

# “Home, from Within and Without”

## By Yen Phang

In his latest solo painting show “Bringing Home, Home”, Leonard Yang explores the urban imaginary through the lens of public spaces, architecture, and visual rhythms of the city. One might enter into Yang’s paintings through his details. One particular motif is that of fireworks. In “I Can See the Fireworks from Far Far Away”, they are viewed from a distance, sparking out from the rooftops of public housing blocks. The eye is drawn to their delicacy and playfulness, as clearly defined highlights against the nighttime scene around them.

Yang’s quick strokes connote a sense of movement and immediacy. In Chinese, fireworks translates into “火花”, which is a particularly apt conflation of fire “火” and flower “花”. Leonard’s representations effortlessly move between suggestions of either. They evoke an image of ephemeral incandescence, but also tip into visual suggestions of a shower of brilliant, floral blooms.

Seen from this God-like isometric view from above, one is distinctly aware of one’s distance from the scene presented, a remove from space and geography of neighbourhood. The fireworks themselves bring to mind Singapore’s recent National Day celebrations. Held during a time of crowd restrictions and social distancing, no longer is the aerial spectacle enjoyed collectively from a central location in the city. Instead, due to the pandemic, they had been set off in more dispersed locations across the island of Singapore. This time, when viewed from afar, they rest closer upon the distant horizon in a more diminutive fashion, sprinkled across the floor of residential and street lights across the city under the vast night sky... a display of nationalistic celebrations and simultaneous but separate jubilation from afar in isolation.



*I Can See the Fireworks from Far, Far, Away, 2019. 97 x 142 cm, Oil on Linen*

At the outset, this exhibition explores ideas and experiences of “home”. From the viewpoint of the artist, this is home not through the lens of domestic interiors with its furnishings and household trappings<sup>1</sup>. The painterly investigations here aggregate into a larger puzzle of home as seem from a more collective sense, with a broader geographical scale. Here, we may view “home” as a space for belonging, as an arena for identity on a national dimension.

In Singapore, the idea of home plays a large part of our search for a new national narrative. One of Singapore’s more beloved National Day songs beseeches the Singaporean listeners to find an appreciation in the country being “home, truly, where I know I must be”<sup>2</sup>. In a 2012 National Day Rally speech, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong responded to the question of “what is the next chapter of the Singapore story” with the three H’s of “Hope, Heart, and Home”<sup>3</sup>, to replace the older economic-developmental paradigms of the 5 C’s (namely, Cash, Car, Credit card, Condominium and Country club membership)<sup>4</sup>.

In “Bringing Home, Home”, the viewer is faced with the looming monolithic form that suggests a platform or pedestal. Clues, such as the anchor, point to the realisation that what we are viewing is in fact an air-craft carrier. Here, “home” may be bounded, carried, and transported. It is embodied in the form of an arc-like vessel for the various nodes of architectural memory that make up our subjective experience of homeland as space for survivorship and

1 We might contrast Yang’s approach with other strategies of curated interiors and objects, such as the Simryn Gill’s photographs of domestic landscapes. See Katherine Brickell, “Home interiors, national identity and curatorial practice in the art photography of Simryn Gill”, *Cultural Geographies*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (July 2014), pp. 525-532.

2 Tee Zhuo, “National Day song Home celebrates its 20th Anniversary”, *The Straits Times*, 7 Aug 2018, <<https://www.straitstimes.com/lifestyle/national-day-song-home-celebrates-20th-anniversary-which-rendition-is-your-favourite>>

3 Lydia Lim, “Help write the next chapter in S’pore story, says PM”, *The Straits Times*, 27 Aug 2012, <<https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/help-write-the-next-chapter-in-spore-story-says-pm>>

4 Fabian Koh, “Pursue different set of five C’s, new healthcare grads told”, *The Straits Times*, 5 May 2018, <<https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/pursue-different-set-of-five-cs-new-healthcare-grads-told>>



*Bringing Home, Home, 2020, 91.5 x 152 cm, Oil on Canvas*

safety. Through the painting, our perspective is that of the carrier coming through the image in a slow head-on angle towards us the viewers. Directionality and movements of large masses feature throughout this series of paintings. The clearest embodiment of this is the encapsulation of collective movement is in “Some-day Our Ship will Sail”. The Central obelisk structure itself evokes the vertical aspirations of city populations, from New York to Chicago, Singapore to Shanghai. The format of the diptych opens up further dialogue between two states of motion, suspending the repeating motions of liftoff and settlement. Part of the development of Singapore’s architectural icons serves the economic agenda of crafting an image of a global city as a relevant throughpoint for international flows of capital.

They form immediately recognizable markers of development, including the Singapore’s version of the London Eye in the form of our Singapore Flyer, Marina Bay Sands (designed by renowned architect Moshe Safdie), and the gleaming faceted domes of Gardens by the Bay and the Esplanade<sup>5</sup>.

The sense of travel and migration over distance is also reinforced by the bodies of water creating both a sense of proximity and separation. The artist here is suspended between his experiences of New York and Singapore. Whether his foregrounds feature references to the brick-walled architecture (including the immediately recognisable Queensbridge Housing Projects) and bridges of New York, or the ubiquitous HDB (Housing Development Board) blocks of Singapore, each locale is often in dialogue with the other.

Segmentation also occurs within the compositions, reminiscent of the zoning practices in land planning. Singapore being a country where progress is marked by infrastructural projects and land reclamation, transience and change is endemic in one’s experiences of one’s homeland over time.

In “The Great Wave Over the Island of Yesterday”, a section of land has been cut out, raised on a supported platform. It is flanked on one side by a wall of waves, possibly suggesting a force that is more tidal, pushing back. Furthermore, this tableau sits within a room itself, dusted by muted ambient lighting streaming in from above. There is a double-framing of spatiality and scale, an interiority containing a separate diorama. It is imbued with a quiet drama of meticulous staging and craft, viewed from a point removed, a scene within a domestic space, with the confluence of larger chronological dimensions and interior experiences of shifting daylight in our own homes.



*Someday our Ship Will Sail, 2018, 38 x 76cm each, diptych, Oil on Linen*



*The Great Wave Over the Island of Yesterday, 2018, 91.5 x 183cm, Oil on Canvas*

5 Cheryl Narumi Naruse, “Bodies That Map: Overseas Singaporeans and the Urban Imagination”, *Verge: Studies in Global Asias*, Vol. 2, No. 1, Asian Urbanisms and Urbanization (Spring 2016), pp. 44-50, p. 47

Moving further inwards back into the details, the feeling of a constantly fluctuating view becomes more apparent when one pays attention to the visual space created between distinct objects, leaving room for the eye to traverse across the canvas in a meandering fashion, where the strict grids of the urban planning give way to more organic ecologies through the blended backgrounds, contrasted primary colours, and overlapping glazes. Within the space, things combust, boats glide through with a phantom-like quietness, nature encroaches and surrounds, buildings take on suggestions of geological agglomerations. There is a sense of play and flux, pointing to notions of access and barriers, proximity and distance.

While Yang's paintings brim with activity and movement – observed in the wind-blown foliage, the dance of flames, the ripples of bodies of water, the curves and bends of buildings, they are also devoid of obvious human presence and figuration. Apart from being reminiscent of the empty public spaces during a COVID lockdown, they also turn the gaze back upon us, as viewers encountering the landscape before us. If we take a closer look at the painting titles, the artist places and positions himself squarely within the unfolding story, immersing us in the immediacy of a first-person perspective (“Portrait of a Cyclist in Winter Fog”).

What we are witnessing are the dreamscapes of an artist responding to the psychogeographical conditions of his time spent between his two homes of Singapore and New York. As an avid cyclist, Leonard Yang threads through the streets of both cities, and then seamlessly weaves his memories together into a blended composition of the subconscious, tinged with nostalgia. Here, “home” is also defined by the individual subjective encounter.

One might even contextualise the artist's subjective position within a more nationalist dimension of identification of the Singaporean as bodily marker of territory, characterised by transnational mobility and adaptability to the varying conditions of other cities, not just as citizen of a post/neo-colonial



*Portrait of a Cyclist in Winter Fog, 2020, 67 x 99 cm, Oil on Canvas*



*Let's Hold Hands #01, 2020, 40 x 56 cm, Oil on Canvas*

Singapore in a globalist reality, but also as a by-product of deliberate government strategy. There is an pervasive and often-invisible valorisation of a citizen's adeptness at navigating other international/regional cities, in turn framing Singapore as a city-state and island-nation not merely through the space within its land/sea boundaries, but also through the international movements of its people<sup>6</sup>.

Nevertheless, such nation-centric agendas only run in parallel with Leonard Yang's self-identification. His approach is instead grounded in the personal sense of interconnection with place. In the series “Let's Hold Hands”, the artist takes us further back into self-awareness of a sensed world through an embodied experience, by placing the hand as central figure, almost also as if they were portraits of intimacy and contact during a time of social distancing. The recurring motifs of an urban landscape swirl around it, implicating body and self within Yang's landscapes, within the narrative of home, development, and nation-building.

Through Yang's paintings, we are provided with an alternative to the surface language surrounding state-centric dialogues of “home”. Here, we get a sense of home not as being defined by official archive or national narrative, but rather as an emerging territory for continuing dialogue with the personal, the subjective, the subconscious-playful. Instead of the rherotic of “home” being all too conveniently deployed as a matter-of-fact descriptor of an immutable set of external conditions, or trotted out as a deceptively singular, abstract aspirational idea, home is in a constant state of being revealed through particularities and the micro-poetics of our own repeated encounters with geography and space, and our memories thereof... through all the boats, through fireworks, through bodies of water, through our own hands, in our mind's eye.

6 Cheryl Narumi Naruse, “Bodies That Map: Overseas Singaporeans and the Urban Imagination”, *Verge: Studies in Global Asia*, Vol. 2, No. 1, Asian Urbanisms and Urbanization (Spring 2016), pp. 44-50