

Title: Spurious Stories from the Land and Water
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FEATURE



SPURIOUS STORIES FROM THE LAND AND WATER

BY SHERMAN ONG

After decades of travel and observation, Malaysian-born but Singapore-based photographer and filmmaker Sherman Ong has built a strong rhetoric on the theme of origin, migration and diaspora. His own experience of migration came fairly early, when as a teenager he was uprooted from his home in Malacca and dropped into the fast-paced and quickly developing metropolis that was, and still is, Singapore. Over the course of his career Ong has travelled the world developing his vision through artist residencies based in Hanoi and at the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum in Japan. His latest series, *Spurious Stories From The Land And Water*, will be showing at a solo exhibition on the Third Floor of Art Plural Gallery from 24 April to 31 May 2014.



1
Spurious Landscape Series
2010

2
Monsoon Series
2005

3
Monsoon Series
2005

4
Spurious Landscape Series
2010

How did you come to make the *Monsoon series*?

I was in Hanoi for my artist residency under the Goethe Institut Art Connexions project. I had already started on a visual haiku series, *Hanoi Haiku*, when this series came to me by chance during a hailstorm one afternoon in Hanoi. On that day, the sky was very dark. I was in a van when suddenly I heard very loud banging on the roof of the van. Then I saw the hailstones falling like rocks on the bonnet of the van. It was my first time experiencing a hailstorm. I was in awe of its sheer power and intensity. Large pieces of ice came crashing on to the van and other vehicles on the road. The ice pieces were quite big and people were just running helter-skelter for protection. They would rush for the nearest shelter or instinctively couch down to make their bodies as small as possible so that there was less surface area for the hail to hit. The hailstorm lasted for about 5 minutes and was followed by blistering rain. When the rain came, some people decided to carry on with their journey through the blanket of water. The rain was so heavy that I was looking at the scene through a sheet of water. I want to capture the mood of the monsoon and how it affects human mobility and the surrounding urban environment. For me, the intervention of the monsoon on the landscape and the body underscore the relationship between Nature and Man within a constructed urban setting.

Can you tell us a bit more about the *Spurious Landscapes series*?

The title draws inspiration from this statement by John Berger: "Landscapes can be deceptive. Sometimes a landscape seems to be less a setting for the life of its inhabitants than a curtain behind which their struggles, achievements and accidents take place." The two mediums that I work in, film and photography, share one thing in common – the Narrative. I have always been interested in telling stories about the human condition – living, dying, loving, hoping, forgetting and longing – and how we organise and regulate

our lives and our environment. I am interested in exploring the intersection between Nature and Human Nature, between the landscape and the body, offering an alternative view point to the banal while eliciting the subtle beauty of everyday life. The series straddles between randomness and planned, where the viewer is invariably drawn to question the 'validity' of the photograph as a document or a construction, whether the scene was 'found' or 'intervened'. I would like to let the answer remain ambiguous and to open up possibilities for the real and the surreal to mingle in the works.

Where are the photographs taken and why did you choose this mysterious title?

The photos were taken in various countries during my travels exhibiting my works. The works on exhibition are taken in Spain, Vietnam, Singapore, Brazil. I think the title is more enigmatic than mysterious. By definition, spurious means "not being what it purports to be; false or fake". I am always interested in the in-betweenness of things, the uncertainty, the hybridity of situations and the intersection between real and surreal, documentary and fiction, the decisive moment and constructed photography.

What are the prevailing themes in your work?

In my encounters with different peoples and cultures, I realise that each of them has their own survival mechanisms of coping, harnessing or controlling Nature in order to build a stable social environment where they can thrive. This idea of coping, harnessing or controlling Nature, and how it intersects with Human Nature in our quest to better our lives – in particular, the social / private spaces in a built urban environment – has always been my interest and a recurring theme in my work.

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