



CONVERGENCES

SINGAPORE

Photographer Wei Leng Tay

Curated by Lisa Botos

Cheong Cheong. In his early thirties, he speaks Cantonese, Mandarin and Malay. He has a Mandarin rock band. Here he is sitting in his studio in Penang, Malaysia. He is from the Cameron Highlands (in another state in Malaysia). His father was a principal at a Chinese school in the Cameron Highlands when he was a child. The Tamil school had asked to borrow classrooms from his father. His father agreed to let the Tamil school use their classrooms. The local Chinese community came down on his father and called him a traitor. His father left his position as Principal and became a farmer.



Hoi Yan and family Kuala Lumpur Wai Leung, a corporate lawyer, and his wife Hoi Yan, a stay-at-home mother and part-time graphic designer.

In 1963 Singapore gained independence from Britain and joined the Malaysian Federation, only to become a sovereign state two years later. It is in the micro-history of these events, and what resulted afterwards, in which Wei Leng Tay dwells, with familiarity. Her series of portraits tell stories on how lives were shaped, inadvertently, by distance, proximity and politics.

The Border, its notion, both real and fantasized, is present in the series *“Convergence”*, which was photographed in Penang, Kuala Lumpur and Singapore in 2009 and 2010. These are places where the photographer engaged in her project and conducted her research, and where she blended with her

surroundings. It is a story of separation and togetherness, of families that were never reunited after political breakaway, and of communities that are built in isolation. Sometimes they are friends or relatives, but not always. The storytelling power of these images becomes amplified as we listen to the recorded conversations that are part of this project. Stories about everyday life, about family and triviality, that emerge from hours of bonding, and sometimes result in a photograph. Because, for all the cinematic quality of these photographs, they are, after all, snaps of life, slices cut through time, and maybe it would not be appropriate to call those she photographed



Chris and Elsie Singapore Chris Ong and Elsie. They are in Chris's parents' kitchen. They both live at home with their parents. Elsie is half Malay, on her mother's side. They both spent a few years studying in Australia.

sitters, although they are obviously aware of the presence of the camera. This is the portrait of a community, not of an individual, so what matters is the totality of the series that has been built over two years. The complexity of multiple languages used in the region by ethnic Chinese communities is part of this dialogue. Hokkien, Mandarin and Cantonese are exchanged between different members of the same family, and this adds a texture layered to family relationships.

Wei Leng Tay has embarked on other portrait exercises of communities. Other projects have taken her to Hong Kong, Fukuoka and Bangkok. The project in Bangkok possibly

most resembles this series, as she focused on the Chinese communities there. Wei Leng Tay processes the idea of Otherness transforming the Other into the familiar. This notion of proximity is a fundamental departure in strategy from the 90s, where identity became one of the major themes for contemporary art. This relentless task of becoming part of the Other results in the disappearance of the boundary between the photographer and the subject. There are epic undertones to this project, when we think of the near impossibility of success or the almost unlimited number of possibilities. It reminds us of August Sander with his series *“Man of the Twentieth Century”*, although the



Eldest Aunt Penang, Malaysia My mother's oldest sister, 78 years old, at her dining table peeling guavas. Her first language is Cantonese, and she also speaks Mandarin and some Malay. She is at home most of the time. When she was younger, she used to work at the family shoe factory.

German photographer pursued the anonymity of his sitters, citing only their profession. Wei Leng Tay, on the other hand, empowers her subjects through their personal storytelling, and as a result they become Karl, Pam, Shi Wei or Jac to all of us.

Although there are no rules, most portraits are taken in the domestic space, others are images in workshops or in public spaces, but even then there is a sense of privacy. A psycho-geography sometimes emerges from these encounters. This is the space of Gaston Bachelard or Henri Lefebvre, as in "Eldest Aunt's bedroom" or in "Grace's ironing board", where the domestic space is left empty but fully

charged with powerful, iconic symbols. For the former, the bed sits perfectly done under the looming presence of dozens of clocks. In the latter, the iron sits on the ironing board. Some of the most enduring images distill a sense of solitude and isolation, of melancholy that submerges the viewer into the depths of the self. These are images that are a continuation of a narrative. Like "Shi Wei", standing in the middle of the road at night, drawing us into the solitude of the scene, the underlying tension in the image, and the stillness of the moment. Or like "Karl", unfolding his collectibles in an eerily tidy room, void of warmth and clinically clean. These are stories that are



Karl Singapore He's in his temporary home. First generation Singaporean Chinese, he is the youngest in his family and the only one who was not born in China. Born and bred in Singapore, he feels a strong cultural and ideological difference with his parents.

developing in front of our eyes, and we regret not knowing the end or the next chapter. These are stories that evoke the memory of endless ramifications and possibilities. And for all the closeness, there is a terrible detachment in these stories. In many of the most striking images light becomes a tool of the narrative language, through a focus or multiple focuses which build this atmosphere, as in "Cheong", where a bright neon light brings out clearly cut shadows that contrast with the organically random surface of his skin and that of his dog.

Other images show us some moving tenderness, as in "Eldest Aunt", which bring us back to memories of Flemish painting and

domestic portraits. Here our gaze is directed to her hands and her expression through the centrally-based composition and perspective. It is as stately as a portrait can be. In "Felicia and Adan" the photographer makes a rare incursion into the idea of landscape. Here the shapes, the postures, and movements become classical, although we do not forget that we are confronting snapshots of daily life.

These images reveal the complexity of the inner worlds that they represent. They show a wealth of accumulation in intimate spaces that define the characters that we observe. They are not sitters, but neither are they subjects, they are more like friends. There is tension between



Pam Malaysia Pam Yee, in the garden of her family home. She lives with her family in a new gated community in Klang, which historically had a large Chinese migrant population because of tin mining.

the detachment and the proximity, between the unfamiliarity and the deep knowledge and understanding. There is a permanent questioning of the place of the photographed through these unfolded strategies. The photographer tries to escape this fate by erasing and blurring the edges that define the artist as actor, as planner, as director.

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Felicia and Adan Singapore Felicia Low and her boyfriend, Adan, in the open areas near the public housing apartment she lives in with her parents. Felicia is Peranakan Chinese, there are many definitions for the straits Chinese, but they are typically Chinese who have been in South East Asia for many generations and have adopted Malay culture. Most Peranakan, especially those of my generation, have lost much of their heritage, and like Felicia, their only connection is through the food that is still sometimes cooked in the home. Felicia can speak Mandarin but is more comfortable speaking Malay. Her first language is English.



Ng family gathering Singapore Ng brothers, and a son-in-law, in red, at a family gathering.



Grace's ironing board



Jac Jac. Peranakan Chinese (Straits Chinese) Singapore
Her family has been in South East Asia for generations, but Jac is not sure when her family first came down to SE Asia. Her paternal grandfather had come to Singapore from Indonesia. Jac grew up speaking English with her parents, and Hokkien with her grandparents. Her grandparents spoke Bibik Malay and Hokkien, but she never learnt Malay. She is one of the older ones among her cousins. The younger cousins, who are in their twenties, all speak English, and some mandarin. Because of the "Speak Mandarin Campaign" the government had in the 1980s, many Chinese Singaporeans who are now in their twenties in Singapore don't speak their dialect.