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Pictorialism and Modernity in Singapore, 1950–60

CHARMAINE TOH

Abstract

This article investigates the practice of pictorial photography in Singapore from 1950–60. It avoids a modernist art discourse that has traditionally positioned pictorialism in opposition to modern photography and argues that in Singapore, at least, pictorialism marked the start of a modern practice of photography that was predicated on the notion of a fully self-conscious and autonomous art form. Drawing upon John Clark's study of the transmission and transformation of stylistic practices from Europe and North America to Asia in his book Modern Asian Art (1998), this article considers Singapore's particular social and political situation to explain how pictorialism's associated practices changed in this new context.

In Singapore, the first Open Photographic Exhibition at the British Council Hall in January 1950 marked the start of a sustained pictorial photography practice and a period of intense production and circulation of photographs.¹ This essay takes a close look at pictorial photography in Singapore from 1950–60, paying particular attention to Singapore's specific social and historical context. The 1950s were Singapore's key nation-building years, coming after the Japanese occupation from 1942–45 and just before Singapore gained

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independence from the British and joined the newly formed Malaysia in 1963. The decade saw an increasing sense of Singapore as a nation, culminating in self-governance in 1959. Photographers were not isolated from these wider developments, and I seek to demonstrate how they appropriated the pictorial movement towards their own ends. Using an expanded understanding of pictorialism that is not dependent on western modernism's chronology of stylistic developments, I clarify the way pictorial photography intersected with modern Singapore society. In the following sections, I discuss three broad categories under which pictorial photography operated within the conditions of modernity in Singapore. The first looks at the way pictorial photography allowed for an assertion of nationhood; the second highlights the pluralism in pictorial photography as a function of individual expression; and the third considers the negotiation with primitivism in the construction of modernity. In the process, I also position pictorialism as the start of modern photography in Singapore.

The rise of a group of photographers who identified themselves as "pictorialists" contributed to a burgeoning infrastructure for photographic practice in Singapore, including the formation of several camera clubs and numerous salon exhibitions. The first Open Photographic Exhibition was organised by the Singapore Art Society and saw 275 prints submitted by 75 photographers from Singapore and Malaya.² By its second edition the following year, the salon had gone international; 65 prints from America, Hong Kong, India, Canada and France were shown together with 175 prints from Singapore and Malaya.³ The Singapore Camera Club (later named the Photographic Society of Singapore or PSS) was also formed in 1950 and started the Pan-Malayan Photographic Exhibition in 1953. The PSS took over the organising duties of the Open Photographic Exhibition and renamed it the Singapore International Salon in 1957, significantly growing its size and reputation. At its peak in 1968, the salon received 4,590 entries from 43 countries, and exhibited 735 works.⁴ The South-East Asia Photographic Society was formed in 1958 and started the biannual International Pictorial Photography Exhibition in 1960; the Singapore Colour Photographic Society was formed in 1967 and started organising the International Salon of Colour Photography in 1976. Singaporean photographers also exhibited regularly outside Singapore, including at prominent exhibitions like the London Salon.

Pictorialism, Modern Art and Modernity

Pictorialism was an international photography movement that emerged in Europe in the late 19th century that aimed to legitimise photography as art.

John Szarkowski has provided an explanation for the advent of pictorialism as a reaction to George Eastman's simplified photographic process in the form of the Kodak camera launched in 1888.⁵ The new convenience of the camera—"You press the button; We do the rest"—threatened the status of photography as an art that required practice and mastery. Photographers responded by differentiating artistic photography from utilitarian photography. The movement quickly spread across countries, accompanied by the formation of an increasing number of camera clubs and annual photographic salons, which were highly influential in promoting the new pictorial movement and stimulating the production of new work.

From the very beginning, pictorialism encompassed a huge diversity of styles. Photographers did not agree with each other on what artistic photography should look like—debates were heated and abundant. John Taylor's research has revealed the different schisms in early pictorialist activity. Tracing pictorialism's history from The Linked Ring in London to the Photo-Secession in the United States and subsequently the Photographic Salon des Refusés (organised in protest to The Photographic Salon of 1908) and the London Salon (birthed in 1910 by unhappy photographers to replace The Photographic Salon), it is clear to see that there were many different camps of photographers, all jockeying for leadership of the field.⁶ Taylor further points out that there were widely differing opinions on pictorial aesthetics, in particular the place of impressionism in photography or, as photographer Frederick Evans memorably described, "all-over, low-toned, 'treacly' things".⁷

Despite this early diversity, by the 1930s, pictorialism was associated with a specific style of photography that featured soft edges, low tones and an emphasis on handwork. In her study of MoMA's photography department, Erin Kathleen O'Toole has suggested that this development was driven by the efforts of key individuals to position a "straight" style of photography, which emphasised clean lines, sharp edges and smooth surfaces, as modern art. She adds, "Where Pictorialism was seen as a vestige of Victorian romanticism or symbolism, a relic from a past age, straight photography was considered contemporary, of the moment. Most photographers equated straight with modern."⁸ Curator Ann Thomas gives a similar account. She states:

Modernist photography in the United States shared a desire to demonstrate synchronicity with the present by exploring new ideas, subjects and techniques and to define itself against the romantic, soft-focus aesthetic of Pictorialism, which by the 1920s had degenerated into mannerism. Sharp, crisp lines would eventually predominate over the aesthetic of soft edges and muted tones.⁹

Pictorialism's position within this stylistic trajectory is dependent on a modernist art discourse which situates pictorialism in opposition to modern (straight) photography. However, this seems to me to be somewhat inadequate in addressing the realities of the development of pictorial photography. For example, Christian Peterson has noted the blurry lines between pictorial and modernist photography in the United States; there were photographers who belonged to both camps, as well as the lively pictorial practice that continued alongside modernist photographic practices until the 1950s.¹⁰ A modernist art discourse is also insufficient to explain the emergence of pictorial photography in other parts of the world. Instead, I would like to shift our understanding of pictorialism by moving away from the emphasis on style—"painterly" or "romantic"—and by refocusing on pictorialism as a *movement* that prioritised the expressive possibilities of the photograph and the individuality of the photographer. Similarly, a pictorial photograph is simply one that concerns itself with aesthetics over fact, regardless of stylistic or technical differences, in keeping with the origins of the pictorial movement. Within such a framework, I want to position pictorialism as the start of modern photography in Singapore, one predicated on the notion of a fully self-conscious and autonomous art form. More specifically, modern photography here is not defined by Thomas's "sharp edge" versus pictorialism's "soft curve"; it is not a matter of style but an engagement with the conditions of modernity.

At this point, I want to clarify my usage of "modernist" and "modern". The preceding discussion of style and the definition of modern photography is reliant on a modernist art discourse that traces a consecutive series of avant-garde reactions and privileges the notion of truth to medium.¹¹ In other words, this modernist discourse is tied to Euro-American art history and the associated ideas of originality and autonomy.¹² However, I am proposing an alternative understanding of modern photography that takes into account a broader idea of modernity. John Clark has observed how modern art in Asia developed in response to different historical processes, including the "growth of a society, and within it an art world", the "institutional introduction and reinforcement of society-wide modernisation processes" and the "transfer to Asian art cultures of a penumbra of styles [...] (which were) assimilated, transformed and developed in relative autonomy to their Euramerican centres of origination ..."¹³ These different processes provide the basis for a more contextual articulation of modern art. Therefore, in positioning pictorial photography in Singapore as a form of modern photography, the conditions of modernity specific to the developmental history of Singapore must be considered.

Modernity, and thus modern art, in Singapore is intrinsically linked to the legacy of British colonisation and the subsequent search for national identity. Singapore is not unique in this. In his catalogue essay for the 4th Asian Art Show in Fukuoka, curator Masahiro Ushiroshoji noted that Asian artists have had to learn western techniques while still establishing a form of self-expression that was not a mere copy. The most common solution was for these artists to depict local subject matter, for example, local landscapes or traditional folk tales, using western techniques. Furthermore, because these artists were often working during periods of nation-building, they tended to conflate the search for self-expression with a search for national identity.¹⁴ In other words, their objective became to create a Singaporean art, an Indonesian art or a Filipino art, and so on. Often, there was a negotiation between tradition, as a substitute for Asian-ness, and modernity. This negotiation has been well-documented with respect to the Nanyang school of painting, which strove to develop a new aesthetic for art in Singapore.¹⁵ Pictorial photography, too, was involved in this negotiation with modernity, but took a vastly different path, not only compared to pictorialism in Europe and North America, but also painting and sculpture in Singapore.

Assertion of Nationhood

Unlike painting and sculpture, there was no long tradition of either western or Asian photographic history for Singaporean photographers to grapple with. One might even say that photography was almost democratic in its accessibility to the masses and association with amateur practitioners.¹⁶ As a result, photographers did not seem to feel a need to “invent” a style that would reflect their circumstances the same way that the Nanyang artists did. In fact, as I shall demonstrate later, the pictorial photographers felt free to embrace all styles under the rubric of pictorialism. Instead, nationalist sentiments manifested through the prestige of salon exhibitions. In the foreword to the 1959 South-East Asia Salon of Photography, organised by the Singapore Art Society, Ho Kok Hoe stated:

Photography, like any other form of art, is an expression of the life and time of a people and in this Salon we see the best aspirations and hopes of the many peoples who call South-East Asia their home.

In South-East Asia, we see a resurgence of nationalism. One nation after another is throwing off the yoke of Colonialism. We in Singapore are on the eve of attaining self-government and we in the Singapore Art Society are especially happy that this Salon should

be held at this most opportune juncture. Through art, the people of a country records [sic] the moods of history, and what is more befitting than that we should, at this crucial moment in the history of our country, hold a salon.¹⁷

Ho seems to have been implying that the very act of organising an international exhibition like the South-East Asia Salon of Photography was an assertion of nationhood. Certainly, the notion of nation did not overtly manifest in the actual photographs in the exhibition, which ran the usual gamut of portraits, still lifes and genre scenes, with no particular political overtones. The only exception was *War or Peace* by Lan Ke Tung from Indonesia, but even that was a fairly innocuous scene of a white dove flying across a graveyard. Instead, it was the salon itself that acted as a symbol of contemporaneity within the international network of photography clubs and salons, as Singapore fought to gain recognition for itself as an independent nation.

The following year saw the 11th Singapore International Salon, held in 1960 at the Victoria Memorial Hall as the first salon after Singapore achieved self-governance from the British in 1959. The guest of honour was the Yang di Pertuan Negara, Yusof bin Ishak, who had replaced the British Governor of Singapore.¹⁸ A close examination of the salon catalogue reveals much.¹⁹ Yusof was the first guest of honour to be invited to write a message for the catalogue, and his congratulatory message was translated into the Malay and Chinese languages. The entire letter, together with the letterhead that featured the newly designed Singapore crest, was reproduced in the catalogue. The foreword and acknowledgments were translated into Malay, Chinese and Tamil.²⁰ In addition, the Malay text was positioned first, followed by Chinese, English and Tamil texts. Catalogues from previous years had only included the Chinese translations, which were placed after the English texts. With self-governance, Malay had been deemed Singapore's national language, with English, Mandarin and Tamil as the other official languages. In another first, photographs were organised by country instead of by subject matter. The country name was prominently displayed at the top righthand corner of every page instead of in brackets after the photographer's name as in previous years (Figures 1 and 2). It was clear that, like the rest of Singapore, the photographers were very conscious of the changing status of the nation, along with a growing sense of national identity, and this was visibly reflected in the organisation of the 11th Salon and its catalogue.

The *Singapore Free Press's* report on the exhibition opened with a quote from Yusof: "The people of Singapore have established for themselves a

reputation in many fields of human endeavour, of which pictorial photography is one which has reached very high standards.” He went on to highlight that members of the Photographic Society of Singapore (PSS) included three fellows and 43 associates of the Royal Photographic Society in Great Britain, and the Photographic Society of America had ranked two PSS members as the first and second in Malaya in their annual “Who’s Who” list of pictorial photographers.²¹ This was not unusual; the Singapore dailies frequently gave high-profile coverage to the achievements of pictorial photographers in the 1950s. Headlines included, “Singapore’s Overseas Successes” (1957) which reported on photographers getting accepted for the Salon Internacional de Fotografia in Spain and the Second Cine Club Bella in Italy,²² “Top Honours for Colony Photographers” (1957) which reported on PSS members getting recognition at the International Federation of Photographic Art²³ and “Leading Spore photographers are today well on top of the Asian Camera World” (1960), which gave a substantial historical account of the achievements of Singaporean photographers, including how they “swept the board in photographic exhibitions local and overseas, leaving the Penang photographers behind”.²⁴

Unlike painting and sculpture, photographs circulated widely and regularly through the international networks of photographic clubs and salon exhibitions. This allowed the photographers to claim a certain prestige for themselves, and also for the nation to claim recognition on an international level. Any and all awards were reported promptly in the press, often accompanied by large images.²⁵ As an apparatus of (western) technological progress, photography was uniquely placed to carry Singapore’s aspirations to modernity and to position itself alongside other modern societies in Europe and North America. In a very straightforward way, the salons allowed photographers to identify themselves with a nation, and the fact that Singaporean photographers actually won a fair number of accolades meant that pictorial photography became a way for Singapore to demonstrate its “modern” status. As Singapore’s first Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew stated in the catalogue of the 1963 Singapore International Salon: “The Society, through its regular activities for members and sponsorship of local and international photographic competitions in Singapore and participation in photographic events overseas, has helped to raise the standard and prestige of Singapore photographers.”²⁶

Pluralism and Expression

Redza Piyadasa has noted that the idea of the self-expressive creative individual did not exist in Malaya (of which Singapore was a part) prior to British

colonisation. The indigenous Malay population created art objects for religious or utilitarian purposes, but did not see art as a separate secular category with its own practitioners.²⁷ It was only with the arrival of a group of Chinese artists in the 1920s that society began to recognise “art” along with the associated value systems of connoisseurship, patronage and education. Modern art thus brought with it a consciousness of the artist as an expressive individual and the value of creativity.²⁸ This consciousness extended across to pictorial photography, which took on the additional burden of populism. As then Minister for Culture, S. Rajaratnam later described it:

Photography is an art, which, in many respects, reflects the characteristics of 20th century society. First of all, it is in every sense of the word a mass art medium. The ordinary man though deprived of the talent of being able to draw and paint can nevertheless express himself artistically through photography. [...] However though anyone can learn to manipulate a camera only those with imagination and artistry can take a good picture. Photography, therefore, offers every one of us avenues for finding such artistic expression as we are capable of.²⁹

Within the context of modernity in Singapore, pictorialism thus served as an assertion of individual expression that manifested as a distinct pluralism of styles and subject matter.

While the stirrings of modern art, including photography, had appeared in the 1920s, World War II and the Japanese Occupation had proved a stumbling block to its development. In Singapore, the art societies and art school were shut down and leaders interned and even killed. It was only after the Japanese were defeated that the development of modern art took off. Piyadasa suggests that the lateness of this growth led to pluralistic tendencies, which were further supported by the lack of existing cultural ideology. This meant that artists felt free to draw from diverse sources for their inspirations. Therefore, artistic developments would not have necessarily followed “deterministic evolutionary patterns” in line with the discourse of modernism.³⁰ Although Piyadasa was addressing the development of painting and sculpture, this tendency towards pluralism was even more prominent in photography due to several factors.

The first was that the Singaporean photographers did not feel the pressure to legitimise photography as art, unlike the early pictorial photographers in Europe and North America, where the search for recognition was a key driving force in the movement. The first photographic salon in 1950 was held by the

Singapore Art Society, so was already presented within the context of “art”. Even after the Art Society handed over hosting duties to the Photographic Society of Singapore, they still retained a “Photographic Group” which presented exhibitions and submitted prints to various salons. As early as 1951, photography was being exhibited alongside paintings in shows and this continued regularly.³¹ There was even an exhibition of local photography at the Raffles Museum Gallery in 1957.³² There were also numerous overlaps in personalities. Ho Kok Hoe, who was the President of the Singapore Art Society, was a member and an Associate of the Royal Photographic Society in London. The 9th Singapore International Salon had painter Cheong Soo Pieng on its jury and the 5th Pan-Malayan Exhibition had painter Chen Chong Swee on its jury.³³ Yet another painter, Liu Kang, gave a talk on composition for photographers at the British Council Hall in 1956.³⁴ (Cheong, Chen and Liu were all considered part of the first generation of artists in Singapore and prominent members of the Nanyang school.) The stylistic developments in Europe and North America had primarily been driven by photographers seeking to position photography as a legitimate art form, hence the focus on handwork and manipulation. However, the different relationship photography had with painting in Singapore meant that pictorial photographers did not need to position photography with respect to painting. This lack of antagonism resulted in a much more open attitude towards photographic styles.

The absence of formal photographic training would also have encouraged an openness to different styles and techniques. The painters in Singapore had been trained in either China or Paris and constantly grappled with both western and Chinese art traditions. However, the early pictorial photographers were all self-taught and picked up their skills through books and informal conversations with peers. Lee Sow Lim, who was one of the earliest pictorialists in Singapore, has spoken at length about the difficulty of learning darkroom processing techniques in the 1940s and 1950s. Most of the technical manuals and books were in English, which many photographers could not read easily. Furthermore, local photographers did not have proper measuring tools for the darkroom chemicals and used ladles, teaspoons and tablespoons instead. Therefore, much trial and error was involved in getting the process right.³⁵ As a result, photographers learnt through observation, mentorship and experimentation, often gathering informally to exchange ideas and suggestions at photo studios or photography clubs.

A large part of the learning process took place during the weekly outings organised by the clubs. During these excursions, members would meet at coffee shops before departing on their field shoots. Recalling his first excursion with the PSS, David Tay, who had turned up not knowing anyone, said that

Wu Peng Seng approached him, gave him some tips on using his camera and guided him on his shots. Tay, who subsequently joined the society and became its president, added that during these outings, these senior members would help the newer members, explaining how to compose pictures and “how to see things”.³⁶ This camaraderie and sense of respect for the senior members cannot be over-emphasised. Many of the photographers have repeatedly mentioned the opportunities they had to meet like-minded practitioners through the camera clubs. As an example, Foo Tee Jun describes meeting Yip Cheong Fun and, subsequently, his regular visits to Yip’s provision shop in Chinatown. Yip would show Foo his prints to advise on different lighting techniques. In describing the senior photographers, Foo makes no judgement of hierarchy regarding the different styles they had—he simply describes them all positively, whether it is the manipulated photo montages of Lee Lim and Tang Yao Xun or the “straight” photographs of Wu Peng Seng and Yip Cheong Fun.³⁷

In addition, pictorial photography in Singapore had a much closer relationship to commercial and studio photography. Many of the pictorial photographers practised some other form of photography: Lee Lim owned a photography studio in Tiong Bahru; Tan Lip Seng worked as a medical photographer at the National University of Singapore Hospital; and Foo Tee Jun photographed singers at Life Records before becoming a photographer for the Ministry of Environment.³⁸ Chua Soo Bin shot for advertising campaigns and Tan Siong Teng was a photographer for the *Nanyang Siang Pau*, a Chinese newspaper. Lee Sow Lim has estimated that, in the early 1950s, 90 per cent of the photographers who participated in salon exhibitions worked at photography studios because exhibitors would have needed access to a photographic enlarger to make their prints.³⁹ This meant that there was much less class distinction compared to the situation in 19th century Europe where the photographers were at pains to distinguish themselves from artisans, but also that the photographers themselves were used to working in different styles of photography simultaneously.

To illustrate this diversity, let us return to the catalogue for the 11th Singapore International Salon. The 11th Salon received 2,009 prints from 43 countries and selected 368 prints for exhibition. Looking at the catalogue reproductions of the exhibited prints, the Singapore jury, comprising C.A. Gibson-Hill, Au Thian Chor, Lee Lim, Chua Soo Bin and Tham Yew Fun, seemed open to all types of images. This ranged from the kinds of portraits and landscapes that would not have been out of place in the London Salon in 1900, to an experimental graphic collage print from Austria. Subject matter, too, included everything from sentimental snow-covered countrysides and

FIGURE 1: p. 35, catalogue of the 11th Singapore International Salon, 1960. Courtesy of the Photographic Society of Singapore

FIGURE 2: p. 49, catalogue of the 11th Singapore International Salon, 1960. Courtesy of the Photographic Society of Singapore

romantic seascapes, to scenes of construction and factory interiors. Both manipulated and straight prints were well represented, as was the full range of focus from soft, blurry edges to sharp, clear lines. Aside from the general selection of prints for exhibition, there were three medals and ten commendations awarded. The winner of the bronze medal was Frank B. Neubert from England for *Jester* (Figure 1), which was a portrait of an old man with only his facial features in focus, the remaining details significantly softened by manipulating the print. Another winning print was *Beauty is Vanity* (Figure 2) by Tchan Fou-li from Hong Kong, a double exposure of the silhouette of a naked female torso juxtaposed with the patterns of a leaf. Semi-abstract in nature, the image shows a play of shapes and lines and could not be more different from the gold medal winner—*The Days of Innocence* (Figure 3) by one of Singapore's most well-known pictorial photographers, Yip Cheong Fun.⁴⁰ Depicting a crowded outdoor scene with two mothers and their babies, the lines are clear and sharp and it is evenly lit. There is a strong sense of immediacy and documentary—we can easily imagine the photograph illustrating a newspaper article.

This pluralism of styles and subject matter was a distinct characteristic of pictorialism in Singapore and a direct result of the way the photography

FIGURE 3: p. 90, catalogue of the 11th Singapore International Salon, 1960. Courtesy of the Photographic Society of Singapore

movement developed. During this period, stylistic approaches could and did overlap and a neat and linear chronological progression of stylistic evolutions did not reflect the developments in Singapore. If style was not the determining factor in pictorialism, what was? The answer is actually consistent with the origins of pictorialism—the emphasis on expression and beauty.⁴¹ In one of the earliest essays on pictorial photography in 1886, P.H. Emerson definitively states, “Pictorial art is man’s expression by means of pictures of that which he considers beautiful in nature.”⁴² The term the Chinese photographers repeatedly use is 美感 (*meigan*), which literally means a feeling of beauty. In Singapore, discussions of expression and beauty were closely related and revolved around ideas of composition, proper lighting and technical expertise.⁴³ These values were upheld through the clubs and salons, and grounded the pluralism in styles and subject matter.

Explaining his thought process on taking portraits, David Tay has explained:

Each face actually has his or her own beauty. As a photographer, how do we take the best out from that character? How do you want to feature the person? [...] The use of appropriate lighting will help to accentuate your subject to project that kind of character you want to feature.⁴⁴

Similarly, Foo Tee Jun recalls how he made even an old man dragging a rubbish cart look beautiful with the right composition and lighting in one of his works from the 1960s. Conversely, he was not interested in showing sad or distressing subjects.⁴⁵ Looking at the salon catalogues, it is very clear that this idea of beauty was paramount for all the pictorial photographers, no matter the subject or approach. It is also equally true that the salons did not feature any upsetting images—there are no hints of the hard lives of the labourers and construction workers often featured in pictorial work, nor any of the turbulent strikes and riots Singapore experienced in the 1950s and 1960s.⁴⁶

Going back to Yip's *The Days of Innocence*, it is clearly a very carefully composed image, with the heads of the subjects forming a strong diagonal across the picture frame, drawing the viewer's eye towards the two children despite the many elements in the picture. Given that it was shot outdoors, the lighting is masterful, again emphasising the focal points of the children's faces while showing a wide tonal range. The photograph is remarkable for its precision in clarity, composition, lighting and tone. The title offers a hint regarding the photographer's intention—the work seeks to express the innocence of children, rather than to capture a particular street scene. To this end, Yip used his excellent technical skills to create a beautiful and arresting picture.

Negotiating Nostalgia

The rapid changes in Singapore after World War II meant that there was a much greater sense of the past existing with the present. This dislocation, combined with the pluralism described in the previous section, allowed for an interesting expression of modernity in the form of a kind of nostalgia. By this, I do not mean that the photographers were rejecting modernity and change for some sort of idealised past but that these images of the “past” were themselves a crucial part of Singapore's developing modernity. These “primitive passions”, to use Rey Chow's term, were, in fact, a condition of modernity. Chow has asserted that China's modernity arrived with a question—How to deal with the people?—which led Chinese intellectuals to look at China as though it were “a foreign culture filled with unfamiliar others”.⁴⁷ So just as western modernism worked by primitivising others (as in the case of Picasso, Gauguin, Modigliani), so too did Chinese modernity depend on this relationship. Chow suggests that Chinese art forms *turn* modern precisely the same way, by drawing upon the primitive.⁴⁸ But instead of exoticising others, the Chinese exoticised themselves.

Although Chow's examples of the primitive centre on the figure of the woman, I suggest that in Singapore photography, it revolved around visions of the rural. The silence of the photograph as a still image and its ability to circulate through time allows a space to negotiate origins, history and change. The nature of photography allows a kind of temporal slippage—whatever is photographed immediately becomes past, even when taken in the present. Photography's reproducibility and its continual circulation through the salon exhibitions, as well as their respective catalogues, reinforced this sense of the past. In other words, they repeatedly performed the past. Photographs of the rural thus operated to show how things *were* even as they represented how things *are*. This dichotomy was an integral part of the process of reimagining Singapore during this critical period of change.

The question of origins was a particularly fraught one for Singapore, with its population of multiethnic migrants. C.J. W.-L. Wee has noted that Singapore did not have a state-sanctioned history stretching back to some primordial beginning. Any impulse towards ethnic origin needed to be checked in order to avoid societal unrest. Instead, Singapore's government used a neutral narrative of progress in the form of industrial and capitalist modernity itself to homogenise the racial and cultural differences within Singapore's population.⁴⁹ With this loss of origin, I want to suggest that the photographers turned to images of the rural to play out their own fantasies of origin, that is, signs of origin were displaced onto the rural as the universal reference.

Photographers frequently went out to capture the rural areas of Singapore and Malaysia, particularly the *kampongs* and fishing villages, as well as the newly constructed buildings, bridges and roads, sometimes on the same day.⁵⁰ These photography excursions were called "safaris", and a description that appeared in *The Singapore Free Press* by PSS member Sunny Giam is very telling. In describing the trip to "a quiet *kampong* deep off Kim Chuan Road", Giam used phrases like "the hunt" and "armed with \$30,000 worth of equipment", and describes the clicks of the camera shutters as a "twenty-one gun salute".⁵¹ The literal hunting down of these *kampongs* and fishing villages was a regular occurrence and the photographs that resulted from it formed a significant part of pictorial work.

Consider *Her Daily Work* (Figure 4) by Wu Peng Seng, who was a very active member of the PSS and regularly joined the Sunday safaris. Although undated, the work was most likely made in the 1950s and is an excellent example of the kind of picturesque *kampong* scene prized by the pictorial photographers. It looks to have been shot at Mata Ikan—the mist is actually the smoke from the burning of crushed cockleshells, which was used to

FIGURE 4: Wu Peng Seng, *Her Daily Work*, undated, gelatin silver print, gift of the artist and his family, collection of National Gallery Singapore. Image courtesy of the artist's family

make whitewash paint. The picturesque effect of the light coming through the smoke made Mata Ikan a favourite with the photographers and it was a frequent destination during the Sunday outings. There is no sign of the bustling industry of Singapore in this photograph, only a quiet village with a woman carrying water from the well. The mistiness of the scene adds to the feeling that this is a Singapore of the past. A newspaper article actually described Wu's photographs as showing "the idyllic country life of bygone days, featuring scenes such as geese swimming leisurely in a pond, coconut trees swaying in the breeze, fishermen casting their nets in the hope of a good catch, or a kampong maiden going about her daily chores".⁵² Yet Wu also made photos like *Construction*, 1958 (Figure 5). Here is a completely different scene—a labourer is literally in the process of creating the new Singapore. The hard edges and high tonal contrast point towards a modern metropolis totally at odds with the previous photograph. Even the composition, with multiple strong diagonal lines cutting across the frame, is a distinct shift from the more classical arrangement of subjects in *Her Daily Work*. Despite this

FIGURE 5: Wu Peng Seng, *Construction*, 1958, gelatin silver print, collection of National Gallery Singapore. Image courtesy of the artist's family

difference in style, both images illustrate the emphasis on beauty discussed in the previous section, through precise composition and lighting.

At this point, I want to highlight again the difference in how these images operated compared to early pictorialism in Europe and North America. I previously mentioned the drive the early pictorial photographers had to gain recognition for photography as art. One of their strategies was to distinguish

between photography for the recording of facts and photography as an expression of beauty.⁵³ The latter, of course, was what pictorial photography sought to achieve. So, to remove as much “fact” as possible, Szarkowski has suggested that pictorial photographers ended up focusing on a very small group of subject matter that would avoid too much specificity as “art existed in an ideal country of the mind, where time has long since stopped”.⁵⁴ This meant close-up portraits, country landscapes or allegorical scenes and avoidance of machinery and other forms of modern industry. As a result, the majority of prints seemed to point back to some kind of romantic past, again reinforcing pictorialism’s association with the premodern.

In Singapore, however, these romantic images had nothing to do with the rejection of fact but were an assertion of modernity, as much as the more ostensibly modern works like *Construction*. Similar to the pluralism in stylistic approaches, the Singaporean photographers saw no disjuncture with making a straightforward document of the rapid industrialisation they saw around them together with a village scene that could have occurred a century ago. The nostalgic images provided a sense of continuity and connection with the past, but they also worked as a contrast to modern Singapore. Photography thus offered a way to deal with history through visibility and imagination, while simultaneously bringing Singapore into a self-conscious modernity by distancing the primitive.

Conclusion

In 1996, the first comprehensive history on modern art in Singapore was published in conjunction with the inaugural exhibition at the newly opened Singapore Art Museum. Written by then museum director Kwok Kian Chow, it was titled *Channels & Confluences: A History of Singapore Art*, and it has remained the key text for the study of Singapore art history until today. In the book, there is no mention of photography. Instead, Kwok traces the development of modern art in Singapore through painting and sculpture. Interestingly, he also chose to include a short section at the end on installation and performance, because “the fundamental idiom remains individualistic expression”, but left out photography.⁵⁵ This article attempts to fill that gap by presenting pictorial photography in Singapore within the discourse of modernity. To this end, I have reframed pictorialism not as a matter of style but as a movement that prioritised individual expression and operated within its own institutions and frameworks, namely that of the camera clubs and photography salons. By repositioning pictorialism as such, we can start to account for the different permutations of pictorialism as it took root in other

countries. It should be clear by now that pictorialism in Singapore took a vastly different path compared to pictorialism in Europe and North America, and any study of pictorial photography in Singapore needs to include an understanding of the specific socio-political conditions of the time.

BIOGRAPHY

Charmaine Toh is a PhD candidate at the University of Melbourne, researching pictorial photography in Singapore from the 1950s to the 1970s. She is also a curator at National Gallery Singapore where she worked on exhibitions such as *Siapa Nama Kamu: Art in Singapore since the 19th Century*, *Earth Work 1979* and *Awakenings: Art and Society in Asia 1960s–1990s*. Previously, she was Programme Director at Objectifs Centre for Photography and Film. She also co-curated the 2013 Singapore Biennale.

NOTES

- ¹ There are records of the Singapore Photographic Society which operated in the late 19th century, a Salon of International Photography in 1931, which was essentially a Kodak competition, and a short-lived Oversea Chinese Photographic Society which lasted one year and had one exhibition. However, the 1950 salon marked the start of a sustained annual exhibition that was organised by Singaporeans in the traditional salon format, with an open call and a selection jury.
- ² “275 Entries in Photo Exhibition”, *The Straits Times*, 1 Jan. 1950.
- ³ “Singapore Art Show is a Must”, *The Straits Times*, 11 Jan. 1951.
- ⁴ *19th Singapore International Salon of Photography* (Singapore: Photographic Society of Singapore, 1968).
- ⁵ John Szarkowski, *Photography Until Now* (New York, NY: Museum of Modern Art, 1989), pp. 143–4.
- ⁶ John Taylor, ed., *Pictorial Photography in Britain, 1900–1920* (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1978), pp. 10–2.
- ⁷ Taylor, pp. 13–6.
- ⁸ Erin Kathleen O’Toole, “No Democracy in Quality: Ansel Adams, Beaumont and Nancy Newhall, and the Founding of the Department of Photographs at the Museum of Modern Art” (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona, 2010), p. 27, <http://hdl.handle.net/10150/204109> [accessed 15 Jan. 2018].
- ⁹ Ann Thomas, “Between a Hard Edge and a Soft Curve: Modernism in Canadian Photography”, *Journal of Canadian Art History/Annales d’histoire de l’art Canadien* 21, 1/2 (2000): 75.
- ¹⁰ Christian A. Peterson, *After the Photo-Secession: American Pictorial Photography, 1910–1955*, 1st ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Minneapolis Institute of Arts in association with W.W. Norton, New York, 1997).
- ¹¹ John Clark, “Open and Closed Discourses of Modernity in Asian Art”, in *Modernity in Asian Art*, ed. John Clark, 7 (Sydney: Wild Peony Pty Ltd, 1993), pp. 5–6.
- ¹² Christopher Phillips has provided an excellent analysis of the complicated relationship photography has had with modernist ideas via a case study of MoMA’s photography department. Christopher Phillips, “The Judgment Seat of Photography”, *October* 22 (1982): 27–63. doi:10.2307/778362.
- ¹³ John Clark, *Modern Asian Art* (Sydney: Craftsman House, 1998), p. 14.
- ¹⁴ Masahiro Ushiroshoji, “Realism as an Attitude: Asian Art in the Nineties”, in *4th Asian Art Show: Realism as an Attitude*, ed. Kiichirō Nakayama, tr. Janet Goff (Fukuoka: Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, 1995), p. 34.
- ¹⁵ Kian Chow Kwok, *Channels & Confluences: A History of Singapore Art* (Singapore: National Heritage Board, Singapore Art Museum, 1996), pp. 38, 40–61.
- ¹⁶ While one might argue that the cost of buying a camera was prohibitive for most people, the Singaporean photographers actually came from all classes of society.

In his opening speech for the 9th Singapore International Salon in 1958, Loke Wan Tho even stated that, “Photography is a great leveller. It recognises no barriers of colour, creed, country, or class. [...] Certainly, we photographers belong to the most democratic club in the world.” Wan Tho Loke, 21 Feb. 1958, MS 6057, Loke Wan Tho Papers, National Library of Australia.

- ¹⁷ *1st South-East Asia Salon of Photography* (Singapore: Singapore Art Society, 1959), p. 7.
- ¹⁸ The title literally means “Head of State” and was changed to President in 1965, when Singapore left Malaysia as an independent nation.
- ¹⁹ *11th Singapore International Salon of Photography* (Singapore: Photographic Society of Singapore, 1960). The catalogue is the only surviving record of the exhibition along with some newspaper articles. I was unable to uncover any photographs of the exhibition, nor the exhibition prints themselves.
- ²⁰ Looking at the catalogue layout, I suspect the only reason Yusof bin Ishak’s text was not translated into Tamil as well was a lack of space because the designer wanted to show the full letterhead of the typewritten message with the Singapore crest. The crest had been unveiled during the installation of Yusof bin Ishak as Yang di-Pertuan Negara in 1959.
- ²¹ Harry Chia, “Praise for Singapore Photograph from Yang Di-Pertuan Negara”, *The Singapore Free Press*, 1 Sept. 1960.
- ²² “Singapore’s Overseas Successes”, *The Singapore Free Press*, 9 Apr. 1957.
- ²³ “Top Honours for Colony Photographers”, *The Singapore Free Press*, 7 July 1958.
- ²⁴ “Leading Spore Photographers are Today Well on Top of the Asian Camera World”, *The Singapore Free Press*, 1 Sept. 1960.
- ²⁵ As an example, see “Associate of the Royal Photographic Society”, *The Straits Times*, 3 July 1963.
- ²⁶ *14th Singapore International Salon of Photography* (Singapore: Photographic Society of Singapore, 1963).
- ²⁷ Redza Piyadasa, “Early Modern Art Developments in Malaysia and Singapore, 1920–1960”, in *The Birth of Modern Art in Southeast Asia: Artists and Movements*, ed. Masahiro Ushiroshōji and Toshiko Rawanchaikul (Fukuoka; Hiroshima; and Shizuoka: Fukuoka-shi Bijutsukan; Hiroshima Kenritsu Bijutsukan; and Shizuoka Kenritsu Bijutsukan, 1997), p. 229.
- ²⁸ Kwok, *Channels & Confluences*, p. 8.
- ²⁹ S. Rajaratnam, “Opening of Photograph Week Organised by the Singapore Polytechnic Photographic Society”, 17 Jan. 1964, <http://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdfdoc/PressR19640117b.pdf> [accessed 5 June 2017].
- ³⁰ Redza Piyadasa, “Modernist and Post-Modernist Developments in Malaysian Art in the Post-Independence Period”, in *Modernity in Asian Art*, ed. John Clark (Sydney: Wild Peony Pty Ltd, 1993), p. 170.

- ³¹ “Chinese Art Exhibition”, *The Singapore Free Press*, 8 Mar. 1951; “Photo, Art Show at Polytechnic”, *The Singapore Free Press*, 4 Dec. 1959.
- ³² “A ‘Merdeka Fair’ Salon”, *The Singapore Free Press*, 14 May 1957.
- ³³ Sunny Giam, “Singapore’s Champion Cameramen”, *The Singapore Free Press*, 23 July 1957.
- ³⁴ Sunny Giam, “Standard is High but there’s Room for Improvement”, *The Singapore Free Press*, 14 Feb. 1956.
- ³⁵ Lee Sow Lim, interview by Teo Kian Giap, 27 Apr. 2010. Accession number 001818, audio recording, National Archives of Singapore, reel 1.
- ³⁶ David Tay, interview by Claire Yeo, 12 Nov. 2007. Accession number 003197, audio recording, National Archives of Singapore, reel 10.
- ³⁷ Foo Tee Jun, interview by Teo Kian Giap, 12 Apr. 2010. Accession number 001508, audio recording, National Archives of Singapore, reel 4.
- ³⁸ Foo Tee Jun, reels 1 and 4. Tan Lip Seng, interview by Teo Kian Giap, 11 Feb. 2010, Accession number 003478, audio recording, National Archives of Singapore, reel 1.
- ³⁹ Lee Sow Lim, reel 6.
- ⁴⁰ There is a mistake in the title of the photograph in the catalogue, which lists the work as *The Day of Innocence*.
- ⁴¹ Peterson, *After the Photo-Secession*, pp. 18–9.
- ⁴² P.H. Emerson quoted in Peter C. Bunnell, ed., *A Photographic Vision: Pictorial Photography, 1889–1923* (Santa Barbara: P. Smith, 1980), p. 2.
- ⁴³ In the oral interviews referenced in this article, the photographers frequently speak about composition: simple but with impact; lighting—how it creates interest; and darkroom technique—making a print with good tonal range and control. For a more public discussion see Cheong Leng Low, “Beginner of the Month”, *The Singapore Free Press*, 6 Oct. 1960.
- ⁴⁴ David Tay, reel 10.
- ⁴⁵ Foo Tee Jun, reel 3.
- ⁴⁶ This was markedly different from painting. A group of artists formed the Equator Art Society in 1956 and sought to use art to pursue social justice by producing realist works.
- ⁴⁷ Rey Chow, *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1995), p. 19.
- ⁴⁸ Chow, p. 21.
- ⁴⁹ C.J. W.-L. Wee, *The Asian Modern: Culture, Capitalist Development, Singapore* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2007), p. 34.
- ⁵⁰ Tan Lip Seng has described in detail the Sunday outings by the Photographic Society of Singapore. Tan Lip Seng, reel 5.
- ⁵¹ Sunny Giam, “On Safari”, *The Singapore Free Press*, 14 Apr. 1960.

- ⁵² “美的旅程 [Mei de Lu Cheng]”, 联合早报 [*Lianhe Zaobao*], 19 Oct. 1996. English translation of description taken from http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_2014-01-16_160401.html [accessed 6 Oct. 2017].
- ⁵³ Szarkowski, *Photography Until Now*, p. 159.
- ⁵⁴ Szarkowski, p. 160.
- ⁵⁵ Kwok, *Channels & Confluences*, p. 13.

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