

# **A WOMAN'S PLACE AT HOME**

PUBLIC ART , DOMESTIC SPACE, the BODY, GENDER, PUBLIC ART

SINGAPORE WOMEN ARTISTS

By

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Keywords: Singapore Women Artists, Domestic Space, Public Art, the Body, Gender*

Previously, the role of woman was confined to daughter, sister, wife and mother. However, this role has since expanded to include worker, or career woman. For Singapore, what this means is that, the modern Singaporean woman spends more time at work than at home, and yet essentially has to manage both work and home.

Through looking at the home in two aspects, as a process and a space where women straddle between the public realm and domestic space, this dissertation seeks to examine how the domestic space at home, with its dynamics, tensions and potentials are expressed visually in art. More importantly, I am interested in how these visual representations are able to inform us about the changing roles of women and how the fixed spaces of home may be negotiated, contested or altered to give women agency.

Although no two experiences are the same, women artists are chosen to be the subject matter as their artworks, both as process and end product have poignantly highlighted the issues women face at large. Also, I have selected artists whose work finds root or speak of ideas about home and domesticity.

The three Singapore women artists chosen are Amanda Heng, Noni Kaur and Donna Ong. By examining the thematic elements in their artworks (the everyday, the importance of ritual and the significance of dreams respectively), as well as correspondingly analyzing the artworks as parallel attempts in architectural representation (the collage, the mandala, the diorama); new connections of space, meanings and identities unfold.

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## INTRODUCTION



**[1] Shake Hands?**  
(source: google image, June 2012)

*There is no question that in this kitchen, replete with foodstuffs, a woman runs the operation and a man might feel discomfort if he strays into her workplace... It transgressed the time-honored convention that women in genre pictures should be demure and not grins, giggles, or laughs, and be the recipients of male action.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Terrence H. Witkowski, "Painting the Domestication of Consumption in 19Th-Century America," *Advances in Consumer Research* Volume 26, 1999: 644-651.

## **PRELUDE**

Lily Martin Spencer's 1854 painting *Shake Hands?* contains connotations of hopes, dreams, home and domesticity. In the year 1854, it reflected the ideal social roles society expected of women and yet intelligently reveals the desire for equality that women wanted.

Like Spencer, women artists in Singapore still face similar challenges and share similar ideals. Challenges include breaking ground in a male dominated environment, developing and maturing professionally and personally and at the same time juggling the multiple 'traditional' roles of women entrusted to them in society.<sup>2</sup> Art works produced by artists like Spencer, reflect profound concern with the relationship between personal identity and social conditions.<sup>3</sup>

Art however, unlike architecture, may not be considered functional in the traditional sense. As Jane Rendell points out, art is nevertheless functional in providing tools for critical thinking, social change and self-reflection.<sup>4</sup> Installation art in particular might create new possibilities for thinking about the relationship between art and architecture. Claire Bishop argues that installation art addresses participants directly as a literal presence in the space where their sense of touch, smell and sound are as heightened as much as their sense of vision.<sup>5</sup> The insertion of real/found familiar objects, structures, sounds and texts into the gallery context therefore produces complex architectural scenes which, when absorbed by the participants, conjures in them a holistic sensory feel of 'everyday life'<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> *USINT Fetes Women Artists in Celebration of Women's History Month*, 04 12, 2012, <http://havana.usint.gov/whm.html> (accessed 06 18, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art & Society* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2007), p. 448.

<sup>4</sup> Jane Rendell, *Art and Architecture; A Place Between* (London: I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd, 2008), p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> Claire Bishop, *Installation Art; A Critical History* (London: Tate Publishing, 2005), p. 41.

<sup>6</sup> Bishop, 'Installation Art', p. 41.



The dissertation seeks to find out if a woman's place continues to be at home today through the subject matter of Singapore's women artists, whose artworks reflect the voice of Singaporean women at large and further develop ideas of home and domesticity. Three Singapore women artists chosen are Amanda Heng, Noni Kaur and Donna Ong. Each representing different generations and yet we find overlaps and continuity of ideas between their works. As the roles of women transform and evolve, their works captures these nuances of change.

## HOME

Home is looked at in two aspects.

*The home is the place from which we start, but it is not necessarily where we end...the home is not 'a matter of some final determination.'*<sup>7</sup>

To Jeff Malpas and Linn Miller, the home is a place of significance where one's identity is developed. However, there is an importance to develop the self further by looking beyond the home. Drawing upon Malpas and Miller's ideas of home, Barbara Penner suggests that the home begins as our starting point from which our worldview is developed. However as we seek to realize childhood dreams or hopes that started from the home, they may not (and often do not) stop or end at the home. Hence, our relationship with our home is always changing.

Extending Susan Stewart's definition on longing, home can also be seen as a space of longing.<sup>8</sup> In this dissertation, the artists interviewed have experienced physical mobility by relocating in one way or another; through evictions<sup>9</sup> or by choice. However through close examination on their works, they subconsciously reveal a longing for their childhood homes and for the environment they grew up in. In this way, the home becomes idealized, due to a sense of displacement or loss. To Gaston Bachelard, 'Memories are motionless, and the more securely they are fixed in space, the sounder they are.'<sup>10</sup> Because we experience a physical space collectively with our body and the five senses, our recollections of the place are heightened and they become even more real.

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<sup>7</sup> Jeff Malpas, *Place and Experience: A Philosophical Topography* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), cited by Barbara Penner, "And the whole house shook...": Mary Poppins and the Modern Home," *Haecceity Inc* (Haecceity Inc), 2009: 1-13, p. 10.

<sup>8</sup> Irene Cieraad, *At Home- An Anthropology of Domestic Space* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1999), p. ix.

<sup>9</sup> During post independence, HDB flats became the Singapore government's proposed standard type of living for the masses. As a result, many families were evicted of their homes and compensated with a HDB flat. Amanda Heng's family was one of them.

<sup>10</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), p. 9.

Home is idealized because this is where childhood dreams are weaved. It is a familiar space where one feels safe and unafraid to imagine. These dreams and ideals are not limited and constrained by the material boundaries of the house. However, in the process of weaving these dreams and making them a reality, we are potentially faced with disappointments that diminish the ideal.

*'There is a lopsided understanding of the world; the domestic places of our lives are not given as much attention as the public spaces.'*<sup>11</sup>

According to John Rennie Short, we understand home as a strange paradox. We see today's women straddling between two spheres, domestic and public. And yet when we compare the two, the domestic space 'suffers' unjustly.

Although many of us spend a substantial amount of our lives at home, which is our first playground and a space where our primary emotional connections are shaped,<sup>12</sup> and also, possibly the last place we spend in our dying moments, little attention has been given to the huge significance of the home. Home is often pitted against what is public. A whole series of polarities are attached to the above terms: heart-mind, emotional-logical, feminine-masculine, weak-strong, oppressed-powerful, inside-outside, family-community, and private-public.<sup>13</sup> While the words used are not definite or sufficient to express the distinctions between domestic and public spaces, the multiple roles of women today seem to negotiate between these two realms. Even as the modern woman goes out to work, she begins and ends her day at home; a place where she performs her 'traditional' tasks.

Domestic spaces are often portrayed and revealed in the artworks as spaces of empowerment and inner strength. By reflecting on the idea of home, I will discuss how the works of each artist finds root in their childhood home and reveal their different changing roles or/and fears of the expectations of being a woman; as a daughter, a mother, or the inability to be one, a wife and a woman with career and how the fixed spaces of home may be negotiated, contested or altered.

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<sup>11</sup> Irena Cieraad, *At Home, An Anthropology of Domestic Space* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1999), p. 9.

<sup>12</sup> Cieraad, 'At Home', p. 9.

<sup>13</sup> Cieraad, 'At Home', p. 10.

I will discuss how the works of Heng, Kaur and Ong through the themes of 'the everyday', 'ritual' and 'dreams.' By referencing the discussions with corresponding objects of architectural representation, namely, *collage*, *mandala* and *diorama*, new connections of space, meaning and identity are formed. While themes are used as guiding concepts for artists, architectural representations are used as spatial models in the architectural discipline to understand the artworks. These works will be analyzed spatially through their scale, materiality and spatial organization.

## CHAPTER 1 | AMANDA HENG

### DEFINITION OF THE EVERYDAY

*The banal, the quotidian, the obvious, the common, the ordinary, the infra-ordinary, the background noise, the habitual? [...] How are we to speak of these common things, how to track them down, how to flush them out, wrest them from the dross in which they are mired, how to give them meaning, a tongue, to let them, finally, speak of what it is, who we are.<sup>1</sup>*

For the definition of 'everyday', meanings obtained were,

1. of or pertaining to every day; daily.
2. ordinary, commonplace.<sup>2</sup>

Some synonyms that are closely related to the everyday are dull, mundane, unimaginative, and ordinary.<sup>3</sup>

To George Perec, the existence of the everyday seems difficult to comprehend and quantify. While it is possible to identify what constitutes the everyday, we are however unable to pinpoint and give it a specific explanation. Stephen Johnstone explains the possible reasons why this might be so, the everyday being 'everywhere and (yet) nowhere at the same time,<sup>4</sup> ends up being in 'the realm of the unnoticed and the overlooked'.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, trans. John Sturrock (Penguin Classics, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> Definition obtained from 'Everyday,' Dictionary, <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/everyday> (accessed 07 17, 2012)

<sup>3</sup> Synonyms obtained from 'Everyday,' Thesaurus, <http://thesaurus.com/browse/everyday> (accessed 07 17, 2012)

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Johnstone, *The Everyday* (The MIT Press, 2008), p. 13.

<sup>5</sup> Johnstone, 'The Everyday', p. 13.

The everyday materializes as something that has a built form and is of physical substance. It is so pervasive that it fades into the background as we hold it with little regard. Thus, the everyday here points mainly to activities that have become routine and objects that have become accustomed to.

While the everyday is universally understood by all, it is unique to each individual. Even as activities become habits, the perception of the activity or the time devoted to it is subjective, hence it is 'yet never in the same way, at the same time, never all at once' for every one.<sup>6</sup>

In Henri Lefebvre's *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, he brings to our attention that Socrates 'never wrote his own philosophy', using 'only everyday objects to illustrate his dialogues: pot with the potter, shoes with the cobblers'.<sup>7</sup> Here, we not only see the association of our vocation (which speaks of work and toil) and the tools that we used, but more importantly how everyday objects have been used to understand and make sense of the abstract.<sup>8</sup> In the same light, Heng creatively uses mundane everyday objects to 'offer illuminating and revealing routes into the everyday,'<sup>9</sup> frequently by juxtaposing through a juxtaposition of private domestic objects in the unlikely public setting of the museum.

The everyday is also seen through narrations of everyday life. Everyday life is experienced as a continuous flow of time. However, as we converse with others, we often speak of the everyday as fragmentations of activities. A narration of it becomes fragmented, as it is a summarized account where only certain details are conveyed. The recipient gets glimpses and snippets of life that we choose to portray. Narration is similar to making a collage. Like the elements of a collage that 'are manipulated,

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<sup>6</sup> Henri Lefebvre, "The Everyday and Everydayness," in *Architecture of the Everyday* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997), p. 37.

<sup>7</sup> Lefebvre, 'The Everyday and Everydayness', p. 37.

<sup>8</sup> Here the abstract is defined as something complex and deep that is not easily understood by all.

<sup>9</sup> Stephen Johnstone, *The Everyday* (The MIT Press, 2008), p. 14.

cut out, overlaid, drawn or painted over,<sup>10</sup> to create certain effects, we highlight, place more emphasis or even exaggerate certain ideas deemed important. Like the eventual product of the collage, which is an accumulation of fragmented scraps of materials, our narrations are also a multi-faceted aggregate of activities.

Spaces of the everyday find their place close to the home. The home is where we spend a substantial amount of time, where we begin and end each day. Home is always associated with the familiar, if not the banal. Children grow up associating freedom, play, fun and excitement with the outside of home. If the outside speaks of fun, in contrast, the inside, home, speak of the opposite, the mundane.

The chapter does not intend to celebrate and glorify the everyday. It is an effort to recognize that the everyday does not merely exist as a singular dimension of time, but to acknowledge that the everyday has the potential to speak creatively and tell off abstract concepts or fundamental truths that we have taken for granted and 'overlooked'. By understanding as a collage, one comes closer to Heng's ideals of domesticity.

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<sup>10</sup> Seungkoo Joo, "Re-discovering the Creative Collage in the Architectural Representation," *IDEA-Interior Design/ Interior Architecture Educators Association*, 2004: 88.



## COLLAGE



**[2] Still Life with Chair Caning**  
(source: *In Defiance of Painting* 1992)

*'In the spring of 1912, Picasso pasted a piece of oil-cloth printed with a trompe l'oeil chair caning pattern to the surface of a small, oval canvas representing a café still life. This work, which he framed with a coarse rope, has acquired legendary status in the history of art as the first deliberately executed collage...'<sup>11</sup>*

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<sup>11</sup> Christine Poggi, *In Defiance of Painting: Cubism, Futurism and the Invention of Collage* (London: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 1.

The birth of collage questioned 'how and what works of art represent, of what unifies a work of art, of what materials artists may use.'<sup>12</sup> By intentionally selecting materials from everyday life, these serve as representational devices and might transform and enhance the identity of the material. In its appropriation in art, everyday items renounce original meanings and take on new ones.

The collage is an assembly of 'fragmentations and the multiplicity of viewpoints'<sup>13</sup> that opens new dimensions of space and time. It brings together unlikely disparate elements that would otherwise not have been found in the same time or space. While architecture exists in a real world of three-dimensional space and time, the collage creates an imaginary space within the mind of the viewer that offers us glimpses of the artist's world.

Heng's works are creative re-enactments of familiar everyday scenes that she experienced while growing up in a traditional patriarchal society. These scenes are her own intimate recounts, because of their everyday-ness, they are also likely to be part of her generation's shared experience and memory. In *She and Her Dishcover (1991)* and *Let's Chat (1999)*, juxtaposition between objects and unlikely settings reminds one of a collage. As Seungkoo Jo points out, 'the relationships within the collage; between the various elements, and those which relate to things which are outside of the collage; between the fragments and their referents, and between the artist and the viewer, are what ultimately creates the order of collage.'<sup>14</sup> These orders are 'constantly interacting; the notions of harmony and chaos, unity and fragmentation, reality and abstraction, truth and fantasy.'<sup>15</sup> Like the collage, Heng is not just interested in creating an order through dialogue with her viewers or a dialogue between everyday objects. Instead her works create dialogue with herself

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<sup>12</sup> Poggi, 'In Defiance of Painting', p. 1.

<sup>13</sup> Nils-Ole Lund, Nils-Ole Lund, *Collage Architecture* (Berlin: Ernst & Sohn, 1990), p. 9.

<sup>14</sup> Seungkoo Joo, "Re-discovering the Creative Collage in the Architectural Representation," *IDEA-Interior Design/ Interior Architecture Educators Association*, 2004: 88.

<sup>15</sup> Joo, 'Re-discovering the Creative Collage', p. 83.

as she challenges and seeks to resolve the ideas and understandings of the given roles of women. If the roles are given, can there be new and added roles? Or do they remain at status quo, regardless of societal changes?

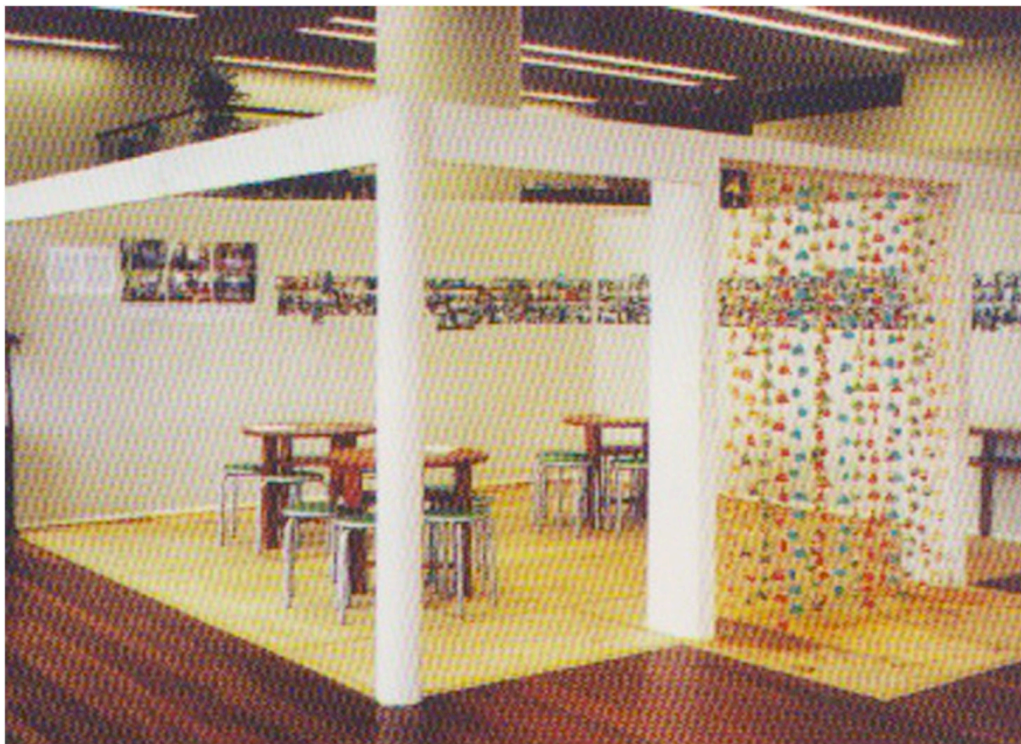
The collage is the creation of new possibilities. Juxtapositions of objects, settings and time manipulated and altered, not only changes and enhances the identity of the objects but also challenges the notion of everyday, which can be said to be banal and unimaginative.

Like conceptual models in architecture, they distill and communicate ideas, her works as collage, are representative of what she intends to present and communicate to her public. Through the creative re-enactments of 'home away from home,' Heng has informed us something about the given roles of women, the possibilities of new and changing roles, and how the fixed spaces of home can be a negotiated site of production.

**HOME AWAY FROM HOME**



**[3] Let's Chat; Bean Sprout**  
(source: Amanda Heng: *Speak to Me, Walk with Me*, 2011)



**[4] Let's Chat; Gallery Setting**  
(source: Amanda Heng: *Speak to Me, Walk with Me*, 2011)



**[5] Let's Chat; Participatory Art**  
(source: Amanda Heng: *Speak to Me, Walk with Me*, 2011)

*Let's Chat*<sup>16</sup> (1999) is a participatory art that attempts to recreate the familiar experience of picking at bean sprouts. Centered at a on the round kitchen table in preparation for a meal, it is a practice that is commonly found in Asian households. It is an activity housewives and children would remember, as conversations are exchanged during the course of this domestic task.<sup>17</sup>

*Let's Chat* (1999) was set up as a space of familiar everyday experiences in a public urban context. This space is representative of a place for primal communication in the context of a home or a familiar community or environment. The idea of picking at bean sprouts is an old or past activity, a way of life that no longer exists today. This private, public juxtaposition creates nostalgic and a sense of displacement, which heighten the experience of viewers. The act of bringing domestic chores to public mirrors women thinking about home even as they work outside. It straddles two very

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<sup>16</sup> *Let's Chat* (1999) is an artwork that came about from discussions with Heng's mother.

<sup>17</sup> Writers and Artist Singapore Art Museum, *Amanda Heng-Speak to Me, Walk with Me* (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2011), p. 166-169.

different dichotomies, work and home. This further reiterates the diverse and unlikely possibilities within the medium of collage where two extreme and conflicting opposites can come together in the same plane.

The various spaces where *Let's Chat (1999)* is set up is crucial. By presenting it in a public space like a coffee-shop, the artwork is made available for people of all walks of life to gather without any form of exclusion and affiliation. In Ray Oldenburg's term of a third place<sup>18</sup>, the local coffee-shop is considered one, where it 'makes it possible for far more informal, even intimate relations among people'<sup>19</sup> to come together, interact and be comfortable. By situating *Let's Chat (1999)*, at the coffee-shop, it becomes natural to 'bring together strangers in an intimate fashion'<sup>20</sup> participating in domestic activity and conversations. The artwork thus engages in the role of a 'home away from home.'<sup>21</sup>

Unlike other forms of representation, the collage is vital in presenting scenarios that transcend time and are easily manipulated. There is a suspension of time and the participants' mental sense of space of past memories are transplanted into an actual space that allows them to relieve these recollections. Hence Heng's *Let's Chat (1999)* seems to 'present the way of life that no longer exists.'<sup>22</sup> However and whatever 'the way of life is remembered, or simply imagined, it nevertheless signifies a widely held nostalgia' that we try to grasp.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Third places refer to gathering places that are essential to community and public life and central to local democracy and community vitality. For instance, some examples of 'third places' are bars and coffee shops. 'Third places' are a contrast to first and second places, which refer to the home and work respectively.

<sup>19</sup> Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: cafés, coffeeshops, bookstores, bars, hair salons and the other hangouts at the heart of a community* (Da Capo Press, USA, 1997), p. 23.

<sup>20</sup> Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), p. 55.

<sup>21</sup> Grafe Christoph and Bollerey Franziska, *Cafés and Bars: The Architecture of Public Display* (Routledge, 2007), p. 18.

<sup>22</sup> Witold Rybczynski, *Home: A Short History of an Idea* (Virginia: Viking Penguins, 1986), p. 13.

<sup>23</sup> Rybczynski, 'Home', p. 13.

**(PRODUCING THE) PRODUCT**



**[6] She and Her Dishcover**  
(source: Amanda Heng: *Speak to Me, Walk with Me*, 2011)

*She and Her Dishcover* (1991) is a sculptural installation with home as its basis. It comprises of a blue plastic dishcover resting on a round kitchen table covered with a white tablecloth imprinted with pointed words such as 'pain', 'choice', 'feels', 'joy', 'speaks' and 'makes'. Beneath the dishcover are a handicraft mirror and a pair of red crescent-shaped wooden divination blocks, known as *sheng bei* in Mandarin and commonly found in temples, which is shaped as a pair of woman's lips.<sup>24</sup>

The assemblage of everyday life recreates the domestic kitchen scene where it is routine for the woman of the home to prepare and lay out meals, often protecting with a dish cover as she waits. The process of developing a collage is similar to that of the preparation of meals, the end product being the family's enjoyment of her labour. The home becomes a space of production: that of development and waiting, of toil, hard work and an eventual product.

The relationship between home and woman is multi-layered and full of complexities. While home is a space of production, it is also the product, through the seen (food on the table) and unseen (preparations and keeping the home clean). According to Mark Wigley, 'she (the woman of the home) is 'domesticated' by internalizing the very spatial order that confines her'<sup>25</sup> and she becomes 'one of the possessions whose status the house monitors...'<sup>26</sup> Women can be seen as the product of home and at the same time, are subsumed by home itself. However, if women are the product, while the home produces 'her', by negotiating with the dynamics of home, because of her familiarity and knowledge of the home, she is able to give her input of the 'product' the home makes her. The home-woman relationship is dynamic and vibrant. It is neither linear nor singular where only the home shapes the woman. Instead, as

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<sup>24</sup> Writers and Artist Singapore Art Museum, *Amanda Heng-Speak to Me, Walk with Me* (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2011), p. 51-58, 130-134.

<sup>25</sup> Mark Wigley, "Untitled: The Housing of Gender," in *Sexuality & Space*, 327-389 (New Jersey: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992), p. 340.

<sup>26</sup> Wigley, 'Untitled: The Housing of Gender', p. 341.



seen from the negotiations and exchanges, there is a two-sided influence, which might possibly even result in the two entities taking on the likeness of each other.

The round kitchen table is both a served and serving space. While the table serves as a space where food is consumed and enjoyed, where conversations between family and friends flow, this experience is different for the woman of the house. As a serving space, the woman prepares, serves the meal (as product), and awaits the family to come home and hopefully enjoy the meal. It is an everyday affair that requires a copious amount of time to prepare and yet possibly overlooked. In the essay 'Table Manners,' Sarah Wigglesworth and Jeremy Till speak of the kitchen table as a site in which resistance may reside.<sup>27</sup> Lilian Chee reaffirms this and states that the kitchen table is a site which is 'commonly seen as a space of decorum hosting family meals and convivial relationships,' and yet, it is also one where the painstaking laborious 'unseen labor and daily maintenance occurs.'<sup>28</sup> This further informs us of two different dynamics at the kitchen table. The unseen labor speaks of a private and hidden activity, and yet, by hosting meals and having convivial relationships, it transforms into an open and relaxed situation. The round kitchen table is where two extremes and polar opposites can take place.

In a larger home context, according to Moira Munro and Ruth Madigan, while others are able to come home, feast on the meal that has been laid out for them and rest, women's responsibility for domestic order (the daily act of putting food on the table) means that they are not always able to enjoy the home as a relaxing 'haven,'<sup>29</sup> as they might constantly be thinking ahead of the next activity to upkeep and maintain the house. However there is some optimism as according to Chee, 'at the kitchen table, (the) menial household labor, creative professional work and individual self-

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<sup>27</sup> Sarah Wigglesworth and Jeremy Till, "Table Manners," *Architectural Design* 68, 1998: 31-35.

<sup>28</sup> Lilian Chee, "The Domestic Reside: Feminist mobility and Space in Simryn Gill's Art.," *Gender, Place and Culture*, 2012: 1-21, p. 9.

<sup>29</sup> Mario Munro and Ruth Madigan, "Negotiating Space in the Family Home," in *At Home, An Anthropology of Domestic Space* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1999), p. 115.

presentation of the woman in the house, as mother, wife and/or daughter' is experienced.<sup>30</sup> The home therefore presents itself as a negotiated space for women to creatively build themselves a 'relaxing haven'. Perhaps only then, Penner's idea of a home, the 'home (as)... a privileged site for self-expression', can be experienced for the woman in the home.<sup>31</sup>

The round kitchen table is chosen to inform viewers the traditional Chinese family that Heng is from. As the Chinese are a collectivistic society, eating is a social affair usually done in a group. Also, the round table facilitates the Chinese culture of 'sharing of food' in a group/family easily. Moreover, roundedness has a number of cultural meanings for the Chinese. It not only symbolizes 'tuanyuan' (united and rounded) but also 'yuanman' (rounded and complete). The blue plastic dishcover resting on the round table speaks of how the 'food' has been prepared and cooked by the woman, where she patiently awaits the rest of the family, to partake the meal together. Here at the round kitchen table it unknowingly also becomes a space to express favoritism. Jeanette Batz Cooperman notes that 'not only does the food encode and reveal relationships, but those relationships determine the choice and allocation of food'.<sup>32</sup> Being in a traditional Chinese family, it is even more apparent that Heng's brothers are favored as the best are often given to them.

The kitchen is both a space where the woman is subjected to go through the monotonous everyday task of preparing food and yet, it is also one where it is the only space where she is in control of what should be produced. However by representing a common domestic setting in a public space or at the museum, the domestic setting is no longer hidden away and the act of transplanting is seen as a

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<sup>30</sup> Lilian Chee, "The Domestic Reside: Feminist mobility and Space in Simryn Gill's Art.," *Gender, Place and Culture*, 2012: 1-21, p. 9.

<sup>31</sup> Barbara Penner, ""And the whole house shook...": Mary Poppins and the Modern Home," *Haecceity Inc* (Haecceity Inc), 2009: 1-13, p. 5.

<sup>32</sup> Jeannette Batz Cooperman, *The Broom Closet* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing , 1999), p. 183.

mode of empowerment. To Heng, it is an open form or perhaps even a public declaration of reclaiming the power and control that a woman has in the home.<sup>33</sup>

Upon returning home, the familiar sight of having food on the table (though often taken for granted for) is a comforting one. To Rybczynski, 'comfort was meant to be un-dramatic and calming, it was to appear 'natural' but like the English garden or the English home (in Jane Austen's novels), it was carefully contrived'.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, this idea of comfort can be applied to our familiar context. It is almost so natural that we often overlook the copious amount of time required in the careful preparation. This familiar sight creates an atmosphere of orderliness and stability in the home.

According to Cooperman, the 'home occupies symbolic as well as (an) actual space', therefore 'how we sort, straighten and tend'<sup>35</sup> create order and maintain the home in the physical environment is an outward expression of internal need for order within us. However, a sudden disruption of orderliness and maintenance of the home (when we come home one day and find no food on the table or the plates remain unwashed) affects our sense of 'ordered' orientation. This sudden disruption is thus indicative of the unspoken power and control the housewife or woman at home silently possesses. The way the food is (not) prepared or (not) laid out or whether the food has turned cold and still remains cold is telling of how the 'presence and absence (can) transform the emotional climate of the space'.<sup>36</sup> In such a scenario, there is a brewing of tension between two opposite polarities, order/ disorder, maintenance/ negligence and hot/ cold that might be experienced.

According to Munro and Madigan, by using their given role as 'housewife' or 'carer', women are able to negotiate their space in the home and not just at the kitchen space, or at the kitchen table. Through these roles, they could excuse themselves

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<sup>33</sup> Interview with Amanda Heng (18 06, 2012)

<sup>34</sup> Witold Rybczynski, *Home: A Short History of an Idea* (Virgina: Viking Penguins, 1986), p. 121.

<sup>35</sup> Jeannette Batz Cooperman, *The Broom Closet* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing , 1999), p. 109.

<sup>36</sup> Susan Bordo, Klein Binne and Marilyn K. Silverman, "Missing Kitchens," in *Places through the Body* (United Kingdom: Routledge, 1998), p. 74.

from entertaining at the living room and 'distance themselves from a conversation between their husband...and his friend by engaging with small domestic tasks, such as...preparing coffee and tidying in the kitchen'<sup>37</sup> if they feel bored and are not engaged. This ' "busy-ness" creates a space, without the very pointed separation that would be indicated by deliberately leaving the room,'<sup>38</sup> and thus legitimizes her actions.

Despite being mundane, 'overlooked' or 'un-noticed', Heng's art juxtaposes common everyday household objects in unlikely public spaces and offers creative insights into how the given changing roles of women are played out in the parallel spaces at hom

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<sup>37</sup> Mario Munro and Ruth Madigan, "Negotiating Space in the Family Home," in *At Home, An Anthropology of Domestic Space* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1999), p. 115.

<sup>38</sup> Munro and Madigan, 'Negotiating Space in the Family Home,' p. 115.

## CHAPTER 2 | NONI KAUR

### DEFINITION OF RITUAL

*'Odd, for someone as disinclined toward domesticity as I am to come home exhausted after a trip and I feel compelled to, as my grandmother would say, 'tidy.' Yet invariably I find myself unpacking, straightening, starting a load of wash, checking the refrigerator's contents.'*<sup>1</sup>

For the definition of 'ritual', meanings obtained were,

1. an established or prescribed procedure for a religious or other rite.
2. observance of set forms in public worship.<sup>2</sup>

What this means is that ritual refers to adopting and following a particular set of social or religious order, which comprises of custom, rites or duty. It also includes a set of decorum, which speaks of an attitude that denotes orderliness, an appropriate form of conduct and a systematic way of approach. Both frequent occurrence of an event or/and carrying out a systematic set of routine are rituals.

Closely associated with a public and general set of orders, for instance, cultural practices or religious ceremonies, which we sometimes carry out of societal demands, rituals are often described as 'hopelessly stereotyped, formulaic, repetitive, and largely boring' or regarded as 'legalism that inhibits genuine feelings'.<sup>3</sup> However, despite their negative connotations, rituals are equally also private and intimate affairs, which find their place in the home and where family members have a stake in and are affected by.

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<sup>1</sup> Jeannette Batz Cooperman, *The Broom Closet* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1999), p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Definition obtained from Ritual, Dictionary, <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/ritual> (accessed 08082012)

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Belasco, *Reinventing Ritual: Contemporary Art and Design for Jewish Life* (New York: Yale University Press, 2010)

Household rituals include, for instance, household chores and grocery shopping. These daily routines are systematically carried out. More than sweeping and scrubbing the floor or putting food on the table and despite the negative connotations that come with the term ritual, rituals of the home take on symbolic significance, bringing order to chaos. According to Cooperman, 'we tidy our surroundings to order our thoughts; we feed our bodies to soothe emotional hunger...'<sup>4</sup> She stresses that ritual is not simply an act of carrying out a routine, rather it has a direct co-relation in our thoughts and the way we live. Without rituals that give us structure and order in our lives, we might end up feeling disoriented.

Kaur's *Sniff Lick Swallow (SLS)* series is inspired by the rituals and household chores that she conducts throughout the day. While a day comprises of 'very laborious techniques of preparing food, upkeep(ing) of home...'<sup>5</sup> likewise Kaur's practice 'also involves many laborious techniques of cleaning, dyeing, preparing materials.'<sup>6</sup> By virtue of the fact that many attributes of the home are found in the expressions of her work, this might possibly mean that home is of great importance to Kaur and that home and work cannot be simply seen as two separate and opposite polarities. Instead, home and work coincide and intersect each other to offer us new perspectives of how their interactions might empower and enable women with multiple roles. By looking at ritual in Kaur's work, through the conceptual organization of a mandala, other crucial issues that matter to women, 'as a nurturer, provider, procreator and safe-keeper.'<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Jeannette Batz Cooperman, *The Broom Closet* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1999), p. 100.

<sup>5</sup> E-mail Interview with Noni Kaur (07 18, 2012)

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

## MANDALA

*It is the exponent of all paths. It is the path to the centre, to individuation.... I knew that in finding the mandala as an expression of the self I had attained what was for me the ultimate.*<sup>8</sup>

The meanings obtained for Mandala were:

1. a Hindu or Buddhist graphic symbol of the universe; specifically : a circle enclosing a square with a deity on each side that is used chiefly as an aid to meditation<sup>9</sup>

While the Sanskrit definition means 'circle'<sup>10</sup>, in etymological studies, it is divided into '*manda*—cream, best part, highest point—and *la*—signpost or completion'.<sup>11</sup>

Together, the term mandala is understood to have a geometrical form, which is spatially bounded and has an effective presence. Like the circle, which symbolizes having no end, the mandala depicts cycles of life and is representative of a complete and balanced order. In addition, it is a 'mystical diagram' that has spiritual and ritual significance.<sup>12</sup> Here, the mandala is understood as having a physical presence and experienced as a spiritual space, both through its ritualistic process of creating and as the end product. In addition, revelatory truths about the individual are revealed. It is from here, everything about self makes sense.

In relation to this, Noni Kaur's *SLS* series is a progressive and repeated ritualistic act of processes that not only reflect revelatory truths about the artist herself, but also addresses the viewers, as they react to the work. Through the laborious, systematic and routine-like creation of each work and repeating this process repeatedly in

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<sup>8</sup> Carl G. Jung, *Mandala Symbolism (A collection of Three Works)*, trans. R. F. C. Hull (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1973).

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/mandala>

<sup>10</sup> Sergio Guinot Studio, *Mandala Design Handbook* (Belguim: booQs publishers bvba, 2000).

<sup>11</sup> Denise Patry Leidy and Robert A.F. Thurman, *Mandala: The Architecture of Enlightenment* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 1997), p. 17.

<sup>12</sup> Leidy and Thurman, 'Mandala', p. 1.

several exhibitions, the work is used as a process for design, where new, creative and thoughtful developments emerge and enhance subsequent iterations.

Another aspect of the mandala is its experiential quality. Mandalas are 'sacred spaces that reiterate the nature of the cosmos'.<sup>13</sup> These natures of the cosmos 'represent the nature and order of the universe,'<sup>14</sup> which constitutes the five traditional elements—earth, air, fire, water and space. Together, they form a unified and undivided world, which sets the framework for life to begin. These five traditional elements are comparable with our five senses, which together with a conscious and active mind, allows us to have awareness of the things around and experience life at its fullest. In the process of creating the mandala, which is typically of a large scale and has an overwhelming presence, it engages the body as we bend over, squat and move around and about the mandala, which thus enhances our experience. As the 'qualities of matter, space and scale are measured' by our 'seven realms of sensory'<sup>15</sup> experience,' there is a re-emphasis of 'unity, presence and unsurpassable diversity that governs the experience' which becomes a reality to us.<sup>16</sup> From here, we can also understand that a work is most powerful when the different layers, from the external to the most intricate are engaged.

Similarly, Jackson Pollock likens his method of action painting to that of the Indian sand painters.<sup>17</sup> By having the canvas on the floor and applying the techniques of 'dripping and pouring', he felt 'nearer (and) more of a part of the painting', as he 'can walk around it, work from the four sides and literally be in the painting'.<sup>18</sup> By the

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<sup>13</sup> John Gray, *Domestic Mandala: Architecture of Lifeworlds in Nepal* (Adelaide: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2006), p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> Gray, 'Domestic Mandala', p. 19.

<sup>15</sup> The seven realms of sensory include the eye, ear, nose, skin, tongue, skeleton and muscle.

<sup>16</sup> Juhani Pallasmaa, "An Architecture of the Seven Senses," in *Towards a New Interior- An Anthology of Interior Design Theory* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2011), p. 42.

<sup>17</sup> Ines Janet Engelmann, *Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner*, trans. Stephen Telfer (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2007), p. 45-47.

<sup>18</sup> Engelmann, 'Jackson Pollock', p. 45-47.



'remarkable integration of body'<sup>19</sup> and the effective use of techniques, there was 'realized spontaneously and quickly' of his expressions, which were 'almost in parallel with his sensations'.<sup>20</sup> Likewise in Kaur's work, the huge dimension of her Rangoli<sup>21</sup> inspired *SLS* on the floor involves her going around and about the work. Through the 'use of spices from her South Asian cultural heritage'<sup>22</sup> which involves grinding, pounding and dying to the eventual decaying, elements of touch, smell, see and taste are absorbed not just by the artist but by the participants as well. By engaging our body and five senses with her work, where we crouch and bend over to lick or sniff the work, references to our innate being as male or female become more apparent.

Here, like the traditional South Asian Rangoli inspired artwork that finds root in the mandala, Kaur's *SLS* series ritualistic process and eventual product reveals revelatory truths about both the artist and participants. The experience of creating and meditating at the mandala is also similar to that of the constructing and engaging of the body in Kaur's *SLS*. Through the repeated and routine-like process to process in her *SLS* series and our responses through the engagement of our five senses and the body, Kaur's works are (might be) able to inform us something about men's views<sup>23</sup> on the roles of women, and yet how the fixed spaces of home may be contested and adapted as a site of empowerment for her.

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<sup>19</sup> Monica Maroni and Giorgio Bigatti, *Jackson Pollock: The Irascibles and the New York School*, trans. Christopher Evans and Leslie Ray (Milan: SKIRA, Geneva-Milan, 2002), p. 73.

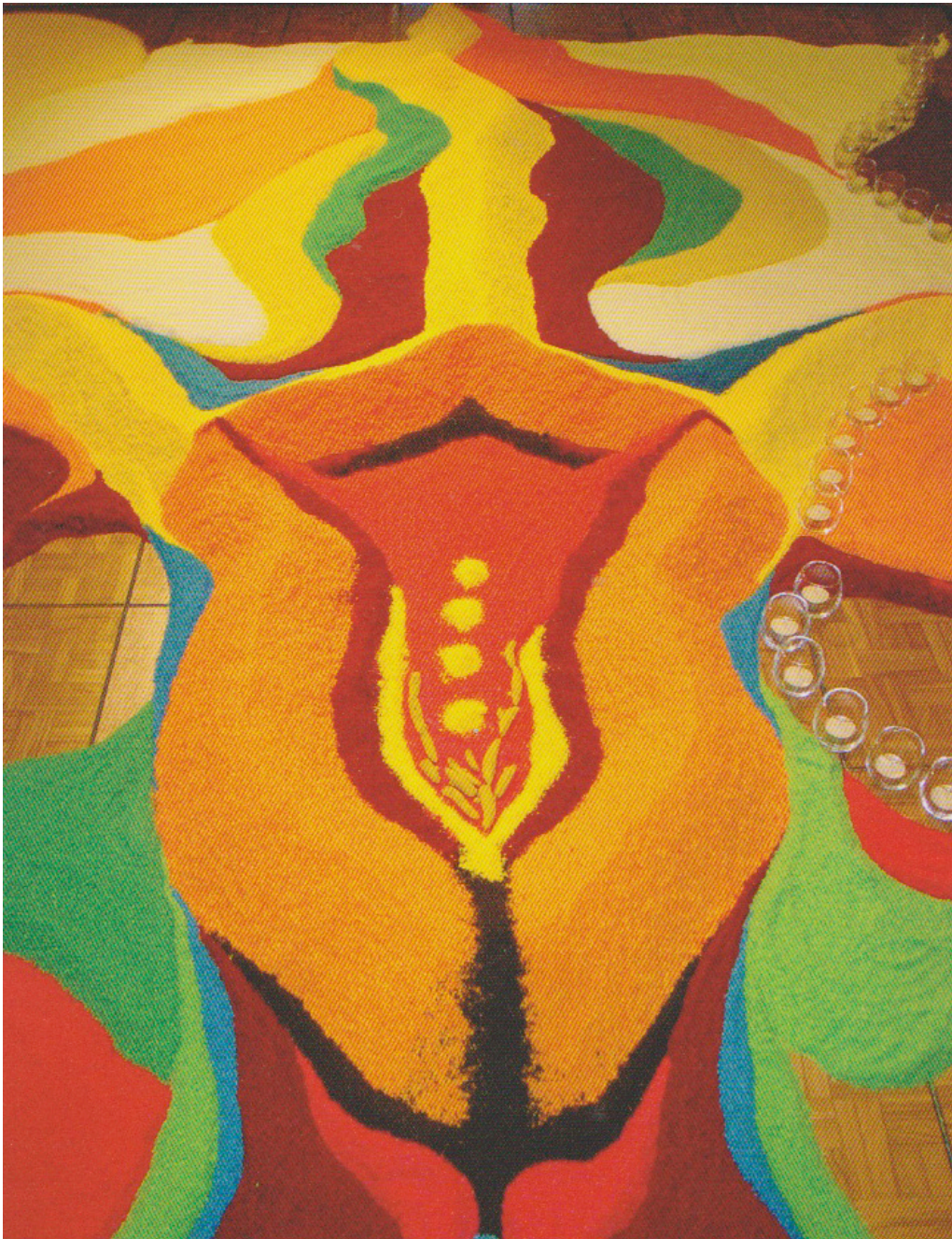
<sup>20</sup> Ines Janet Engelmann, *Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner*, trans. Stephen Telfer (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2007).

<sup>21</sup> Rangoli is an inspired Indian art form of Mandala.

<sup>22</sup> E-mail Interview with Noni Kaur (07 18, 2012)

<sup>23</sup> In the interview conducted with Kaur, Kaur relates that 'her body belongs to him: Woman remains merely as the prop for a masculine psycho-drama...' Hence, judging from the attitudes the male counterparts engages with the 'body,' we can perhaps the positions of women's roles to men.

**PROCESS TO PROCESS**



**[7] Sniff, Lick, Swallow**  
(source: *Women Artists in Singapore*, 2011)

Kaur's *SLS* is an installation art that involves a laborious process of creating. Similar to domestic rituals, the work attempts to represent a woman's female roles in her commitment to the home through the artwork's time consuming and routine-like process. Though it is an effortful and tedious process, like the mandala, this work, is intentionally repeated, altered and presented in many different exhibitions and biennales, as though performing what is tedious in an endless cycle. This approach mirrors what is actually experienced.

From the careful selection of which spices that Kaur finds in her pantry, to the food-coloring formulas that she painstakingly thinks of and applies to accurately represent and depict her thoughts in appropriate tones, to the eventual assembly and direct application of the materials depicting female body parts on the floor, the work is also 'a semi-autobiographical piece'<sup>24</sup> that gives us glimpses into Kaur's personal life.

From the description of Kaur's process above, we identify several qualities that find roots in her culture and background. Her works, which uses the horizontal floor plane as their canvas, are influenced by the traditional Indian art rangoli, which is traditionally practiced by the women in the home on important occasions. Rangoli is the art of creating a mandala on the floor in the home.

By creating her art in a gallery instead of the home and placing edible ingredients, spices on the floor instead of the kitchen table, the gallery floor becomes a space of resistance and contestations. The floor is no longer a 'neutral space' as it is transformed into a 'space of labor,'<sup>25</sup> where her identity of different female roles and their different responsibilities are played out in the laborious execution of the work. In addition, spices are symbolic because they are 'linked to struggle for freedom' for the native Indians against their colonial masters and 'offer a singular instance of when

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid

<sup>25</sup> Lilian Chee, "The Domestic Reside: Feminist mobility and Space in Simryn Gill's Art.," *Gender, Place and Culture*, 2012: 1-21.

action and resistance coalesced around the mutable significance of food.<sup>26</sup> For Kaur, by using spices, which are socially placed on the kitchen table and yet, culturally and religiously, misplaced on the floor, in her work she seems to be finding a common ground and striking a compromise between the different set of values and influences colliding between her Western education and her Eastern cultural heritage. More so, she negotiates with the assigned roles that are given to women and by giving her personal input, redefines what these roles should constitute.

Transposed onto different exhibition spaces with various audiences of diverse cultures, the work continues to transform and adapt to each new context. Like diagrams that are used as a process for design development, the subsequent works of the *SLS* series rely on 'an ideal of the origin or model, an economy of identity...and exists as a continual process of differentiating'.<sup>27</sup> What this means is that the process employed is both linearly and divergently driven and the work continues to morph and evolve from the different site condition and the different experiences from previous works. More importantly, the works reflect Kaur's or women's strength in their adaptation to different physical environment and surroundings. Rather than succumb to cultural norms that determine how a traditional Indian woman should live their life, Kaur takes on the dual 'roles of both the patriarch and matriarch' and as the family's sole provider.<sup>28</sup> The continual process of adjusting each work to new and different conditions is also an affirmation of the resilient quality that the women at home possess.

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<sup>26</sup> Anita Mannur, *Culinary fictions: Food in South Asian Diasporic Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010), p. 116.

<sup>27</sup> Robert E Solmol, "Dummy Text, or the Diagrammatic Basis of Contemporary Architecture," in *Diagram Diaries*, 6-25 (New York: Universe Publishing, 1999).

<sup>28</sup> E-mail Interview with Noni Kaur (07 18, 2012)

## **(MAKING THE) BODY**

*...the only equivalent of the world within is the world without, and just as I reach this world through the medium of the body, so I reach that world through the medium of the psyche.<sup>29</sup>*

Like Pollock, Kaur's works involve using her body as a brush. By applying the grinded spices directly to the ground without adhesive or binder, Noni's installations are a result of her body movements, energy and precision, which is similar to the expressions. She 'shapes each contour like a topographical model, ebbing and flowing, rising and falling in peaks and undulations', creating a depth to the work and bringing it alive.<sup>30</sup> These contours are also representative of the curves that are found in a woman's body. While Pollock's painting speaks of a record of all his movements and feelings, similarly for Noni, the use of materials give hints of her ethnic or gender references, as an Indian, as a woman and as an Indian woman.

With dimensions as wide as 3m by 1.5m, the installation serves to confront observers with its large scale. The work seems to be perceived as part of the surrounding environment. The installation has a huge physical presence, making it visually impactful. Like Ron Mueck's sculptures, whose scale have been incredibly manipulated, some larger than life, while others smaller than life-size, the works evoke physical reality and confronts the observer at a very personal level. Both artists employ a 'shift in scale' as 'a means to force the viewer into a fresh way of seeing.'<sup>31</sup> There is a re-focusing as scale isolates the installation 'from its surroundings and concentrates our gaze'<sup>32</sup> on it. Similarly, like Kaur's installations, some of Mueck's sculptures, *Dead Dad* (1997) or *In Bed* (2005) are positioned on the

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<sup>29</sup> Jolande Jacobi, *Complex Archetype/ Symbol in the Psychology of C G Jung*, trans. Ralph Manheim (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 189.

<sup>30</sup> Bridget Tracy Tan, *Women Artists In Singapore* (Singapore: Select Publishing, 2011), p. 126,127.

<sup>31</sup> Heiner Bastian, *Ron Mueck*, trans. Anne D'Offay and Marion Kagerer (Berlin: HATJE CANTZ, 2003), p. 39.

<sup>32</sup> Bastian, 'Ron Mueck', p. 39.

floor plane. By positioning the art works on the floor plane, instead of casing it up in a glass box, viewers are given 'an aerial view for maximum impact'<sup>33</sup> and there is a direct intimacy and appeal that exposes our senses, as it draws us to want to touch and feel the works. Juhani Pallasmaa states that 'the eye is the sense of separation and distance' and 'touch is the sense of nearness, intimacy and affection.'<sup>34</sup> By enticing us to touch and feel the works, the boundary between the two senses is bridged and the tactile sense then connects us with time and transports us to 'past memories of nostalgia.'<sup>35</sup>

The title of Kaur's work, *Sniff, Lick, Swallow* further accentuates the artist's engagement in the participatory experience. As the materials used to conceive the artwork are consumable and are positioned on the floor, viewers engage in a dialogue with their own bodily movements by squatting, bending over and reaching out to the artwork. The female audience tends to touch, feel and smell the installation, and have a 'more subtle and have a more sensual connections to the works,' which speaks of care and delicateness. On the other hand, their male counterparts have 'a more primal view of the work,'<sup>36</sup> as they also tasted and licked the installation. These distinct responses allows her to understand her own identity within the traditional patriarchal power of 'the subjection of woman's body to man's explanations'<sup>37</sup>, which she seeks to contest. Moreover, female participants might have a careful and delicate approach and attitude to Kaur's work as it can be imagined as a continuous prolongation of their bodies. Like a white wall structure seamlessly flushed against a white floor surface, which 'gives the appearance of

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<sup>33</sup> E-mail Interview with Noni Kaur (07 18, 2012)

<sup>34</sup> Juhani Pallasmaa, "An Architecture of the Seven Senses," in *Towards a New Interior- An Anthology of Interior Design Theory* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2011), p. 45.

<sup>35</sup> E-mail Interview with Noni Kaur (07 18, 2012)

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

homogeneity' and an 'unending space,'<sup>38</sup> Kaur's artwork can also be seen as a literal extension of a woman's body.

The use of the floor is temporary, since Kaur uses perishable materials, like spices, which would start to decay and disintegrate. Here, the idea of gradual transformation and change that she hopes observers would draw connection to the physicality of the human body is apparent. More importantly, being in control of the time it takes for the artwork (which takes the form of a female body) to decay, it offers a possible counter-response to the 'patriarchal power relations' where 'her body belongs to him'.<sup>39</sup>

However, even as the female participants seem to prolong the body's life by delicately caring for it, the tasting and licking by the male participants accelerates the process of decay and decomposition and its "eventual death". As such, Kaur may not be in control of the artwork after all. Similarly, women themselves are inevitably subject to men's authority. Furthermore, like the mandala, which reveals truth about one's self, the floor becomes an interface and a site of contestation that reveals frictions between two colliding worlds of life and death, and two contrasting spheres between the female and male.

To Beverly Gordon, 'the woman was seen as the embodiment of the home, and in turn the home was seen as an extension other—an extension of both her corporeal and spiritual self.'<sup>40</sup> What this might possibly mean is that the relationship of women and home is reciprocal and the woman is both a representative and an expression of the home, and vice versa. Taking this even further, Gordon goes on to say that, 'the home did not just represent the woman, but became her, almost like another body.'<sup>41</sup>

As the woman cleanses and keeps her own body pure and hygienic, similarly, she

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<sup>38</sup> Wolfgang Meisenheimer, "Of the Hollow Spaces in the Skin of the Architectural Body," in *Towards a New Interior- An Anthology of Interior Design Theory* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2011), p. 627.

<sup>39</sup> Meisenheimer, 'Of the Hollow Spaces', p. 627.

<sup>40</sup> Beverly Gordon, "Woman's Domestic Body," in *INTIMUS: Interior Design Theory Reader*, 126-132 (United Kingdom: Wiley-Academy, 2006), p. 127.

<sup>41</sup> Gordon, 'Woman's Domestic Body', p. 127.

extends the same commitment to the home by religiously cleaning, sweeping and mopping the floor. In addition, 'housekeeping became a condition of homemaking' and 'domestic labor became a token of the housewife's affection for her family.'<sup>42</sup> The clean home was also seen as an outward expression of the housewife's commitment to the family. In Kaur's artwork, it is a woman's body, which is representative and reflective of her commitment to the home. Though she has to go through this same routine like process countless times, she is still meticulous and sensitive to the details, such as coming up with the most accurate color or dye and sprinkling them specifically to each boundary. This is similar to the household chores that she has to diligently deal with as part of her daily home routine. Here, the home is seen as an extension of Kaur's own body, which she protects it from harm and cleanses. Similarly, she cultivates the 'home (as) a safe place, the base from which we enter the world and to which we return for renewal' and purifies it.<sup>43</sup> Thus Kaur's home becomes the 'new impersonation of herself.'<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Rudi Laermans and Carine Meulders, "The Domestication of Laundering," in *At Home-An Anthropology of Domestic Space*, 118-129 (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1999), p. 127.

<sup>43</sup> Jeannette Batz Cooperman, *The Broom Closet* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1999), p. 99.

<sup>44</sup> Beverly Gordon, "Woman's Domestic Body," in *INTIMUS: Interior Design Theory Reader*, 126-132 (United Kingdom: Wiley-Academy, 2006), p. 127.



## CHAPTER 03; DONNA ONG

### DREAMS

*All the material making up the content of a dream is in some way derived from experience, that is to say, has been reproduced or remembered in the dream—so much at least we may regard as an undisputed fact...<sup>1</sup>*

The meanings obtained definition of 'dreams' were,

1. a succession of images, thoughts, or emotions passing through the mind during sleep.
2. a vision voluntarily indulged in while awake; daydream; reverie.<sup>2</sup>

Dreams occur while we are awake and asleep. Our experiences recreate a juxtaposition of varied illusions, thinking and feelings that transpires our mind while we are asleep. The very same experiences also occur in the day, where we fantasize or hope of becoming. To Ludwig Wittgenstein, 'dreams are wish fulfillments because it points to the sort of interpretation that is wanted'.<sup>3</sup> What this means is that these juxtapositions consist of fantasies and hopes that might and/or have not taken place in reality.

While there is no specific time and place of dreaming, according to Gaston Bachelard, the house seems to be 'one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind... the binding principle in this integration is the daydream.'<sup>4</sup> Here, dreaming spaces are invariably sited at home, 'the house

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<sup>1</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, ed. James Strachey (London: Lowe and Brydone (Printers) Ltd, 1971), p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> Definition obtained from 'Dreams,' Dictionary, <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/dream>, (accessed on 08 05, 2012)

<sup>3</sup> Harold Bloom, "Sigmund Freud's: The Interpretation of Dreams," in *In Conversation with Freud* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987), p. 14.

<sup>4</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), p. 6.

shelters day-dreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace.<sup>5</sup> Here, the home is a safe haven for us to not only dream but also attempt to pursue these dreams. With no restrictions and boundaries, we create interiors within interiors, and build our dreams on where these layers safeguard our dreams.

At the very same time, dreams might also seem foreign because we are in pursuit of something that wouldn't or had not materialized. Dreams are intangible and we cannot grasp them with our senses. And yet, they are important and vital as Frederick Buechner shares the undisputed common understandings of dreams. Firstly, dreams allow us to be in 'constant touch with a world that is as real to us while we are in it...and whose ultimate origin and destiny are unknown and fascinating, as the world of waking reality.'<sup>6</sup> Secondly, dreams make 'our lives...a great deal richer, deeper, more intricately interrelated, more mysterious, and less limited by time and space that we commonly suppose...'<sup>7</sup> Here, dreams are not only grounded through our experiences in the real and physical world, but they also gives us hope to look ahead of time and current situations.

For Donna Ong, many of her works, in particular *Dr.Auctor (2002)* and *Sing O Barren Woman (2002)* are visual expressions of her own dreams. While growing up, Ong envisioned that she would assume certain roles when she became an adult, however, as of now, this is not possible. Dreams constitute an idealized world where desires, fantasies and inner thoughts are expressed. They are also strangely familiar because they juxtapose people, things and happenings in different settlings in real life. Here the diorama, a visual model used by Ong has the capacity to express these idealized and/or strangely familiar worlds.

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<sup>5</sup> Bachelard, 'The Poetics of Space', p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> Robin van Loben Sels, *A Dream in the World: Poetics of Soul in Two Women, Modern and Medieval* (New York: Brunner-Routledge, 2003), p. 32,33.

<sup>7</sup> Loben Sels, 'A Dream in the World', p. 32, 33.

## DIORAMA

The term diorama was 'coined around 1821 by Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre, inventor of the daguerreotype, from the Greek *dia*, through, and *horama*, to see.'<sup>8</sup> On top of the definition by Daguerre, Ray Anderson's idea of the diorama suggests more than the act of seeing and looking through someone and/or something. To Anderson, there are 'No other kind of modeling (that) grabs and hold viewers like a diorama, because a diorama tells a story,'<sup>9</sup> where it is 'capable of conveying a tale, a mood, or even evoking an emotional response.'<sup>10</sup> Here, the diorama offers a physical and tangible three-dimensional space filled with narrative, depth and volume that can transport us directly into the artist's world.

In relation to this, Ong's works often stem off from the narrative possibility of fiction to create a strangely familiar world. By choosing to use the diorama as a device to frame her work there is opportunity 'to combine representation and material reality, fiction and fact, and art and science.'<sup>11</sup> And the world imagined becomes 'fastidiously accurate or fantastically imaginary.'<sup>12</sup> By choosing to use found objects without altering their form or function but giving it a new meaning, Ong's works, particularly in *Secret, Interior: Chrysalis (2006)*, are both grounded in the real world and yet also imaginatively capable of transcending what is reality.

While it is strangely familiar, the idea of the diorama also creates an 'idealized' world. According to Toby Kamps, realistic, life-size diorama in natural museums often 'while painstakingly accurate in their particulars... do not imitate nature exactly, but rather present idealized, concentrated views.'<sup>13</sup> Likewise, Ralph Rugoff suggests that the

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<sup>8</sup> Hugh Davis and Toby Kamps, *Small World, Dioramas in Contemporary Art* (San Diego: Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, 2000), p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> Ray Anderson, *The Art of the Diorama* (Kaimbach Publishing, 1994), p. 3.

<sup>10</sup> Anderson, 'The Art of the Diorama', p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> Hugh Davis and Toby Kamps, *Small World, Dioramas in Contemporary Art* (San Diego: Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, 2000), p. 7.

<sup>12</sup> Davis and Kamps, 'Small World', p. 7.

<sup>13</sup> Davis and Kamps, 'Small World', p. 9, 10.

diorama 'revolve(s) around and reproduce(s) a specific set of values, fantasies, and assumptions, rather than offer(ing) a neutral and direct depiction of the world we live in.'<sup>14</sup> Combining the ideas by Kamps and Rugoff, the diorama is seen as a biased representation of space that allows real life situations to be controlled, altered and expressed in how we desire and want them to manifest. Similarly in Ong's works, particularly in *Dr Auctor* and *Sing O Barren Woman*, they are concerned with dreams that she had in her childhood, and reflective about what she hopes to do but might not be able to. Through the act and process of creating this 'idealized' world, it allows 'an escape from reality; an alternative ending; a different life experience; a 'what if' played out'.<sup>15</sup>

Adopting the concept of a diorama, enables her to see the space in its entirety. The process of miniaturizing is powerful as Gaston Bachelard explains that he 'feels more at home in miniature worlds' which to him are 'dominated worlds'.<sup>16</sup> Only through looking at the small are we then able to better imagine the truly large. Mark Morris goes on further to explain that by acquiring the knowledge of miniaturizing the world, we are equipped with both an 'easy-to-digest' skill of details and have an 'instant totality' and completeness of looking at a situation or of one's imagination.<sup>17</sup> As a result and discipline of using this methodology that Ong adopts, her art works are often likened to a life sized diorama. Together with its backdrop, fully furnished objects, and sensitive detail, her works have a form, a material being and look complete. In the words of Merleau-Ponty, 'we see the depth, speed, softness and hardness of objects...we see even their odour.'<sup>18</sup> Through the theatrical qualities of the diorama, the sense of sight is heightened considerably, and all other senses are engaged as a result. By being in an interior within an interior and by creating a persona, Ong's

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<sup>14</sup> Davis and Kamps, 'Small World', p. 16.

<sup>15</sup> Enoch Cheng, "Interview with Donna Ong," *Asia Art Archive (Beta Version)*, May 2009, <http://www.aaa.org.hk/Diaaologue/Details/659> (accessed June 12, 2012).

<sup>16</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), p. 161.

<sup>17</sup> Mark Morris, *Models: Architecture and the Miniature* (Great Britain: Wiley-Academy, 2006), p. 11.

<sup>18</sup> Juhani Pallasmaa, "An Architecture of the Seven Senses," in *Towards a New Interior- An Anthology of Interior Design Theory* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2011).

works can inform us something about the changing roles of women, and how the fixed spaces of home may be altered as a site of resolve for her.

## INTERIOR WITHIN INTERIOR

*'A child moving figures and furniture about in a tiny house gains a stature and perspective not normally its own, becoming large and powerful. The child grasps--literally and figuratively--objects and ideas from the adult world while employing his or her prodigious powers of imaginative projection.'*<sup>19</sup>

Ong is an example of the child described above. Growing up in a small space, there were no large spaces for her to run around, she ended up looking inside drawers and cupboards, pulling out stuff and looking at things in detail. Likening this to the dollhouse, Susan Stewart expresses that, '... the dollhouse not only represents the house's articulation of the tension between inner and outer spheres, of exteriority and interiority, it also represents two modes of interiority.'<sup>20</sup> By 'occupying a space within an enclosed space,'<sup>21</sup> the dollhouse 'emblemize(s) the intimate connection between states of mind and domestic spaces.'<sup>22</sup> The exploration of drawers and cupboard is a safe and deep inner enclosed space where Gaston Bachelard explains that we may dream and safeguard. He asks, 'Does there exist a single dreamer of words who does not respond to the word wardrobe?... Every poet of furniture... knows that the inner space of a wardrobe is deep. A wardrobe's inner space is also intimate space, space that is not open to just anyone.'<sup>23</sup>

What this can possibly mean is that the dollhouse symbolizes four closely familiar relationships. No particular relationship is of a higher hierarchy than the others, instead, these interior-within-interior relationships are progressive and inter-

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<sup>19</sup> Hugh Davis and Toby Kamps, *Small World, Dioramas in Contemporary Art* (San Diego: Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, 2000), p. 7, 8.

<sup>20</sup> Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 61.

<sup>21</sup> Stewart, 'On Longing', p. 61.

<sup>22</sup> Hugh Davis and Toby Kamps, *Small World, Dioramas in Contemporary Art* (San Diego: Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, 2000), p. 7, 8.

<sup>23</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), p.78.

connected and offer us new understandings of the emotions experienced in our most private sanctuary. The first is a relationship between our imagined space (where we are miniaturized) and the physical space. The second is in a physical space (a room) within a physical place, for instance the home. The third, the diorama, is a strangely familiar or/and idealized world within the museum. Lastly, the fourth relationship finds itself in 'a female sphere of emotion within the female sphere of domesticity.'<sup>24</sup> Here, all emotions and feelings experienced from everyday melodrama narratives spill into the 'literal and psychological spaces of home,' a commonly recognized female sphere of domesticity.<sup>25</sup>

In the case of Ong, all four relationships find their place in the expressions of her works. While the first two relationships are processes in which she dreams, thinks and imagines, and the space she is in increases linearly (from the first relationship to the second), the fourth allows us to understand the intangible qualities that she might have experienced in the first two. The first three relationships are at spaces similar to that of drawers and cupboard, where she or the protagonist of the diorama feels at ease and safe to dream. Lastly, the third is the realized work of the first two and potentially, the materialized overwhelming response of the emotions from the fourth.

While it might be an intentional or subconscious act of constructing or finding ourselves in these interiors, these relationships are similar to Adolf Loo's understanding of architecture, where 'architecture is a form of covering.'<sup>26</sup> In the spaces of Loo's interiors, the interiors 'cover the occupants as clothes cover the body.'<sup>27</sup> Clothing, which is 'immediately next to the body, can be seen as the first

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<sup>24</sup> Laura Mulvey, "Pandora: Topographies of the Mask and Curiosity," in *Sexuality & Space* (New Jersey: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992), p. 55.

<sup>25</sup> Mulvey, 'Pandora', p. 54, 55.

<sup>26</sup> Beatriz Colomina, "The Split War: Domestic Voyeurism," in *Sexuality & Space* (New Jersey: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992), p. 91.

<sup>27</sup> Colomina, 'The Split War', p. 92.

layer that forms an interior.<sup>28</sup> Like the interior where it is both psychologically and physically safe to dream, the act of clothing envelops the body and creates the first basic layer of physical protection. Moreover, clothing becomes a flexible medium that offers us a 'visual and tactile dialogue' with what is presented and what is hidden.<sup>29</sup> However, because it takes the form and shape of the body, each fold and bend gives hint of shared characteristics of our most innate self. There are inevitable traces, which are not and cannot be concealed. Similarly, like the third interior, in a diorama, where we are in full control of what to construct, what we attempt to mask and veil, a lot of the self<sup>30</sup> is projected in the diorama. Ironically, the very medium that we use to hide our inmost thoughts is inevitably that which also reveals our inner self.

In the second relationship, the room in which Ong pursues such a dream (where her wooden desk<sup>31</sup> is situated) might not necessarily have defined thick solid walls that clearly demarcate the function of each physical space. It is at this state of pursuing that she is at 'the crossing of a threshold'; where 'entry and invitation are offered,' and both 'interior and exterior are felt.'<sup>32</sup> In addition, by being in a space that allows her to immerse in her own world, there is 'the geometrical divide between inside and outside through an analysis of the imagination of matter.'<sup>33</sup> Once she has crossed over, it creates a definite and clear invisible separation between the interiors and exterior.

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<sup>28</sup> Lois Weinthal, *Toward a New Interior- An Anthology of Interior Design Theory* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2011), p. 72.

<sup>29</sup> Weinthal, 'Toward a New Interior', p. 72.

<sup>30</sup> This refers to our interests, thoughts and hopes expressed through the careful composition and sensitive selection of materials, objects and furniture.

<sup>31</sup> The idea of the wooden desk will be discussed subsequently.

<sup>32</sup> Wolfgang Meisenheimer, "Of the Hollow Spaces in the Skin of the Architectural Body," in *Towards a New Interior-An Anthology of Design Reader* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2011), p. 626.

<sup>33</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), p. 211-231.

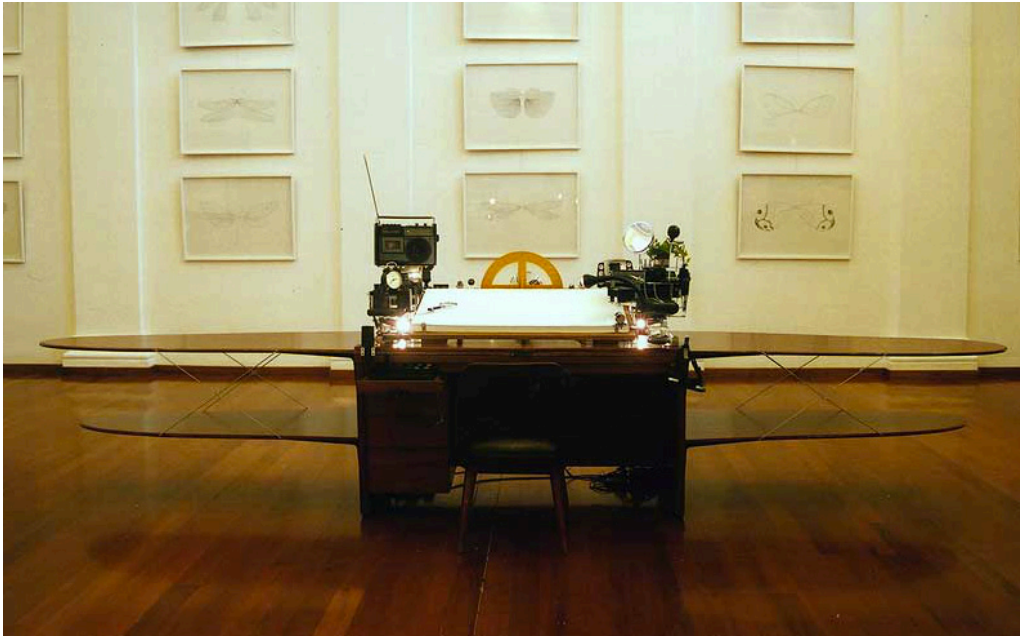




**[8] Wooden Table, Secret, Interiors: Chrysalis**  
(source: Donna Ong's website, 2006)



**[9] Wooden Table, Sing O Barren Woman**  
(source: Donna Ong's website, 2002)



[10] **Wooden Table, Palace of Dreams**  
(source: Donna Ong's website, 2004)

The wooden desk is a recurring element in Ong's works, *Sing O Barren Woman* (2002), *Dr. Auctor* (2002), *Palace of Dreams* (2004) and *Secret, Interiors: Chrysalis* (2006). The wooden desk, offers a space where the protagonist works and dreams. This dream is realized through the other exhibits seen in the artwork. According to Mark Kingwell, 'in such a space, with such vistas and dreams alive to our gaze, furniture is no longer something merely to sit upon... here furniture is instead an invitation to think and to dream, a beckoning of possible ideas and half-formed notions.'<sup>34</sup> It mirrors the personal wooden desk that Ong works from at home.

Ong's wooden desk is made of teak. Together with other objects used in her art works, they are all bought in the region. These objects are procured from thieves markets, at Sungei Road or from antique markets. Many have commented that Ong's works look nostalgic. Stewart adds that every object or souvenir has a context of

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<sup>34</sup> Taylor Mark and Preston Julieanna, *INTIMUS- Interior Design Theory Reader* (Wiley-Academy, 2006), p. 173.

origin of its own.<sup>35</sup> By purchasing objects from antique or 'second-hand' shops, it not only has a rich history but also 'represents the lived experience of its maker and the "second-hand" experience of the possessor or owner'.<sup>36</sup> In addition, Jean Baudrillard shares that 'wood draws its substance from the earth, it lives and breathes and 'labors.'"<sup>37</sup> Wood in its purest form, is already 'a material that has being.'<sup>38</sup> By using such objects and materials in her works, it not only enhances the participant's experience but also heightens their sensation, of the space they occupy.

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<sup>35</sup> Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 134.

<sup>36</sup> Stewart, 'On Longing', p. 134.

<sup>37</sup> Taylor Mark and Preston Julieanna, *INTIMUS- Interior Design Theory Reader* (Wiley-Academy, 2006), p. 39.

<sup>38</sup> Mark and Julieanna, 'INTIMUS' , p. 39.



**[11] Crystal Cave underneath the table, Secret, Interiors: Chrysalis**  
*(source: Donna Ong's website, 2006)*



**[12] Close-up View of Crystal Cave underneath the table, Secret, Interiors: Chrysalis**  
*(source: Donna Ong's website, 2006)*

Interiors do not have to be constructed by structural elements alone. Rather, the different elements (for instance, objects or furniture) within the interior can be understood as a build-up of a sequence of thresholds that we construct by layers of interior elements. In Ong's work, *Secret, Interiors: Chrysalis 20 (2006)*, its engagement with the participants creates a suspense of not only what to expect. In the work, the room looks almost empty apart from the book on top of the protagonist, the judge's table. However upon walking to the chair, there is light flickering underneath the table, which forces the participant to crouch, squat or bend, only to discover what is beneath it, a crystal cave. This staged process intensifies the tension and can be likened to entering the different levels of boundaries and gradually unfolding these interiors that leads to the secret. Additionally, according to Chee, such acts of engagement and viewing postures 'collectively recall non-anthropomorphic postures borne of primitive quadruped animality'<sup>39</sup> and might heighten our experience as it reminds us of our childhood days, where we move about the home in similar fashion. Unable to reach over, the child bends, squats or crouches.

Even though interiors-within-interiors are symbolic of the many layers we attempt to build our dreams and secret desires upon, there is a dual side of reality that Ong's works reflect. Even when there are secrets, there are also fears that they might be exposed as these layers are peeled. This is reflective of the 'strangely familiar' world that a diorama is capable of showing, where we too, are able to relate. Through the judge, we see a secret desire or obsession, a belief in something specific that is expressed and revealed in the private realm<sup>40</sup>, in his intimate space, his room. It is within this room, this locked room that they find security and comfort. In the locked room paradox, Joan Copjec narrates a detective's experience of trying to find the

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<sup>39</sup> Lilian Chee, "The Domestic Reside: Feminist mobility and Space in Simryn Gill's Art.," *Gender, Place and Culture*, 2012: 1-21, p. 2.

<sup>40</sup> Dr. Rajinder Jit Singh, "An Interview with Donna Ong," *Sight: An Oracular Insight (A Singapore Art Blog)*, 04 19, 2006, <http://www.donnaong.com/2006.pdf> (accessed 06 04, 2012)

corpse. She expresses that it is 'only comprehensible if we view the surplus element not as the corpse itself' or in the case of Ong's work, the secret desires but instead 'that which allows the corpse to be pulled out' and hence the secret (desires) revealed.<sup>41</sup> The paradox of the locked room is identified here, as the rooms of secret desires are opened for the public to view, something so raw and fragile is scrutinized and judged, and the potential fears and disappointments might follow suit.

Additionally, even as the judge 'controls the interior,' his intimate space, he might be unknowingly 'trapped within it'<sup>42</sup> due to his obsession. The judge is fixated in materializing his ideal world of crystal cave, yet there is no such cave in reality, as reflected by the everyday common objects in the cave, from glass-wares or crystal jars that are found at home. *Secret, Interiors: Chrysalis 20 (2006)* contains overlapping and linear relationships of interiors, more importantly, the obsessive relationship between the creator with the interiors has resulted in a disappearance of the interior. Surrounded in an interior of glass-wares, which unique material property is to reflect, the interior becomes a juxtaposition of self on the glass. In here, everything becomes homogeneous – there is no more interior; the interior has become a reflection of the self.

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<sup>41</sup> Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire* (London: The MIT Press, 1994), p. 175.

<sup>42</sup> Beatriz Colomina, "The Split War: Domestic Voyeurism," in *Sexuality & Space* (New Jersey: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992), p. 98.

**(CREATING THE) PERSONA**



**[13] Identification of Comfort; Leisure, Dr. Auctor**  
*(source: Donna Ong's website, 2002)*



**[14] Identification of Comfort; Intimacy, Dr. Auctor**  
*(source: Donna Ong's website, 2002)*

Pondering on the question James Olney raised, where he asks if we see a separation between our professional 'persona' and our private self,<sup>43</sup> perhaps we can only attempt to create this separation or wall. In art, often because the works are so personal, as in the case of Ong's, this attempt is even greater. However in her attempts to use personas, it allowed her to distance herself from the work, where the work does not become so much about her. Instead, while dealing with issues that she is concerned about, it enabled her to look at the world at large more critically and gave her the capacity to look at its entirety. As a result, her works, like a diorama give glances to everything, and there is some sense of completeness and wholeness in it.

Walls divide and separate. Because 'walls have fronts and backs, interiors and exteriors,'<sup>44</sup> they become a physical limit to us and contribute to the creation of a persona. However, in the attempt to create, there is still a straddling of 'professional 'persona' and our private self,' as there is a desire to be 'simultaneously in both places,' yet it is impossible as 'two bodies cannot occupy the same space at the same time.'<sup>45</sup> The walls become ambivalent and its role as a physical separation is questioned. By creating personas that are not 'fully-fleshed characters', but caricature-like,<sup>46</sup> Ong's materialized proposition and individual self is better defined and articulated.

In *Dr. Auctor* (2002), a series of 24 black and white film stills show an interior of the room. From the objects in the room, one is able to piece together a story of the owner, Dr. Auctor, a scientist. Objects such as anatomy studies, models of hands, fetuses in glass jars, drawings of insects are found in the room. Surrounded by familiar objects and her creations, there is intimacy and closeness, which are related

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<sup>43</sup> James Olney, *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* (Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 3.

<sup>44</sup> Monica Wyatt, "Space-Enfolding-Breath," in *Towards a New Interior- An Anthology of Interior Design Theory* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2011), p. 342.

<sup>45</sup> Wyatt, 'Space-Enfolding-Breath', p. 342.

<sup>46</sup> Interview with Donna Ong, (05 29, 2012)



by scale. From the nearest, that is, clothing that she adorns, to the objects around her, to the furniture that holds these objects, and eventually the 'perimeter walls that divide interior from exterior,'<sup>47</sup> we sense that the closeness between the levels of organization bring comfort to Dr. Auctor.

To Witold Rybczynski's, he concludes that comfort is both objective and subjective and it encompasses these important characteristics: convenience, efficiency, domesticity, physical ease, leisure, intimacy and privacy. And for each of the attribute, he associates it with the objects found at home. He defines this the 'Onion Theory of Comfort'.<sup>48</sup> Though the onion looks deceptively 'simple on the outside'<sup>49</sup>, it comprises of many fragile and permeable layers. 'When we look at the whole onion, we see not just the surface but also something of the interior'.<sup>50</sup> Likewise for the meaning of comfort, while it is easy to tell when we are comfortable, it is difficult to explain why and what makes us comfortable with some attributes 'buried deeper than others'.<sup>51</sup>

In the Onion Theory of Comfort, the attributes of domestic comfort can be found in Dr. Auctor's room. The idea of privacy is associated with the ability to enjoy and read in such a space. As the very act of reading required silence, meditation and solitude, there is a strong connection between developing our sanctuary and privacy.<sup>52</sup> Another attribute is leisure, which contributes to creativity and creation, which is seen in Ong's drawings of insects and formulation of little creatures. Moreover, the domestic ideas of comfort: privacy and leisure, allow one to create an interior within an interior. When reading, Dr Auctor was herself immersed in the author's world; when creating, she is likewise engaged in the imagined interior. More importantly as

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<sup>47</sup> Lois Weinthal, *Toward a New Interior- An Anthology of Interior Design Theory* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2011), p.18.

<sup>48</sup> Witold Rybczynski, *Home: A Short History of an Idea* (Virginia: Viking Penguins, 1986), p. 231.

<sup>49</sup> Rybczynski, 'Home', p. 230.

<sup>50</sup> Rybczynski, 'Home', p. 230.

<sup>51</sup> Rybczynski, 'Home', p. 230.

<sup>52</sup> Ed Lilley, "The Name of the Boudoir," in *Toward a New Interior- An Anthology of Interior Design Theory* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2011), p. 419.

the sequence of Ong's film still series progress, we eventually see the fruits of her labors, little creatures, half-humans, half insects in bottles under the microscope and in photographs.<sup>53</sup>

Perhaps comfort for Ong and her persona, Dr. Auctor is not just having all these characteristics come together to contribute to the physical experience of comfort. Instead, by imagining themselves in an idealized world, and seeing their hard work come to fulfillment, they are further comforted.

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<sup>53</sup> Dr. Rajinder Jit Singh, "An Interview with Donna Ong," *Sight: An Oracular Insight (A Singapore Art Blog)*, 04 19, 2006, <http://www.donnaong.com/2006.pdf> (accessed 06 04, 2012).

## **CONCLUSION**

*Not only was the interior of a setting for domestic activity—as it had always been—but the rooms, and the objects that they contained, now acquired a life of their own. This life was not, of course, autonomous, but existed imagination of their owners, and so paradoxically, homely domesticity depended on the development of a rich interior awareness, an awareness that was the result of the woman’s role in the home... If domesticity was, as John Lukacs suggested... it was, above all, a feminine achievement.<sup>1</sup>*

This passage poignantly illustrates a woman’s relationship with the home. Women will always play a part in the domestic space, and the home itself is a reflection and extension of the woman. Because the woman has a dynamic relationship with the home, the domestic space influences and also embodies her changing sentiments and attitudes. Behind the artworks by Heng, Kaur and Ong lie domestic spaces flecked with intimate details of daily routines and commitments revealed only through the negotiations, contestations and alterations of the home environment. These artworks provide the rawness and uninhibited emotions of these artists, which are often masked due to the imposition of a ‘right’ code of conduct within the home. Additionally, the multi-layered and complex relationship between women and the home speaks of domesticity as a description of a set of emotions and not as a single attribute.<sup>2</sup>

Through three different themes that are also vital components encompassing the discussion of the home, I have attempted to translate snapshots of the domestic space in a woman’s life into architectural spatial models that can be read parallel to

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<sup>1</sup> Witold Rybczynski, "Domesticity," in *Toward a New Interior- An Anthology of Interior Design Theory* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2011), p411

<sup>2</sup> Rybczynski, 'Domesticity' , p. 411.

the artworks. Each snapshot reveals different social contexts that challenges the perceived and shapes the actual roles of women. Moreover, each snapshot highlights the intersecting relationships between the roles of women and the physical elements used in their works. We see progressive levels of organization that not only produces but also protects the woman of the home. As each of the physical elements has a life of its own, these different layers are thus riddled with nostalgia and memory that cannot be quantified.

The three architectural spatial models are similar in that they allow women to create a version of the world that they can arrange according to their will, thus allowing them to imagine a home in which they can play their ideal role.<sup>3</sup> Through the use of representation, juxtaposition, and abstraction, it crystallizes women's desires into idealized forms. At the same time, the three models also serve as a 'realistic giver of order'.<sup>4</sup> By weaving together unlikely and disparate relations and arranging a world that is seemingly in disarray through the use of varying scale, material and spatial organization, their artworks propose an idealized and new form of order that allows them to find order and makes sense of their environment.

I have always wondered about the role of women in my culture as I consider the multiple roles the woman in my home plays. My mother is at the same time, a filial daughter, a supportive wife, a doting mother and a successful career woman. She toils and labours and more often than not, is under-appreciated for her efforts. Not only does she manage the household chores; she also plays an integral role in supporting the family business. I often wonder how she accomplishes these things and is able to do them cheerfully and without complaints. As she plays different roles to many, self becomes secondary. What is her ideal world? Is she already living it out through the fulfillment of her roles or have her dreams been subsumed by them?

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<sup>3</sup> Aaron Betsky, "Furnishing the Primitive Hut," in *Towards a New Interior- An Anthology of Design Theory* (New York) p. 204

<sup>4</sup> Betsky, 'Furnishing the Primitive Hut,' p. 204.

With this in mind, I was inspired to explore the often-overlooked domestic space, a space commonly recognized as a woman's domain. This dissertation is neither intended to be a feminist read nor purposed to elevate the status of women, instead, it is hoped that through the analysis of artworks as objects of architectural representation, new insights of how women are able to adapt and thrive in their different roles are discovered.

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## **APPENDIX—INTERVIEWS**

### **INTERVIEW (with Amanda Heng)**

**18 June 2012, Monday  
Telok Kurau Studios**

Hi Amanda, what do you think are the roles of women? From when you were growing up and in today's 21st society? Do you think the roles of women have changed? And do you think it is a positive change?

You have actually pointed out here quite clearly that modern woman having to juggle/ spend more time at work than at home. That is pretty much a modern woman's life nowadays. But I think the difference is nowadays women have a lot more changes as compared to say my mom's or my grandma's generation. For them there is no choice. Everything is pretty much decided for you. You go match making and then you go and get married and you have children and that is where it stays. And in a way modern women have more choices, even though they are now caught in this situation where you have to be good at work as well as home. I think it is also, because today's women are also more highly educated. So I believe they are intelligent and they know how to make the best choice for themselves. So I think it all depends on the individual woman who access her own means and abilities and make the best out of what you have. Make your best decision and stick with it, isn't it?

That's how i see it. There are women who are luckier, who have everything. Everything meaning having a good family, children and still be able to work or even better, doing something that you like. So there are women enjoying this kind of very privileged position. But most women will be struggling, for whatever, even in today's circumstances. (Even in today's society?) I think so. And I don't see struggling or working hard for what you want as something negative. It is more of when you make a decision and this is the choice I have made and I will stick to it and work for it.

Does any persona in your art works e.g. Taking on the role of the Singapore girl in 'Singirl' reflect your role as a woman or your understanding of women's roles in today's society?

That was in fact a critique on the representations made by advertising company. The reason for making that critique is that advertising companies portray an exotic image of woman for the westerner's gaze or the male gaze. And in reality, there are big

gaps. There are all kinds of woman, this is a lot more, other kind of strengths that women have today. However these were not portrayed. So it is necessary to make a critique. (But then they see it as a marketing strategy or a gimmick to attract more customers) But then there must be that kind of desire to suit the male gaze's or the westerner's gaze.

**You represent a group of first generation feminist women artists, who have lived in a patriarchal society and that has inspired them to create seemingly women or feminine works. However, times have changed and people seem to be more open and receptive to the idea of women having more say or representing us. Therefore how would you describe your works or place them in the Singapore women art scenes then and today?**

I get quite tired of this dichotomy. Its either DO or AH. There are over-laps. It is the same for the first generation, like Chen Chen Mei, Lai Fong Moy or Shen Yan or Georgette Chan, the oldest, our seniors. And then Han Sai Por, Chg Seok Tin, my teachers basically. I think there is continuity. There is certain gratitude that I have to acknowledge my seniors. Before them, there were only craft works. Craft works, needlework, handcrafts, you create souvenirs or gift items; those kind in the school curriculum and there were exhibitions on this. Women were not supposed to be practicing practitioners, in old days. Before the first generation came. More than 40yrs ago. I think read up the book by Tracey. So the first generations were already a step out of that, and make themselves the artists even though it was not given the same attention as the male artists, like Liu Kang or Chen Wen Si, or those people. And the subject matters that they used or their techniques and all that, even though they were more confined to say paintings or sculptures, their subject matters were more different from the male counterparts. For example, Georgette did a lot of family portraits and friends portraits, so still life and all that, they are rather everyday, mundane domestic, those kind of things. I don't see that as negative. It is completely different from the guys where only big ideas like war or abstractions can be real fine artists master subject. I think the domestic space is just as important and this is part of the feminist proposal, that even though we were confined to this, we make the best out of it. And then the 2nd generation of Han Sai Por, Cng Seok Tin, Yin Tao, Lin Sin Sin, I think some of them actually introduce other disciplines. Like Lin Sin Sin was the computer expert, musically talented as well so her drawings and paintings definitely different. And I think Yin Tao deals with creating textile works. Seok Tin

does print making, she was the one who brought in the etching print making technique to Singapore. So these are the various contributions by female artists that we never really kind of investigate or investigated. And of course Sai Por's public work. Such a fragile lady dealing with marble, there is a lot of strength in that. So the 2nd generation was basically, most of them are my teachers. There is a lot of continuity. I deal with a lot of domestic, mundane every day lives, relationships and things like that. So there is a very strong continuity. I think it is very natural for women artists to deal with this. I would say that my time had a very different approach or attitude towards gender. It is the first time gender becomes the subject of our work or of our expression. Before those, people were making representations but they were not making a critique on representation. But this time, for the first time, gender becomes a very important primary subject. And the body as well. I think first time; bodies were introduced as material and subjectivity. It was also the first time the process becomes art where we engage the bodies in the performance work. Whereas in the earlier works, they were making objects, where the final object becomes art. So these are very different progress or developments. In terms of methodology, art language and all, this was very different because time has changed. We have different opportunities. Jus like Donna Ong's generation has very different works, because they met with globalization, the internet, whereas I now have to learn those things. For them, this is their everyday life. So because of all these bigger changes, naturally women respond to these changes and find ways to exploit these things. So my time was the body, putting forth the body was already a critical approach to gender issues. So I think that was a very big step ahead. I talked about the performative, the processes and women of the older generations w/o feminist consciousness, I think the approach or the mindset or the attitudes or the ideas of being an artist is like being the guy, the male artist. And the male artist is of course the Genius, so they find themselves in their studios and they don't care about the outside world. And that was the ideal image of the artist, the genius artist. So young artists look up to that kind of scenario and they work towards that. Whereas in my time, that was different. We don't see ourselves as genius and we just have something to say and just say it creatively. And we are not confining ourselves to the studio and making work, actually we work together with other people, in the form of networking or collaborating, and this is the well difference. So our works are mostly more relational, engaging with social commentaries, concerned with, I think it is a form of engaging with public issues. You don't have to be a politician to engage with important issues like that. So that is you are an artist, so you engage through your expressions.

Also, how do you think your generation of artists have set the tone or ease the way for the younger generations of artists and for those to come?

I think that is not for me to set. I don't become an artist to set a tone or find a way for them. I think there is a path we have taken and it is up to the younger generations to choose their path and of course there is overlap. Whatever that is already done for them, I think you just take the convenience. It is just like my seniors who have started out and I took on their right as well. And I have to acknowledge that. I can't force the younger artists to acknowledge that.

What do you think is a running theme for all Singapore women artists, from the first of artist to the newest of female artist today? Do you think the theme has changed?

Family, Domesticity, the everyday life. Women are very grounded. You don't dream of doing the sublimes. But I think the poetics is found in the everyday, the hard work, the inner strength.

Do you think the works of women artists are representative of the issues women face today and therefore artists can be seen as spokes people or mouthpiece for these women?

I want to go back to subject matters and the difference and all that and we mention about the continuity. I think apart from subject matters and themes, one v important is the attitudes. It takes a lot for women to make the decision to be a full time practitioner. We all know that when we get into the art scene there is no place for you, and yet you persisted and these are very strong women who persisted and I think the mindset is very important. And I mention earlier our approach, our approach is more networking, not confining yourself, communicating, engaging with the wider public.

I can't speak for women artists but I personally don't think that I speak on behalf of anyone. If you look at my practice, all my issues are actually about personal issues. But they are personal and specifics, but at the same time they are universal. So I began with dealing with my own problems and then as you go further, you realize that everyone has the same problems, so it becomes a universal, an open public issues. So I have never feel that I am in position or assume the position of a

spokesperson. I think every individual have to have their own voice and they have to work for it. Work to having their own space and voice.

But sometimes I feel women are more inhibited, so art can be seen as relatable because perhaps the artists are dealing with similar issues as them which they are unable to voice out and they can relate to the art works more easily.

It is true to some extent but I cannot say that all women deal with issues in their work. For example Han Sai Por doesn't, the abstraction doesn't, Kim Leng doesn't, she is another women artist that deals with abstraction. I don't know whether DO deals with that. But there are many women artists who do not. For example Hong Sek Chon, Jane Lee. But still women who do not deny themselves a woman will be able to appreciate another woman's work. I always feel that unless the woman artist pretends to be a male artist and make their work like the male artist, and yes I can tell too. That is how I feel. If some of the women deal with their issues, take me for example, it is because of the environment. As a young girl I became aware of that and that became part of me and I have to talk about that. And that comes out in the expression. And I am sure a lot, most works, it is not just women who respond positively but there are also a lot of males. For instance, Another Woman, a lot of males actually came up to me and said that it actually remind them of their mothers, the relation. So it is not necessarily confine to women. I think issues on humanity relates quite easily to anyone. You don't have to understand the art language but you can be moved by it.

You seem to expound more extensively on the often 'overlooked' components of our social world, such as the sacrificial maternal role (Another Woman), the neglected domestic workers in our midst (Home Service, 2003), the value of old forgotten spaces that was and still is a part of our cultural heritage (part of the Singirl project),

Therefore, is there a running theme of all these works?

The un-noticed or the overlooked. I don't specifically go out to notice or seek those areas to reveal. It wasn't on purpose. It was because I deal with my family situations. Working with my mom was a very good example because there is a woman like her, not educated, no husband for a long time, whole bunch of children. It is a very overlooked kind of situation but when I deal with that it was not about crying about that. But it was about how in those difficult times, this person who has so little still

stand strong. I was thinking what kind of strength is that, I am interested to find out. What kind of strength keeps her going on.

For the foreign maids and all these, they were social issues. They were things happening in our environment, our surroundings. But it is also to do with how it changes my family. it affected my family. I am not married but my brothers sisters are all depending on the maids and how the kids were very different, their upbringings were very different from my, the values. So I began to notice how that has actually impacted on our lives in Singapore. What kind of life do you want for the younger generations? What kind of values are we now establishing for ourselves, for our countries. So that becomes important to bring in. It was on foreign maids but it was more about family values that I am questioning. Questioning what kind of family values are we having in such an urban living.

**So, is there a running theme of all these works?**

I think it has got to do with me being a woman, but it is not about me. It started from my personal problems and then it became part of the public's problem as well. I don't think I have a theme; it is just the way it is developed. A very strong thing is about the identity perhaps, but of course identity is a very complex situation in Singapore, the time that I grew up in coincided with nation buildings. So you have gender, identity, nation building, the role of an artist, a Chinese woman, a daughter, are you going to be a wife, those kinds of questions. And these are the questions that every individuals are bound to ask.

The first performance work from 1994, you sat in front of a mirror, painting strokes and scribbles on your face in traditional Peking opera manner while reciting (active) Confucius quotes. You were listening (passive) to music of classical Chinese melodies mixed with a western choir played in the background.

Well, there is a context for dealing with that piece as well. For that piece, it was the first time I deal with the cultural aspect, being a Chinese woman and of course, I actually have one question to ask you. You are a Chinese, but you question of the beginnings of the Greek culture and not the Chinese cultures so I want to ask why? Was it because of your education? But have you ever asked in Chinese culture, what are the positions of women?

So there is a good reason for me to quote Confucius' saying, Confucius says that there is great influence on us because we are Chinese. What this means is that women have no individuality, you are not an independent self. Your self is only related to the different people in the family structure, so during my performance I try to deal with that culture in relating to being a, in a form of enquiring about the positions of a Chinese woman, so making marks on my face was dealing with the language policies in my time, where the Chinese language policy was then put down as 2nd language and end becomes the main language and how that has impacted my life. And hence in that performance, it was in an attempt to create a new language for myself even though it was nonsensical. Even though it doesn't carry any meaning, to me, it was to get out of this being imposed, something that i was forced into accepting. And it was about a performance on that. So the Confucius saying was necessary for me, because it was part of my heritage, to see how that began and that began with Confucius. And now that I become conscious, I want to suggest a different thing and through my performance, I am suggesting or deconstructing a whole culture, whether it is Eng or Chinese and the music and all that was to indicate that I basically inherit both because when I was born, the society is already colonized for how long, and naturally I inherited some of the western thinking as well. It was not about making a judgment, a value judgment on whether the west is good or better than the east. But it was me looking into all these things and trying to sort out myself, how do I deal with these. How do I negotiate my own space through my performance?

For myself, I have come to terms with it. But I am not the government or activist, I don't speak for other women but in me, I know that I am a different person. I dealt with them critically.

**In the pursuit of capitalistic progress, do you think we have passively allowed western cultures to replace our national culture and identity?**

Well there is no national culture to begin in the first place. But we do have our heritage, our individual heritage or multi racial heritage, but unfortunately it is being surprised. I think it is up to individuals to go and dig them up. And this is what my practice is about.



However, do you think western cultures and ideas too have empowered women in our society to overcome the Asian Confucius belief in women's subservience to men?

No, if you actually have seen some of the old classical operas. You will actually see a lot brave women. I grew up with all these Teochew Peking operas and there are actually many brave women in these classical operas. So I think just because feminist movements started in the West, it doesn't mean that it doesn't happen in Africa, or India or even amongst the Eskimos so individual women find their consciousness. But of course the Western feminist movements were theorized and it becomes very influential kind of academic or scholarship or discourses and of course it has greater influences, as compared to say studies in China or Japan or India for that matter. But we all have very different contexts still and so you can never just bring the feminists happening in the West and impose it on the Indian women or Japanese or Chinese or we all here. For me the meaningful thing is actually how do we contextualize here, what is our very own situation?

During your mother's generation (w cultures similar to the present day Middle Eastern culture), a woman's social identity and family status were not identified by her own abilities but by her relation to male members of the family.

In 1999, you expressed a strong statement that women were progressing in society with discomfort about her physical appearance. A woman's social identity and employment opportunities were tied to her physical attributes subject to social expectations of beauty.

Do you think, in the 21st century, a woman's social identity as a female artist is less inhibited/determined by social expectations as compared to female artists in the early '90s?

I think I made those works raising the question on what is beauty and who decides what is beauty. Because a lot of women went for plastic surgeries to make themselves ideal. Even today like the Koreans idols. It is not just the Koreans but the whole Asia is doing that. I don't think we have changed. Look at the K Pop now, I think to me what is different is that the ideal look, the exotic look, but today it is playing on the cuteness that is reflected in the popular culture, those very cute cartoonist way of make up, those cartoonist figures, the K Pop group singers, the

drama. So do you see those changes? It is different forms. But having to say that this is the mass, but there are a lot more women who became conscious and pursue their own liberties. You become conscious, you can never go back to that, you make up your own mind and you make your own choice about your life rather than waiting on others to define them for you. And we see a lot of these in our societies.

**What do you think a 21st century Singapore home is? Do you think the Singapore home has changed, from previously to now, where more and more women are going out to work and women have more say in the home, as they too contribute financially to the home?**

Yes. I think if you are talking about the home as structure, the house, yes it has changed. You have a lot of money now to make it nice, the dream house, but I think the home has to do with communications, relationships, quality time. Making connections with others, and having time for yourself and having time to care for others. So I think there are intelligent women making very intelligent choices, we can see now. Like every now and then you see reports in the papers, and amongst our friends. People are making really wise choices but of course there are also a lot of mass, where women have not come round to that. Generally women are more highly educated and I tend to be more optimistic, where everyone, every individual, they will be confronted with these issues and they will make their decisions. I am not, its not up to us to make a value judgment on them, whether their decision is right or not, but it is their decision that they make themselves and how it turns out is through their decisions and no one will make any value judgment on them. The point to me is they come round to make that decision.

**Do you think that in Singapore, we are tied down with loans and paying off our loans. We end up making our homes look like homes in the magazines, we end up dolling up our homes as opposed to in the past we start our dreams from homes, we dream and we go out of the homes, what do you think is the current situation now where money is always tied to the home, and you don't dream and aspire and let your dreams grow?**

That is the biggest problem of having to measure everything on monetary terms. Then again it is up to us to make our own values, and these are very critical points

that you bring out. That we actually started from the family and worked at it and it grew. It is never as if you painted something and you don't have time to enjoy it, because you spend more time in the office, paying off your loans. I think it is really unfortunate for me, but of course there are women who will argue that I have a lot of satisfaction from my work so I think also, there is already a kind of scenarios where women have a lot more choices today. A lot of women are not married or rather life does not necessarily ended up with marriage, and it is still a good or meaningful life. So whether there are children or not, even with children or marriage, there are women who feel that family is part of them only, the other part is just as important. So there are all these different kind of complexities nowadays and I think it is very good because it shows that... Of course it demands that we are more agile to make decisions, how to decide for yourself and give priorities and all that.

**What is home and domesticity to you? When such words are thrown at you, what comes to mind?**

A house for me is very important. We moved house quite a bit. I was born in an attap sheds and then my grandpa built a house and we moved to that house and that was my Kampung house and I was very attached to it. But that was taken by the government in the name of building HDB flats. We were compensated with a present day flat in Hougang. It took me more than 15yrs later to begin to accept the HDB flats as my home. Why I say that? It was after more than 15 years later, one day I started to buy a bed for myself. Although I have my own room, it was my first time I buy something that belongs to me for my room. So that tells you much I miss my kampung lifestyle, the environment all that. I remember when I was a kid, i enjoy so much working in the house, i remember keeping the house clean, I enjoy the gardens. I do a lot of gardening, because we had a lot of compounds, growing trees, fruit trees and all that. I really enjoy those things. Our kitchen was as big as the HDB flats now, so can you imagine how big the house is. Of course I live with my extended family, my cousins, uncle aunties and all that. I have never experienced a nuclear family's life until we all separated, so it was strange for me. That is why it took me so long to begin to accept it. To me they are very natural tasks of a person who naturally want to keep your living environment warm and nice, isn't it and beautiful. To me it was never a question. It was natural to give and to work at it. So even though now I am not married, I am living with my mom and all that taking care of your house and making it nice but of course the home is not a house, it is the kind

of memories you have in those spaces. So what I shared with you were all my memories and how I actually clung on to those memories until I have to let go. Not actually letting go, because it keeps coming out in my practice, in my expressions.

**Do you reckon your works reflect your understanding of home and domesticity, in any ways?**

I think the works, on the surface it talks about all those environment changes but deep, in the depth it is about values, it is about raising questions on what kind of values should we have for the kind of contemporary urban living. I think I am asking those questions or at least for myself, contemplating on that and making decisions. So anyone who comes to tell me we have to change this or that, I have to ask more questions about that.

**How has the changing dynamic role of women effected transformation in the domestic space?**

I think that at the same time women have spent little time at home, all the electronics stuff make chores and tasks easier. So in fact you have a lot more time now. Because everything is already not hand processed, not hand made, everything is made convenient for you, everything is instant and you just use the mechanism and press/turn it on. In fact it saves a lot of time for you. But the point is that these are all mechanisms to support your lives, but they are not the values of your lives. So again we come back to values. So what are the intangibles? What are we looking for in a family or in relations?

**In Julie and Julia or Lily Martin Spencer's painting, Shake Hands?, it speaks of the kitchen as a dichotomous space, being both oppressive and empowering. Similarly, in your 1991 project, She and Her Dishcover, and in Let's Chat, it seems to speak to me as that too. So, what is the kitchen space to you? Has that changed?**

I think women have the abilities to make the best of what they have and this is what I learnt from my mom, so you confine them in a cell and they also make the best of the cell. I don't want to say that is the best way of being positive but this is also a form of strength. There is always the say that, you know the Asian women control, they are

the most powerful person in the household because they cook. Well because they are in charge of the household and everyone needs food, so they actually control the lives of people. And there is a lot of knowledge in the kitchen and they find their own wisdom in dealing with things in the kitchen so I think the problematic here is we are still looking at the domestic space as negative. We are still kind of comparing the domestic space and the public space or the workspace. So working is powerful, going out to work and earn a salary is powerful. But staying home and being a housewife is not, it is negative. And yet we are still taking that stand. To me, how do we discuss the dichotomies of good and bad, feminine/ masculine, all those positions? There are already feminine arguments about that, many theories on that and we have to become aware of that by not having the old thinking and confining ourselves in that sphere. So for example when we present the domestics, presenting the question on all those everyday mundane life, by presenting them in the institution, we are actually putting them in the public, otherwise it is being hidden. Now it becomes in the public space. So it is a form of reclaiming that power.

It seems so natural for us to take the stand that the domestic space is negative, so we have to be conscious of that now.

**In Let's Chat, the set up of a space made for experiencing the old everyday activities in urban context – This space seems to represent a place for primal communication – in the comforts of a home or a familiar community.**

**How do you think this space has changed and evolved over the decades?**

This work actually comes from my mom, when we were working together. We moved from the kampong house to the HDB flat, so to me it was already so difficult to adapt and then how about my mom. So these were the questions I was asking when I started working with her, but then I realized that of course she lost all her contexts, the familiar environment and all that and now this new environment is so new, so strange and everything she can't read. But when she goes to the market, it was natural for her to make connection with the people, the butchers, the neighbors and all that and then they realize that they were actually living in the community, in the neighborhood and after the market, they would bring the basket to sit down at the void deck and have coffee until lunch time, so this is going back to the same old kampong lives. Because in the kampong, the door was always open, neighbors would always come by, anytime or when there is a gossip to share. So it becomes

very natural, almost like an open kitchen, and that becomes the space. They find these spaces to reclaim those familiar life style.

The space that allows for public communications. Because time has changed, today you younger generation would prefer to face the screens as opposed to talking to someone else face to face. It happens amongst my nieces and nephews. You used to have family social functions like dinners and birthdays and these people are glued to their screens. Even Japan has specific terms for these people. They occupy such small rooms but it does not matter, as long as they have their screens, that was fine, they are already communicating with the whole world. Now you have match-making programs come back and they become very popular, because a lot of singles are unmarried due to lack of social skills. You neither communicate nor attempt to do so. In our days, we don't have such opportunities, because we have to work hard and sacrifice our social life.

**What do you think of art and space? By putting the art work out there and using familiar everyday and local objects (for example in Lets Chat) and situating it in a gallery space, what do you think it does for the artwork or the intention of the work? And what are the social implications it has for the public?**

I think there are 2 ways to present your work. The work can be presented in a real life situation, for example i set up my lets chat say in a coffee-shop, where its good because the coffee shop is a where strangers meet but the activity itself is so common to all. So it becomes very natural when even if you know each other or not you just sit down and do these activities and start to chat, so it has a very interesting space for Lets Chat, this kind of real life situation. I also did set up Lets Chat in shopping malls too and you meet with people who find it a surprise. That was in Japan, someone was curious and came to us and asked if we were selling some health food, you know nowadays you make all kinds of health food out from vegetables or all kinds of organic thing, so they thought it was some kind of brand new organic stuff and then they realized that it was an art work, it was a big surprise for them and you get this kind of chanced upon audiences. The shopping audience when they are tired they welcome this situation where you sit down and take a rest. It is more of this kind of audience we are encountering. When these works are brought to the museum it is definitely an art work, because people go to museums to see art, so no matter how un art or non art it looks, it is still an art work, so it caters to the art audiences.

I think space is a very important component for an installation work or performance work, even sculptures or traditional paintings, because you just put a painting on the wall, it deals with space too because when the viewer comes, how much of a distance would you want to viewer to see, so the consciousness of that space is already there. So space is a very important element of art making. Sculptures of course deal with real space, you put the sculpture there and you can go around it. Installations you choose a real site, say a market place or you create the market place in the museum, so it is a very important... For performance, it is even more important, performance art deals with real time, real space and performance does not create any illusion. Do you know Starla, an Australian performance artist who is very famous in the 1970s. He hangs himself up in the sky. He uses fishing hook to hook the body, of course through calculations you know how to balance yourself. You are hung up and held suspended, like you are hanging any kind of feast meat or something, he builds towers and he hangs himself at towers, church tower, so of course when you hang yourself at a church tower, the church tower itself is coded with meaning, so it has a very different meaning to have a body suspended there. So this addresses how the encoded space actually affects the artwork. For the artist to choose such a space, it adds a new dimension to the artwork, in terms of reading it. And actually these are very important considerations. Another artist, in theatre you create illusions, in performance art, you deal with real situation so it is the artist being hung there, not an actor or camera trick by using lighting etc, it is a real experience. This particular artist deals with the environment, he wraps things, Christo; his work is about wrapping. One very important work of his is wrapping the German parliament house, when East and West Germany were separated, and this parliament use was situated in Berlin, for a long time he wanted to wrap this building using very special material and he got refused because he had to go through all these parliament debates, for 23yrs his pursuits and negotiations persisted and eventually after 23yrs he did it. The exhibition lasted for two weeks. It became an event. So it was a work that involved many people and it became an event because they put lightings and people actually went for it. It was a festival for 2 weeks. So of course that parliament house is very politically charged and come at a time where E and W reunited. When he first started to request for that, the cold war was still going on and so this artist then addresses political space.

For your works, how do you decide the space? How do you decide which space to use? Say a coffee-shop or void decks there are already connotations that come with it, as opposed to a gallery space or in the museum...

It is easier. Because all the viewers going there know that they are going there to look at a work. However when I go and have a coffee shop situation in the market place, it is more challenging because it can be mistaken as coffee-shops in the market place, because they represent an everyday life.

The intention is to narrow the differentiation between art and life. So the void deck is intentional to have Lets Chat. However when we have it at the void deck the only hints that say it is an artwork is that it is created or organized by an artist. One work, A Walk with Amanda, it was at Marine Parade Hawker Centre. It was an invitation by The Necessary Stage to present 3 different artists work to present in their black box theatre that deals with theatre so my performance I choose to do it in the hawker center instead of the black box. The hawker center is about a 10mins walk from the black box, so I brought the viewers to the hawker center and performed there. This process begins with... I laid the red carpet along the route (from black box to hawker center) and then when we arrived there, i put pink table cloths on the table, so can you imagine, when you have pink table cloth on the table, the whole scenario is different, it completely transform the idea of hawker center. This transformation is the art. So you have the performance at the hawker center and after it is over I again lay the red carpet and bring my viewers back to the black box for the next performance to begin. So here I am actually exploiting the real life situation, by making a very simple act it transforms and changes the meaning of the whole space. So is this a stage? And of course life is a stage too. But who are the audience? Who are the diners? And it immediately raises a lot of questions for me and I take advantage of those situations.

You have been described by others as a 'living theatre' or 'mediator' for your public works, why do you think these terms have been given to you?

I don't know. As I have said earlier, part of the challenge for me about making art is how I have narrowed down the differences between art and life. And I am really very interested in that in between space by using very simple act and its a kick to me, I really enjoy that. And I will strategically plan or take advantage of those situations.



Do you think your art works have changed people's idea on the social situation in Singapore? Or perhaps create greater awareness?

I think yes... people are informed by certain things that I have expressed but it is not that they don't know anything about that. Instead, I offer certain perspective maybe. But I don't see myself in a position to change people's opinion about things. To me it is a form of engaging my way of engaging with public issues.

For other artists, the desk (is) a common place from which dreams are first imagined and take flight' and that has compelled them to create and generate their works. How about you? Do you also have a particular desk where you think and work at? Is the desk located in the studio or at your home?

At home it was difficult to have, I always enjoy big tables like this. But at home there was no space, it is really nice to have a studio space here. If there is any... Of course a table is very important where you can really sit down and focus. At home I have a very small table and I always find I am restricted. So I will always come to the studio to do my paper works, but I can't do my computer stuff here cause there is no line, so there is always these two troublesome things so yes I need a table, but specific tables no. These are all picked up from somewhere. All my stuff here are picked up from somewhere except for that one, that one was my work (points to table with army prints). Tables are important but not specifically. So in that sense I am not really attached to objects.

Do you think better at home or at the studio?

It depends. I think all artists are thinking all the time about their work. Because sometimes things suddenly come to you and you go. I have been thinking so hard. But it comes when you are cooking dinner or doing something so to say that you only think when you are here, I don't think so, it is very hard. But when u are here, in the studio, there is the tendency that you have quieten down and you can focus whereas at home there is a lot of other things, like I have to attend to my mother or there are some telephone calls from sisters or nephews or engagements etc. All those more social stuff but when you are here, here, is almost like a second home too. When I one somewhere quiet, when you are seriously executing some kind of serious work, you want some kind of alone time to be alone to do it. Of course sometimes you

need to engage in the outside world as well, but the main thing is how you thought through all those stuff where you need the quiet, the silence, the focus, the concentrations, it is here. On the other hand, through talking to your friends, suddenly something strikes so it is hard to say.

...Giving up their careers once they have children. Not employing the maids. So I think women are beginning to weighing things...? I always believe that women know how to do that. Maybe I am very optimistic. Maybe because my mom taught me that and I really believe in that. My mom is a living theatre.

When you are hard pressed to make decisions, and it affects your life, you make the best decision. Spoilt for choice is already your choice. So the demand is that it sharpens our sense of evaluation, you become more critical about your own values. Because once you make it you stick with it. And life is also about making decisions and facing disappointments...

## **INTERVIEW (with Noni Kaur)**

### **Email Interview**

**What is your understanding of home? And domesticity?**

Home to me is a sacred space whereby matriarchal qualities are given a chance to evolve and develop. It is a sanctuary of hope, idealism and even utopic visions. It is a shelter for warmth, peace, love and affection. Relationships and bonds are created and treasured, evolve as time passes. Every person in the household practices their own unique part in relationships and bonds. It is also a space where ideas abound amidst everyday living, everyday life as it happens. Triumphs and tribulations abound.

Domesticity is the upkeep of various traditions and roles of the homemaker, through domestic rituals such as upkeep, the feeding, washing, nurturing and loving of the occupants of a domestic sphere.

**How has the idea of home influenced or shaped your works?**

The body is a vessel that stores such unique instinctive and matriarchal energies that influences the home. Its ability to procreate and feed, its preparedness, through the ritualistic upkeep of the home is much influenced by the way a home is kept and nurtured through its evolving nature.

**Is your studio space ask your home, where you are able to come up with ideas?**

Most of my ideas come through my ritualistic practices of keeping the home and through the binding of ideas, feelings and progression of these ideas influenced daily. They may be ever changing and ever evolving as with life experiences. I live my artistic practice through this.

**How has this compelled or inspired you to generate your works?**

The idea of ever evolving and coming back full circle through the nurturing and feeding, just regular very laborious techniques of preparing food, upkeep of home

and even the sources of where each type of food comes from. As an artist, my practice also involves many laborious techniques of cleaning, dyeing, preparing materials.

What do you think are the roles of women? Do you think today's Singapore's home has changed as compared to the past? How has the role of women and the Singapore home changed from what you saw or know while growing up to what it is in today's Singapore? What do you think of this change?

Roles of women have come full circle. As a nurturer, provide, procreator and safe-keeper. In current times, women like myself, combine the load of having a full time career, being a mother, an artist with an active practice and that of a confidant. We are researchers who apply knowledge learnt through our everyday life experiences to art practice and living.

Singapore's home has definitely changed compared to the past as women's roles have changed and we are able to be the primary breadwinners and also have an active life filled with nurturing and providing skills. We are psychologically stronger, more skilled, and more knowledgeable and are at par with our male counterparts and partners. As time changes, society is able to accept a more matriarchal role of the women in households, homes.

Women's roles have definitely changed from the time I had been growing up as we always the mother as a nurturer rather than a primary provider. Now, the roles are combined and even more powerful than before which has led to more single parent families. Women's roles have come full circle and we are not just able to combine resources to have a successful home, but also careers as artists and bread winners. It's a positive change and will definitely keep evolving for more progress in the way a domestic household is run.

Particularly, in Sniff, Lick, Swallow (SLS) series, the huge dimension seems to confront observers with its large scale and presence. Why such a large scale? How did you start thinking about the scale of the work? Does it stem off from the size of the different spices used or what were you thinking about?

The SLS series is definitely a piece about empowerment, to absorb the viewer into the works. The scale itself speaks volumes to the viewer and gives a sense of volume and mass. Its monumental scale is also an expansion of the idea of the ritualistic technique that is involved in creating the works. It talks about the laborious rituals and time taken for a piece to be presented in such pristine conditions. The dyeing of the desiccated coconut to create different tones, hues and colors are an extension of the domestic ritual of the upkeep of a home. The shapes and layout of the piece also stem off the size of the various spices used such as turmeric and coconut and these are universal symbols of the female body as vessels.

Elements of touch, smell and vision are important in the creation of these works. The simultaneous juxtapositions of East and West through my Western Art training and my South Asian cultural heritage is a prime concern to create spontaneity in my work. The use of spices like turmeric, red chilli powder, coconut is used to create rich, fluid, sensual expressions. There are deliberate signs of struggle throughout that emerge and translucent diffusions of glowing mixtures of the work, with a direct response to the organic. A reference to the seductive, aspect of sexuality is also apparent. The visual language used is a culmination of responses evoked through that of being a loom between two cultures. Thus the idea of tradition and roots bind the works.

**SLS series has been featured in many different countries. What are the reactions of the participants of different culture? Also, are there differences in reactions by males and females? How has SLS change or evolve over time?**

The series have been featured in the Havana Biennale, Cuba , Fukuoka Triennale in Japan, An exhibition in Oslo, Norway, Royal Ontario Museum in Canada and in Australia. In all showings, different audiences reacted very differently. Definitely well received by viewers, the female audience was more subtle and in part had a more sensual connection to the works. They would also have visions of swimming and rolling in the works. Their male counterparts on the other hand, had a more primal view of the work. They would get on their knees and would want to lick and literally

taste the work. A lot of interaction there definitely. When explained to them what these works were about, the viewers would have a natural dialogue with the work through different sensory elements, which would transport them to different planes nostalgically.

SLS is a semi-autobiographical piece, which is an extension and adaptation of female body parts as a landscape and naturally evolves in the space where it is being shown. As I would adapt to my physical environment as an artist and individual, a homemaker, so will the work wherever it is being shown. It adapts to its surroundings and is shown in a different light through the evolving process. It reaches out to different audiences with different cultural and socio-economic backgrounds and is receptive of different reactions.

**It seems to me that in the SLS series, there is an experiential quality to it, where people are engaged to squat, bend, sniff, lick or swallow the materials used. Therefore what is your understanding of experience? And how has the reactions of the participants increase or enhance their experience?**

There is definitely an experiential quality to it as I encourage my viewer to interact with the works and engage in a critical dialogue. It is a wonderful experience as it gets the viewer to come to a more personal level with the work. Its ephemeral nature also evokes and triggers different responses through the life of the work. Through its pristine and immaculate state when it is first shown and as it evolves and gets rancid towards the end of the showing, different audiences and viewers react differently. It is fascinating to see how viewers engage on such a personal level with the works.

It definitely enhances the viewer's experiences and they are able to walk away from the work gaining insight or even reflections of past memories of nostalgia, connections to certain events through the sense of smell and vision. It sets a different light to ephemeral and experiential art. The works itself triggers various responses that leave a mark or taints memories of viewers.

In SLS, the materials used are perishable, and every installation requires a substantial amount of time from choosing to preparing to getting the right color to arranging to the end of the installation. Because SLS being featured in many different countries and each of SLS requires a large amount of time and energy, there seems to be some what a very 'ritualistic' process to it? I was thinking does this represent the role of a mother? Where one starts off the day preparing food for the child, waking the child up, sending the child to school, preparing the child's meal, etc...

The amount of time required to create the materials and the dyeing of these perishable, delicate mediums is immense. The formulas created to dye individual colors, hues and shades are precise. It has taken a very ritualistic and laborious albeit tedious form of creation. It requires a large amount of time and energy to be able to derive such tones and colors.

Yes, it is similar to household chores and the rituals that we go through throughout the day to be able to accomplish day to day tasks and a systematic ritual of preparedness and readiness.

I am not sure, but what were you thinking about when you created this work? Were you trying to convey the role of a mother in this work?

Yes, definitely. As a woman, a provider, nurturer and facilitator. I also enjoy what I do experience every day and try and convey my experiences through my work.

With regards to the perishable materials (which have different connotations, especially the coconut) used, are you perhaps drawing any parallels to women? For instance, the changing attitudes of women, where previously, women are mostly silent about their emotions, to being more vocal today? Or perhaps even the changing and different roles of women?

Yes, cultural distinctions are made through the production of norms of behavior and expectations concerning the nature of an encounter with a work of art. I primarily draw parallels to women in my works and the experiences they go through. The current evolving of women's roles sets a stage for a very current critical discourse in art making by female artists who are also have full-fledged careers. This is a very

positive progression towards the socio construct of the female / woman psyche and identity.

**In SLS, are you making a statement about women or particularly empowered women?**

Patriarchal power relations rely upon the subjection of woman's body to man's explanations. Within this masculine trajectory woman is denied a desire and a libido of her own and her body serves, instead as a site for projected masculine desire. In other words, her body belongs to him: Woman remains merely as the prop for a masculine psycho-drama. The appropriation of woman's body in patriarchal discourse, to a set of metaphors supporting masculine privilege excludes the possibility that woman might articulate the experience of her own body. The 'politics of sameness' which aims toward equality with men accepting the paradigm of the disembodied individual, leaves unchallenged the perspective deemed universal by the 'One' (masculine) sex, in its representation of the 'Other' (feminine) sex. By disregarding women's specificities, 'the politics of sameness' excludes the possibility that experience related to woman's body has relevance to the public sphere. My works are a direct response to this notion and a dialogue created through my works to suppress the empowerment.

**Besides the influence of traditional Indian art Rangoli on the floor, are there any other reasons why the work is situated on the floor? Why the floor? Why not elevate it on a platform?**

It has been shown on platforms and cases before but does not have the impact that it should. The works need an aerial view for maximum impact and be exposed to all the viewer's senses. With that regard, the full interaction with the viewer would be through the work being displayed on the floor and also inculcate the influences of the traditional rangoli.

**Right now as you reside in Toronto, and previously in Singapore, how has that changed your understanding of home? What is home like previously? And what is home like today?**



Home is very different now as being a single parent; I have had to combine roles of both patriarch and matriarch of the family. Priorities are still the same that of a provider, nurturer and facilitator. The structure of the home is different as the space area is more spread out and we live on the ground with a backyard and driveway. In Singapore, we had a more contained form of dwelling which also affected the expanse of the works I could create. I also have an outside studio space now where I am able to create works with no restrictions.

Home is where I am influenced for the creation of my works. My domesticity, my dwelling and forms of interaction with my environment, my actively participating in the growth and evolving nature of the natural surroundings that I am in.

**Lastly, do you reckon your works reflect home and domesticity, in some ways?**

Definitely. I practice actively what I experience and use the medium of art making to create a vocabulary and terminology of my own evolving, ritualistic adaptations of everyday domestic life rituals.

## **INTERVIEW (with Donna Ong)**

**29 May 2012, Tuesday  
Goodman Studios**

Hi Donna, your works are often based on dreams and fascinations. I understand that perhaps this might possibly stem off from being an avid reader since your childhood days. But why dreams and fascinations? While it is definitely intriguing, I was wondering what draws you to create such art pieces?

I think it stems off from one of the promises I made when I was a kid; where I promised myself not to forget what it was like to be a child. And through my adulthood, I try to keep that promise. What I felt as a child was that children just had bigger dreams than adults, they had the freedom to imagine. When you ask any child what they want to be, they will say astronaut. It doesn't matter if they wear glasses or not, huge glasses, etc. they will say, they want to be a pilot. They might not be very smart but they will say astronaut. There are no boundaries for a child; they really believe they can achieve something. Their dreams are huge and the things they want to do have no limits. I really like that kind of thinking; the way children imagine and they make stuff. Every single child can draw, every single child makes stuff. It is only later where they feel like what they are making is not good and they stop creating but actually when they are young they love to create, they love to have dreams. So for me, it is wanting to keep that spirit. It is wanting to keep the spirit but yet seeing myself as an adult and knowing that it is not the same as when I was a child. Even though I tried to keep the promise as an adult, there is still the limitations that you have that life puts on you that you feel disillusioned about stuff and you understand that there are limitations. And that whether you are not smart enough or you don't have the money to get there, there are limitations but I am trying to keep the dream in spite of that.

Also, having such a diverse training background in not just architecture, but also fine arts and fictional writing, how do you merge them together? Do you see any contradictions or complements when you introduce the different disciplines together?

Well I think that when I first went into art from architecture, I had quite a tough time. It is just different ways that you think about stuff. Because in architecture, often times you are responding to a brief. So every single project is different. Every project

responds appropriately to that brief, it might look different and have different concerns. But when I did art, it is different because they are actually seeing through what you are interested in, what is the thing that keeps you going, what is the thing that makes you want to make art. And I didn't have the threads. So when I first started, I just thought of it as a project, except that I set it as my own project. For example, lets investigate boxes, lets investigate speeches, and then I will make an artwork in response to that. But then, later on I realized that the difference is really that the audience is interested in who i was, what my dreams were, what I was concerned with. And the artwork in me reflected who I was, and I think that was a shift I had to make as well. To find the threads between the work and to find out what was it I was concerned about, what was it that moved me.

**So was it difficult? Even now?**

Now it is a lot easier. I think architecture helps me a lot in my art work. I think it enables me to go to places that some others do not go as well. One of it was the ability to let go. Like its okay if I don't know how to make everything. I can just get somebody else to make it. I mean you don't have to have all the expertise, whereas some other artists are very concerned. Their artworks are very constrained by their abilities, so if i can only do ceramics, I will only make ceramic works for example. I won't do still. But because of my architecture training, if I don't know how to do steel, I will just go to a steel maker. And ask them, oh do you know how to make? Can you make this for me? So it is kind of that release. And also architecture just gives me the ability to do this marco and micro thing, to be able to concentrate on details as well, as looking at the big picture. i think that was a real advantage as well.

**As the formative years of your life was spent abroad, in UK and now that you are back residing in your home country, Singapore, can you share what your idea of home and domesticity is? Also, have your ideals changed? Especially in the West where it seems more liberal and women have perhaps more say as compared to the patriarchal society that some Singaporean families face today.**

I would say for me, it is not so much the, I guess also maybe Singapore has changed a bit, where a lot of women are working here as well? I think that maybe in overseas, there are more women artists whereas here, there are fewer women artists, around

my age or older. You can see that once they get married and have children, they stop or even when they are single, they usually end up in administrative jobs or become curators, something that is more stable, so very few of them remain on as artists. Maybe that is in a way reflective of our society that when you are a woman, you feel like you have to take care of the children or have a stable job or income is really important for Asians. If having a stable income is important for the woman in Asia, it means you must have a certain commitment. Whereas I think in the Western society, it is not so, there are more women artists around but I think I was more influenced by space. I think someone commented that my works are always very claustrophobic or enclosed, it always has its own light source or always in a room or separated from other people's work. Some other works can exist very happily together in a big exhibition with other works, but my works always need its own room or I will create my own room for the works. And also, you look very into the detail of something and you kind of get lost, almost like being in your own room and having your own special science project and I think it stems off from Singapore that we often don't have huge spaces. A lot of our views and perspectives don't have landscape views, we don't have panoramas. We don't have that kind of views that overseas, like England or Africa have these huge expanse, these skylines, where in Singapore, all the views that you see are always constrained by buildings or boundaries. And I think I respond to that, for example, my childhood was in a flat in Singapore, so I grew up in a flat, in a small space. And when you play, it is like you are finding things to play with. So you don't go outside in huge spaces and run around, but you look at drawers and cupboards and you pull out stuff and look at things in detail and that is where you find the interest. And so I think it is reflected in the works that I make, that everything is about you look at something small and it becomes big through your imagination. It is almost like a dollhouse, or like a diorama. You look at a diorama and you imagine yourself small in the space and suddenly the landscape becomes bigger, the space becomes bigger than what it is by changing your perspective. And that simply I always felt my works work. And also I think it is the environment you grow up in this small spaces.

Your studio is very spacious. There are also views looking at the green spaces. So are you trying to create this idea? This is not common in Singapore.

It is the first space I had that is so huge. I only had the space for a year. It is the sponsorship that I have. Previously the studio spaces are all very small. My first studio was in a kitchen, my friend took the corridor, and another friend took the bedroom. We all occupied the house together and we worked from there. So a lot of my works are... I work with installation works, which are usually big stuff, and usually you make things in small parts. You put together maybe parts of it. You don't know if they are going to work but then you go to the site. In a way architecture really helped, because you imagine something and you never see it in reality. I never really fully make the whole piece. Its not like sculpture, installations is like you try out different pieces and you make different pieces and you all pack it up and you go to the site and piece them together.

**How has this perception of home influenced or shaped your works?**

I guess for me I am interested in the idea of dreaming spaces, where you dream from. And a lot of my works are concerned about dreams that you have in childhood and what you hope to do or what you want to do. I am always interested in where you dream from. That's why I often use the desk, or an environment that looks like home. A lot of people say my works look nostalgic but actually its because I grew up in a house that my dad collects antique and it is actually part of my childhood to have that kind of home that has old furniture. We never had a couch or a sofa, we always have like wooden furniture. So for me, home was like this kind or wooden furniture, old stuff around and home for me symbolized a safe environment from which you feel safe enough to let your dreams wild, where you day dream and build castles in the air. And a lot of it starts with the desk, you sit at the desk and you imagine or where you plan out things.

### **What were your childhood dreams?**

Very different. I think I wanted to be a professor at one point. I wanted to be a writer, I wanted to be a mother. But I have never really stem close to that. These were the dreams I had. I think it wasn't so much talking about individual dreams but the spirit that you have, that you felt, that you could achieve anything, the ability to dream big and to see it and have no boundaries. I think sometimes life gives you better dreams than what you dream of yourself, and I think it was just that feeling that you have as a kid where so many things were possible.

### **Right now, do you have dreams?**

Yes, I always still have dreams. To travel, to live in different places. I think my dreams expanded, dreams that will help more people, other dreams like making a real difference in somebody's life, whether it is through sponsorship or philanthropy, this is what I am hoping to dream. And you also hope as well, that your art is able to reveal certain things about yourself, by sharing your dreams or your failures with people that they kind of resonates with somebody and that they communicate with somebody.

**Also, is 'the desk being a common place from which dreams are first imagined and take flight' placed at your studio space or at your home where you are able to come up with creative and unusual ideas? And how has this compelled or inspired you to generate your works, etc.?**

I guess it is anywhere. Different places, some of which, just sitting at my desk. Some of which through reading. I get a lot of ideas when I read. Sometimes at my desk, ideas come just before I go to sleep, in bed. Different places. And I get a lot of ideas... I am sort of the person where the more I see, the more I look at, and the more ideas I have. Usually the actual process takes 2 months. I give myself 2 months where I don't have to come up with the idea. I just look and read and come up with different things. I try to keep that process as open as possible. Only through out the final week, maybe I try to tie things down. The ideas that remain at the end of the 2 months are ideas that I think are worth-while, since they managed to survive two months.

**When you have an idea, it is usually for one work, or it multiplies to different works?**

No it is usually for one work. I start a sketchbook for each project and for each project, I will read and write, (record) the movies. I am quite traditional. So usually everything that I see and write, it goes inside the book. Even my receipts. I guess it is a track. To see where my inspirations come from. And how from different pieces, how it pulls together and forms the idea. So I do keep.

Here are some sketchbooks, so I paste different things inside. Photocopy images. Lots and lots of stuff, I just investigate different things. Some become projects, some don't. (So you photocopy all the books that you read?) Now less so than before. Now I write the reference down. Now I have an excel sheet that I put all the books down. (This is for one project?) Sort of, one or two I think. Not more than 2.

Different things... One project, this for another... Different ideas and different projects will come up.

**You started your projects in 2002. Dr Auctor. It has been 11yrs. It is a very long time. So do you have many of these sketchbooks?**

Some years I take a break. Some years I don't do anything. Well I guess sometimes I do too many projects in one year and I burn out the next. So (those years that I don't do anything) I just read, help friends, teach. So it is like a... I try to pace myself better. I think sometimes when you have a project in mind, you tend to be very focused. Its like everything you read goes into the project. Or you try to make it go into the project. So I felt that I wasn't really getting what the author meant or what the film meant because I was trying to fit it all in my project. But then everything just felt like I was seeing through a lens, and the lens was my project. I felt that I was shutting up on a lot of possibilities. So I wanted to create some space for myself. Certain times I would not have a project, and allow other things to influence me. So it wouldn't always be me forcing the project and everything that I see go through that lens. Rather, letting things around me influence me and then suggest the project. So thats what I try to do. (So those years that you don't do anything, they have been rather helpful?) I think so, some years... depends. Some projects take a year to make. And so it will be one book. And the books are actually only at the start of the project and I will put some technical drawings inside but they will not contribute so

much. And now, later on, towards my career, its more using the computer as well. I don't have to draw.

As I come across your works, I cannot help but be reminded of a literature text, I am the King of the castle. In the book, if I remember correctly, there is a room surrounded with glass cabinets that are filled with moths, and it symbolizes decay, death, morbidity. And some how these words seem to find its place with some of your works? Why so? When I first came across your works and read your interviews or when you reply my emails, you seem very cheerful. Why is this so?

I think that everything has two sides. I mean, when you have dreams, there is always the fears that come with it as well. The bigger the dream, the bigger the fear. So I think it is always that dual sides of things. Where you have big dreams and you are faced with huge realities and huge boundaries and I think that whenever you have hope, you also have despair or disappointment, where is the other side of it. And also sometimes you hope and when you don't achieve something. I think there is a bible verse that says, hope defer makes the heart sick. I think it is really true. I think for me it is always about the dual side of it. I think when I first became an artist, I had a lot of people come up to me and say, 'oh you know when I was younger, I love to draw and wanted to be an artist. But you know, my parents did not allow me.' 'Or I wanted to be a dancer, but I never made it.' And when you are doing something that you love and you get all these stories from other people that say, 'oh you are so lucky you are doing these. I wish I could be something like that.' And you hear all these other side of it, and even when you are doing something that you love and every single project starts with a blank slate, every project you wonder 'can i succeed in this?' 'will this project be as good as my last one?' And when you do a good project and the last project is a great one, you are so happy you did it well. The next project you are faced with a huge expectations by people, and you are scared. And I think all these fears go hand in hand with dreams and hopes. And I think a lot of works I just want to be vulnerable, with people. I think that I don't want to portray just one side of the coin. But I want to portray both sides where things go along side, and I think that it makes me have a fuller picture of it. Sometimes my works are about dreams, but it is the stage just before the dreams happen. So it is when you are in a bad situation and you are just beginning to hope. But you are still in that bad situation and the work may not show that happy side. But it might just be that side. But the hope might be reflected in the title. So I might have a lot of works that look very depressing but they



are called cocoon or chrysalis, the name chrysalis is about the stage in between where the caterpillar becomes a butterfly. It is about that coming. You can't see the hope but the hope is reflected in the title that suggests some hope. But even when you see the work, you might think that there is no way. It might take a miracle for this, for this situation to be hopeful. Another thing, my work is very meticulous. It takes a lot of effort. And for me, that effort actually... I am actually a very messy person. Initially. Like when i was in architecture, i couldn't even draw a straight line with a ruler. Because you know the ink seeps through the ruler, so my lines are always wonky because I have to keep it away from the edge. Everybody recognizes my muddles because there is glue or over and I am always very messy. But at the same time when i started making art, I wanted to show belief. How do you show faith, that you have faith in an idea. That you have faith in that dream. And I felt that people who have faith put a lot of effort into things, like the Wright brothers. They fail so many times but they really put efforts into making these planes. They put efforts into making these beautiful drawings. And when you have faith, you actually don't mind putting the effort into something, because you know that it is going to pay off. And so for me, effort and belief and being meticulous was a sign of faith, kind of a symbol as well. So in a lot of the works, I had to learn how to be neat, how to do things that are very repetitive which wasn't my natural characteristics. But something that i had to develop. Strangely enough, i became neater. When you pretend to be something, long enough you actually become it. So now everyone thinks that I am this neat freak but I am only neat in certain things and I am very messy in others.

**So how has your work connect faith and barrenness? Because in Dr Auctor, in the first image in the website, you quoted Genesis 1:28, be fruitful and multiply... So it speaks of multiplication as opposed to decay and barrenness. So how do you connect the two?**

I think for me, that one was talking about, what is the purpose of marrying. It is to multiply, to go forth and multiply. And so what happens when you can't. What happens when you are barren? So initially when i first started working with the theme of barrenness. It was actually a literal thing. It was talking about barrenness without being able to have children, about fertility. And it stems from me having this illness lupus, and not being able to have children myself. Or difficulties. And many people around me at that time were feeling that a traditional Asian view is that a woman is fulfilled when she is a mother, when she is at home looking after the children. And I

guess me going to England and I felt that I was called to do art and also not being able to conceive any easily bear a child. That term, I kind of knew that for young. So I was just wondering, am I lesser? Do I not fulfill my dreams because of my limitations? So I guess a lot of the works question that. The idea of barrenness is this; it is what most people think. To be fruitful is to multiply, physically. Multiplication. But what happens when you try to multiply through your own means. Or you try to think what multiplication might be? Or what the fruitfulness might be. But later on as I moved through my career, the barrenness became more of a symbol, not so much physical but more of a metaphor for potential. It is about... are you barren in life? About creativity, you fear not having ideas, you fear being not fruitful, you fear not achieving your potentials. Like when you are in college or university, there are some students who get 1st class and they always top, and people have some high hopes in them. But when they go into their career, they just can't make it. And they feel so bad, they feel people have such high hopes in me, I have such high hopes in myself and I never achieve my potential. So there is always the fear that when people predict great things for you, you never achieve that. So that is always the fear for myself and other people. And so when it went on, it became less about my own individual circumstances but more about generally. It became more generic.

**What do you think a 21st century Singapore home is? Do you think a 21st century home is where dreams are pursued and there are opportunities to fantasize and explore. Also, do you think the Singapore home has changed, from previously to now, where people are going out to work and they have more say in the home?**

I don't know... I guess it is different. Sometimes I feel that home is a place where you dream of things you do outside, and before, home is a place where you come back and you dream of... home is a place where you dream about what you are doing for the vacation, like where you want to help people, where you start an orphanage, or you become a doctor, or being a successful student. But then home becomes.. now it becomes the focus, the home now comes the dream and you have all these magazines, Home and Gardening, and the aim is to have a beautiful home, rather than to start from home, and to dream outside home. Using home as a dreamy place, rather now home becomes that dream. My dream is to have now that condo, or a hDB flat in town, my dream is to make my flat look exactly like the magazine picture and its really interesting and I was just having this conversation with my friend and she just sold her house. So that she can use the money to sow into a dream of

having a craft initiative, her dream is to have a factory, a warehouse space where young people can come and design objects that are made into bags and products and it is to help people, young people who have been really creative in art, to continue doing their art and she was saying that she was talking to one of the students and he was saying that maybe, Singapore's aim of having everybody own a house prevents them from reaching their dreams. Because a lot of money is invested into having this home, instead of dreams outside that home. So they are stuck, all their money is tied up to 40 yrs? They have to pay all the money to pay this house and all the money is placed there, it is also where their heart is also. So they buy things for their house. IKEA is full everyday, every hour because people are buying things for their house. So it becomes less a space.

**But this is about placing furniture or making the house look perfect. But what do you think of... last time its about a family consisting of parents and siblings, but now the idea is that gays can also get married, though not in Singapore. So what do you think of this idea about the family and the home?**

I guess previously in the home, the different functions of a home have. People see the home as having more functions. There are homes that become home office or single people start having individual homes. I think in Time, there was an article, 10 things that changed the world that you should know about. One of it was the idea of single person's home. And I think increasingly in the States, it is about, there are more people having the means to just be one person in the house. The house changes as well. The house becomes a space for entertainment, a space for home office. The place has different functions. Not just a space where you sleep, or grow a family. But it becomes a space that is semi public space, where u can invite people in, you can invite associates, it is a place for entertaining. It is in between a private space and a public space. And often times, that changes it. I guess previously your house changes. I guess especially when you look at older generations; their house is like full of stuff, very messy, lots and lots of things. i guess after generations, you have old toys or table tennis table in the house. Or a famous one is a stationary bike, old exercise equipments. It is just wouldn't a place where you bring people to. You wouldn't bring your business people, maybe close friends. But now a day, the house is almost like a showroom, it is very neat and you can bring people there all the time, you can have a party.

You seem to represent the group of up and coming transnational young artists who perhaps have had the opportunity to live overseas and travel abroad for a substantial amount of time and are able to dream, fantasize and pursue interests. Therefore, the themes that are apparent in your works are very different from the other older women artists, who have lived in a patriarchal society and that has inspired them to create seemingly women or feminine works. Therefore how would you describe your works or place them in the Singapore women art scenes today? What are the struggles and issues that you have to deal with?

I guess it is slightly different from where they came from and where I came from. I guess a lot of the work has been done by previous generations of breaking ground for the future generations. I think previously a lot of works do not get shown. Like the works done by guerrilla girls for example, and how 99% is male artists, and only 1% is by female artists. And I think even today, you can see the statistics of shows, often times, there are 9 male artists and 1 female artist. But it is a lot better now for me. I think it is always the work that other people have done. I guess for some of the women, the older generation, a lot of the works are very political. There is less space for the individual. I think in my generation, it is less about the community but instead about the individuals, what are your individual dreams, what are your individual hopes and it stems from there. So that also counts the change as well. But I think the 3rd thing is that my environment is... when I was 16, I already moved to England, and previously before I was always in a girl's school. There weren't boys in the school, and you always felt that girls can achieve everything, and you are very proud of being a girl. And even when I went for A levels, in England, obviously it is a bit less, if you are a woman, you have to be a housewife, or stay at home and be a mother. There wasn't this kind of thinking, so there wasn't this concern for me. It is only when you come back and you are faced with some things, and you start thinking about it, and you realize that actually it is a big concern for many countries, like in India, Indonesia, China, Singapore. But when I was there, it wasn't such a huge concern.

**And since you were trained in the west in most of your formative years, how did you or have reorientate/adjust to the less western and liberal art scene in Singapore?**

Actually Singapore scene is quite Western, because many people have been educated overseas. Even if you look at the Nanyang artist, they were actually educated in France and they came back. But I think it was more like when you came back, you see things from a very different perspective. You want to engage in local issues and being Asian. Because I think that is what makes you different, sometimes, there is a phrase, I don't know, but it is about going away and then being able to appreciate home. I think any artist or anybody who goes overseas, you gain this. For example, I know most Singaporeans that go overseas, they write their thesis about Singapore. And it is very ironic. Like they have to go overseas and their topic is Singapore, whether it is architecture or art. But yes, you see things or realize how foreign you are. You don't look like them and they will go, oh your English is so good and you will be even more foreign and that makes you start questioning who you are. So when you come back, you have been trained western thinking, but you are aware of your identity as Asian. And when you come back, that becomes a huge part of your work as well. So I guess for me, that was also similar, when you come back, it is wanting to dabble in things that were Asian, trying to understand what are Asian aesthetics, understand certain things. So some of my works try to do that. So some of my works try to use Chinese painting for one, or Chinese teacup for another.

**Why did you decide to come back? Is your family back with you?**

Well, yea. My sister is overseas, she is living in England. Actually I was intending to go back to England, but when I came back to get a visa to go back. (Oh you came back just to get a visa) Actually I was in England for 9years, and actually I was less than 9months away from my PR, but when i came here I really felt... I felt God really wanted me here. I did feel that. Another thing I was looking at... I went to an exhibition by Zainal Kooning, and the work really struck me. It was just so raw and there were certain things that I don't see in Western art. Western Art was at that point in time, very conceptual. I was in Goldsmith, Goldsmith was very conceptual. Damien Hirst, Tracy Anend, it is just very Western. Certain type of art and it was, aside from Tracy Anend, a bit distant (?) and conceptual. Lights turning off and on, minimal, very conceptual, and when i came back, Zainal Kooning's works are very raw, talking about myths, about the Orang Laut, the myths about the sea people, how they came about. I looked at Zunian's works, about Sa Ning La Utamal, and suddenly I just

really felt that wow, these people are doing very exciting works. Singapore seems to have this kind of rawness and honesty and emotions that I felt wasn't present in Western art and I felt that I really wanted to be part of that. So that was another reason as well that I felt. I felt that in terms of contribution, in England, you felt that everything has been done, everyone is better than you. And all that you can do is a drop in the ocean. And everything that you contribute, you are just at the tip where everything has gone on before you, you are just following after. Many times I attended interviews at Goldsmith as a helper and people, students going in or teachers would say, the administrator person would say, why do you want to come to Goldsmith. And they will say oh because Damien Hirst came here, oh because Tracy Anend came here. And that happened ages ago, 10years ago. But they are at the tail/tier end. Whereas in Singapore, I just feel that things are just beginning, when you come in, you are at the beginning of everything, you are making things happen. It is the same thing as 1sgd in Singapore or in India, in India, with 1sgd, you can probably support a child for a day, but you give 1sgd here, you can barely buy an ice-cream. But I felt that being here, you can really be part of history, you are making history. You just want to make your life count.

**Some of the works that you have created spaces and interiors that fictional characters/personas (e.g..Dr.Auctor) would dwell in. I guess these personas perhaps reflect you in it. Does any persona reflect your role as a woman in today's society?**

Not sure directly. When I first started using personas, it was a way of distancing myself from the work. So it doesn't so much about becoming myself, it was issues that I was concerned about and it enabled me to be a bit more critical about the stuff. Sometimes its like yourself, when you are writing a biography or autobiography, you become very precious about things, it has to be very accurate and you are afraid how people will see you and so I use personas to allow myself to be free-er, so I wouldn't worry. It becomes a bit passive, fantasy, and I don't have to worry about what people will think about me. And I become free-er and critical with the work, the personas would almost... each of them are not so much fully flashed characters, but they are almost like a caricature, like one aspect, like a woman who wants to play with the dolls and wanted the dolls to come alive, or a woman wanted the plane to fly. But it was like a sketch rather than a fully flashed character, so I don't know if any of them represented the... it wasn't so much the modern woman that make them but people

in general, different types of people. So the woman, the barren woman was one, the scientist would be another, but it was different people, with different dreams.

**Do you reckon your works reflect home and domesticity, in any ways?**

Yup... I mean everything used is domestic object, and everything is made from things that you can find from the house. Everything starts from a home environment and it becomes fantasy and i mean it is just talking about the idea of play. When you are a kid, you can't really... a lot of it deals with the promise I made to myself, you know when you are a kid, the child cannot go out by himself so the child mainly is at home, especially a young kid. Their world can only expand through imaginations, through the things that they make, so I think that for me, home is a metaphor. For like having boundaries, you are restricted by the domestic items in the everyday, the everyday person, this is as far as i can go. The world that they make out in the everyday, they try to make it into a garden, they try to make it into a fantastic garden, the coral landscape or a plane and it takes some out of the place. It is through imagination. That small world becomes bigger, so a lot of the work just stems from home and domesticity and it becomes a metaphor.

**But the objects that you have chosen are not very Asian, so do you think Singaporeans are able to relate to them?**

They are actually very Asian, all the objects are actually teak wood Asian furniture. But the reason why they don't look Asian is because, I guess those formative years I have been living overseas, so whenever I put together something it is with an aesthetics that is not Asian. But actually every single object is bought from here. It is from thieves markets, from antique markets here, they are traditionally all Asians. But it is certain times for example, when I paint the furniture white, it doesn't look Asian, it has a Western feel and it is just that my aesthetics is Western, so the way when I put together things, the glass, crystals, it is not such an asian thing, those items add another element to it. Actually a lot of objects... that is one of the thing I can never get, which I always want to get, which is an Asian aesthetics, but I can never get... somehow everything that I put together feels different. It doesn't feel completely local... I know that other people have this... maybe I need to be in that environment... the things that you look at and you just have it... but I don't know, I

just don't have it. You just tend towards a certain aesthetics and you just can't get that...

**For Amanda Heng, she uses everyday objects that is very local. When I look at her works and your works, I am not from her generation, but I find it easier to understand her works.**

You see all her objects... I mean my objects are also bought from Singapore, but it is just different. I guess it is just coming from different places and where you get the influences. I mean a lot of my influences are really filmic as well... films that I watch, a lot of European films, Stakosky, Russian, and I guess a lot of aesthetics seep into you. I try but they are just different. A lot of what people say about my work is that... oh it is so strange you can use things that are full of tradition, but when you look at it, it just loses all the tradition, which is true...but i don't know why it happens. I mean I use traditional tea-cups, but when people look at it, somehow, it didn't remind them of chinese stuff. It wasn't my intention, but I guess somehow it is just the way that you are I guess, the way that you see things or put them together. I am Asian.