

Domesticity and Monumentality¹

Reconsidering the Peranakan House

Lilian Chee

The exchange across a building's porous envelope makes us vulnerable. One's presence may be betrayed by a discarded orange peel, a bit of smoke, the sound of a toilet flushing or a pipe banging as water passes through. We are revealed through these traces, the things that architecture cannot keep, the separation that it cannot provide, its secretions, the excess that leaks through like light.²

Houses fascinate me. I am intrigued by how we set out to change them with our ordered routines, eccentricities and possessions, and how in turn, with time, we inevitably become inextricable from the houses we live in. We strive to change houses. Yet, they in turn, transform us. Renovations, demolitions, reconstructions, preservations and conservations reveal the porosity of houses as sites where occupation takes centre stage.

On my first visit to the house on Neil Road, I remember a wall smothered by a web of roots and overhead, a bat flew past, oblivious to the ancestral hall's boundaries. I was told that a dig had just been organized, and shards of pottery, old bottles, and usually inconsequential items like a hair comb, had come to light. Just as flora and fauna had begun to re-decorate the walls and rooms, these artifacts were evidence of another life.

Someone lived here once.



Baba House • airwell area before restoration



Baba House • facade before restoration

Built in the 1860s, 157 Neil Road is perhaps the last intact Baba or Straits Chinese house in Singapore. It was previously owned by a sixth generation Peranakan, Wee Lin, who inherited the 146-year-old three-storey terrace house from his father Wee Seck Hock in 1972. Purchased by NUS with an endowment from Agnes Tan, youngest daughter of Malaysian nationalist and businessman Tun Tan Cheng Lock, the structure is now a heritage house.³

The Peranakans or Straits Chinese descended from 16th century Chinese seafarers who settled in the Malay archipelago and married native women. Their hybrid culture, evident in food, dress, music, art, aesthetics, literature and leisure, is known for its eclecticism, richness and complexity. In response to recent ethnic consciousness, this matriarchal culture was flagged up by the national heritage industry.⁴ It is within this fragile balance between architectural history, ethnic heritage and corporate national identity that the site-specific work at the Baba House develops.

As a response to architectural conservation works done to the property in late 2006-early 2007, eight local and international artists commissioned by the NUS Museum under the curatorial leadership of Karen Lim conceptualized projects, which conveyed contemporary attitudes of living, thinking and working with the history and identity of this culture.⁵ The curator's calculated decision to invite non-Peranakan artists challenged conventional understanding of local heritage as underpinned by essential attributes, and being essentially accessible only to an indigenous public. It attempted to forefront historical understanding through interactive and collaborative modes of working, often involving a community and extending beyond the confines of the gallery.⁶

In particular, the work of two New York-based artists, German Bettina Johae and Mexican Mauricio Alejo are worth discussing in some detail as these engage the house specifically. Alejo's *Leaning* comprises a variety of household objects, differing in scale, function and materials, neatly spaced apart on the gallery floor. The impetus for this work came from the archaeological



Mauricio Alejo
Leaning • Installation • 2007

dig conducted at the house, which revealed amongst other domestic objects, a used hair comb. Alejo, whose previous projects explore the representational value of common household objects, divested of, or removed from, their normative classification and function, visited Peranakan homes to borrow 'an object belonging to a Peranakan'. His loot included a toothbrush, a broom, a plastic dustpan, a ladle, an IKEA fork, an unopened bottle of *bedak sejuk* or homemade face powder, a red ballpoint pen, a paper fan, a parasol, a plastic toilet brush, a banister loaned from the Baba House, a roll of drawing, and a chopstick.

Leaning demystifies Peranakan culture by showing a range of very utilitarian 'Peranakan' objects. More significantly, these domestic objects reference 157 Neil Road first, as a house before it is cast as a monument. The household objects reinvigorate its domestic practices and occupancy as two aspects primary to its architectural constitution and history. Objects borrowed from different Peranakan homes, which subsequently came into contact with historical pieces loaned from the Baba House, reframe this architecture in relational and contemporary terms.



Bettina Johae
Miniature Photographs • Digital prints • 3.5 x 2.3 cm each
 Copyright of the Artist

Johae's *Miniature Photographs* are photographs of the house's intimate details, for example, a brass door ring worn by use, a set of switches on a wall pock-marked by scratches and nail holes, layer upon layer of peeling paint, the phantom of a once glorious mural, and even leaves and roots jostling for space in the cracks of walls. Each miniature measures only 3.5 cm x 2.3cm. For the exhibition, the photographs were 'hung' in different parts of the NX Gallery at the NUS Museum, positioned so that they were viewed approximately in relation to their original locations in the house, for example, in terms of sequencing, height, and proximity to each other. Confounding passive viewing, the visitor had to squint, bend, kneel, lean, reach, and patiently search out these miniatures.

According to Johae, who is also trained as an architect, the miniatures:

...act like little memory objects, parts of a puzzle, which the viewers encounter throughout their way ... (along the) exhibition, bringing ... (these) details into a ... white gallery space. The visitors have (to) search for them, the same way you need to spend time and look closely in order to find ... interesting corners in an old house full of history. The idea is to transfer the (gallery) viewers' experience into something closer to the exploration of the house itself.⁷

In *Miniature Photographs*, Johae reenacts her experience of inhabiting the old, crumbling house. The scale and placement of her images encourage the visitor to linger, to be conscious about how these details engage their attention beyond the visual. The miniatures provoke bodily action. Here, architectural history is perceived beyond a typological and form-based architectural account. It becomes an occupied site, reliant on a mnemonic quality of one's past domestic experiences. This sense of visceral occupation compliments a cerebral understanding of heritage, and becomes a concrete basis for how one may relate meaningfully to Peranakan culture today.

However, modes of occupation, that is, how we choose to live, is ultimately never static, being subject as it were to the vicissitudes of time and context. Hence, the difficulties of nurturing a culture that is enduring yet ever changing seems to be the most challenging aspect of Peranakan heritage. In that sense, Peranakan culture is not a *priori*. Its continuity depends largely on its ability to metamorphosize. It is this quality, and the status of a contested culture, which provokes Singapore artist Michael Lee's project *A Psychotaxonomy of Home*.⁸

When Lee talked to me about his ideas for the exhibition, which would be held not off-site but on-site, that is, in the house itself, I was thrilled that a project would finally attempt to re-occupy No.157. After the family, the plants and the bat, could art perpetuate these complex domestic occupations?

Someone had lived here.

We talked about the house as a ruin, about its architectural history, the Wee family, the myth of Peranakan-ness in today's contemporary culture, and the difficulties of using contemporary art to critique national institutions and cultures. There were obvious problems of intervening. The artist, who does not hail from a Peranakan family would not run the risk of essentialism but he was conscious that he could well repeat the recent clichés of Peranakan-ness. In retrospect, perhaps naively so, Lee wanted to bounce off ideas with me, since I laid claims to being a Penang Peranakan.

However conversations, extended research and persistent reading revealed a culture, which was increasingly alien to me. Its rites and rituals, opulent furnishings (including materials like marble, mother-of-pearl and ebony wood), and architecture of grand forecourts, ancestral halls and spacious rooms seemed wholly unfamiliar. The only space I recognized was the humble kitchen where I was reminded of cooking implements and recipes found in my own late grandmother's stash. In contrast to the rich trousseau of an 'institutionalized' *Nonya*, my family heirloom (if one can even call it so) consists of but a few precious pieces of jewellery, *kebayas* and *kerongsangs*, all of which I suspect are more sentimentally valuable than their actual monetary worth.

This encounter with institutionalized Peranakan culture made me wonder about two things: one, whether I could claim to be a Peranakan, and two, whether this culture has only represented the fashion, furniture, habits, cuisine and architecture of the very rich and the very privileged. When a culture becomes

institutionalized and sanctioned, it is necessary, as feminist cultural theorist Ella Shohat argues, to persistently ask: 'Who is mobilizing what in the articulation of the past, developing what identities and representations, and in the name of what political visions and goals?'⁹ Is Peranakan about a set of unyielding beliefs, or a set of artifacts and forms, or a series of transformative principles? If it is about all these, can Peranakan culture evolve and be relevant today as a mode of occupation, that is, as a way of life? Can it emerge as a set of principles driving aesthetic, political and social concerns?

The challenge of Lee's work was to enter the conversation at this crucial juncture. His approach was not so much an irreverence of this culture (which is sometimes also not a bad thing). But what the artist tried to do was to take apart the cultural symbols and make them perform other roles. In a way, he was misappropriating them. In other ways, he was testing how they could operate outside the boundaries of Peranakan-ness. 'The identity of a place', geographer Doreen Massey reminds us 'does not derive from some internalized history. It derives, in large part, precisely from the specificity of its interactions with "the outside"'.¹⁰ Our initial point of departure was a common if not an anachronistic one – mine, a fascination for the house re-occupied by flora and fauna, Lee's, an intrigue with the zoological forms constructing Peranakan beliefs such as the phoenix, the lion dog, the *qilin*, the tortoise, and the animals of the Chinese zodiac. In a shared sense, we were moving away from the monumentalization of the house as a heritage house. The common goal was ultimately to resist the museumification of this culture.

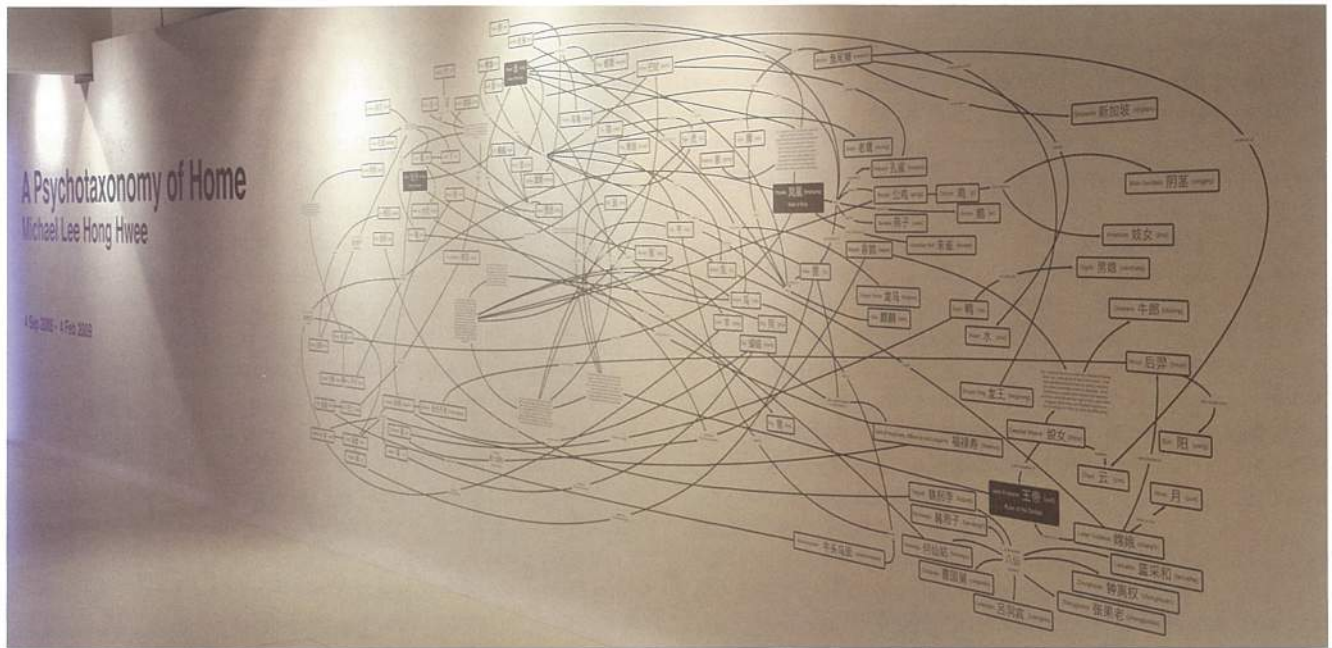
An initial idea was to construct a diorama of Peranakan 'natural history', by showing a hoard of animals associated to this culture, and categorizing them using scientific nomenclature. The purpose was to forefront fact with fiction in an objective manner, mirroring the way Peranakan culture and its myths have been rarified by museums. Indeed, as far as I am aware, there is no such category as Peranakan 'natural history', but the principle argument here is that categories are never merely 'natural'.

Unfortunately, the constraints of time and labour meant that this extravagant idea had to be shelved. In his project, Lee still works with animals that dominate the art, furnishings, and imagination of Peranakan culture. He was keen to test how these symbolic creatures would perform outside the boundaries of the culture. It was a response to the fact that we had entered a foreign land once we immersed ourselves culturally. As such, 'Peranakan' as it is performed here, cannot claim authenticity, nor promise allusions to a real culture. Instead, *Psychotaxonomy* articulates Peranakan culture as an empire of signs, always to be deciphered anew, and always to be performed in relation to an 'outside' or an 'outsider'.

For example, mythical creatures like the phoenix and the *qilin* (a gentle animal which has the body of a deer, the tail of an ox, a single horn on its forehead, a yellow belly, a multicoloured back and the hooves of a horse) were conjured up, then, ruthlessly dissected in terms of their origins and relationships with other animals and customs. These creatures were further formally multiplied and manipulated to show their uncertain and tenuous nature. What does a phoenix look like? What is



Michael Lee Hong Hwee
Will The Real Phoenix Please Stand Up? • Paper • 2008



Michael Lee Hong Hwee
An Almost Natural History of Social Relations • Vinyl • 2008

its purpose? Lee even invited his assistants to play around with their paper constructions so that variations on the aesthetic form of the phoenix abound. The artist's mind map is my favourite exhibit. It exposes the complexities, inventiveness and absurdity of Peranakan 'natural history'. And it also shows up our willingness to suspend rationality for something, which approximates the perceived contours of an 'authentic' culture.

Recently again, in *Of Fingerbowl and Hankies*, artist Chris Yap uses photographic portraiture to revisit the notion of the 'real'.¹¹ Yap, who is known for his high-resolution scans of nature, was drawn to work with the house since it 'reminded him of his own childhood home'.¹² As the artist was at pains to emphasize, he is not a Peranakan but the culture beckoned because it is better defined by the negative, that is, what it is *not* – neither Chinese nor Malay, with languages, foods, fashion and practices selectively borrowed and creatively reinvented by a thriving local population. Hence, despite its claim for specificity, Peranakan-ness seems, at the same time, impossible to pin

down. At its simplest, one might perceive it as a hybrid form. Following this oversimplified situation, it is not hard to see how a cosmopolitan society would not be enamoured. But the question remains whether there is such a thing as an authentic culture that excludes as much as it includes? This question is key to unravelling Yap's intervention at the Baba House.

Five photographs are hung together on one wall. Their dramatic content reminds one of a classical tableau, harking from some ancient glorious past. They are also distinguishably monumental in size. Measuring 107 x 140 cm each, they evoke the atmosphere of ancestral portraits, commonly found in stately homes (there are a couple in the Baba House), minus the solemnity of the latter. Yap's versions are animated with plentiful bodily actions, facial emotions, and vivid colour. The portraits are also, we evidently discover, stories constructed by the artist following plots and characters inspired in turn by the people whom he chose as models. The lengthy titles of these portraits, such as *The Illegitimate Cross-dressing Son*, *Two Princesses and the Royal Cook*, *The Queen, King and the Illegitimate Cross-dressing Son* and *Grandson and Son of Illegitimate Cross-dressing Son and the Chinese Businessman* convey that a family drama spanning across three generations is unfolding in these scenes. Indeed, the familial is the stronghold of Peranakan culture, where bloodlines presumably ensure the preservation of customs, propriety and property. Yap, who also installed objects in the adjacent rooms, sees the portraits as a kind of theatre, to which the audience becomes party, as if by accident or stealth. Like him, we enter the Peranakan house not by birthright but as voyeurs.

The performative aspect of Peranakan domesticity is highly marked in these five scenes. Fakery, hyperbolism and the spectacular are employed as strategies to restage a family drama in the context of a Peranakan house. Yap's *forte* is in the details. The portraits are massive in size but ultimately reward those who take time to peer in, since the images shift from the obvious (the middle panel showing the patriarch and matriarch) to the obscure. As the three centre panels work tirelessly to evoke what we perceive to be within the bounds

of this culture – that is, in the modes of dress, etiquette and furniture – their appearance warrants minimal uneasiness. But there is already a transition in place as we observe young women prettily decked out in *kebaya* but struggling to master the culinary prowess of their talented forebears. In these transitional scenes, it is the supplement of the house with its iconic domestic fixtures and fittings, which begins to overwhelm, transform or trap the characters, who in turn become exposed as pretenders faking their birth claim.

In a scene involving *Young Prince of the First Princess*, *The Prince*, *Young Prince of the Second Princess*, three men with different proclivities are found together in a study. Books are piled high on the floor and on the desk. A modern image is hung on the wall panel (this is one of Yap's high-resolution scans - in the series, the artist slips in many of these references into the house, as if to betray a trace of his 'intrusion'). The books, evidence of Peranakan legacy, are a mixture of fact and fiction. Some titles were fabricated by the artist while others are legitimate. Legitimacy, it seems, is high on the stakes of Peranakan succession, and Yap as artist-voyeur is poking at its foundations. By introducing slippages into these portraits (in the forms of a true cross-dresser, fake books, ultra-contemporary artwork and fictional 'Peranakan instant food' amongst others), we are asked to evaluate if we can trust the detail, a quality prized by fastidious Peranakans and a trait which the artist is partial towards in his work.

There is something pejorative about the detail. To privilege the detail is to subscribe to an anti-idealist culture, and to brush against the grain of the big, the important, the generalized, the abstract and the essentialized. Significantly too, the politics of the detail, as feminist critic Naomi Schor argues, is radically linked to an non-patriarchal culture, and 'bounded on the one side by the ornamental, with its traditional connotations of effeminacy and decadence, and on the other, by the everyday, (which is)... rooted in the domestic sphere of life presided over by women'.¹³ Thus, to embrace the detail is to embrace the particular, the fragmented, the marginal, the feminine and the inconsequential. In this situation, the feminized detail becomes

a viable means to enter a heritage space like the Baba House. The unauthorized detail seeps through, is non-threatening and does not demolish. It behaves in ways which are 'ornamental and contingent', and hence, may subvert 'form and convention'¹⁴ when the historical is displaced, or re-occupied, by present circumstances.

On another level, the five portraits also invoke questions of the real. How 'real' is Peranakan culture? How 'real' is the Peranakan house? There are no easy answers to these rhetorical questions. In their overt and hyperbolic performances of Peranakan-ness, abetted by details in dress, activity and props, the characters in *Of Fingerbowls and Hankies* are consciously desublimating 'Peranakan-ness' – often regarded a sublime quality – with humour and dubious facticity. These five images act like mirrors to the contemporary Peranakan household. They differentiate between a 'real reality' and a 'reality effect', showing us that one's knowledge of 'the real' is ultimately partial, subjective, and 'at best realism cannot copy *the* real, only *some* real':¹⁵

We never know it except in the form of effects (physical world), functions (social world) or fantasies (cultural world); in short, the real is never anything but an inference; when we declare we are copying reality, this means that we choose a certain inference and not certain others; realism is, at its very inception, subject to the responsibility of choice...¹⁶

What we choose to perceive as 'Peranakan' (and here, the quotation marks are meant to indicate Peranakan's constructed status) is then based on certain inferences and particular choices. The lure of Yap's work is, of course, the photograph's 'reality effect'. Compared to paintings, photographs are compelling because they promise some evidence of what is there. The photograph is a proxy of the real, a witness to the scene of the crime. Photographs are key articles in archives because they are perceived as objective records. In these assumptions, the photograph is deemed to passively reproduce the real. But,

Photography does not simply produce the real, it recycles it ... The photographic recycling makes clichés out of unique objects, distinctive and vivid artifacts out of clichés. Images of real things are interlayered with images of images.¹⁷

The 'interlayering' of image upon image – in this instance, the discrete image of the Peranakan house and its occupants are layered with our perceived images of what Peranakan should or should not be – thus, constitutes 'Peranakan' culture, not as 'the real' but as a recycling of its 'reality effect'. This phenomenon cannot be simply deemed good or bad. At its worst, it produces a cliché. At its best, it makes robust a fragile and fading culture, ensuring its continued survival. For example, the popular Singapore television miniseries *The Little Nonya* propelled a renewed interest in Peranakan dress, aesthetics, customs, food and architecture. This interest is ultimately fanned by consumerism but it has flagged the culture to a new generation who will embrace and internalize it in ways natural to the current milieu. At the centre of this evolving culture is ultimately the experiencing subject or the occupant of spaces which have survived – the true blue Peranakan, novice Peranakan, amateur Peranakan, or just the curious voyeur.

The Peranakan house as a monumental form may be invaluable to architectural history but it is also a specific locus of power and privilege. The house needs to be meaningfully occupied, not fetishized, if this culture is to survive and evolve. Architecture has the capacity to connect the conceptual and material realms, to relate what is now monumental with the exigencies of unremarkable domestic life. This ordinariness is 'the outside' which will matter for this culture. It is fundamental material still worth holding onto.

Because we should never forget, that once, someone lived here.

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NOTES:

- 1 A version of this paper was presented at a panel discussion titled 'Performing the Peranakan', held at the NUS Museum on 11 March 2009.
- 2 Karen Bermann, 'The House Behind', in Heidi J. Nast and Steve Pile (eds.), *Places Through the Body* (London: Routledge, 1998), p.169.
- 3 Restoration work was overseen by NUS' Centre for the Arts in consultation with the NUS Department of Architecture, the Urban Redevelopment Authority of Singapore and the Peranakan Association. See Cheong Suk-Wai, 'Breathing new life into an old culture', *The Straits Times*, 5 February 2007; Desmond Foo, 'Peranakan Treasures', *Life!* installment, *The Straits Times*, 5 February 2007.
- 4 For example, the old Singapore Asian Civilizations Museum on Armenian Street, reopened in 2008 as the Peranakan Museum. In 2009, the highly popular television drama *The Little Nonya* by the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation aired to much public acclaim. It has since spun a new Peranakan frenzy.
- 5 Email correspondence between author and NUS Museum curator Karen Lim, 8 May 2007.
- 6 See Karen Lim, 'Objects – A Conceptual Project', in *Objects and Desire*, exhibition catalogue for exhibition at the NX Gallery, 31 January – 30 April 2007 (Singapore: NUS Museum, 2007), unpaginated.
- 7 Email correspondence between author and Bettina Johae, 16 May 2007.
- 8 Michael Lee Hong Hwee, *A Psychotaxonomy of Home*, a solo exhibition of paper objects and texts at the Baba House, 4 September 2008 – 3 April 2009.
- 9 Ella Shohat, 'Notes on the "Post-Colonial"', in *Social Text* (1992), n.31/32, p.110.
- 10 Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, Gender* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), p.169.
- 11 Chris Yap, *Of Fingerbowls and Hankies*, large-scale photographs and objects installed at the Baba House, 25 June – 31 December 2009.
- 12 Interview between author and Chris Yap, 11 May 2009.
- 13 Naomi Schor, *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* (London: Routledge, 2007, c.1987), p.xlii
- 14 Ellen Rooney, 'Foreword: An Aesthetic of Bad Objects', in Schor, *Reading in Detail*, p.xxxi.
- 15 Schor, *Reading in Detail*, p.103.
- 16 Roland Barthes, *Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972), p.159, cited by Schor, *Reading in Detail*, p.103.
- 17 Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 1977, c.1973), p.175.