, i.e. to be connected to and be a part of the culture, yet maintaining the mysterious element which connects us to all of nature.

It is a valid way for discovering personal experiences and attitudes towards the world.

*C K Kum*



THST - With The Best Intentions, 2004, Series of acrylic boxes, 600 x 600 x 200, with recycled remains of last Hopea Sangal tree

# CK KUM

Born in 1962, Singapore,

## EDUCATION

- 1984-87 / B.A. (Arch. Studies), National University of Singapore, Singapore
- 1988-90 / B.Arch., National University of Singapore, Singapore
- 1996 / Regn. of Prof. Practice, BOA
- 1984 / Self-directed course of art education incl. National University of Singapore, Extra-mural Art Programme, National University of Singapore, Singapore, 90-95

## RECENT GROUP EXHIBITIONS

### 2004

- Save the Earth - Environmental Art Expo Korea - 1<sup>st</sup> Exhibition of International Art
- Lost City - SA Group Exhibition 2004 at Utterly Art Gallery
- Best of Singapore Art, 2004 - The Danger Museum, a mobile art gallery
- Mile-stone - Sculpture Society Annual Show at Sculpture Square

### 2003

- Negotiating Boundaries - MASS 39<sup>th</sup> Annual Show at ARTrium @ Mita, Singapore

### 2002

- Urban Artists - Group Exhibition at ARTrium @ Mita, Singapore

### 2001

- Kecang Puteh - Exhibition of Small Works at Studio Telok Kurau

## AWARDS

- 1998/ Distinction Prize - UOB Painting of the Year Competition/ Exhibition, Singapore
- 1999 / Joint Winner (Singapore) - The Winsor & Newton Worldwide Millennium Painting Competition, UK International Finalist
- 2000 / Selected Artwork - The United Nations Millennium Art Exhibition - Our World in the Year 2000 @ Mall Galleries, London, WTC, NY
- 2000 / 1<sup>st</sup> Runner-up - Daler-Rowney Worldwide Art Club Challenge Palette 2000, UK (International Level)
- 2002 / 1st Prize - UOB Painting of the Year Competition/ Exhibition, Singapore 'Abstract Category'
- 2002 / Juror's Choice (Singapore) - Philip Morris Group of Companies Singapore /ASEAN Art Awards (International Finalist)
- 1997,1998,1999, 2000 & 2003 / Honorable Mention - Philip Morris Group of Companies Singapore Art Awards (Singapore)

## PUBLICATIONS

- 2002 / ASEAN Art Award 2002 Catalogue
- 2000 / Young Contemporary Artists in Singapore, Art & Artist Speak
- 2000 / Our World in the Year 2000, Sheeran Lock, The United Nations Millennium Art Exhibition
- 2000 / Urban Artists 2002 Exhibition catalogue

Ck Kum is currently practising architecture with Atelier Oasis but also hold a diverse portfolio of design and art work that spans various media and scales. Kum has participated in many international and local shows since graduation from NUS in 1990 and has won numerous awards, including National Prizewinner of The Winsor & Newton Worldwide Millennium Painting Competition, UK in 1999, 1<sup>st</sup> Runner-up at the Daler-Rowney Worldwide Art Club Challenge Palette, UK in 2000, Juror's Choice at Philip Morris Group of Companies Singapore /ASEAN Art Awards and Top Prize for the Abstract Category in the UOB Painting of the Year Competition, Singapore in 2002.

In 2000, his painting entry was selected for The United Nations Millennium Art Exhibition - Our World in the Year 2000 at the World Trade Centre, Stockholm, United Nations, NY and Mall Galleries, London. Most recently, he represented Modern Art Society at the 1<sup>st</sup> International Environmental Art Expo Korea – Save the Earth at COEX Centre, Seoul.

# Acknowledgements

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