

# Transcending the limits of photography

Two contemporary art photographers present works using opposite approaches – one with light source from the outside, and the other from the inside. **BY CHEAH UI-HOON**

PHOTOGRAPHER John Clang gets his inspiration from long, solitary walks – without his camera. And keeps himself from distractions by having a basic phone that he only texts or calls with.

That “thinking space” he creates is “a way to engage all my senses in the moment,” he describes. “If I had a camera to take a photo, I’d already be processing the moment for the purposes of the photo.”

He takes notes on his phone to record what he sees and feels, like he’s hoarding thoughts. “I have my own short forms or code of recording things so it’s not tedious,” he relates. “I’m trying to deal with life in a different perspective as much as I can.” He adds that he’s been consciously practising this observation mode since he was 31. He’s now 43.

His notes came in useful for his current solo exhibition entitled *The World Surrounding an Indoor Plant*, at Fost Gallery. He last had a major show, *Being Together*, in Singapore in 2013, at the National Museum where he featured 40 families who had members living abroad.

This current show is an example of how he mines personal memories to depict key impressions. “The indoor plant is actually referring to me, because I’m quite low maintenance, resilient and I don’t really socialise,” he quips, while his wife and de facto manager, Elin Tew, does agree that he is quite low maintenance.



At least, where his wardrobe choice is concerned – since Clang sticks to only grey T-shirts and black pants. “It’s a headache to think about what to wear. I also have one jacket for formal occasions!”

How he’s chosen to present the work also shows that exploration of the intimate realms of memory and recollection. Using the *camera lucida* method, Clang projected images of acquaintances and family members from a “magic lantern”, then he traced them and used charcoal to draw them. He photographed them again to create the final printworks in this exhibition.

The reversal from photo to sketch and back again alludes to the fundamentals of image-making. “The key is how images create Impressions and how these experiences can be shared by people,” he shares. “We’re unique as persons but not that unique as humans. This whole exercise is to expand the thoughts of the viewers rather than tell them how this work should be seen.”

It fits with his view that his photographs tell stories. “When I look at a photograph, I refuse to see it as a visual documentation. I’m informed, for sure, but I’m looking forward to something in or about the work which allows me to expand my own thoughts and where I can create my own narrative. Everyone has their own stories and secrets and it’s nice when they see a work that helps them relive

their own memories. It creates a resonant experience with them.”

There’s no lack of good, technical photographic images in these days of the Internet and smartphones, but for an artist, it’s going beyond photography as technique and seeing it as a medium for self-expression.

The World Surrounding An Indoor Plant, a solo exhibition by John Clang, opens tonight and runs until Sept 4 at Fost Gallery, 1 Lock Road #901-02, Gillman Barracks. Opening hours are Tue-Sat 11am-7pm, Sun: 11am-6pm. Mon/Public Holidays: Open by appointment



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John Clang on his images: *Brused Girl in Blue* (Pinhole above); and *He Is My Father* (right)

## Art of sprouting roots overseas

By Cheah Ui-Hoon  
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HOW do beans grow in different environments? When Taiwan-born artist Lavender Chang pondered her life in Singapore as a permanent resident, she used the hardy bean as a metaphor for humans who adapt and put down roots on foreign soil.

Now that germ of an idea has grown and she’s expanded this metaphor to look at family relations – by photographing the bean plants as they grow in cereal boxes in different homes across Singapore.

Using the technique of solargraphy, where the box acts like a camera with one pinhole for natural light to come through, she captured portraits of the growing bean plants, and also the view from the window of the various homes.

“The cereal boxes are like black boxes of the unknown, parallel to how families are often impenetrable to the outsider despite the common issues they face,” explains the 32-year-old artist.

She refers to the art theory that the family photo is a cryptic vault of power, pain and secrets as much as it is an instrument for displaying cohesion and togetherness.

Chang’s solo, *The Movingly Minute Scale of a Restricted Life*, is on at Alliance Française – featuring the photo prints of 15 families and also some images from the series that won her a prize last year. She was the winner in the sixth France and Singapore Photographic Arts Awards (SPAA) with her series, *I Walked, and Laid Down on This Warm, Bare Earth*, in 2015.

In that exhibition, she also used beans – by planting them in five different areas in Singapore where she had stayed before and photographing them over a period of



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PHOTOS: LAVENDER CHANG

two weeks, to see how they took root and grew. For that project, it’s an apt metaphor of how immigrants find themselves growing in a foreign land – a very personal issue with Chang herself as a Taiwanese.

Chang immigrated to Singapore with her parents. A junior high school student then, she studied visual communications at Temasek Polytechnic, followed by a degree art course at Nanyang Technological University.

Life was moving along well until she came across her first xenophobic encounter at an anti-foreign immigrant rally in Hong Lim Park in 2012, which disturbed her and also inspired a series of art works examining the idea of adaptation and also the idea of home. “I’ve never felt unwelcome before this, nor felt my ‘foreignness,’” she relates.

After more than a decade in Singapore, she also feels her disconnect with Taiwan. That spurred the series, *A Dissection of...*, where she interviewed people about their favourite hawk food that reminded them of home, and featured photographs of the dish, with their

cooked ingredients taken apart. Having studied drawing and painting, Chang picked up and majored in photography only when she was in the polytechnic. Singaporean photographer John Clang’s works – shown as his first solo at The Esplanade’s Jendela Gallery – was one of the earliest inspirations. She later got to know him through her coursework and was also mentored by him for a year. “What he taught us is not about technique but how to better understand ourselves and our own voices,” she shares.

“Not that we had planned to do projects using opposite optical devices,” she quips, about their respective solo exhibitions. Chang is also the director of photography for Clang’s art film project which is almost completed.

Alliance Française presents Lavender Chang’s *The Movingly Minute Scale of a Restricted Life* solo from July Aug 8-13 at Societe Generale Gallery, 1 Sarkies Road, Level 2 Singapore. Viewing hours are Mon-Fri, 12pm to 8pm; Sat, 12pm to 6pm. Closed on Sun and public holidays