

# *Critique of the Urban Order*

by Michael Lee Hong Hwee

Order has a privileged status in the urban setting. It confers notions of certainty, reliability, and objectivity, which align it comfortably with modern institutions like business, politics, and science, whose modus operandi involves curtailing its counterpart: chaos. German sociologist Georg Simmel regards the insistent disassociation of the city from chaos as the tendency to manage urban life as if it is science: "The calculative exactness of practical [city] life which the money economy has brought about corresponds to the ideal of natural science: to transform the world into an arithmetic problem, to fix every part of the world by mathematical formulas."<sup>1</sup> Even with contemporary recognition of its inevitability and usefulness<sup>2</sup>, by and large chaos has a host of negative connotations: unpredictability, dubiousness, and subjectivity, to name a few. Order is an ideal, chaos the problem.

Singapore's urban landscape reflects an interesting way of privileging order over chaos. There is an urgency to keep things in order, which manifests in its clean and neat environment. With the concerted efforts of URA<sup>3</sup> and HDB<sup>4</sup>, both downtown and suburban areas undergo regular upgrading. NParks<sup>5</sup> also ensures that the built environment is punctuated with greenery in the form of roadside trees, landscaped parks, and nature reserves, revealing a sensibility towards embracing the spontaneity of nature within an ordered, man-made environment. German architect and critic Rem Koolhaas regards Singapore's urban planning thus far as a defence against unbridled disorder: "[I]f there is chaos, it is authored chaos; if it is ugly, it is designed ugliness; if it is absurd, it is willed absurdity."<sup>6</sup> This defensive land use has resulted in a highly ordered and regulated environment, which Koolhaas has referred to as an "urban complex"<sup>7</sup>, an expression that both aptly describes the physical cityscape of Singapore and wittily hints at the complicated psychology at work.

The favouring of order over chaos in Singapore's urban environment can be restrictive to experiencing life to its fullest, in range and richness, as Tang Ling Nah's charcoal drawings of the local urban landscape suggest and address. This essay examines Ling Nah's critique of the urban order as espoused in her works. It first discusses Ling Nah's concern about humans and their urban environment through the concept of nostalgia. It then considers her methodology in relation to her

and nameless inhumanity of the urban crowd. On closer inspection and further reflection, one can no longer be so sure about the paucity of human figure in her drawings. Are the marks and dirt not made by a human (the artist) who attempts to question the relationship between people and the environment in the urban context? Might these elements be representations of traces left by humans who use these transitional spaces? Or, have humans been moving so hastily in these spaces that their images could not be properly captured? As one ponders along these lines, the dirt and marks on Ling Nah's drawings begin to take on multiple, even if contradictory, meanings. Presenting more than mere snapshots of urban spaces, Ling Nah offers us what photographers would call the long exposure shots, in which a moving figure becomes indecipherable to the naked eye, leaving only traces of its movement. The human figure that is thus suggested can be seen in *Fleeting Descent* as well as earlier works like *Future...Presence...Present* (2001) and *Mass Rapid Transit* (2001). Just as Piranesi's prisoners have to negotiate, detect, and indeed devise for themselves, crevices of desire among the prevalent claustrophobic spaces, the figures in Ling Nah's urban voids opt for, or have been opted out for, fleeting presences. As local artist-writer Susie Lingham puts it, Ling Nah's images narrate "the 'alienation' between figure and environment through movement—a faintly marked absence; a trace of presence; escape of the figure from the still-trembling ground."<sup>18</sup> A bustling city transforms into a haunting ghost town.

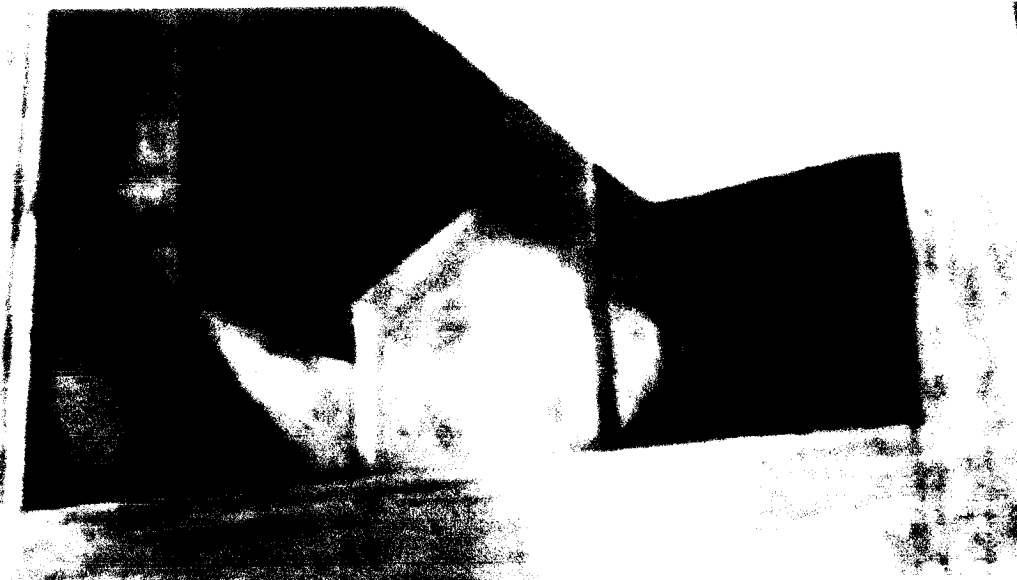
Ling Nah's images thus have the effect of evoking emotional ambivalence in the viewer. By featuring our familiar environment, they first alert us to Ling Nah's thematic reference: Singapore's urban landscape. This familiarity shatters as soon as one imbibes the dramatic darkness and haunting emptiness of the urban spaces she has depicted. Ling Nah's drawings are not meant to only highlight the oppressiveness of urban living; they also relieve. With the seemingly absent or indecipherable human figure in her spaces, Ling Nah invites viewers to inhabit them, walk, or even run around in them, to focus attention on details and textures of surfaces, and to investigate their own relationships with the city they have long known or have not yet begun to explore.

Ling Nah critiques the urban order through a particular nostalgic mode. Rather than urge us to abandon the city, she reminds us of the need and possible ways to manage the over-orderliness of urban living with regards to our own individuality and relationships with others. In her drawings, one discovers what French cultural theorist Michel de Certeau has, elsewhere, referred to as tactical spaces, spaces which the weak can manoeuvre in and "make do" with, within boundaries set by the

Signs of uncertainty abound through Ling Nah's creative use of the charcoal medium. Apart from the almost pitch-black and pure-white areas in her drawings, there are also different tones of grey, traces of cancellation, accidental marks, mistakes, stains, and spontaneous strokes, giving Ling Nah's drawings a sense of dirty realism. In place of the "authored chaos", "designed ugliness", and "willed absurdity" that Koolhaas has observed in Singapore's urban landscape, are examples of chaos coexisting with order in a more realistic manner: dirt on the wall, unclean structures, damaged fixtures. A distinction between realism and idealisation comes across clearly when one contrasts Ling Nah's lifelike rendering in her resolved drawings with the urban gloss captured on her photographic references. By adding traces of humanity—accidents, chaos, and uncertainties—to the pristine exteriors of urban structures, Ling Nah peels off their clean and ordered façades, suggesting to us that what lies beneath (the surface) and before (the cleanup) can be just as interesting, perhaps even more real and worthy of our attention.

It is appropriate at this point to elaborate on the absent human figure. Ling Nah's drawings are clearly devoid of people. As mentioned earlier, she avoids the heavy human traffic when and where she takes photographic references for her drawings. For her, this is a way of relieving herself from the faceless

*Staring Cases (Detail)*



Repressive architecture of the Piranesian imagination, however, does not spell total doom, as individuals may still seek out individualised nooks and crannies of escape (for example, under arches or within the darkness of shadows), be they momentary, vicarious, or imaginary—an epitome of the queer ambivalence of living death. One cannot help but recall Piranesi's Roman arches and Rococo embellishments after viewing Ling Nah's **Arching** for some time. Through such art-historical referencing, Ling Nah suggests that three centuries after Piranesi, we continue to be trapped as prisoners in the urban milieu.

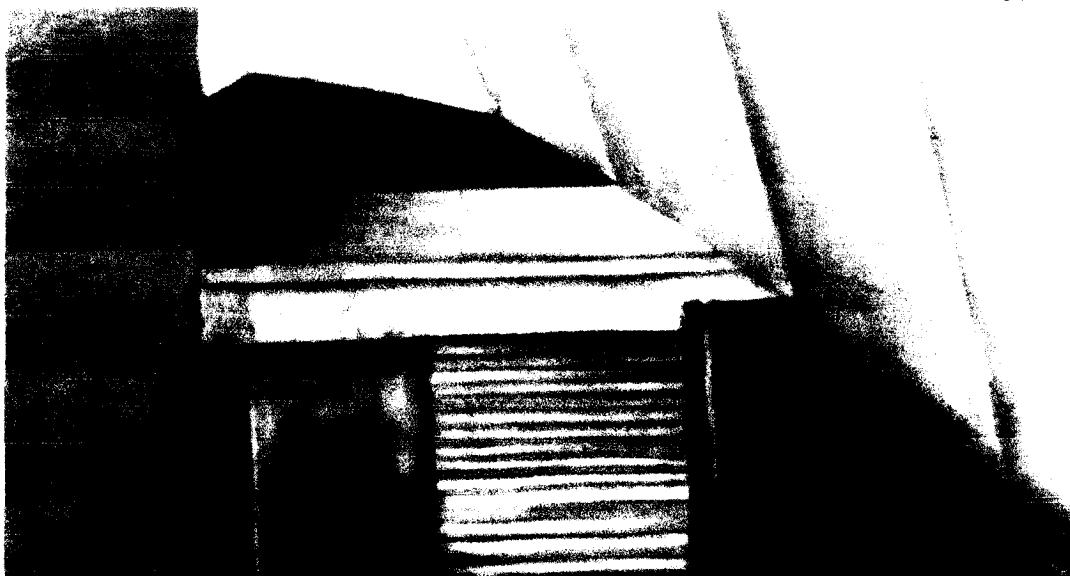
Yet there is room for escape. According to Ling Nah, "if one looks at [her] drawings long enough, [one] may realise that, amidst the pessimism, there [are] outlets (such as doorways) for escape and survival..."<sup>15</sup> She locates such escape outlets in the transitional spaces of the living environment. In **Staring Cases**, for instance, one confronts flights of staircases, with an urge to wander around them, while wondering what might be going on behind the parapets: Couples sharing intimate moments? Youngsters revising schoolwork? People engaging in illegal activities? Kids playing hide-and-seek? Or a girl hurrying down the staircases with wild abandon, similar to the one dashing along a pavement in **Nostalgic Run** (2000)<sup>16</sup>, one of Ling Nah's earlier paintings? Ling Nah's images portray as much the constricting urban order as moments and spaces of escape within it.

Using charcoal on paper, Ling Nah extends her images' play on ambivalence, simultaneously reflecting the order of urban life and subverting it with elements of disorder. She achieves this in three ways: chiaroscuro<sup>17</sup>, traces of uncertainty, and the absence of the human figure. Although her photographic references are taken at different moments in the day, all her resolved drawings have qualities of night: pitch-dark areas, low-key lighting, and high contrast, for example. This *chiaroscuro* aesthetics creates an interesting problem for the viewer. It is difficult, at least initially, to decide whether to respond to the images with fear and suspicion (as one might, while watching a horror movie or reading a suspense thriller), or quite contrarily, with a sense of relief (the way one feels about one's own bedroom, for instance). This is because Ling Nah has conflated visual codes of authority (associated with discipline and urban orderliness) and abandonment (linked to spontaneity and the lack of restraint in one's most intimate spaces) within each image. Through the interplay of light and darkness, Ling Nah imbues public urban spaces, which are hard and cold, with a sense of intimacy and domesticity. On the whole, the monochromatic scheme of her works has a decidedly nostalgic quality, lending a positive mood to her initially pessimistic spaces.

and conscious nostalgia in her. Ling Nah expresses regret that the housing block in which she has been living for the most part of her life will be demolished in a year's time. One could, even if superficially, regard Ling Nah's sentiments towards such spaces as a nostalgic response to their impending disappearance.

Ling Nah makes strategic aesthetic choices when photographing her environment. She avoids postcard-friendly aspects of the urban landscape, like panoramic views of the city skyline and low-angle shots of high-rise buildings. Instead she keeps her eyes alert to alleys, corners, pathways, windows, openings, staircases, and escalators—transitional spaces that we find at once familiar and strange, because they appear rather different from what we know of the urban environment. These are spaces by and through which we often pass without a second look. For Ling Nah, they are captivating because of the concurrent sense of mystery and optimism they embody. To understand Ling Nah's particular photographic choices, it would be useful to make a detour to one important art-historical reference in her work: the prison scenes of 18<sup>th</sup>-century Venetian etcher and architect Giovanni Battista Piranesi. Writer Aaron Betsky refers to Piranesi's architectures as "the queer space where the self was forced to confront his or her own body of everyday life, and without [apparent] escape."<sup>14</sup>

*Arching (Detail)*



concern. Finally it explores the aesthetic experience one may derive from her works.

In her artist statement, Ling Nah shares her concern that “the Singapore urban environment, particularly its dominating architecture” is “very man-made” and “very unnatural”.<sup>8</sup> This is understandable, given the over-emphasis of orderliness in Singapore, which makes its architecture hard and cold, and the state a veritable concrete jungle. Together with the haste of modern living, the urban setting contributes to alienation between environment and self, between self and others, and within the self. In his study of life in early 20<sup>th</sup>-century European metropolises, Georg Simmel has observed that relationships in the city tend to be defensive, characterised by an objective reciprocity, a blasé attitude, and a consortium of distrust, indifference, and pragmatism.<sup>9</sup> Both Ling Nah’s and Simmel’s laments about the urban condition are symptomatic of nostalgia, which local sociologist Chua Beng Huat has defined as “an immanent critique of the present”.<sup>10</sup> To experience nostalgia is to reminisce about the past, especially its positive qualities, such as a simpler life, more informal relationships, and spontaneity in expressing emotions.<sup>11</sup> In this respect, nostalgia constitutes a negative evaluation of the present place and time.<sup>12</sup> Although Ling Nah does not regard nostalgia as a central theme in her practice, she concedes that there are nostalgic elements in her works. Her particular nostalgia is not a blatant renouncement of the present or an invitation to travel back in time, but a suggestion to imbue some sense of humanity back into the urban environment.

To address her concern, Ling Nah has developed a three-tier methodology, which comprises walking, photography, and drawing. She roams around the urban environment in search of visual references for her work. These places include the financial district, train stations, and public housing areas. Shenton Way recurs in a number of her works, such as *Rear(ing) Reflections*, *Minding the Gap*, and *Emerging Descent/Ascent*. This area fascinates Ling Nah because of the stark visual contrast it presents at different times of the day: The hustle and bustle of the place on weekdays gives way to an almost haunting emptiness at night and during weekends. Such a contrast provokes Ling Nah to ponder over the relationships among urbanites, environment, and time. Spaces in and around MRT<sup>13</sup> stations are equally intriguing for Ling Nah. As with the commercial district, train stations are usually overcrowded with people, but Ling Nah looks for particular moments and spaces of solidarity, when and where human traffic is light or not visible. *Archiving* and *Expo(sing) Posterior* are cases in point. While the first two groups of environment suggest nostalgia only implicitly, spaces around her HDB flat, which she has captured for works like *Lifting Corners* and *Alleying* (2001), seem to evoke overt

powerful.<sup>19</sup> At the level of discourse, Ling Nah's work also constitutes a tactical transgression of Singapore's official ideology of privileging order over chaos in its urban planning. Ling Nah's nostalgia is not simply a return to a more idyllic past but a cue to (re-)experience the absent, in present terms. In the midst of the urban order, Ling Nah enacts a return of the repressed: an invitation to attend to one's unfulfilled wishes, a reminder to explore life's experiences diversely and intensively, even if only with quiet rejoice.

#### Notes

1. Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life" (1903), in *Sociological Perspectives: Selected Readings*, ed. Kenneth Thompson & Jeremy Tunstall (New York: Penguin, 1979), p. 85.
2. Against a misguided goal of totally removing chaos from the city, Richard Sennett argues that "the city must be conceived as a social order of parts without a coherent, controllable whole form. ...[D]isorder is better than dead, predetermined planning, which restricts effective social exploration." Richard Sennett, *The Uses of Disorder: Personal Identity and City Life* (London: Allen Lane The Penguin Press, 1970), pp. 138–42.
3. URA (Urban Redevelopment Authority) is Singapore's national land use planning authority.
4. HDB (Housing Development Board) is Singapore's public housing developer.
5. NParks (National Parks Board) develops and enhances Singapore's image as a Garden City.
6. Rem Koolhaas, *S, M, L, XL* (New York: The Monacelli Press, 1995), p. 1011.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 1027 & 1035.
8. Tang Ling Nah, "Tang Ling Nah," artist statement (16 Jan 2002), p. 1.
9. Simmel, "The Metropolis," pp. 84–8.
10. Chua Beng Huat, "That Imagined Space: Nostalgia for Kampung," in *Portraits of Places: History, Community and Identity in Singapore*, ed. Brenda S. A. Yeoh & Lily Kong (Singapore: Times Editions, 1995), p. 227.
11. *Ibid.*
12. For a discussion on nostalgia and the city, see Elizabeth Wilson, "Looking Backward: Nostalgia and the City," in *Imagining Cities. Scripts, Signs, Memory*, ed. Sallie Westwood & John Williams (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 127–39.
13. MRT (Mass Rapid Transit) is Singapore's public underground transportation system.
14. Aaron Betsky, *Queer Space: Architecture and Same-Sex Desire* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1997), p. 49.
15. Tang, "Tang," p. 1.
16. Sian E. Jay, "One Moment in Time," *Life! The Straits Times*, 1 June 2000.
17. Chiaroscuro is Italian for 'bright-dark'. It is used to describe purely tonal monochromatic paintings which rely for their effect only on gradations between brightness and darkness.
18. Susie Lingham, "New Lines of Inquiry," in *Infinity: 8<sup>th</sup> RMIT University Bachelor of Arts (Fine Art) Exhibition* (Singapore: LASALLE-SIA College of the Arts, 2001).
19. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984).

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