

*Mud & Mashed Hydrangea Leaves
And Salad of Dandelion Greens*

Eiffel Chong



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16 - 30 August 2018

Remembering the Beautiful Inside My Head Forever

Eiffel Chong

Kuala Lumpur, 2017

People always claim that Bangkok looks the same as any other fast developing city, but I disagree. These developing cities, covered in debris of overdevelopment, do not have many colours, both literally and metaphorically speaking. To me, these cities can be rendered in just black and dark grey tones whereas Bangkok, though carrying the same grey-ish tones, is accentuated with more colours. Maybe it was the colourful culture with its campy pink and neon colours or maybe it was the golden stupas and the orange robe of the monks that accentuate the colour for the city. Maybe it is the friendly people and its smiles, too.

However, my perception of Bangkok has changed during my recent trip in 2015. I felt that Bangkok is not as colourful as what I remember her to be. It's as though the city had lost her charm. The city is filled with shopping centres that carry international brands. My trip to Chatuchak Market, something that I was really looking forward to, ended up in disappointment. This is my 3rd visit and I remember both my earlier visits where I was awed and inspired by the many creative talents that Thailand had. This time around, what I noticed was mainly products that were bought from production factories cheaply being sold in higher prices to the tourists. There is no creative burst from the market anymore.

One of my friends felt that the people in Bangkok are less friendly now. Maybe because he looks like he is from Mainland China and they had mistaken him as just another 'Chinese

Tourist'. Another friend who is currently working in Bangkok claims that the locals seem to be friendly in the beginning only to become less as time goes by. One of the reasons why the locals are friendly to tourists is because of the 'tourists money'. Tourism is important to Thailand and tourists who visit Thailand will usually have a lot of money to spend. When they realise that they couldn't get money out of a particular tourist, their expression changes. The all-smiley and all-friendly locals are allegedly for the tourists' money only.

What really happened? Does it have to do with the various political coups that Bangkok experienced in the past few years? Or because of the booming market in Southeast Asia, leading to gentrification and causing living conditions to be tougher now that everyone is busy working to earn a living and have no time to stop by and smile to each other?

Beautiful Inside My Head Forever is the title of Damien Hirst's exhibition at Sotheby's a day before the collapse of the Lehman Brothers in the USA back in 2008. I was in Bangkok at that time and remember reading a newspaper article about the success of his exhibition. This was also my earliest trip to Bangkok as an artist and it was one of the nicest trips I remember of Bangkok at that time. It was a lot more interesting and adventurous.

Fast forward to 2015, I notice more grime and gritty colours in the city. The city has lost its pink and neon colours. The city has lost its smile, too. It's like the city had past its prime and is dying. Wilting, becoming limp through the heat, loss of water or perhaps caught some kind of disease.

Some would say that the city has grown up, has become mature and stable, economically speaking. It is becoming a 'rich' city like Singapore, or Hong Kong. Growing up also means that the city has lost her childish charm and naivety adventurous characters to become boring.



In Lieu of Flowers

Jessica Ho

Kuala Lumpur, 2018

1 mass produced and often made of plastic, heavily glittered and usually tied together with a hard-boiled egg.

2 Institutionalised
Care by Eiffel Chong,
published by Grenadier
Press Pte. Ltd. (2013)
ISBN: 978-976-12099-
0-5

Growing up as a child, it wasn't standard practice to gift flowers. It was as though my mum's natural instinct was to shun flowers as they were mostly considered an act of extravagance and indulgence. On the off chance that she would quietly accept it without fuss, it would be flowers either made from craft class or the ones given out as wedding favours from Malay weddings¹.

As a child, my relationship with flowers were mostly synonymous with occasions like funerals, weddings, or child birth. Events signifying life-altering moments that could be

quantified with a simple mathematical formula, during which an addition or subtraction of a family member occurs. Naturally, I tend to consider flowers not only as a gesture of sincerity from the giver, but to a certain degree, they come along with a comforting or celebratory presence as a person might carry.



Eiffel Chong, *Institutionalised Care* #40, 2007, C-type photographic paper.

Viewing these images on screen for the first time, I was strongly reminded of the final work published in his artist book, *Institutionalised Care*². Eiffel had managed to capture these flowers of a vibrant red in full bloom on proud display tinted with a sense of abandonment and loss. Speaking to the artist, you'd realize that the reality couldn't be further off, that the bouquet of celebration was to usher in a new born and belonged to a ward filled with flowers that it had to be placed outside of the

entrance. Perhaps, then, that sense of abandonment came from the flowers, having been separated from the others, caught up in its abandonment, mourning for not having lived to its full potential?

It is qualities like this that resonate through Eiffel's works. The artist's curiosity compels him to explore the unknown, as he did with abandoned spaces in *Royal Malaysia Police Series*³ and *This Used to Be My Playground*⁴. Like a detective piecing together traces of life and found clues, he restores these findings and abandoned spaces to their former glory through the figment of his imagination. The artist's intervention successfully taps into a collective well of memories, calling upon sentiments like nostalgia, fear, and solitude. His neatly framed works are rich with human sentiments yet devoid of the human presence, just as we are well aware of the puppet master's presence orchestrating behind the scenes.

It is evident that Eiffel is a patient observer, using his sensitivities towards form, structure and colors as his primary guide to execute and plan his compositions. Upon receiving an invite in 2017 to teach Photography in Chiang Mai University, Thailand, Eiffel found time to visit Bangkok, only to discover the city he had remembered fondly did not weather the test of time. His return to the city met with a huge gap in the impression to when he had first encountered her in 2008. Making frequent trips to Bangkok from Chiang Mai, where he was based, Eiffel's suspicions were made evident as he observed the contrast in both cities, the city of smiles he had known as a tourist seemed to be fading. He began seeking out a language to express this ambivalence as he found himself gravitating to the famous flower markets in each city.

It is hardly surprising that Eiffel resorted to flowers, it is rather impossible to spend time in Thailand without noticing the overarching importance of spirituality in the culture that is marked by the presence of flowers. Flower garlands and paper flowers⁵ are a common encounter throughout one's journey in Thailand. The roots deeply embedded in their daily lives, are purchased and used to deliver well wishes and prayers for protection, good luck and fortune⁶. Eiffel's floral arrangements respond to an ephemeral part of this ritual, as a keepsake to



Eiffel Chong, *Royal Malaysia Police #05*, 2012, C-type photographic paper.

3 currently in the collection of Singapore Art Museum, Singapore

4 The artist's first exhibition series in Hong Kong with Artify Gallery (2013)

5 Phuang malai, a rich flower arranging tradition that holds an integral part in ceremonies across Thailand. It was first recorded during the reign of King Rama V (1868 – 1910) and had since developed and progressed so much more in practice, deeply rooted in Thai culture and their everyday, the presence of flowers within a Thai household are also very much closely linked to religion and good thoughts.



Eiffel Chong, *Untitled #05*, 2006, C-type photographic paper.

6 Spirit worship, or Animism, was practiced widely by the people of Southeast Asia. Many Thais believe in a spirit world. These spirits, or phi, must be respected and are capable of bringing blessings and good fortune to those who appease them.

take home and how cultural traditions might be sustained despite displacement and urbanization.

Eiffel's dispassionate and systematic cataloging allowed me to look beyond the symbol of femininity to recognize them for their quality and form as I considered the scale, size and display formats employed by the artist, falling in line with the continued to play with the concept of life and death through the metaphor of flowers adopted throughout history. Be it handmade or freshly plucked, each flower possesses their own intrinsic personalities – especially evident in *Years of Mourning*, with the little deformities that Eiffel had carefully selected from multiple visits to flower markets across Thailand, whose beauty he chose to magnify.

Intending to record his subjects as they were, they were set up as is. Loose leaves and petals sitting in their original packing from the flower market correspond with the idea of an embalming ritual, fresh blooms enclosed in foam nettings, just as a new born is swaddled in fresh towels. The presentation format of these multi-paneled pieces seem to have taken a page off the year book. As with the meticulously constructed assembly, as seen in *Sense of Falseness*, reminiscent of a military like drill or a fragment in a time one embraces conformity. Putting forward a sense of tribe as one had in seeking association in the years when coming of age, it is a composition that requires a kind of obsession with form and precision. The subjects are now being rid of individuality and viewed as a collective, standing proud erect and tall, suggesting an audience placed on high alert, perhaps ready to deliver a chorus or are put in line as a parade of distinction.

In contrast with such orderliness, *The Colors of Wounds & Diseases #1 & #2* is most telling of human qualities. They seem to suggest a kind of weariness of an old soul, weathering through trying times. The choir of Helichrysum (better known as Straw Flowers) once beaming and neatly arranged, was a display left to nature's devices. Discarding a picture perfect moment, Eiffel captured a gradual succumbing of his subjects,

once poised and potentially carried resemblance to Van Gogh's *Sunflowers*, are now shrivelled and bending away from light, reminding the viewer of shame, mortality, and the brevity of beauty. It also considers the role of gravity and shaky foundations of ethical quagmires as adults learn to navigate a trying world. No doubt, even in such conditions, the collective scent was beautiful to those who knew how to appreciate, delicate and sweet as proven by the caterpillar that had nestled itself amongst the waning bloom. An element of absurdity is highlighted, if not through the association of his titles, in the artist's decision to embed these flowers in energy drink bottles, which are heavily consumed and littered across the streets in Thailand. It draws light on the rampant consumption of these artificial boosters, suggesting the frail and synthetic foundations of the social fabric that the fast growing city on steroids sits on.

As if to suggest an alternate reality, Eiffel employs the use of the well wishing forever blooms of *Kathin* flowers⁷ in an orderly composition in *An Antidote To Solitude & A Sort of Hallucination: BLOOD, SWEET & FRUIT*. As if to please the *Kuman Thong*⁸ of life, he arranges rows of colored sugary drinks so often used as offering. The cheerful and fun color play draws inspiration from a child's desire to ace their exams, as believed in Thailand to be an effective offering in passing state examinations with flying colors. This full use of artificial elements aligns with the quest for eternity in the heavy investment of scientific advancement and explorations that humanity has embraced. The flower in this scenario has fully evolved into a symbol where its defining quality – the ability for pollination and produce scent (a blessing reserved for the receiver) is no longer relevant. Interestingly, they highlight the discord that most Southeast Asian countries have been muddling through in contemporary today. For as long as donations are continuously being offered in the form of Bahts clipped to a *Kathin*, the desire to believe in guardian spirits and powers beyond mankind still runs deep.

Flowers had provided an emotive inspiration to many greats throughout the course of art history, the language and iconographic trend had since evolved from markers to the change of season to capture a whole range of emotional

⁷ plastic flowers often made from discarded plastic bottles. Usually presented with money clipped to it as financial donations and offerings for the upkeep of the wat.

⁸ A household divinity believed to bring luck and fortune to the property owner if properly revered. Kuman means "Sanctified young boy"; thong means golden

expression. Such is the case when I consider the connection between Eiffel's subject of flowers and the human psyche, capturing a frame in each timeline of events, further continuing his preoccupation and dialogue on mortality, individuality and collective identity.

Eiffel's homage to Van Gogh is obvious. Perhaps engaged by the great artist's dedication and tragic life, Eiffel challenges his viewers to step in closer to scrutinize the hints and shapes veiled behind a curtain of darkness with his 3 largest prints entitled *Acebutolol*, *Benazepril* and *Captopril*, that darkness is perhaps not as terrifying as it seems, that there is beauty to appreciate when it seems the most bleak. The closing note suggests the artist standing in solidarity with the need to bridge the growing gap in understanding suicidal depression. His exhibition title, inspired by the satirical *Animal Farm* by George Orwell, serves as a gentle reminder for those so caught up in the rapidity of post-modern life to, once in awhile, stop and smell the flowers.



Beauty, Fame & Personal Glory

2018, C-type photographic paper, 101.6 x 81.28 cm, edition 1 + 1 AP



Promise, Hope & New Beginning

2018, C-type photographic paper, 101.6 x 81.28 cm, edition 1 + 1 AP



Admiration, Affection & Pure Love
2018, C-type photographic paper, 101.6 x 81.28 cm, edition 1 + 1 AP



An Antidote To Solitude & A Sort Of Hallucination: BLOOD
2018, C-type photographic paper, 60.96 x 76.2 cm, edition 1 + 1 AP



An Antidote To Solitude & A Sort Of Hallucination: FRUIT
2018, C-type photographic paper, 60.96 x 76.2 cm, edition 1 + 1 AP



An Antidote To Solitude & A Sort Of Hallucination: SWEET
2018, C-type photographic paper, 60.96 x 76.2 cm, edition 1 + 1 AP



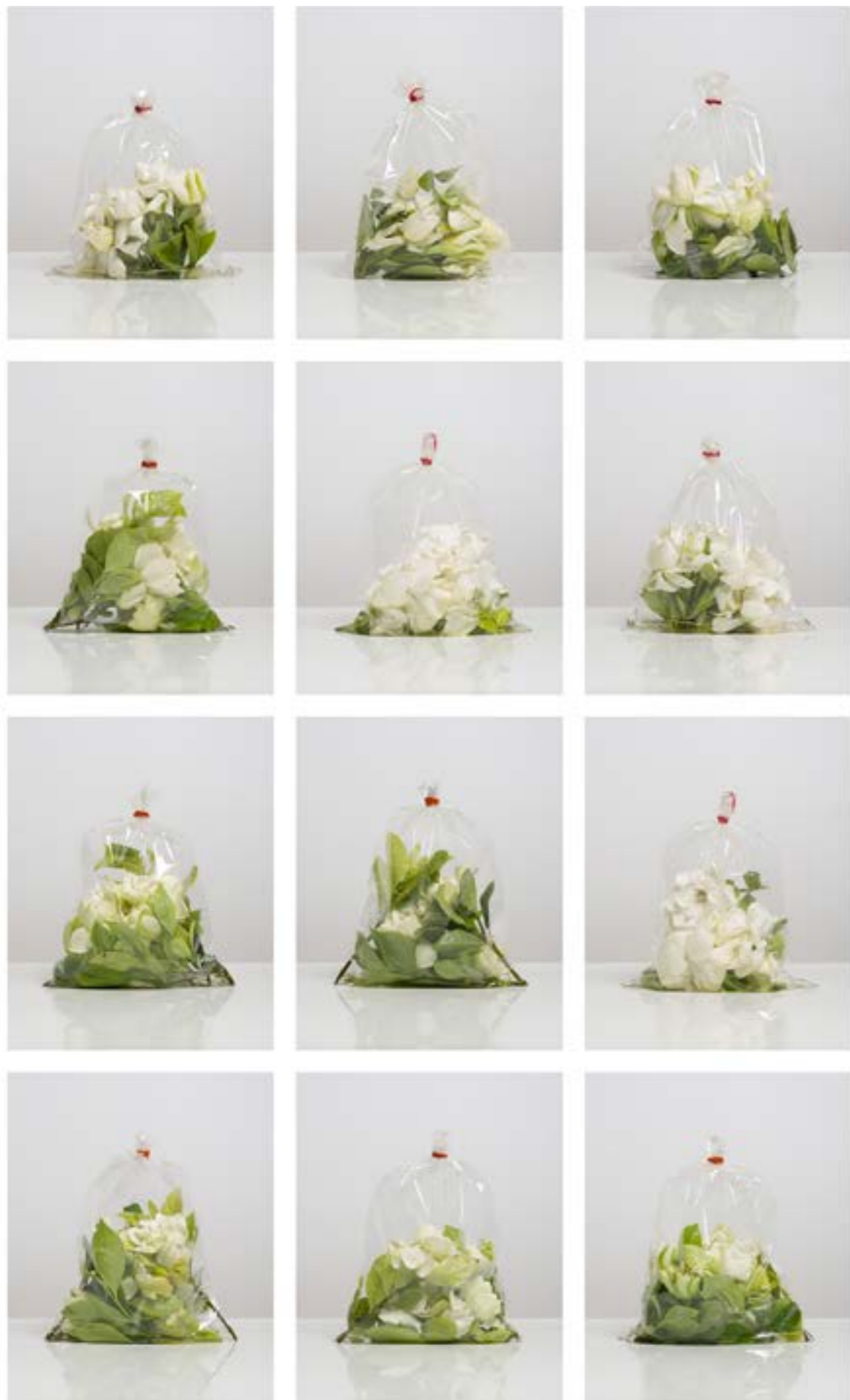
Collective Loss

2017, C-type photographic paper, 127 x 101.6 cm, edition 1 + 1 AP



Collective Memories

2017, C-type photographic paper, 127 x 101.6 cm, edition 1 + 1 AP



Wealth, Happiness, Prosperity & Health

2018, C-type photographic paper, 210.82 x 127 cm, (50.8 x 40.64 cm each, 12 pieces), edition 1 + 1 AP



Devotion & Loyalty

2018, C-type photographic paper, 210.82 x 127 cm, (50.8 x 40.64 cm each, 12 pieces), edition 1 + 1 AP



Sense Of Falseness

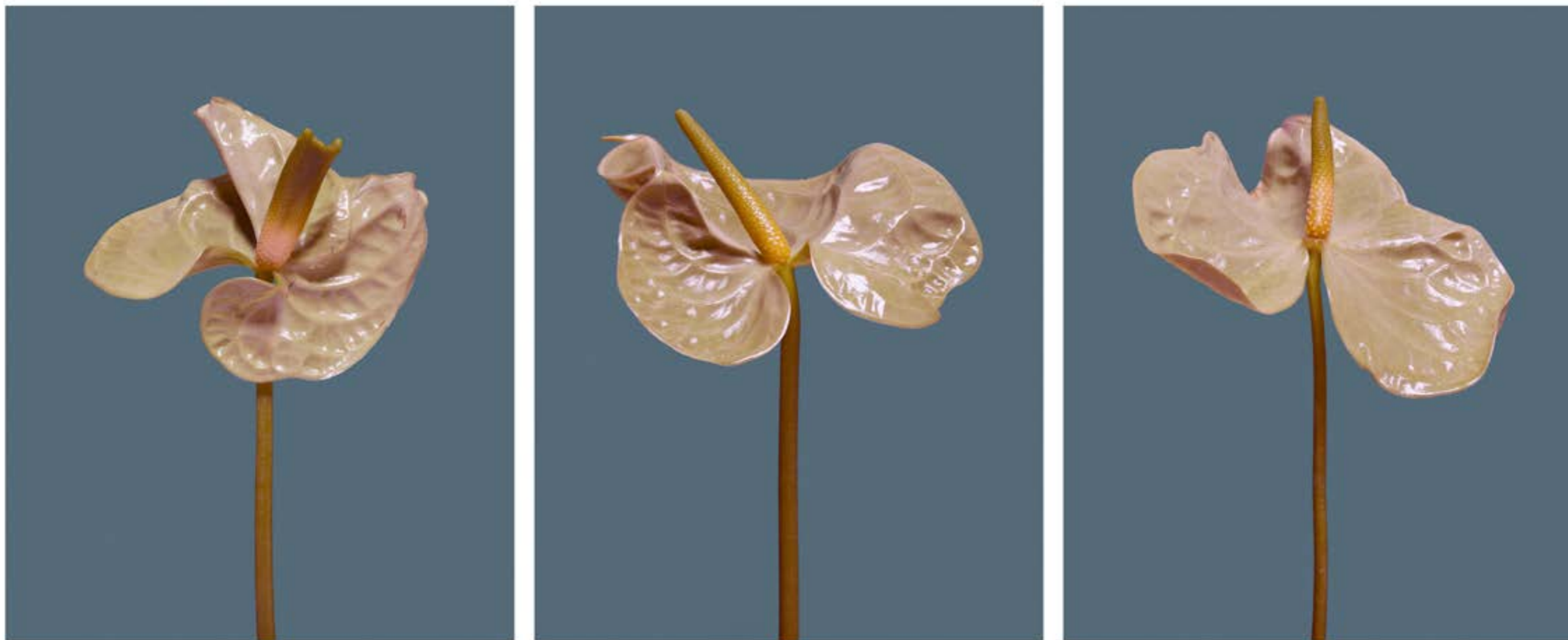
2017, C-type photographic paper, 162.56 x 121.92 cm, edition 1 + 1 AP



The Colour Of Wound & Diseases #2
2018, C-type photographic paper, 127 x 101.6 cm, edition 1 + 1 AP



The Colour Of Wound & Diseases #1
2018, C-type photographic paper, 127 x 101.6 cm, edition 1 + 1 AP



Years Of Mourning

2018, C-type photographic paper, 63.5 x 157.48cm, triptych, (63.5 x 50.8 cm each), edition 1 + 1 AP

Acebutolol

2018, C-type photographic paper, 190.5 x 152.4 cm, edition 1 + 1 AP





Benazepril
2018, C-type photographic paper, 190.5 x 152.4 cm, edition 1 + 1 AP



Captopril
2018, C-type photographic paper, 190.5 x 152.4 cm, edition 1 + 1 AP



Eiffel Chong

Eiffel Chong (b. 1977, Malaysia) graduated with an MA in International Contemporary Art and Design Practice from the University of East London and a BA (Hons) in Photography from London College of Printing. Besides his production of photographic work, Chong is highly engaged with the Malaysian photographic community; taking on the role of mentor for the Goethe Institut Malaysia / Nikon Shooting Stars programme and Exposure+ Workshop. In addition, he has been appointed to the panel of judges for the Kuala Lumpur Photography Awards 2013 and 2010/2011 Annual Nikon Photo Awards, Malaysia. Eiffel Chong's work considers abstract concepts of life and death through the banal details, silent landscapes and curious obsessions he observes from daily life. He is interested in how the photographic medium can translate a particular time and space, memories and thoughts into something permanent. He personally thinks that the images say more with less, and makes one just want to stare and think about it.

Education

MA in International Contemporary Art and Design Practice, University of East London, United Kingdom
BA (Hons) in Photography, London College of Printing, United Kingdom

Solo Exhibitions

- 2018 *Mud And Mashed Hydrangea Leaves And Salad Of Dandelion Greens*, Richard Koh Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2017 *A Trace Of Mortality*, Kathmandu Photo Gallery, Bangkok, Thailand
- 2016 *Seascape*, START SOLO, START Art Fair, London, England
- 2015 *Seascape*, Artify Gallery, Hong Kong
- 2014 *Works 2002-2014*, Hong Kong Design Institute, Hong Kong
- 2013 *Under Control*, 2902 Gallery, Singapore
- 2012 *This Used To Be My Playground*, Artify Gallery, Hong Kong
Before The World Fell to Pieces, Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 2018 *Xishuangbanna Foto Festival*, Yunnan, CHINA Fine Art Asia, Hong Kong
Wu Yinxian Photography Art Biennale, Jiangsu, China
- 2017 *Urban Implosion*, Asia Culture Centre, Gwangju, South Korea
Ilham Contemporary Forum Malaysia 2009 – 2017, Ilham Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, MALAYSIA
Singapore Contemporary 2017, Singapore
- 2016 *Malaysian Art, A New Perspective*, Richard Koh Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Victoria Crime, MC3@702 Creative Space, Hong Kong University, Hong Kong
- 2015 *Noorderlicht Photo Festival 2015*, Noorderlicht Gallery, Groningen, The Netherlands
Victoria Crime, Artify Gallery, Hong Kong
Only A Fragment, Richard Koh Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
The Space Between - An Exploration of Role, Meaning and Intent in Contemporary Malaysian Art, Wei-Ling Contemporary, Kuala Lumpur
- 2014 *After Image: Contemporary Photography From Southeast Asia*, Singapore Art Museum, Singapore
Others & Me: A Contemporary Photography Exhibition, Sharjah Art Museum, Sharjah, UAE
Sovereign Asian Art Prize 2014, The Rotunda, Exchange Square, Hong Kong
Malaysian Eye, White Box Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

My Country, Louis K. Meisel Gallery, New York City, USA

2013 Mt. Rokko International Photo Festival 2013, Kobe, Japan
SIPF NOMAD, Noorderlicht Photo Festival 2013, Groningen, The Netherlands
Portraits - Group Exhibition from Singapore International Photography Festival, Theory of Clouds: Gallery and Community Worldwide, Kobe, Japan
MIDTERM, Shalini Ganendra Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Chobi Mela International Festival of Photography, Shilpokola Academy, Dhaka, Bangladesh

2012 Wawasan 2020, Valentine Willie Fine Art, Singapore
Headlights 2012, Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

2011 Young Artist Project 2011: Future Lab, Daegu EXCO, Daegu, South Korea
Tanah Ayer: Malaysian Stories from the Land, Selasar Sunaryo Art Space, Bandung, Indonesia
Angsana: Southeast Asian Photographers Taking Flight, 2902 Gallery, Singapore

2010 2010 ASEAN- Korea Multimedia Competition, Gallery Jinsun, Seoul, South Korea
CUT2010: New Photography from Southeast Asia: Parallel Universe, Manila Contemporary, Manila, Philippines; Sangkring Art Space, Jogjakarta, Indonesia; Valentine Willie Fine Art, Singapore; Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Al-Kesah: Once Upon a Time in Malaysia, MAP White Box, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

2009 Eyes Wide Open: Selected photos from the First Singapore International Photography Festival, The Annexe Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Different But Same, Wei-ling Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Paradise Lost, 2902 Gallery, Singapore
A New Wave of Responsive Images, Nikon Ginza Gallery, Tokyo, Japan; Sabanci University, Istanbul, Turkey

2008 Singapore International Photography Festival 2008, LaSalle College of The Arts, Singapore
Photoart Asia 2008, Zengallery@Central World, Bangkok, Thailand
CUT: New Photography from Southeast Asia, Valentine Willie Fine Art, Singapore; Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

2007 Bebas Lah: Malaysia@50, Annexe Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Sharing Space: Contemporary Photography of Malaysia + Japan, The Annexe Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
NYKL: Landmarks of New York and Kuala Lumpur, The Annexe Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Young Contemporary Arts Award 2006, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Awards

2015 Nikon Photo Contest 2014-2015, Category D, Japan (2nd Prize)
The Prix Pictet: Disorder, London, England (Nominee)
Asia-Pacific Photobook Award, Australia (Finalist)

2014 The Sovereign Asian Art Prize, Hong Kong (Finalist)

2013 The Prix Pictet 2013, London, England (Nominee)

2012 29th Higashikawa International Award, Hokkaido, Japan (Finalist)

2010 2010 ASEAN- Korea Multimedia Competition, Photography Category, Seoul, South Korea (3rd Prize)

2006 Young Contemporary Arts Award 2006, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia (Finalist)

Publications

2015 Seascape, Artify Gallery Publication

2013 Institutionalised Care

2012 This Used To Be My Playground, Artify Gallery Publication
Before The World Fell To Pieces, Valentine Willie Fine Art Publication

2008 Faces of IJN, Institut Jantung Negara Foundation Publication (National Heart Institution Foundation Publication)

Public Collection

Singapore Art Museum, Singapore





Richard Koh Fine Art has been in operation since 2005 and is regarded as a pioneer for introducing contemporary art to Malaysia and the region. Promoting an adventurous roster of emerging and established artists, the gallery regularly mounts exhibitions locally and abroad with a commitment to emerging practices and challenging media.

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