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Mise en Scène

Based on both sides of the Johor Strait, Malacca-born artist Sherman Ong portrays the human condition and the relationship between individuals within the larger milieu with photography and film.

BY ASIH JENIE

Sherman Ong's childhood in Malacca is something worthy of an Oscar-bait movie. Ong's family legacy comes from both sides of the Johor Strait—his great grandmother was one of the wives of prominent Peranakan philanthropist Tan Kim Seng, who became a Singaporean when the country gained independence from Malaysia—and likewise, he divides his time between Singapore and Kuala Lumpur. His old ancestral home was on the historic Heeren Street, now neighbours to private museums and commercial establishments renovated and refurbished from colonial buildings. Ong's fascination with film was courtesy of his great uncle who worked as a projectionist in then one of the city's independent cinemas and frequently gave him free tickets.

"Back then I watched a movie about an earthquake and they would put these huge speakers in the theatre so that when the earthquake scene played out you could feel the vibration from the speakers," he recounts. "That was a novelty, and you come to cinema to experience this. It was the same deal with *Jaws* and *Star Wars*. I grew up with that."

As for photography, Ong got his first camera from his father when he was 10. "It was a Kodak Pocket Instamatic, the one with flashcubes you need to replace after four snaps," he says.

TRAVEL



Photography became a hobby then, and soon after Ong graduated to manual cameras—a Minolta, then a Nikon—and then digital cameras. It remained a hobby throughout his university years in National University of Singapore where he studied law on a scholarship. "At that time I was not sure about what I want to do. I thought law would be a flexible major, and that it would be a good thing to get by," he says.

He joined an audio visual club on campus and volunteered on film festivals that reopened his eyes to the glorious wonder of motion pictures. By graduation, he had accumulated a portfolio that landed him a job as a producer at a local TV station. "My parents weren't too thrilled about that," he laughed. But for him, law wasn't a subject too different from film-making, if anything Ong says it had helped him in some ways. "It helped me in building narratives. In law you are given a set of facts and then based on that you build a plausible narrative, stories. Whether you are the prosecutor or the defendant, you are presented the same set of facts, but present different outcomes, different stories. And which story is the most plausible, the judge must decide," explains Ong.

Ong's photography and film projects have been shown at biennales, film festivals, museums and galleries around the world. He's

also won various awards including the 2010 Icon de Martell Cordon Bleu Photography Award. Recently Ong held a solo exhibition at Singapore's Art Plural Gallery titled "Spurious Stories from the Land and Water", which showcases his photography series *Monsoon and Spurious Landscapes*, and a segment of his feature length film *Flooding in the time of Drought*. Together these projects build a narrative about water and drought and bring together Ong's practice of photography and film. "The narrative [of the exhibited works] deals with elements. One side is the dry land and on the other is water, and the film talks about mortality and water. It's about the human condition in a larger scale, relationships between individuals and our relationship with the land, of how we position ourselves in the larger cosmos," says Ong.

Currently Ong is working on a feature length movie, *Lucy & I*, which will be participating in Fukuoka Triennale. He is also heading home to Malacca for a residency project with the architecture department of NUS. "It's very interesting because before it was turned into a research centre, the building was a maternity home, and before that a stable. I was born there when it was a maternity home," he says. "Malacca has changed a lot."