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An Interview with Photographer Sherman Ong: Narrating through Image

In his 2014 exhibition at Art Plural Gallery in Singapore, Sherman Ong celebrates man's subservience to the changing natural environment through a series of splendid, surreal and often absurd images. The Culture Trip speaks with Ong about his work as a photographer, filmmaker and storyteller.



Sherman Ong, Moon, Spurious Landscapes | © Sherman Ong, Courtesy of Art Plural Gallery

Ellen von Wiegand: *How would you characterise your work both as a photographer and filmmaker?*

Sherman Ong: First and foremost, I am a curious person and this sense of curiosity about the world around me defines my work to a large extent. 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 the relationship that we have with the land - how we organise and regulate our lives and our environment.

The Image is the common denominator for both the photographer and the filmmaker, albeit one is still and the other moving. I think, since its invention, the camera has never been and will never be an objective tool.

In the 21st century, the Image has become so malleable in its interpretation and context that it is no longer possible to evaluate Image separately from its maker. Today, where corporations can be more powerful than countries and values are no longer bi-polar, the role of the Image has evolved to take into account a global geopolitics with many centres of power and cultural dominance. The image has become a 'mercenary', aligning itself to the agenda of its most powerful bidder.

Nevertheless, imageries that are found in photographs, films, paintings and other visual art forms all share an experiential aspect that goes beyond the intellect. The ability of the Image to reach out to the viewers through a non-intellectual mode, bypassing any intellectual/conceptual discourse, ensures that the image will still have its place in the 21st century.

To quote Laszlo Moholy-Nagy (1895-1946) who remains relevant more than ever today: 'Knowledge of photography (image) is just as important as that of the alphabet. The illiterate of the future will be a person ignorant of the use of the camera as well as the pen.'

EvW: *Do you identify in any way more as either a photographer or a filmmaker?*

SO: I am neither. I see myself more as someone who tells stories through images, which could be through the still or moving image.



Sherman Ong, Monsoon | © Sherman Ong, Courtesy of Art Plural Gallery

EvW: *You have been quoted as saying: 'I have always been interested in telling stories about the human condition and how we organise and regulate our lives and our environment. I am interested in exploring the intersection between nature and human nature.' Explain your interest in the relationship between nature and human nature.*

SO: Traditional societies and indigenous communities have a way of working with nature where their social and economic activities are inevitably bound to the climate and geographical peculiarities of the land. Rather than trying to control nature or going

against nature, they work with the dictates of nature. For example the Native American Indians, the indigenous tribes of South East Asia and other parts of the world, the Balinese, and to a large extent the Japanese take on a belief system and world view that if they are in harmony with their environment, then they will be secure.

A case in point would be the monsoon season that defines the economic life of many agrarian societies along the equator. The monsoon determines the planting season, the fishing season, the harvesting period and also the tourist calendar for a coastal community.

I think an urbanised, industrialised, capitalist way of living has created a need, urge or desire for humans to control nature rather than working with nature. Notwithstanding the pockets of 'treehuggers', city dwellers tend to isolate themselves from nature and cut their ties with the land. I feel, in many ways, a highly urbanised way of living is very dysfunctional and goes against the essence of being human. Singapore and Hong Kong are clear examples of these where the main preoccupation of most people is the accumulation of wealth and success is oftentimes defined by material wealth and consumption.

As an artist, I hope to reflect on such situations because the artist is also part of the equation. Hopefully, the preoccupation of the artist could become a catalyst for a larger momentum for change.

EvW: *You are a child of upheaval, having migrated early in your life from a much smaller Malacca in Malaysia to the bustling metropolis of Singapore. In what ways does this question of origin and displacement manifest in your work?*

SO: I think origin, migration/movement and identity have always been important themes in my practice. Coming from a Peranakan background, hybridity and diversity have always been part and parcel of my upbringing. Even before Singapore was part of Malaysia, Malacca and Singapore had a connection in terms of family and trade ties, which went back to the 1600s, I would say.

My maternal ancestors were born in Malacca and came to Singapore to do business in the 1700s. Growing up amongst the elders and being aware that the Peranakans identify themselves as Chinese because of political and economic convenience and yet don't speak Chinese as a mother tongue (a situation that is specific to Peranakans in Singapore and Malacca) and tend to differentiate themselves from the later Chinese, also manifested subconsciously in my work perhaps. Migration defines the identity of Peranakans and overseas Chinese, and this movement is a perpetual cycle of humankind.

So I guess having one foot in Malacca and the other in Singapore is natural for me, as I have families on both sides of the causeway. To paraphrase Gertrude Stein, I would say that Singapore is my city and Malaysia is my country.



Mow, Sherman Ong, Spurious Landscape | © Sherman Ong, Courtesy of Art Plural Gallery

EvW: *In your photographic series Monsoon and Spurious Landscapes, featured in Art Plural Gallery's exhibition of your work, you capture moments that seem perfectly orchestrated. A boy with a lawn mower stands precisely centred within a football goal, while in another photograph a figure is bent over the wall of an odd building in the middle of a largely deserted landscape. Are these moments truly spontaneous or do you take some part in their orchestration? Tell us a bit more about the Monsoon and Spurious Landscapes series.*

SO: *Spurious Landscapes* 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 series straddle randomness and plan, 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 open up possibilities for the real and the surreal to mingle in the works.

For the Monsoon series, it was made instinctively. I was in Hanoi for my artist residency under the Goethe Institut Art Connexions project. I had already started working 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 onto 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 to the nearest shelter or instinctively crouch down to make their bodies as small as possible so that there is 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 wanted 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 underscores the relationship between Nature and Man within a constructed urban setting.

These two series, metaphorically, exist on opposite ends of photography and allow me to move from 'calligraphy' to 'sculpture' and back again, all within the same medium.



Sherman Ong, Monsoon | © Sherman Ong, Courtesy of Art Plural Gallery

EvW: *Can you recall the first photograph you took that captured the specific concerns that you address today in your photography? Talk a bit about your early inspiration as a photographer.*

SO: My earliest inspirations for photographs were my pet dogs, cat, fish and mice. As a child I was curious about the world around me and the things closest to me at that time were my pets. I took photos of them sleeping, playing, running, eating and fighting within their cage, house compound or aquarium. In my childlike way, I was already questioning the relationship of animals with humans, their mortality and also their role within the larger context of the cosmos.

EvW: *How does your work in film differ from your work in photography in terms of your process and the issues that you explore.*

SO: The Image is a weapon. The Image can be used to change or to control the world. Photography, in my work process, is a solitary endeavour while film is very much a collaborative process. I would vacillate between the solitary and the social aspects of image-making, depending on my mood and temperament.

Although I started with still images, I soon developed a keen interest in moving images. For me it was a natural progression and also a logical one, as both still and moving images are in essence the same, as both deal with time. I think the issues I explore are similar, about the human condition. The difference is that film has the additional elements of sound, music, dialogue, text, and involves both horizontal and vertical juxtaposition of these elements. With photography, the juxtaposition of images with or without text will determine the 'openness' of the work to a multiplicity of interpretations. With photography, the caption or text becomes the choker for the images. Hence I tend to not locate or explain my images, in keeping with the democratic and malleable nature of images, which can also be a tool for social change or social engineering, for example propaganda.

I now work in both still and moving images, as these are the two art forms that resonate with me and allow for an unlimited scope of expression, from the coincidence of documentary/street photography to the conceptual tableaux of highly constructed imageries.



Sherman Ong, Spurious Landscapes | © Sherman Ong, Courtesy of Art Plural Gallery

EvW: You have engaged in several projects that deal with the subject of dance, such as your 2011 *I Want to Remember* and *Exodus of 2003*. What is your interest in dance and performance in general?

SO: I think dance is a form of expressing emotions using the human body, objects and space. For me dance, film, performance, photography are all related if you distil them to the essence of the creative process. I think, ultimately, all art forms would reach towards a common centre where one can sense and experience that centre but may not necessarily be able to put it into words. For both the art maker and the viewer, embracing art is an experiential process that may sometimes bypass or extend beyond the intellect, a spiritual endeavour that tries to encapsulate the complexities of being human and the 'desire', perhaps, for a certain end point or utopia.

So my interest in dance is very related to my film practice, which encompasses performance, music, literature and painting.

EvW: *Can you talk a bit about your recent film project Lucy and I, shown in March 2014 at the 12th Hong Kong Asia Film Financing Forum?*

SO: *Lucy and I* is a film about origin, migration, diaspora and the idea of moving, seen through the eyes of mothers, and their idea of the motherland. The film is still in the pre-production stage. I am working on the film with a Norwegian co-director Birgitte Sigmundstad, supported by CPH Dox:Lab. The result is a film that sits between fiction and documentary.

Starting with my earlier films like *Hashi*, *Flooding in the Time of Drought* and *Memories of a Burning Tree*, I do not make a distinction between documentary or fiction film. Both genres work with a narrative. The work will be like a tapestry, a jigsaw puzzle that gives the impression of the whole, even if its individual parts do not specifically relate directly to one another. It will be like improvised jazz where Norway will throw a bar of music to Singapore and Singapore will reply with another bar.

EvW: *What's next for you? Are you planning any trips abroad in search of your next project?*

SO: First, my show at Art Plural Gallery is on in Singapore until 31 May, 2014. The *Monsoon* and *Spurious Landscapes* series will be exhibited, as well as a short film.

This year I will be part of the 5th Fukuoka Triennale, and I will also be doing an Artist residency at the Tun Tan Cheng Lock Centre for Asian Architectural and Urban Heritage in Malacca.

Questions by Ellen von Wiegand