Wei Leng Tay

How did we get here
When Chan Hampe Galleries opened its doors in 2010, the gallery’s aim was to “create a platform for East-West cultural exchange by exhibiting and promoting contemporary art with a primary focus on Singapore.” As the gallery developed, the emphasis on “East-West” became less relevant. “East-West” was far too simplistic a description for the programme and the complex art practices it represented.

Wei Leng is one of many Singaporean artists working abroad, including Heman Chong, Ho Tzu Nyen, Suzann Victor, and Ming Wong, who represent Singapore in various biennales, exhibitions, and art fairs. The idea of a “Singaporean artist” is linked to a porous concept of “Singaporean-ness”, a principal characteristic of which is racial diversity. Many years ago, I had the pleasure of seeing Wei Leng’s *Discordant Symmetries* exhibition at the NUS Museum Baba House (Singapore, 2011). She approached this project, even though she had by then not lived in Singapore for more than a decade, from the perspective of a third-generation ethnic Chinese—born, bred and largely educated in Singapore.

However, setting up base in Hong Kong, a place more ethnically homogenous and familiar, and yet less welcoming than her home country, had stirred deep-seated questions about difference and inclusion. This experience and the nuances behind these perceptions continue to inform Wei Leng’s practice.

The issues and perspectives illuminated by Wei Leng for her show are very close to my heart as someone with mixed parentage. I constantly strive to understand myself and have come to embrace who I am as a ‘Millennium Child’, a term endearingly tagged onto me by my playwright friend, Bille Brown. It is a term for a person who is the embodiment of a melange of different cultures, habits, and identities, and who comfortably embraces these differences to his or her advantage. Wei Leng is, then, undoubtedly a true-blue Millennium Child.
Reading a photograph by Wei Leng Tay necessarily begins with the sensation of boredom—this is natural, and must be admitted before we can move on to more productive things. Her photography initially deflects curiosity about the specifics of the work and instead raises the status of the image: What are we supposed to be looking at here? What kind of image are we facing? We recognize that the work is not about the particular in a meaningful way, and that these images belong to a broader system that lies just beyond the boundaries of understanding available to individual works. There is a feeling that it is the viewer who falls under critique here, that our media consumption habits predispose us to read these images incorrectly. Our approach to photography today is often far too literal, leaving us unable to decode the relevance—not to say meaning—of the image outside of its immediate media context, be it photojournalism, contemporary art, or something else entirely. Tay’s work reeks of aura, but what its halo stands for is more complicated. We feel that these works are intensely personal, and that whatever research might go into them (that is to say, whatever they might be about in a social sense) and whatever formal attributes affect their composition are secondary to the involvement of the artist herself.

Preconceptions, mercifully, can be wrong; this applies to the viewer as much as the characters who inhabit the work, who often feel lost as to their roles in the practice, and the artist, who, we suspect, often ends up with more than she intended. The obvious topics of the work are naturally and immediately deconstructed. Domesticity, of course, is submerged in a sexualized nostalgia for the familiar relationships surrounding the individuals pictured in scenes like Cathleen and Raphael or Pinky. What remains is a latent discomfort that cannot be explicitly discussed, but rather informs and adds an edge to everything around it. There are artists who take questions of media and the use of the image—even looking directly at domestic situations—and make them more or less boring. Think of Li Yu and Liu Bo, who dramatize offbeat articles from the newspaper by restaging the tableaux of frontpage photographs with long, still videos in which no one moves—almost. Or John Clang, whose work with telepresent families split up over long distances is his least visually engaging practice, even if it constitutes the ineffable background to his more exciting one-off still lifes. There
is Nguan, whose outdoor lightness mirrors the darkness of Tay’s interiors. And there is Chien-Chi Chang, whose responsibly distant black-and-white images counterbalance the inextricably intimate and oddly entangled subjectivity we find here. For all of these photographers, the fates of the artist and the image diverge as much in their afterlives as, we suspect, do their subjects. Unique to Wei Leng Tay, there is far more to be discovered in the expressiveness or, more likely, non-expressiveness of the figures she captures in Lee Family than in their living conditions and the social environment around them.

Reading a photograph by Wei Leng Tay often then proceeds to a feeling of revulsion when we mistakenly focus more on these external conditions than on the involvement of the artist or the relationship between figure and lens. This is the problem with the extravagant profusion of research-based practice and the artist-as-ethnographer today; everyone gets pulled into this way of working. For Tay, the question of how the artist is perceived—by the viewer and by her subject—is often more significant than what she herself perceives. There are, indeed, social issues that are raised in her work, but most are the product of the artist’s interest in herself: she focuses, for instance, on middle-class Chinese families in Singapore and Malaysia, as well as, later, Hong Kong; she has also immersed herself in mainland families in Hong Kong, and in Japanese families in rural Japan. The constant, however, is displacement, not the particular ethnic or cultural matrix that might come to dominate the practice of a lesser artist. These categories are interesting because of their self-imposed racial segregation, and for the images of insularity that they cultivate. Certain formations emerge in Tay’s understanding of these displaced domestic cultures within cultures: what she sees is the framing of the self, of gender, and of family structures, albeit in ways that reflect her own position as much as anything else. Everyone becomes subject to the epistemic violence of the category, of the label, and so this is the last thing that the artist seeks to do with her photographs. They speak, always, in the register of “Am I this?” rather than the more common “You are that.” Tay understands her own process in a way that is open-ended enough for it to avoid becoming literally sociological; wherever there is a message, it should be far from obvious. Our lives, after all, are not so dramatic. What we end up seeing is that things aren’t happening at all.

Reading a photograph by Wei Leng Tay settles, in the middle phases of the process, into a satisfaction with or at least acceptance of the flatness of the image. Putting aside questions of research and realizing that there are forms of silence other than boredom, we become curious about how, precisely, the artist manages to accomplish what she does with these pictures. There is a very conscious flattening of any family or social drama that might take place before the moment is recorded, even when it is clear that Tay pulls the trigger at a sensitive time. When something happens, it is always a memory of the very recent past. The key question in her work is this: How much should the audience understand of what she is trying to do? How much of herself should enter the images? How much social history should be captured? It is this instability, this refusal to make a decision about where the photograph begins or ends within her practice (and within the world at large) that makes this body of work so compelling.

For Tay, the perfect threshold is reached when she herself understands what she is trying to do. Everything else, as they say, is icing on the cake—including the legibility of the photograph for her viewers, even those who could be considered ideal viewers. The artist has experience in photojournalism, and in the flatness of her creative work there is a curiosity about the current polarization of photography in the news: to have value, an image must be either unique, unreproducible and spectacular; or universal, endlessly recyclable and timeless. Tay’s photography has nothing to do with these categories, and yet her practice speaks to mass media culture far more than it does to the culture of viewing photography in galleries. As if to underscore this fact, she pays attention to the balance between various forms of media in her work, occasionally including recordings or transcripts of conversations and other forms of documentation alongside the images of her subjects. This background, however, necessarily becomes vague. Tay refuses to attribute specific quotations to specific personalities, allowing their positions to recede into a general interest in social conditions that never overwhelms the photograph.
Reading a photograph by Wei Leng Tay really only becomes interesting after the viewer has already passed through these initial phases of discomfort. What happens next is surprising: perversion enters the picture, with the understanding that something else entirely is happening here—that the pictures we are looking at resonate not because they reflect their subjects or their intended audience, but rather the projected desires and positions of the artist herself. This is most obvious in Tay’s involvement with Hong Kong Chinese families, but is also evident (in a more distant and, therefore, extreme way) in everything up to and including her portraits of the women in Japanese families. Sometimes this takes the form of projected autobiography—the feeling that subjects with the same life experiences might have similar concerns—but, as often as not, it also takes the more interesting form of projected image production. Here, the artist makes pictures that tell her things about herself that she otherwise refuses to acknowledge, and presents her subjects in ways that affirm the self through the manipulation of the other. This is a long, two-way process of dealing with expectations: Tay might expect the social circumstances of a family to tell her one thing, while the subjects depicted might expect to be presented in a certain light.

As these disagreements are negotiated, social realities collapse onto individual psychological portraits, both of which evaporate and enter into the artist’s production of a possible image of the self. There is something performative about this process, as the artist embeds herself within families (members of which quickly go from being strangers to relatives in a queer domestic structure). This is not to suggest that Tay’s work with her subjects is at all flippant—her approach is earnest, curious, and open. It is possible, after all, that this way of working is nothing but the projection of a writer onto an artist. We all traffic in misunderstandings, even as we hope that some might be more critically productive than others. The artist is a participant in an open-ended theatrical rehearsal without star or director—one that never expects to come to fruition on the proper stage. By appropriating the lives of others, Tay comes out on the side of an anti-identitarian politics.

Reading a photograph by Wei Leng Tay concludes with a feeling of optimism and excitement born of the fact that so much of the baggage that would otherwise weigh down her project can be successfully stripped away. There is an understanding of what can be accomplished in interpersonal relationships, and of what art can do to mediate otherwise tricky social situations. Rather than engaging in the kind of humanizing documentary approach that has poisoned so many otherwise inoffensive images, Tay delivers a universalizing project that is simultaneously more open and less understanding—or less willing to understand. Her strongest photographs eliminate the visible identifiers of culture, shifting these outside of the frame of relevance and leaving behind only the remnants of what could be called universal culture, the culture of the non-place. The artist has moved tangibly from searching for something within her practice to producing, what she needs is no longer something tied to a self or other out there in the world, but rather something that can be called into being through the image.

Looking at photographs from the better part of a decade ago, certain social issues remain evident; today, this space has already been explored, catalogued, and left for dead. Perception becomes alien. Tay is not interested in commentary on a specific community, but rather on the conflicting ideas of image and media that pass directly over these communities—how the universalizing lens of the genre of family portraiture in Fion and Hei Hei or Kitty, for instance, might reveal both the fractures and connections between individuals, between households, between cultures, and, most importantly, between self and other. Many things feed into the final emotion that is distilled in any one of Tay’s pictures: the search for a subject, the painstaking work of getting to know strangers, the fabrication of particular moments, the capture of something that disregards the content of all of these things. As we move on to the next image, we are left with the feeling that Tay has done as much as any artist can do—she went somewhere, did something, and only came part of the way back.

Robin Peckham is an independent curator and Deputy Editor of LEAP.
Pinky, 2015
Detritus, 2007

Lisa Botos

Out of Place
The idea of place, as psychological or physical orientation, as social position and relational emplacement, in context and in concept, is relevant when thinking about the work of Wei Leng Tay. Subtext in some works, catalyst in others, disposition and dislocation—although subtle and elusive—inva...
Wei Leng Tay’s compositions, too, accentuate the physical, social and psychological textures associated with a range of conceptual interpretations of “place”. In Fion and Hei Hei, the vertical and horizontal lines in the image hold the two figures tightly in the space, creating tension in what is a quotidian activity for a mother, but speaks of weightier issues of power relationships in the home, prescribed roles of women in society and what women want out of their own lives—all consequential questions Wei Leng Tay has of her own life. Although we know Fion is in the act of feeding her child, we can’t actually see that physical connection. But that connection, our brain tells us, is there, expressed formally, and playfully, through the repetition of polka dots in Fion’s blouse, the child’s chair, and even in the tray of food. However, the visual obstruction of the physical connection between the two figures from the viewer’s perspective amplifies a tension present in the work. A physical disconnection and, perhaps, a psychological isolation felt by both the mother and the artist. Tay’s emotional ambivalence here is palpable. The composition is further accentuated by the complexity of the lighting. The foreground and middle ground light outline and define the edges of the figures, reducing them to pleasing, sculptural shapes— albeit separate and distinct— triggering a subtle perception of emotional displacement within.

The idea of place, in its full spectrum of possibilities, opens up fresh lines of thinking on Wei Leng Tay’s work. Place as a physical location, place as a conceptual framework for orientating and observing oneself and place as a formalistic tool, invite concomitant avenues of engagement. The idea of place is just but one way in. Once inside, the works do not disappoint, beckoning us to circulate through, traversing divergent levels, always open.

Lisa Botos is a Singapore-based curator and founder of Botos., an arts-related, project-orientated initiative.
Human Faces, National Museum of Singapore, SINGAPORE
All About Fukuoka: The 10 Years of FAAM Artist-in-Residence Program, Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, JAPAN
Singapore Survey 2010: Beyond LKY, Valentine Willie Fine Art, SINGAPORE
City Planes: Social Documentary Photography, Hong Kong Heritage Museum, HONG KONG
Young Portfolio Acquisitions 2009, Kiyosato Museum of Photographic Arts, JAPAN
Grid versus Chaos, Gallery VER (with Para/Site Art Space), Bangkok, THAILAND
Photo MIAMI 2009, Charles Guice Contemporary, Miami, USA
ArT/MART 2009, Para/Site Art Space, HONG KONG
Traces, Singapore Art Show, Earl Lu Gallery, Institute of Contemporary Art, SINGAPORE
Where do we go from here?, 3. Internationales Fotografiefestival F/Stop, Leipzig, GERMANY
Declinations of Joy, Fotografia International Festival of Rome, Palazzo delle Esposizioni, Rome, ITALY

2008
Document, O’Born Contemporary, Toronto, CANADA
The Photo Review 2008, Gallery HA01, The University of the Arts, Philadelphia, USA
Volume XVIII, New Works Gallery Online, Silver Eye Center for Photography, Pittsburgh, USA
Young Portfolio Acquisitions 2007, Kiyosato Museum of Photographic Arts, Kiyosato, JAPAN

2007
Singapore Art Exhibition 2007, Singapore Art Museum, SINGAPORE
Desbromientos Phet07, PhotoEspaña 2007, Museo de Artes Contemporaneas, Madrid, SPAIN
Projections of the Night of Photography, PhotoEspaña 2007, Madrid, SPAIN
Group Exhibition, Grotto Fine Art, HONG KONG
Young Portfolio Acquisitions 2006, Kiyosato Museum of Photographic Arts, Kiyosato, JAPAN

Public Collections
National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts, Taichung, TAIWAN
Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Fukuoka, JAPAN
Kiyosato Museum of Photographic Arts, Kiyosato, JAPAN
Heritage Museum, HONG KONG

Residencies and Commissions
What we are left with, Format Festival and WYNG Masters Award, Derby, UK. and HONG KONG
12 Oil Street Project, Arts Promotion Office, HONG KONG
The Art Incubator Residency, SINGAPORE
Artist-in-Residence Program 2009, Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Fukuoka, JAPAN

Grants and Awards
Presentation and Participation Grant, National Arts Council, SINGAPORE
Market and Audience Development Grant, National Arts Council, SINGAPORE

2012
Finalist, WYNG Masters Award, HONG KONG
International Development Grant, National Arts Council, SINGAPORE
Singapore Internationale Grant, SINGAPORE

2011
Nominee, ICON Martell de Cordon Bleu Photography Prize 2011, SINGAPORE
HESP Grant, National Heritage Board, SINGAPORE

2009
International Development Grant, SINGAPORE
Arts Creation Fund, National Arts Council, SINGAPORE
Singapore International Foundation Sponsorship, SINGAPORE

2008
Arts Professional Development Grant, National Arts Council, SINGAPORE

2007
Selected Publications
Photography & Diaspora: A roundtable with Pok Chi Lau, Surendra Lawoti, and Wei Leng Tay, moderated by Anthony W. Lee, Trans Asia Photography (TAP) Review
The Roving Eye: Contemporary Art From Southeast Asia, ARTER Space for Art
Photofile vol. 94, Australian Centre for Photography
Concept, Context, Contestation, Bangkok Art and Culture Centre

2013
Everyday Life, Asian Art Biennial, National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts
300 Families, Hong Kong International Photography Festival Flare
Convergence (monograph)

2012
STILL BUILDING, Selasar Sunaryo Art Space
Like Boys, WEK No 19

2011
Affinity, Delhi Photo Festival 2011, India Habitat Centre and Nazar Foundation

2010
Discordant Symmetries, NUS Museum
Interior Living, Daylight Magazine, May 2010
City Planes: Social Documentary Photography, Hong Kong Heritage Museum
Outside, Ojodepez, #20
Photographs by the Next Generation: 2009, Kiyosato Museum of Photographic Arts

2009
The Pursuit of Happiness, Noorderlicht 2009
Traces, The Art Incubator 2009
Where do we go from here?, F/Stop Katalog 2009
La Gioia - visioni e rappresentazioni, Fotografia - Festival Internazionale di Roma 2009

2008
Desolatory Landscapes,Doi Botox Gallery
UnDiaCualquiera, Ojodepez, #12

2007
Photographs by the Next Generation: 2007, Kiyosato Museum of Photographic Arts

2006
Photographs by the Next Generation: 2006, Kiyosato Museum of Photographic Arts

Wei Leng Tay
How did we get here