

## Ghost Cities

To walk through any city in Malaysia is to experience a myriad of contradictions. Each city contains within it multiple worlds. Kuala Lumpur is at once a city of movement and a city of secrecy. Melaka treads the borders of being an oneiric city and a souvenir globe. Penang fluctuates between traces of the past and visions of the future. And so, the rest follow. The incessant and chaotic crossing of characteristics suggests that these cities, like Malaysia as a whole, are always in flux. They are unstable sites whose contents are composed of different historical and cultural influences. From the debris of the past, Malaysian cities feverishly emerge and reemerge as cities with mutant identities that mediate between contrasting forces. However, on many levels, each city can be seen as an assembly of collages -- a glut of signs and images and a collection of narratives and reflections.

At the heart of the urban space, and within the cramped confines of the city, locals invent their own spaces and channels of expression in dialogue with the urban landscape. Their invisible and visible movements in the urban body, their appropriation and reclamation of space, and their whispers and gossips flow through the veins and arteries of the city, pumping life into it and imbuing it with identity. Gaston Bachelard, in *The Poetics of Space*, speaks intimately of the spatial poetics of the city when he describes being "lulled by the noise of Paris" (Walker 2013, 161). He returns, again and again, to highlight the interplay between memory and architecture. Architecture becomes a central element, not only due to its physicality that anchors our memories in urban places, but also because of how it inspires us to claim space and forge identity. Buildings that dominate the city as markers of modernity and decaying structures that reverberate echoes of trauma and conflict speak not only of the durability of materials, but of the desires and fears and of the hopes and dreams of the people who built it, dwelled in it, and those who lived in its background along the years. Personal and collective memories are ingrained in each building, and from the moment of its initiation to the event of its destruction, it houses a dialogue that embraces the traditions and traumas of the past, the anxieties of the present, and the dreams of the future.

Within the city, memories survive. They survive in the form of traces and residues left by architecture. Abandoned or decaying, demolished or standing, memories of shifting social, political, and cultural dynamics persist in the tokens and remnants of buildings. Stories and narratives of the locals are woven into the fabric of architectural structures. The house, Bachelard famously wrote, "protects the dreamer" (Bachelard 1969, 6). When we look at fragmented architectural elements, we realize that spaces need not be 'official' to be memorial, they only need the meaningful and creative appropriation of those who dwell in them to become sites of memory. And so, the stairs of the post office become a fleeting stage for the children to play make-believe as they wait outside for their parents to send off packages and postcards to distant relatives. The window in the college lecture room provides a temporary escape, inviting daydreams. Buildings become memory boxes that bear references to the many identities of a city.

It is within the framework of spatial poetics that young Malaysian artist Yim Yen Sum works to create contemporary artworks that preserve the narratives of Malaysian cities from past to present. Walking in the city is both an act of remembrance and amnesia for Yim. Or perhaps, one should think of remembrance and amnesia as two sides of the same coin, as for every event we choose to remember, we also indirectly choose to forget another. Who is to decide what is worthy of commemoration and what should be rewritten? Both are questions that the artist reflects upon in her latest series *The Further You Stand, The Clearer You See*. Yim adopts a traditional approach in creating soft sculptures that evoke elements of nostalgia within the viewer, and at the same breath comment on the power relations that govern the city. Buildings that bear the collective memories of the community or the personal memories of the artist are embroidered on gauze to create a cluster of patchworks, which when sewn together, present a reworked set of imaginative architectural structures

that carry within them fractions of other buildings and of other memories. The process is long and arduous, and its beginnings sees Yim assuming the identity of an urban anthropologist, as she makes site visits to historical and decaying buildings across Malaysia that are linked to her childhood. These are buildings and structures that were once living spaces, playgrounds, and sites of nostalgia. It is only through going back to these sites that the artist gradually uncovers other stories beyond her own. After her research and documentation, she recycles existing buildings into new edifices. The reimagining of buildings is not just an artistic choice; it sheds light on the power dynamics that govern urban space. History and memory, commemoration and amnesia pervade contemporary cities. Continuous movement leaves a sense of irrecoverable loss in cities hollowed out by policies or conflict. Whereas in reality the citizen is rendered powerless when it comes to such decisions, Yim resists this state of helplessness by reclaiming autonomy as an artist and rebuilding traces of the past city through stitching, thereby preserving vanishing memories.

Process and technique are tools of storytelling in Yim's practice. Her delicate needlework sees a fine black thread weave together fragmented memories and stories, as if mirroring the narratives that are scattered throughout the city's hidden corners. Black, a color that contains and absorbs, becomes a base on which the artist structures her narrative. Metaphors of care are also prominent in Yim's work. Her use of gauze, a material traditionally employed to treat injuries, alludes to the need to heal the wounds inherent in the fabric of the city. With every stitch, Yim builds new connections, metaphorically juxtaposing the reality where heritage is demolished. In her manual process and through her traditional technique, the artist contrasts the fast pace of the urban environment, and invites reflections on the fragility of history and memory.

In her exploration of the dialectics of disappearance and the changing face of the cityscape in Kuala Lumpur, Yim incorporates a portion of Pudu Prison in *Whisper Silhouette II*. The prison, situated in Jalan Hang Tuah, was built in phases by the British colonial government between 1891 and 1895, but as of December 2012, the complex was largely demolished, leaving behind only the main gate and a portion of the exterior wall (Zappei 2010). Pudu Prison was a vital monument in Kuala Lumpur. The past once clinged to its structures that housed allied prisoners in the Japanese invasion of the Malay peninsula. Architecturally, its walls were adorned with a mural depicting tropical scenes painted in 1984 by an inmate, who began painting it during his sentence, only to return as a free man to complete it (Zappei 2010). The vertical facade made entry into the Guinness Book of World Records (Zappei 2010). Despite its importance that permeates collective memory and cultural heritage, authorities demolished it, leaving a gap in the city's memory.

When not abolished, buildings in Kuala Lumpur are left to withstand the passage of time. Certainly, that is the case for the Old Post Office at the end of Jalan Petaling in Jalan Panggong. The building is the subject of *The Faded Memories*, which features elements of the building's Malay and Tudor architecture. It has morphed since its initiation in the 1920's from the Old Post Office to Malaya Hainan Restaurant, savouring old memories and making space for new ones. Here, architecture acts as a vessel, preserving the tales of the city from the past to the present, while carving out space for the future.

Multiple works in the series reference Razak Mansion, a housing project launched in the '60s, which was a place the artist often wandered around after school. Now, she returns to it again in her work in attempt to stitch together memories of her childhood playground. In *The Faded Memories II*, units and units of houses are condensed to form the mansion, a communal architectural space where bonds are forged between neighbors, who find solace in the kopitiams nearby as their children make playgrounds out of the mansion's rigid architecture. It is this sense of childhood imagination that Yim evokes in the triptych *The Further You Stand, the Clearer You See*. The shape of an artist's imagination is a deeply intimate territory, one that Yim invites the viewer, quite playfully, to explore.

Bearing the title of the exhibition, the triptych focuses on a zoomed-in detail of Razak Mansion: the ventilation wall. In our conversation, Yim spoke of the dialectics of the inside and outside, recalling the impalpable shadows cast through the ventilation holes, and how, once inside, she possessed a view of the world outside while remaining invisible. The walls also became a storage for memorabilia, with the holes functioning as a storeroom, a sort of shelf where various household items found a home. This liminal space, like the cities in Malaysia, exists in tension between the outside and the inside, the public and the private, the past and the future.

Yim's triptych shows detailed and distant depictions of the ventilation walls, as if saying that to experience this intimate, indeterminate space one must step closer to read the details, and then move further away to read the whole narrative.

The city is prone to forgetfulness. There are no conditions in which the city will live forever. It does, however, linger. It lingers in the minds of its inhabitants through their disjointed and imaginative memories of the past. What one person remembers is irretrievably lost for another, and so the community balances itself. The city also lingers in the words of a poet and in the works of an artist. The interlaces of autobiographical reflections and historical anecdotes in Yim's artistic practice can then be seen as an attempt to resist the ineluctable process of erasure. Her works hold together an image of the urban landscape of Malaysia that is gradually slipping into the archives.

#### **Reference list:**

Bachelard, Gaston. 1969. *The Poetics of Space*. Boston. Beacon Press.

Walker, Casey M. "Intimate Cities: *The Portrait of a Lady* and the Poetics of Metropolitan Space." *Studies in the Novel* 45(2): 161 - 177.

Zappei, Julia. "Historic murals are lost as Malaysian jail wall is raised." *The Sydney Morning Herald*. June 24th, 2010.

<https://www.smh.com.au/world/historic-murals-lost-as-malaysian-jail-wall-is-raised-20100623-yz0x.html>

#### **Line Dalile**

*Line Dalile is a curator and writer based in Belgium. She graduated in 2017 with a degree in visual culture from Curtin University, Perth, Australia. In 2018, she attended the School of Curatorial Studies in Venice, Italy.*