

## **Men at Work**

by Ellen Lee

What is it with men and construction?

Since their youngest years, boys tend to be drawn to construction from all its aspects – power tools, heavy machinery, the enticing playground of scaffolding. Following a reductionist reading, you might say that it's the phallic symbolism that they admire; that men are simply drawn to creating phallic reminders as proof of their conquests. But architecture and construction have also left some of the greatest feats of human creativity, from the pyramids in Egypt to the Colosseum at Rome to the Empire State Building in New York – monuments to civilisation and man's triumph over nature.

Lee Mok Yee and Mark Tan have always been fascinated by urban construction and super-structures, which are recurrent themes and sources of inspiration in both their practices. Rudiments, the first collaborative exhibition between the pair (who share a studio space) presents works old and new that are inspired by the currents of construction in Kuala Lumpur.

The works in Rudiments explore the rhythms and movements of urban life through each artist's material of choice. Mark Tan, trained as a printmaker, makes prints and print-like paintings, while Mok Yee elaborates on his experiments with cork sheets that were first articulated in his solo exhibition A Rhetorical Garden at Richard Koh Fine Art in 2020. In the works of both artists, the formal properties of their chosen material take precedence over the creation of any recognisable image; for this same reason, both artists enjoy working in monochrome, with Mark's works having the minimalist cleanliness of black and white while Mok Yee's cork sheets are left in their raw sienna tones.

The exhibition was curated by the artists themselves, who have sectioned the space into a few select pairings: Mark's A Series of Plants and To The Moon series with Mok Yee's 130 BPM, a large circular sculpture-painting; Mark's Block/Lines with Mok Yee's Rhetorical Garden series; Mark's Rain Patterns with a series of layered vertical works by Mok Yee; and Mark's Symbiosis series with Mok Yee's Landscape Drawing no. 6.

### **Stacks and layers**

The process of making the works mimics the process of urban construction, pared down to the most basic Lego-esque elements of stacking and layering. Mok Yee tears and layers strips of cork sheet over each other, producing descending wave-like patterns in the Landscape Drawing series and bulging textures in others. For Mark, the process begins with photography, specifically with personal snapshots captured during his rambles around the city. He heavily modifies these images, filtering them into monochrome and heightening their contrast levels until they are reduced to their most basic binary forms. To The Moon features some of these modified snapshots, which serve as the spine for the various assemblages in the series. The photographs are embellished with geometric appendages—rectangles, triangles, elongated rhombuses—to become brand new structures. Some of these structures resemble mecha robots, others Corbusier homes. Stacks and layers; repeat. Like a boy-child's obsession with building up Lego blocks and violently striking them down almost immediately after completion, or like a developer's obsession with building new towers only to leave them empty for other pastures, the action of building may appear wanton to some eyes but it has its own base logic in its assertion of individual creative will. In the end, the process, which involves turbulent feats of planning, overcoming, transforming, and by extension destroying, proves more gratifying than the final work.

The coupling of Mark's Blocks/Lines with Mok Yee's Rhetorical Garden shows the playfulness in construction, with more fluid silhouettes and play within structures. In Blocks/Lines, Mark abstracts the forms present in To The Moon and turns them into building blocks for play: the forms break out and into each other's silhouettes, with the painted outline surrounding each geometric arrangement adding a sense of dancing movement to the hard-edged tableaux. They could be a monochromatic bird's-eye-view of Mok Yee's Rhetorical Garden series, which are also contained within a frame.

The pedestals supporting the Rhetorical Garden “bonsai”s (Mok Yee’s own take on the Chinese culture of bonsai tree cultivation) are formally inspired by the looming archways being constructed all around the city to support new MRT train tracks above the highways. What are these new totemic structures lifting us ever higher into the clouds? By drawing a parallel with traditional bonsai cultivation, Rhetorical Garden shows that the imperative to construct elegant structures has been latent in the act of human creation since time immemorial, and that elegance is not antithetical to monumentality.

### **Rhythms and routines**

For the city that never stops building, the act of construction oxymoronically becomes routine, even banal. A city is dependent on its routines, from its schedules of work and commute to the circuitous routes of its townships to the omnipresent hum of its various noises. The city never sleeps, never goes dark. In repetition, there is rhythm. Mok Yee’s 130 BPM most clearly draws out this distinction, with “BPM” standing for “beats per minute”, the aural measure for percussion instruments. The work, a spiralling piece that rises and dips in tight frequency, resembles the triangular oscillations of an audio recording. We can also view it as a representative of the city, an enclosed bubble sustained by tight routines, in which case it is reminiscent of famous city- or island-states that operate on clockwork, like Hong Kong, Singapore, or Manhattan.

A Series of Plants by Mark explores the interior and affective experiences of a building. Despite the “plants” in the title, the series explores organic life generally, whether plant, animal, or human, and how these lives interact and sustain themselves within the city’s hard inorganic structures. The series features more organic forms, created through a combination of printmaking and painting. With ragged brushstrokes, Mark manages to achieve the fluidity of movement and transactions with that touch of aggression that tends to distinguish the urban attitude. These are not your ordinary houseplants, but rather wild thickets that represent the untameable nature of city life; even despite (or perhaps because of?) all our cosmopolitan routines, chaos thrives in the city. At the same time, the forms in Plants also resemble fires, a discovery which revolutionised human history and ushered in the dawn of civilisation, the very thing that all these skyscrapers now serve as monuments to. With its organic forms, A Series of Plants, along with the Symbiosis series and the pair of paintings on canvas (Flytrap and Thorn), adds an emotional timbre to the rhythm of the city by acknowledging the presence of life within it.

## Heights and depths

Each new development is an additional instrument to the orchestra of the city, disturbing its established rhythms. Architecture changes the way we navigate and understand the city – in the most extreme case, how the Merdeka 118 mega-tower now imposes itself within the Kuala Lumpur skyline, its silhouette practically inescapable from every angle in the city centre. Refracted light off its glass facade is another reminder of the tower's presence, in case it wasn't already obvious enough. On a more modest scale, Rudiments also suggests new ways of seeing. Mark's works play with contour and lines to produce new interpretations of prior forms, while Mok Yee's stacks are not only experiments in material but also in shadow play, with the works casting different illusions of depth depending on the angles from which you approach them. In Mok Yee's Untitled works, Stacking Memory, and Landscape Drawing no. 6 (paired in the exhibition with Mark's Symbiosis series), the cork sheets are stacked in more complex formations while still retaining an internal rhythm. Their elevated forms, resembling topography, extend the boundaries of the frame and stretch the definitions of drawing/painting and sculpture.

In contrast to the ascending heights and textured depths of other combinations, Mark's Rain Patterns with a series of Mok Yee's Landscape Drawings presents a more mellow corner of the exhibition. Descending patterns and a relatively flat finish are the unifying factors in this coupling. Rain Patterns is a series of paintings that explore nature's interaction with manmade structures, its patterns inspired by rainwater stains on the sides of buildings. Mok Yee's Landscape Drawings are his rudimentary attempts at experimenting with the cork sheets, experiments which Landscape Drawing no. 6 complicates and brings to a crescendo on another wall.

In Mark and Mok Yee's works, there are no political overtones towards mankind's bottomless capacity for construction and destruction. Their works are inspired by and explore this consuming energy, and their sense of marvel towards these super-structures is a refreshing sentiment to partake in, in contrast to the more apocalyptic view of man as a purely destructive force. Kuala Lumpur is constantly shifting around us, with many of its new changes often amounting to a net negative, but that ancient desire to build and conquer still inspires. The works in Rudiments are produced by two artists who live, work, and socialise in the city, but practised and developed with a patience and curiosity that are difficult to come by in a city that's always hungry for the new.

## ABOUT THE ARTISTS

**Lee Mok Yee** (b. 1988, Klang) received his Diploma in Fine Art from the Dasein Academy of Art, Malaysia, and his Degree in Fine Art from Middlesex University of London. Mok Yee's work is primarily concerned with the entanglement between the conceptual and the material.

He is process-focused and often interrogative of the material aspect in art-making, choosing to work with ready-made or store-bought objects. Mok Yee re-arranges these materials as an act of interrogation against uniformity, pushing against the boundaries of function in mass produced objects. In his material re-/arranging, his practice questions the idea of moving within structures as an exploration of change and its futility.

Currently, Mok Yee is pursuing collaborative projects and art residencies. Most recently, he was a grantee under British Council's Connections through Culture programme in 2021, during which he participated in an online residency with British artist Laura Porter. In the same year, he initiated a temporary collective called Labour & Weight alongside artists and cultural workers Okui Lala, Yeo Lyle, and Koe Cheng Gaik, which travelled to and exhibited in various spaces around Malaysia. The project was funded by the CENDANA Art in the City Public Art Commission. Also in 2021, his work was selected for the Gold Award in UOB's annual Painting of the Year competition. Mok Yee has exhibited in various galleries locally and in Germany, London, Korea, and Singapore. His most recent solo exhibitions include *A Rhetorical Garden* (2021) at Richard Koh Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur; *Superstition II* (2019) at George Town Festival, Penang; and *Superstition* (2013) at Studio at Straits, Penang.

**Mark Tan** (b. 1991, Kuala Lumpur) obtained his Bachelor of Arts degree in Drawing and Applied Arts from the University of the West of England, Bristol. In his investigations and experiments with the methodologies of mark-making, he works across a diverse range of digital and traditional media, including photography, oil, charcoal, and various printmaking techniques. Working from his centrally-located studio amidst the sights and sounds of modern urban development projects in Kuala Lumpur, Mark translates his daily observations into inspiration and subjects to be explored in his practice.

## **ABOUT THE ARTISTS**

Mark has exhibited both locally and internationally in Singapore, Indonesia, France, and the UK. In 2017, he had his debut solo exhibition, Arrangements, at OUR ArtProjects, Kuala Lumpur. His most recent exhibitions include A Collapsible Time (2020) at zlgdesign, Kuala Lumpur; The Echo Boomers (2020) at Richard Koh Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur; Printmakers' Assembly (2020) at STPI Gallery, Singapore; Rethinking Editions (2019) and Heartbreak Hotel (2018) at OUR ArtProjects, Kuala Lumpur; and Bi-Lateral Bonds (2016) at Taksu Gallery, Singapore.

## **ABOUT THE WRITER**

Ellen Lee is a writer based in Kuala Lumpur. She received her Bachelor's in Comparative Literature from the University of Kent, UK, in 2017. Currently, she is assisting with operations at The Back Room gallery while pursuing writing on a freelance basis. She has worked with a wide range of Malaysian artists and art entities, the latter of which includes Snow Ng Advisory and Projects, OUR ArtProjects, ILHAM Gallery, CENDANA, and Cloud Projects.

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