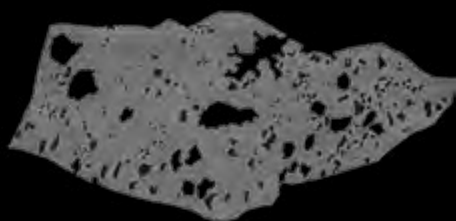


MELISSA TAN

BACK TO WHERE WE'VE NEVER BEEN





TO DREAM IN THE RIGHT SHAPE:

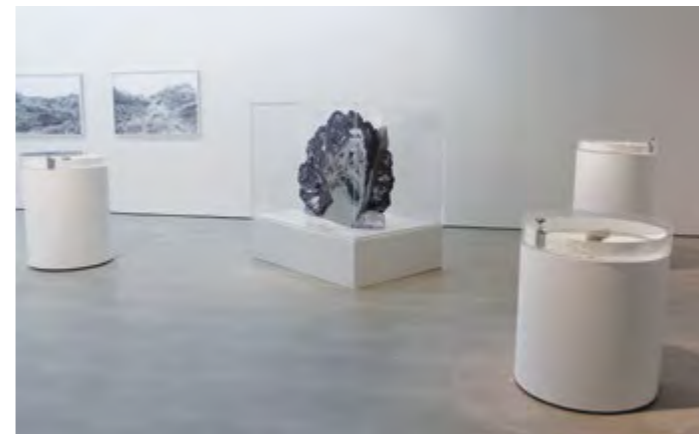
A CONVERSATION BETWEEN MELISSA TAN AND SAMANTHA YAP

“Strange to dream in the right shape and build in the wrong shape, but maybe that is what we do every day, never believing that a dream could tell the truth.”
— Jeanette Winterson, *The Stone Gods*

Samantha Yap (SY): Your chosen exhibition title, *Back to Where We've Never Been*, conveys a rather paradoxical situation — returning to a place that is unknowable or that has *become* unknowable. This going “back”, the notion of returning and revisiting, brought to my mind stories from Boey Kim Cheng’s *Between Stations*. Reflecting on his boyhood and days of travel, Boey’s writing attempted to reconcile different impressions of Singapore — the Singapore of his boyhood and present day Singapore. Reading your exhibition title in relation to this sense of displacement made me think about how to “go back to where we’ve never been” describes a rather Singaporean condition, to be unfamiliar with a point of origin and to not recognise “home”.

Melissa Tan (MT): Yes, there is a rather clear reference to the local urban landscape in this exhibition which follows in the trajectory of an earlier work that was presented in the Singapore Biennale 2016, *If you can dream a better world you can make a better world or perhaps travel between them*. What interests me is that the city is so faceted in its composition, a system of parts from different places brought together to create a living ideal. The title for the Biennale work also references this ideal world and how in striving towards a “utopia”, we are always caught in between, traversing between this ideal vision and our present world.

A lot of these concerns are still present in this new body of work which similarly focuses on the urban landscape, specifically on roads and how these roads, pathways,



bridges and features that we encounter everyday undergo so much reparation that it always feels brand new. The city almost appears self-regenerative, what with all the efficient upgrading work done to its infrastructure. The exhibition title, *Back to Where We've Never Been*, describes the process of constructing urban Singapore and how the materials used in its construction originate from places

that we might never have been before and then used to repair the potholes and surfaces of the ground that we tread on.

This sense of uncertainty guided the creation of the works, like how the paper works appear to be in a uniform black but on closer inspection there are patches of an even darker black in the resin pieces. It’s similar to how I saw tones on the road, the presence of patches and shapes in our surroundings. These visual cues in the work, like colours or patterns, reference the makeup of our urban landscape and its uncanny textures. The resin parts of the paper works were also casted from original rock fragments which were made into sculptures after, reinforcing a sense of repetition between the two series and how they correspond to each other.

Image Above:
If You Can Dream a Better World You Can Make a Better World or Perhaps Travel Between Them (2016), Acrylic on Watercolour Paper, Mild Steel and Compressed Foam, Dimensions Variable



Back to Where We've Never Been #2 (2018)
Found Road Fragment, Stainless Steel, Plaster and Asphaltum Lacquer, 24.5 x 12 x 13.5 cm











Back to Where We've Never Been #8 (2018)
Found Road Fragment, Stainless Steel, Plaster and Asphaltum Lacquer, 28.5 x 25 x 18 cm



Back to Where We've Never Been #5 (2018)
Found Road Fragment, Stainless Steel, Plaster and Asphaltum Lacquer, 23.8 x 12 x 21.4 cm

SY: The ambiguity in your exhibition title is also present in how you choose to name your works. Text has an interesting relationship with your work, it is suggestive, but it also deflects precision. In following the phonetic alphabet naming system, you appropriated the radiotelephone language into something that could also disguise the origins of each piece. Something telling like South-West becomes encoded cryptically into *Sierra's Whiskey*. It almost feels like a hidden narrative. Could you share more about them?

MT: I enjoy the additional interpretative dimensions that text lends to my works. The NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) phonetic alphabet system is interesting because it's used to get message and information across clearly, but for those who aren't aware of the key, like how A is communicated as Alpha and B as Bravo, the system just appears to be referring to a person's name or a place. I saw this language as one that disguises and clarifies, it presented a strange kind of ambiguity that I enjoyed.

Initially there was some consideration to title the works more explicitly, after the regions they corresponded to but that seemed a little too obvious. Another reason why I decided on this way of naming was how the city's orderly methods of repairing itself echoed the orderly language of the military and its systematic organisation of people, data and information. Singapore is quite the self-diagnosing nation, there is even a Pavement Management System that monitors and schedules the road maintenance island wide before the road surface begins to form ruts.

SY: The use of the phonetic alphabet system to avoid ambiguities and reconfirm information is quite interesting because the very words themselves, understood out of context, are quite ambiguous. On that note of threading familiarity and unfamiliarity, the ambiguity about what your work represents is something I find fascinating. I find myself thinking a lot about science fiction worlds when I regard the visual properties of your work, like the coarse obsidian surfaces or the glimmer of metal in some pieces seem to resonate with the imagination of far-flung planets in space. But for this series of works, your points of references are actually quite localised. Could you share more about your references?

MT: It's nice that you brought up the textures of the work. I was hoping that the repetition of shapes from the found road fragments to the paper pieces and the restriction of colours would help emphasise the patterns that recur across the two series.

I began with found road fragments and images of areas where road constructions were taking place around Singapore, in areas such as Woodlands, Bukit Timah and Geylang. For instance, the construction site that I photographed in Woodlands is rather fractured. As large vehicles regularly enter the site, concrete was probably used to level the road as a temporary solution. I liked the fractures in the ground and used the image to create a silkscreen that would be printed in black onto the paper works. For the white patterns, they came from a site in Mountbatten.

Woodlands construction site, January 2018



The form of the paper pieces follow after the boundaries that expressways form in the Singapore map so most of the pieces correspond to specific regions. I'm interested in these features of the urban landscape, how pathways, roads and bridges are intended to bring people together and help us get from one location to the other efficiently but they also demarcate and keep us apart. The expressways on the map that delineated the boundaries of a specific region is also a way of sectioning the city.

SY: You reference two different representations of the locality in your work. With the map, you get a macrocosmic view and an official diagram and with the ground, you get textures marked not only by state intervention and upgrading but also by everyday life.

MT: Yes, I do try to combine these two perspectives. Form and patterns taken from the two perspectives are brought together in my works and they're perhaps the most important element as I am trying to get a sense of the shape of the city. I am interested in exploring the shaping of the landscape and the city.



Found Road Fragment in junction between Geylang and Mountbatten, December 2017







Whiskey (2018)

Acrylic on Watercolor Paper, Compressed Foam, Asphaltum Lacquer and Resin, 40 x 49.5 x 4.8 cm



Back to Where We've Never Been #3 (2018)

Found Road Fragment, Stainless Steel, Plaster and Asphaltum Lacquer, 30 x 17 x 18 cm



Back to Where We've Never Been #4 (2018)
Found Road Fragment, Stainless Steel, Plaster and Asphaltum Lacquer, 26 x 13.5 x 20 cm



Back to Where We've Never Been #6 (2018)
Found Road Fragment, Stainless Steel, Plaster and Asphaltum Lacquer, 33 x 16.7 x 19.5 cm

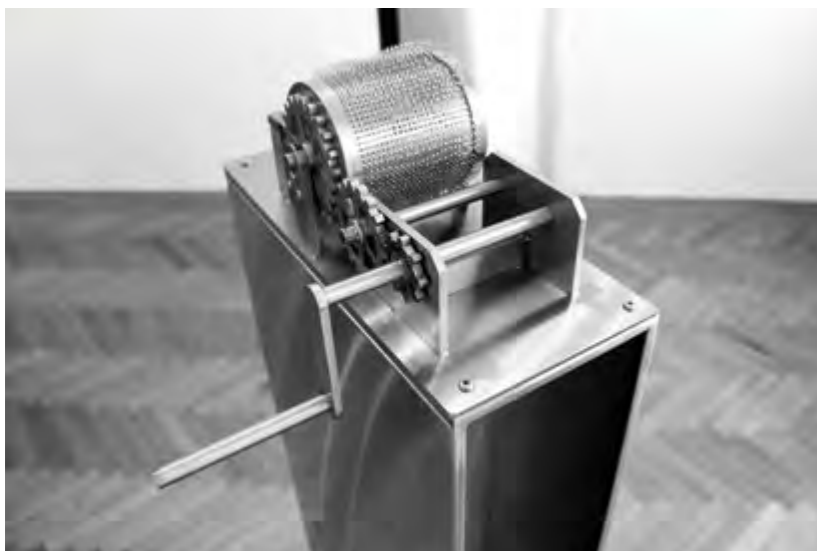
Back to Where We've Never Been #1 (2018)
Found Road Fragment, Stainless Steel, Plaster and Asphaltum Lacquer, 15.5 x 9 x 10 cm



Back to Where We've Never Been #7 (2018)
Found Road Fragment, Stainless Steel, Plaster and Asphaltum Lacquer, 42.8 x 22.5 x 30.6 cm



SY: I know we talked about our interest in science fiction and I'm sneaking this in, but I do see your works as following in the spirit of science fiction in the remaking of new worlds or vistas. In *Whiskey*, the demarcated shape of the western region on the Singapore map forms the basis of a new sculptural entity. Aspects of the locality, like its shape on the map and its impressions and textures, are translated into your works and made anew. This thread of translation is something I picked up with your previous works too. In the case of *The Live-esque Stone That Sings*, you created a cast of rocks that is like a pin drum, allowing for texture to translate into sound. With translation, there is also the persistent question of fidelity to the source material. Do you feel like you are moving further away from where the work first started? What is the relationship between your works and the original sites that you referenced?



I was attempting to construct a system of objects that did not privilege human mastery so there was a definite need to stay true to the point of origin and to "nature".



But using this software also proved to be just as time consuming as tracing the photograph by hand since AutoCAD's tools are structural. This made the process of contouring organic lines more difficult because it was not as seamless. In a sense, tracing and lifting the patterns from the photograph was another translation, whereby some details became lost again.

MT: I agree as well that the combination of the impressions, textures and the action of adding, reducing forms all alter the "original material". In terms of process, this body of work is very different from *The Live-esque Stone That Sings*. Even though both works retain the texture of the source material, with the latter, there was a different set of concerns.

For this current work, the process of repetition, in translating the various shapes and patterns across different processes like photographing, casting, as well as drawing using AutoCAD, have transmuted them so much. I wanted to learn to use the software AutoCAD to draw and trace the road patterns from photographs in order to laser cut metal.

In combining these different "translations", the resulting work feels quite distinct from where I first started, something quite new but it does hold a suggestion or the outline of its origin.

Some of the paper works also share the same area, such as *November's Echo I* and *November's Echo II* (referencing North and East regions), *Charlie and Whiskey I* and *Charlie and Whiskey II* (referencing Central and West regions). Even though there are overlaps, visually *November's Echo I* and *November's Echo II* do not share much resemblance. They're dissimilar kins. Also, by chance, in the phonetic alphabet, the code word assigned to "E" is "Echo". "Echo" comes up a few times over the works and I think it's a good way to characterise the relationship between my works and their original sites. It's like an echo, there is a sense of repetition and a suggestion of similarity but it's not really a copy or a duplicate.

SY: Your works echo impressions of local urbanity, like the uneven texture of the roadside or other markings caught on the gravel or bitumen. Although they reference Singaporean localities, they may still be difficult to recognise. How important is it for viewers to be able to identify what they're seeing?

MT: It's true that with the paper pieces, it's hard to draw the connection between their shape and the demarcations on the map. Although most people may recognise the shapes of continents, I chose the shapes marked out by the boundaries of the expressways so that is a form that's less familiar. At the same time, there are also visual cues to read the work and pinpoint its references. Perhaps that's why it's important for the works in the show to be read in relation to one another. Between the paper pieces and the road fragment sculptures, there is a repetition of textures. The textures of the road fragment sculptures echo the patterns of the paper pieces. The choice of using black asphalt lacquer to coat all the works also made them more reminiscent of roads.

SY: You highlighted patterns as a crucial element of your work. I can see why patterns are central to your work, a rock's texture reveals much about how it is formed. A study of urban textures also provides clues to points of origins. In reinterpreting the textures you found, you are also re-articulating a new kind of origin, to go "back to where we never came from". At the same time, this interest in representing and exploring textures recurs in your practice. Why the interest in patterns?

MT: I really like that you mentioned a rock's texture is telling of its formation. It allows us to speculate its formation and trace this passage of time that we can never return to. In a way, it is a kind of "uchronia", an unspecified and hypothetical point of time, a place that can only be traversed through imagination. This goes back to my interest in exploring parallel worlds. Like what you said, reinterpreting the textures is also a way of conjuring up a new origin, almost like an alternate timeline.

(Left Page) Image Above:
The Live-esque Stone That Sings (2015), Laser cut metal, Plaster of Paris, metal pins, sculpey clay, found rock, Dimensions Variable

(Left Page) Image Below:
AutoCAD trace of photographed Bukit Timah construction site



For me, my artmaking process is shifting, but it always holds ties to a language that I am able to access or to begin with and that is perhaps the language of textures and patterns. For this series of works, I started with shapes, lines, patterns and I suppose it goes back to my training as a painter as that was how I was taught to begin with visually. Speaking of patterns, it reminds me of something from the television show *Fringe*.

The characters are always sharing how there is a pattern to everything. This pattern refers to a sequence that can be observed and maybe even understood as they try to make sense of the world around them. I think that I am also similarly drawn to finding connections and linking narratives together to create or unearth shared trajectories.

Image Above:

Work-in-progress material test with the asphalt lacquer

Samantha Yap shuffles between writing and project management across the fields of art and design. She co-founded the feminist art platform, Bubble Gum & Death Metal. She writes about entangled emotions and escape routes and is interested in the potentialities of feminised subjects like that of the witch, cyborg, and magical girl. Currently, she is reading English Literature and Art History at the Nanyang Technological University of Singapore.

Melissa Tan is a visual artist based in Singapore and received her BA (Fine Arts) from LASALLE College of the Arts. Her works are based on nature, themes of transience and beauty of the ephemeral. Her recent projects revolve around landscapes and the process of formation, translating the geography and textures of rocks into a visual language articulated through different mediums. Employing methods such as paper cutting and silk-screen techniques, she is interested in materiality and how the medium supports the work. Trained as a painter, she also works with video, sound and objects.

Her recent solo show *Arc of Uncertainties* was held at Richard Koh Fine Art and she has been involved in group exhibitions such as the Singapore Biennale 2016, *An Atlas of Mirrors*, Singapore Art Museum at 8Q, CNEAI, Chatou, Ile des impressionists in Paris and Strarta Art Fair, Saatchi Gallery in London. She also participated in the National Arts Council and Dena Foundation Artist Residency program (Paris, France) 2013.

Richard Koh Fine Art has been in operation since 2005 and is regarded as a pioneer for introducing contemporary art to Malaysia and the region. Promoting an adventurous roster of emerging and established artists, the gallery regularly mounts exhibitions locally and abroad with a commitment to emerging practices and challenging media.

Colophon

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