

# We meet in a sky where nobody can stay

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## About Kong Yen Lin

Kong Yen Lin curates and writes about photography. Born and based in Singapore, she has participated as a guest curator in Brighton Photo Fringe’s Open 2011, and was the Education Programme Manager of the Singapore International Photography Festival in 2012 and 2014. Her writing can be found at <http://inneryennings.wordpress.com>.

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## Postcards addressed to memory

“One of the most basic human requirements is the need to dwell, and one of the most central human acts is the act of inhabiting, of connecting ourselves with a place on the planet which belongs to us and to which we belong”  
– Thomas J. Harper, afterword to “In Praise of Shadows” by Jun’ichirō Tanizaki

“All around the world, you’re a great way to fly” – this slogan is emblazoned in cursive script on an advertisement postcard for Singapore Airlines (SIA). A pair of statuesque flight attendants, wearing the iconic SIA *sarong kebaya* uniform, are posed daintily along a street bustling with pigeons, passers-by and vendors peddling their wares in front of an Indian-style courtyard house. Illuminated by the golden rays of twilight, the scene mysteriously melts into the Golden Gate Bridge in the background, complete with a white couple enjoying a picnic by San Francisco Bay.

In this scene, the Singapore Girl is as much a spectacle as her surroundings; in fact they complement each other with their blend of Asian exoticism and Western modernity. She is there to sell charm and sensuality during the ephemeral pockets of time when travellers are suspended between departing and arriving. The destination is secondary in this context, the voyage is primary. Likewise, John Clang’s series “The Land of My Heart” deploys former Singapore Girls as muses to delineate a journey, not in a physical sense but a psychological and emotional one across the terrain of memory: his, ours and that of humanity’s collective conscience.

Clang’s images resemble the typical SIA commercial, but cleverly subvert it through disruptions of time and space. They replace the exoticism of faraway promised lands with the most mundane and nondescript Singapore landscapes, the flow of time haltingly recedes into the past instead of being projected into the future, and the accompanying handwritten messages (mostly conversational excerpts from pivotal moments in Clang’s relationships with his loved ones) are no longer advertising slogans but ruminations on love, kinship and identity. Even the iconic Singapore Girl, usually synonymous with youth and vitality, exudes a more mature and understated allure – most of Clang’s models have moved on from being stewardesses to markedly different careers or motherhood.

Clang re-appropriates the icon as an ambassador for the Singapore heartlands: the neighbourhood car park, art sculpture, overhead bridge, shops and sports stadium – the nooks and crannies that, despite their everyday quality, are iconic landmarks that have defined his Singaporean life and identity. It is a poignant form of protest against the erosion of memories, an issue particularly resonant given that Bedok Town Centre, where he grew up, has been undergoing dramatic redevelopment.

## Romancing the spectre of memory

The Singapore Girl is our island nation’s loveliest apparition. Cloaked in secrecy, she is whisked away in a taxi once she touches down at a destination; she is never spotted in the public eye beyond the safe sanctuaries of airports; her uniform, even when put away after years of duty, is considered sacred and inviolable by its former wearers. She dwells within the airborne space that the rest of us fleetingly pass through; as we are upended through the wormholes of time zone differences, she is there with us. In this respect, she resembles a protagonist in a film, whom audiences encounter but do not live with. In John Berger’s words, “we meet [her] in a sky where nobody can stay”. For Clang, who since 1999 has divided his home between New York and Singapore, this sentiment about fleeting encounters is stirring. It is the physical distance and constant state of being in limbo that drives his art, and the self-reflexive process of remembering, sifting through memory’s flotsam and jetsam, as well as forgetting, that brings a universal and timeless quality to his artworks.

The visual recollections in this series include Clang’s childhood memories of learning to ride a bicycle at an HDB void deck area, learning to swim at Bedok swimming pool where his girlfriend and now wife, Elin, was his coach, school sports days at Bedok Stadium, as well as his favourite haunts as a teenager. Some are sites pegged with a specific expiration date (Bedok swimming pool and Bedok Stadium will soon be demolished for a sprawling new integrated sports complex), while others are simulacra bred from the artist’s re-imagining of everyday spaces and the chance encounters he had while exploring them.

Clang’s tableau-style depiction of feminine figures as muses owes a certain artistic debt to Renaissance paintings such as Sandro Botticelli’s *Allegory of Spring* and Lucas Cranach the Elder’s *The Three Graces*. However, in Clang’s endeavour, his subjects are not merely objects of pleasure or commodities created for visual consumption, as their emotional involvement is very much evident. For the former Singapore Girls, participating in the photo shoot triggered their own personal memories and the images became a convergence point for multiple consciousnesses and stories. Entrepreneur Pearly Tan, who is featured in *Swimming Pool, Stadium, Tree* and *Dragon Playground*, describes the experience as a “back-to-the-past” tour. “I used to climb trees with my younger sister, I fell down at a dragon playground and injured my shoulder when I was seven, I swam competitively in primary school and trained for up to three times a week at Toa Payoh swimming complex,” says Tan, who was a stewardess with SIA for eight years. “I was a tomboy at heart.”

Unsurprisingly, the strongest memory trigger for all the Singapore Girls was the *kebaya* uniform. A reminder of their connections to the capitalistic machinery of tourism, it exerted a coercive force – even after all their years away from it – to commodify and objectify the wearer. “Once I donned the uniform, [my] instincts kicked in. I started becoming more conscious of how I behaved,” says Christina Widyanti S., who appears in *Octopus*. Tan adds, “You ease into that role again, showing more poise and elegance to uphold the image of the airline.” This concept of a ‘second skin’ that induces conformity to a set of performative norms resembles Clang’s encounters as part of the Singaporean diaspora. While he challenges stereotypical views about Singaporean culture and identity, he is simultaneously engaged in clarifying his inner self – not only his identity in relation to the Other, but his relationships with his homeland and family, which are coloured with love, longing and tension.

The annotations on Clang’s images, like echoes from the past, are especially revealing. Drawn from different encounters in his life, they add gravitas to the pictures, sometimes like delicate pinpricks, at other times like forceful punches. In *Void Deck*, the text is a reference to how he courted his wife. “I did not have her number, but I knew she lived near Bedok Reservoir. So I spent close to two hours calling almost everyone with her last name living in that area. It turned out that I got her last name wrong. It’s Tew and not Teo, so I tried again. She finally picked up the phone and I was totally delighted,” Clang recalls. On the other hand, the text in *Flower Shop* – “I don’t want to die. Help me.” – shocks and disturbs the viewer with its stark contrast to the scene of vitality and life in which it is embedded. Clang explains, “This sentence was said to me by my favourite uncle who was suffering from terminal cancer. He fell to the floor and told me that. I was young and very shaken by it because he had always been a very strong masculine figure to me.” Yet there is always something left out and unspoken in these annotations, and it is in these gaps of calming silences that we may discover similar epiphanies or moments of repression in our own psyches.

### In between

Through a juxtaposition that draws on the whimsical and the absurd, Clang’s series conjures a free space of contemplation about what might constitute Singaporean identity in a world that has become increasingly globalised, borderless and porous. The artist’s introspection, writ large on these images, holds up a mirror to our attitudes towards preserving memories and heritage in an urban city-state that is caught in a perpetual flux of neverending construction and reconstruction. As in Clang’s other works, the series addresses the question of individual belonging. Zygmunt Bauman has described the modern relationship with home as one of “unplacement” instead of “displacement”. Referring to an increasing

trend of people relocating to foreign and unknown places as well as those staying put but feeling estranged from their sense of place, Bauman concludes that “home is no longer a dwelling but the untold story of life being lived”. “Home” to Bauman – and by extension, Clang – is not a noun but a verb, a lifelong process of negotiation. Like one pursuing a target on the distant horizon, Clang, it seems, will always be approaching “home” but never fully possessing or sinking roots into it.

His works also create an in-between space, between perception and interpretation, where viewers can momentarily forget about real time and space, away from the deluge of images that inundate our sight and consciousness every day. Clang explains, “I combed through these areas personally before the actual shoot dates, trying to recover that identity in me, that sense of the past. It was like time travel, but it didn’t feel nostalgic as it felt real. It made me think, can I dwell in stationary time if a group of us decide that ‘Time’ doesn’t exist, but rather is a highly subjective and arbitrary entity?” Michel de Certeau, who has likened the concept of mobility and presence to that of a child’s differentiation from the mother’s body, points out that the act of leaving leads to an externalisation and definition of selfhood: “to practise space is to repeat the joyful and silent experience of childhood; it is, in a place, to be other and to move toward the other.”

*Swimming Pool* is one particular image that conveys the idea of liminality. In it, the Singapore Girl leans against a starting block, water lapping against her naked feet. Turned away from us, she gazes into an unknown horizon, the tension of the image heightened by the swimmer on her left. It appears as idyllic as Claude Monet’s *Cliff Walk at Pourville*, but is weighed down by the burden of guilt and memory – an unfulfilled promise that Clang made to his dying grandmother in hospital. “My grandma likes to eat *char kway teow* but due to her old age and ill health, she can’t leave the flat to buy it. She would always ask me or my brother to go buy [it], but we always find excuses not to because the stall is quite far away,” recalls Clang. “She was on the brink of death but the doctors managed to revive her, even allowing her to return home a week later. But on the day of her discharge, she passed away. I never got to buy her the *char kway teow*.”

In Singapore’s hot, tropical climate, swimming pools are one of the most ubiquitous recreational amenities, perhaps the only one embraced by people across different socioeconomic strata. Water features are commonly used in architectural design as transitional spaces between exteriors and interiors, literally and metaphorically. The touch of water, the sound of it and the way it plays with light provides a psychological respite from the oppressive heat. For Clang, the pool itself represents a space of pleasant memories, but no amount of swimming can dilute his unresolved regret.

### Hunting the city

In *The Importance of Living*, Lin Yutang writes, “The true motive of travel should be travel to become lost and unknown ... A good traveller is one who does not know where he is going to and a perfect traveller does not know where he came from.” What is not apparent in Clang’s series is the process by which he selected the locations for his shoots. He has an ardent love for solitary walks, a ritual that helps him to put things into perspective, or even functions as “a strategy for encountering strangers”. It is reminiscent of Guy Debord and his situationist theories of the *dérive*, whereby Clang puts aside rational attachments and preoccupations to immerse himself in the psychogeographical features of the terrain. This activity is an essential scaffold in his artistic practice, as evident from earlier works such as *Time* (2009) and *Twilight Dreams of a Papilio Demoleus* (2012), which demonstrate Clang’s sharp, hunter-like knack for picking out the scent and trail of the urban uncanny – what Freud describes as instances where something can be familiar yet foreign at the same time, resulting in a feeling of it being uncomfortably strange.

As de Certeau writes, the user of a city, when engaged in navigation choices such as avoiding paths or taking shortcuts and detours, actualises signifiers of a spatial language, which is known as “the rhetoric of walking”. If the act of wandering is part of Clang’s artistic language, the creation of visual imagery would be his syntax. “The Land of My Heart” is a cartographical rendition of the experience of growing up and leaving things behind. It is also fiercely political, not in the most literal of definitions, but in using art to create a dialogue within and between us. Beyond a nostalgic retreat, Clang’s images attempt to challenge the deterministic norms and rites of social life, and uncover the significance of seemingly banal signs and symbols. His art is not bound within himself, but is capable of what Jean Fisher describes as “sustaining a poetic imagination capable of disclosing the ethos or common dwelling place of our humanity”.

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