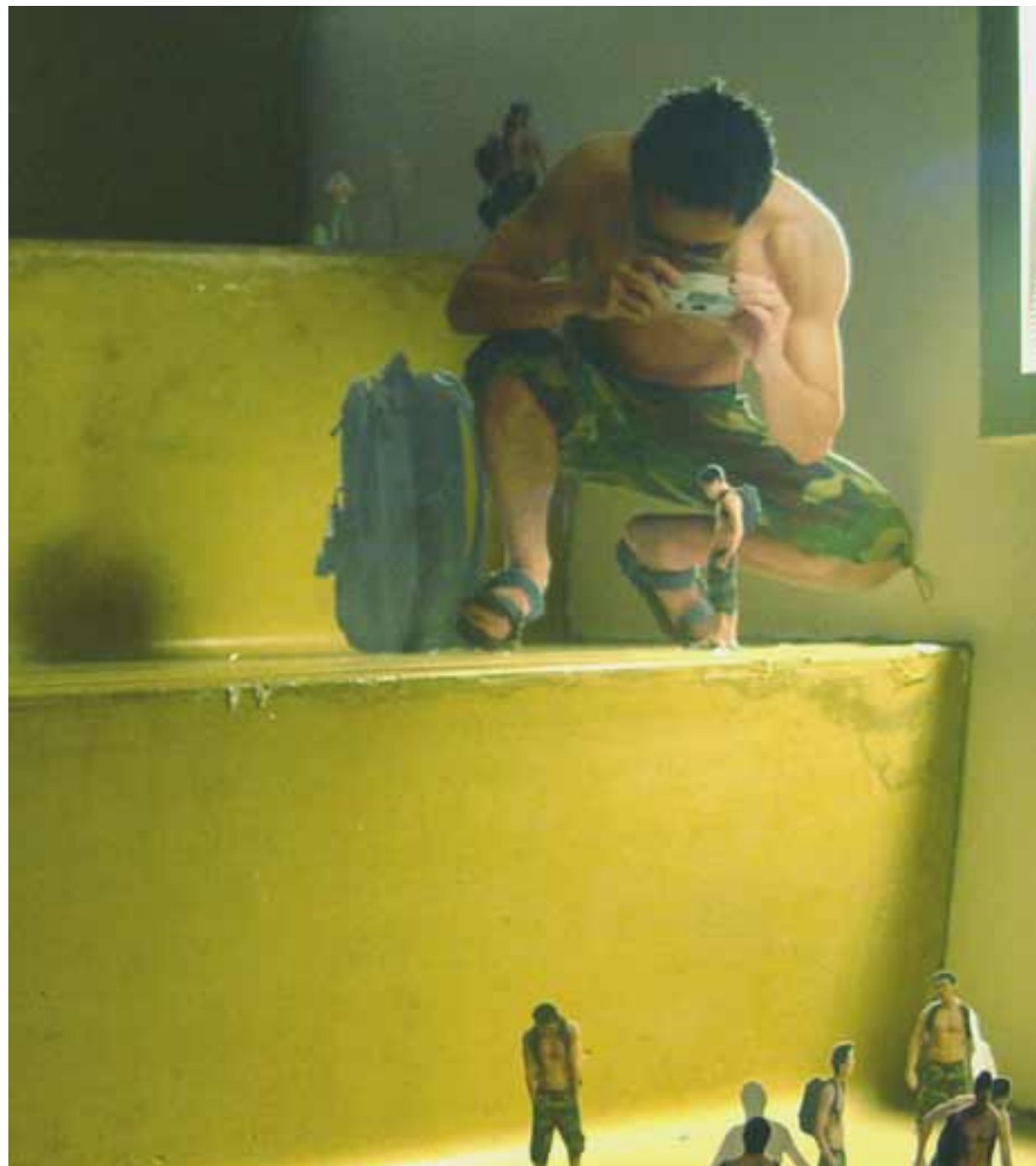


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Interview with Michael Lee Hong Hwee: Notes Towards an Interdisciplinary Artist





Post-It 1: A Few Caveats

“My name is Rudolph today!” Michael proclaimed, referring to his dermatologically afflicted nose when we met up for lunch just the other day. In fact, the lunch itself was a kind of prelude to the interview which we had arranged for the following day. I did not know how to react. Such mental immobility is common, when one is in the presence of an artist – irony is always a possible mot-clef in the mantra of artistic sensibility.

The over-arching thematic concerns in his body of work stem from two domains: architecture and anatomy. In his creations, he translates these concerns into an exploratory dialogue between body and building, desire and space. Through a host of art forms and media, he constantly addresses the question: “What’s a body got to do with a building?”

Hence the title of his recent solo exhibition in August 2004 held at Alliance Francaise de Singapour: When a Body Meets a Building.

His writings have been published in Asian Cinema, Singapore Architect, Artizen and Vehicle, among other journals, and has written for various art exhibition catalogues. He has also curated art exhibitions in Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay, Woodlands Regional Library and Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA).

Currently Pathway Leader of two Bachelor of Arts (Honours) Fine Art programmes in Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, Singapore, where he lectures on professional practice, studio practice and art theory.

Post-It 2: Dialogue

Given your formal trainings in Communication Studies, graduating with a major in video production and film analysis, how has that prepared you as an artist? More specifically, as the artist that you are today, working with such a wide array of art forms?

These formal trainings helped me develop my visual and verbal languages. I was trained in all the basic rules of making a “good-looking” video image. One cannot break rules without first knowing what they are. In fact, I become quite good at it early on and proceeded to more experimental stuff in my Honours year. My video production skills, with, I think, a particular strength in visual composition, continue to help me in my art today, no matter what media I’m handling.

By contrast, my verbal language came less naturally. Not having a family with a reading culture meant that I was pretty much lagging behind in terms of general knowledge and skills in research and writing. But my interest in selected subjects on my Bachelor degree studies like visual communication and advertising spurred me to work on my reading and writing habits. Additionally, my Master’s research further developed my intellectual department and academic writing. In my dissertation, I employed a semiotic-psychoanalytic framework that

continues to underscore my current professional practice as artist, writer and curator.

As for working with, like you've mentioned, a wide array of art forms, you could say it's both my weakness and my strength. It is an extension of my own personality. I always have had an anxiety that I'm not doing enough, so I tend to end up trying to do more every time. Looking at my life thus far, there seems to be an immense anxiety to compensate for many self-perceived lacks. This anxiety is also the driving force behind my creations. Being a Gemini, I guess such crisis is understandable. Being a middle child might have further contributed to my need to prove my worth, to seek approval.

On a more serious note and in relation to my art, the use of different approaches and media promises vast possibilities. If at any time I were involved in several different projects, each utilising an artistic medium different from the rest, or even in the same work itself different art forms may be incorporated, there is the excitement of bouncing ideas off from one idea and using these new ideas to feed the inspirations of the other projects.

That's why I really admire artists who are able to do various different things, play different roles concurrently. Artists who especially amaze me are those who are able to traverse different disciplines, and perform equally well in the respective domains. Artists like Victor Burgin: He's one of my idols. As an image-maker and a writer, he is excellent in both fields. He's able to bridge the respective demands imposed by two different disciplines. Closer to home, Susie Lingham is an important role model: She makes exciting installation artworks, she writes beautifully and profoundly, she curates cool shows, and she is an excellent lecturer! "Super-ultrawoman", I'd say.

Tell us about your other influences. Magritte was impassionedly discussed yesterday at lunch.

Magritte inspires me with his subtlety and his astounding ability to combine words and visual in his paintings, thereby questioning their respective and related conventions. He went way beyond Dali in his exploration of the surrealist sensibility. His violence, unlike the blatancy of Dali, is subliminal. His images are always ostensibly calm; ostensibly because one can discern that such visual serenity is a fragile construct in attendance of an eventual "crack-down." So, the profundity and poetics of Magritte's works are what attract me. Added to that, his powerful visual sense. He is truly amazing!

Another influence would be Tom of Finland. He does drawings of the male nude, or what he himself affectionately called his "dirty drawings." The reason why his works appeal is the sheer beauty of the smooth, powerful musculature of his male figures. I guess there is a universal appeal there, for people of certain persuasions, if you know what I mean. Though aside from the raw nature of his drawings, Tom of Finland was able to infuse them with a kind of buffering (pardon the pun) mellowness, even vulnerability. There is this nice tension between hard-core pornography and pure emotionality in his works. I like that.

My idols have always been multitalented multitaskers, and I regard another Tom – Tom Friedman – to be a particularly mind-boggling interdisciplinary artist. He is the only living artist I'm aware of who still does things the hard way. I've always like to see artworks which, upon close inspection, I can actually discern the immensity of effort that went behind actualising them; works that make me go: "Is this artist crazy or what?! Damn cool, man!" I never really like art that are too "easy." I think it brings the integrity of the artist to suspect. I like to be both conceptually and "corporeally" challenged by a piece of work.

Tom Friedman once said: "When I make something, in a sense, I want to build it from atom up to when I know what it is." For yourself, what is the atom, and where is the end?

Friedman continues to be quite impossible to surpass, and he inspires me by virtue of the fact that he does not take the easy way out when creating his art. All his works are really painstaking process of actualisation, and that is the amazing thing about him.

He also provided me a model of resolving my own works. I did a painting for submission to the UOB Painting of The Year 2001 competition, entitled Three in One – I gave myself some guidelines: I wanted the work to be exhibited. I also wanted to satisfy my lust for the male nude. And in Singapore, to have both would be equivalent to having your cake and eating it too. I wanted my work to be exhibited without offending public propriety. Hence, male nudes disguised as trees; and all three figures were done from a back-view perspective.



Usually when I've addressed the original vision and wishes, hopefully the end-product goes beyond the statement, that is when the work is complete. There should be some kind of ambiguity and mystery. Most importantly, for me, a resolved work is one that has, first of all, visual interest, and where possible, an indication of "labour".

I also don't enjoy works that are either too minimal or conceptual. There are a number of contemporary artists – no, I won't name names – who engage political or social issues like gender and race, use trendy technology like digital photography or video, or do minimal work that has weak or no sense of visual aesthetics. These artists also likely use words – in their statements, for example – to explain (away) their minimalism or conceptualism. But if you think about it, some of the most important and interesting conceptual artists (for instance, Christo & Jeanne-Claude who wrap up architectural monuments and Robert Smithson who built a spiral jetty) go through hard labour to arrive at their work and have very good visual and material sense.

This is why, I dare say, there is only one true video artist around: Eija-Liisa Ahtila. Her works have stunning cinematography, are highly experimental in mixing genres and formal conventions, and are both mind-boggling and heartrending at the same time.

Looking at your body of work, one can say that there is a distinct evolution towards a more personal, intimate expression. Cinetectonics of Desire (2004) is

arguably the culmination of this trend. Tell us more about this externalization of the internal.

Especially in recent times, I have begun to firmly believe in the mantra “the personal is the political,” a phrase that has its historic roots in the Feminist Movements of the sixties.

I must first mention Stud House (2003), an architectural model, which was also a rather personal project. Through conceptualizing and creating it, I was exploring issues that were close to my heart. I was very much concerned with the question of how two people might live together without getting tired of each other. The management of distance; we all know the proverbial truth: familiarity breeds contempt.



It was also a prelude of sorts to Desire.



All the texts in *Desire* were personal interpretation of my terminated relationship with my partner at that time. I wanted the video to be a record of that leaving and pain. It was both a way of punishing myself for losing myself (without hurting myself physically), and also a reminder to myself of who I was. It was an emotional reclamation of sorts.

In your videos you juxtapose texts and images. I find the compositions extremely poetic, thus moving. Which writers influence and inspire you? How important is literature to you as an artist?

I've always had an admiration for people from a literary background. I did not come from one; I've always been a "science" person. Perhaps this explains my fascination with people who are able to communicate ideas through words, literature, poetry. Amongst the writers whom I read are John Berger and Susan Sontag. These are critics who not only write beautifully, but are also able to convey their ideas effectively, and without seeming to compromise their literary values. Their intellect shines through in their writings, and their prose is simply magical.

Jeanette Winterson is also someone who has greatly moved me with every piece of her essays. Her prose is concise, hard-hitting, to-the-point. She writes in a way I would love to do, and which I can't, at the moment. All the more reason to strive towards that, you could say.

The reason why I'm unable to write as well as I would like to, I think, is that I have this internal blockage – the anxiety to prove myself as an intelligent and informed writer. So often, especially during my early days as a researcher and writer, I was dropping names and jargons like nobody's business and using a lot of flowery language – at the expense of clarity and perhaps integrity. Fortunately I encountered writers whose style, the delicate combination of aesthetics and intellect, I have always strived – and continue – to emulate.

Being exposed to all these writers actually prepared me for Jenny Holzer. She is a post-modernist artist who (in her *Truism* project) incorporates, no, uses short phrases of her own

construction as tools to create her art. These short sentences, of truisms, would be printed on shirts, painted on murals, put onto billboard etc. I find her art emotionally stimulating. Getting acquainted with her art actually helped gave birth to Desire. She was one of the important influences for the texts that appear in my videos, including the commissioned video art piece for Gallery Hotel, entitled Caressing the Gallery. I continue to be rather productive in generating my own collection of truisms.



One of your works, A Thesis on Cruising (2001-3), is a video installation that examines the cruising culture. What gave birth to this baby? What were the concerns that fed into and informed this work?

Actually I didn't intend to make another work on cruising, especially since I have already addressed the issue in an earlier video, One or Zero, in 1997. In fact, when I was filming the images, I didn't even envision it to become a work.

I was in UK with my students on a study trip in mid-2001. I did what I was supposed to do: take care of my fellow travel mates, participate actively in the tour itinerary, document my experiences and so on.

However, one day during the trip, I got bored after a series of museum and gallery visiting. Before I knew it, my videocam was tracking and recording footages of good looking men around me. From then on, I allowed my camera to lead me, and as that was happening, I also thought to myself: "Hey, wouldn't it be cool and sweet to bring home images of gorgeous guys for my partner to enjoy?!" What was really interesting and thrilling about the process was that I was myself aroused by the people I stalked. So issues of fidelity, of my personal safety, of the intrusion of other's privacy - were invoked and were going through my mind. My body got the better of me, of course, and I persisted on this cruising-video project.

When I returned from UK, I had tapes after tapes of cruising video images from this risky

endeavour to share with my partner, who was only mildly impressed. The tapes remained in storage for 2 years. Until - I committed to a group exhibition on video and electronic art with fellow NAFA colleagues.



To create my video installation, I collaborated with fellow artist Brian Gothong Tan. I really enjoyed the process and outcome because I learnt a lot from Brian - not just about making installations, and also cutting images to music and the whole business of professional practice and career planning! Pertaining to the video installation, I really enjoy, for instance, the way my subjects 'appear' and 'disappear' from one monitor to another: It uncannily (because so precisely) re-enacted my cruising experiences. I'm also glad that some of my fellow artist-friends and visitors to the show shared with me that they too were aroused by the work. I continue to be turned on by the video, myself.

Do you feel alienated, pursuing your career in the arts?

There is definitely a sense of alienation. Very strong in fact. Both as an individual inhabiting a society with a "non-artist" majority, and also as an artist working in the areas that I'm doing.

In my opinion there are two camps in the local arts scene. One emphasises strong visual aesthetics whereas the other is more concerned with the profundity of conceptual ideas that frame the art work. I try to combine both orientations. So, I see myself as striving for what most local artists don't. And this as it is can be quite alienating as well. At the same time, I've also grown to enjoy this loneliness through strong belief that this is part and parcel of the strive towards developing a distinctive art practice.

Of course, the alienation also comes from my neurosis. Basically there are many mental knots in my head that constantly worry and depress me. The video *A Psychotectonic Experiment* (2004), which addresses the question: "How can a neurotic become a psychotic?!" – exemplifies and explores the chaos in me.



However, learning about other artists' struggles – through personal contact and reading – helps. Most notably Marcel Proust once wrote: All great works of art are made by neurotics, and neurotics alone. Reading stuffs like this is both consoling and encouraging. But the true neurotic never learns his lesson: He constantly finds new worries and pains.

Pain is essential to your creative process.

Yes, very much so. I'm a sucker for bastards. Without them, without the pain they inflict, my work sucks. I think I've also developed a pain-inducing system that helps me in my creative process: through over-sensitivity, through hallucination – you get my drift. Doing things the hard way, doing too many things at one go and feeling anxious that I can do more – all contribute to sustaining pain in me. As I've said, every work that I do is, at least in part, a form of self-punishment, even if the process may be enjoyable or therapeutic. Every work is a reminder of who I was, and a reclamation of that self.

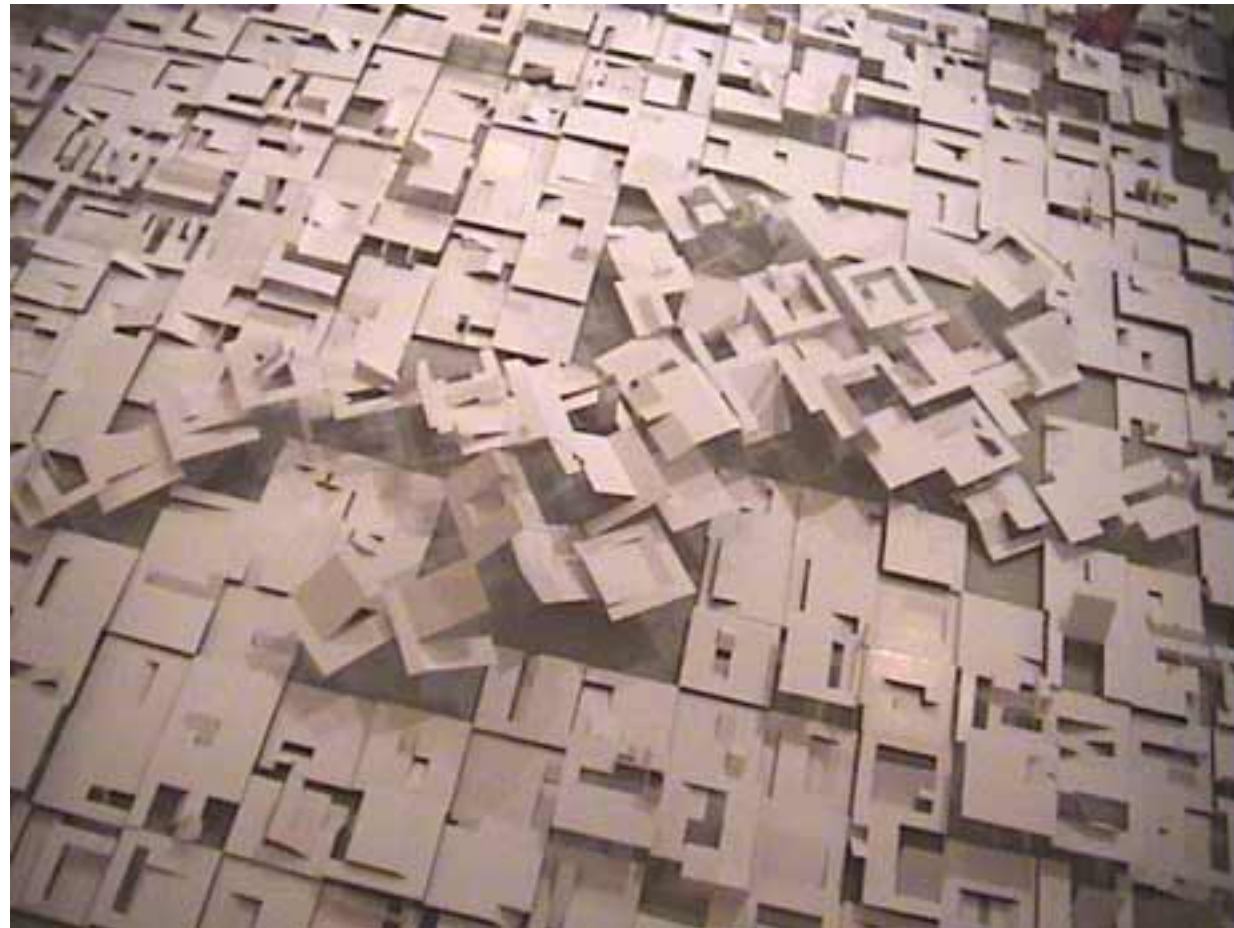
The anxiety of inadequacy, the feeling of not doing enough, of underachieving, is also what

propels me along in the trajectory of the artistic career. I hope to grow as an artist, above all as a person. Perhaps I take the saying, "No pain, no gain", too literally.

How much of Michael can we discern in your next project?

I'm currently working on an installation which would be one of the art pieces to be featured in Asian Traffic , an exhibition that explores cross-cultural interactions amongst cities in the Asian Pacific region. I call it Notes Towards a Corporeal City.

For this installation, I am creating a cityscape in the shape of a square on the exhibition floor space, and this perfect square is to comprise smaller squares of varying designs. I really want to emphasise the perfect straight lines at the edges of this gigantic square. At the moment I have made fifty small squares. I'm aiming for a thousand, to give it that visual impact.



Post-It 3: A Selection of Works

In order of images displayed above:

- i. Staircase: A User's Guide, photographic installation, digital print, variable sizes, 2004
- ii. Three in One, painting, acrylic on corrugated board, 120 x 180cm, 2001
- iii. Stud House, architectural model, compressed foam, paper & perspex, 36 x 36 x 36cm, 2003
- iv. Cinetectonics of Desire, video, digital, 5min, 2004
- v. Caressing the Gallery, photography, digital, variable sizes, 2003
- vi. A Thesis on Cruising, video installation, mixed media, 5min, 2001-3
- vii. A Psychotectonic Experiment, video, digital, 5min, 2004
- viii. Notes Towards a Corporeal City, installation, cardboard & perspex, variable sizes, 2005

Links

Eija-Liisa Ahtila

<http://www.paolocurti.com/ahtila/ahtila.htm> <http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/ahtila/default.htm>

Victor Burgin

<http://www.egs.edu/faculty/burgin.html> http://www.ubu.com/concept/burgin_moment.html

Tom of Finland

<http://www.artatlarge.com/pages/TOMETLGR/TOMBIO.htm> http://www.erotcartcollection.com/Tom_of_Finland_Biography.html

Jenny Holzer

<http://adaweb.walkerart.org/context/artists/holzer/holzer1.html> <http://mfx.dasburo.com/art/truisms.html>

Tom Friedman

<http://www.designboom.com/portrait/friedman.html>

Contact Michael [here](#).

Interview by [Yisa](#).

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