

# Singapore on Sea

Geographically, historically and economically, Singapore is existentially tied to the sea. From the 13th to the 18th century, it represented a strategic foothold at the tip of the hotly contested Straits of Malacca, a key trade route between East Asia (especially China) and, progressively, South and West Asia, Africa and Europe. Following the East India Company's establishment of a trading factory on the island in 1819, Singapore rose rapidly to prominence as a free port. Along with Rotterdam, Shanghai and Hong Kong, it remains one of the busiest ports in the world, while related industries – bunkering, ship repair, logistics – contribute substantially to its economy. Under numerous defence agreements, Changi Naval Base is used by the British, U.S. and other navies for re-supply. Moreover, the historical legacy of Singapore's role as a transshipment centre can be seen in everything from its refining to its financial services industries, and its reputation as a long haul stopover hub, and a 'gateway' to other parts of the region.

Over sixty islands lie in Singapore's territorial waters, with many serving specific functions in meeting the requirements of a modern nation-state, such as military training, oil refining, or leisure activities. Proximity to the Indonesian Riau islands (to the south) and peninsular Malaysia (to the north) has enabled the development of a sub-regional economic processing zone known as the SIJORI (Singapore-Johor-Riau) Growth Triangle, which synthesises the capital and expertise of the first with the natural resources and market provided by the second, and the land and low-cost labour of the third.

If the sea is integral to Singapore's economy, historical development and regional relations, it figures relatively little in the republic's contemporary self-imaging and self-imagining. Simultaneously nation, state and highly built-up city, the word 'island' is rarely used in public discourse to describe the place. Although many of its high-rise offices and apartments afford striking views beyond Singapore's shores, so many ships lie at anchor in the invariably placid sea, that it tends to be seen either as an extension of the land, as an aestheticised seascape or backdrop, or as the place from which you can, in turn, gain some striking views of the city's skyline. As an elemental factor in the lived experience of the modern Singaporean, and as cultural figure in the national imaginary, the sea is largely absent.

An important reason for the sea's relative absence is that although Singapore's economy, history and cultural make-up derive in large part from its location, a key factor in the nation-building effort has been the attempt to transcend the idea that geography is destiny. Materially, the most obvious manifestation of this is a vast project of land 'rec-

lamation', which, by 2030, is projected to increase the island by 25% of its size at independence in 1965. Beyond this very literal version of nation-building, the effort has taken two contrasting forms. The first, exemplified by the 'Total Defence' concept, derives from the militarisation of society, and a rhetoric of selective regional isolationism. Motivated in part by the racially charged circumstances in which Singapore became, at independence, a majority Chinese state bordered by the larger, predominantly Muslim nations of Malaysia and Indonesia, 'Total Defence' is indicative of a low-level but persistent garrison mentality in Singapore (which unsurprisingly, maintains close military and diplomatic links with Israel). Coupled with a popular and political monoculture, the result is a high degree of national self-absorption (one hears and reads the word 'Singapore' in Singapore with unrelenting regularity), and a cultural insularity which, by dint of the state's small size and centralized media, can result in parochialism.

In a simultaneous rhetorical gesture, however, Singapore has successfully leapfrogged its immediate surroundings to market itself internationally as a 'world class' city that offers an attractive tourist destination; a safe, good quality environment for expatriates to set up home; and a secure, well-resourced and relatively corruption-free base from which to do business in a profitable, if volatile, region. In part, the rhetoric is justified. In terms of standards of living, infrastructure and technological development, Singapore is on par with other global cities, and its sizeable middle class is well-travelled, with many of its professionals educated at universities in the U.S., U.K. or Australia.<sup>1</sup>

Still, this is not to say that the sea is entirely absent from the national imaginary; rather, it tends to be confined to rather restricted aspects of it – most visibly, the port. Although the port has long been central to Singapore's *raison d'être*, its rise to global prominence was profoundly bound with the influence of the shipping container on the transport industry and its role in driving the global economy. The first container ship docked in Singapore in 1972; within a decade, it had become the world's busiest port by shipping tonnage, and by 1990, it was the world's largest container port. Today, it is the world's busiest transshipment hub, handling approximately 6% of global container throughput.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Singapore routinely rates highly in expatriate quality of life league tables. In HSBC's 'Expat Explorer 2009' report, it ranked second for locations to raise a family, fourth for quality of life, and sixth as a place to save money. In a 2002 *Business Times* article, the Malaysian commentator Karim Raslan raised a rare dissenting voice when he wrote: "Try as it might, Singapore will never be a great global city like New York, London or Paris. Singapore is thoroughly provincial though not quite as provincial as Kuala Lumpur or Jakarta. However, the region's other capital cities enjoy the benefit of an extensive hinterland, providing a greater depth of cultural and political diversity. If you doubt my conclusion, read the city-state's newspapers and examine the cultural concerns of the citizenry: the banality is astounding" (85).

<sup>2</sup> These and other figures are available on the Port of Singapore Authority website at <http://www.singaporepsa.com/aboutus.php>

In *The Box: How the Shipping Container Made the World Smaller and the World Economy Bigger* (2006), the economist Marc Levinson argues that the importance of containerisation to the globalisation of trade has been under-appreciated because of the apparent ordinariness of the shipping container. Describing it as having “all the romance of a tin can”, Levinson goes on: “The value of this utilitarian object lies not in what it is, but in how it is used. The container is at the core of a highly automated system for moving goods from anywhere, to anywhere, with a minimum of cost and complication on the way” (1-2). Levinson then tells of how a cost-saving measure implemented by an American haulier in the mid-fifties led to the world-wide integration of today’s transport system and transformed where and how goods are produced. In this light, to retain an attachment – to the romance of the sea (such as the ship lines), wa-

terfront ways of life (such as the docker’s unions), localism (such as manufacturers) or regionalism (such as port authorities) – is to risk obsolescence.

By contrast, “no government anywhere was more aggressive in preparing for the container age than Singapore’s” (211), with initial plans for a more conventional ‘breakbulk’ port development being rapidly revised when it became apparent that container shipping was on the rise. And yet, Singapore’s success as a container port has also led, as the sociologist Chua Beng Huat describes it, to its ‘eclipse’:

*With the highly mechanized containerisation of all cargoes, the amount of labour required by the port has been radically reduced. The remaining jobs are now part of the 3D – dirty, dangerous and degrading – jobs that are filled by foreign workers from neighbour-*



Charles Lim: *All Lines Flow Out* (stills), 2011. Image courtesy of the artist.

*ing countries. Visually, the port is seen only through its brightly painted tower-cranes that lift and move the containers; it is a landscape of robots, with sparsely distributed machine operators. (2009: 191)*

For this reason, suggests Chua, although the port is larger than ever before, it has never been less significant for Singaporeans. In his study, Chua goes on to survey recent developments in the cultural and creative industries, proposing “the new constellation of consumption and leisure activities as the major preoccupation of daily life and as new veins of economic development” (191).

This in turn raises the question of where else one might look for the sea ‘in’ Singapore, for as both Levinson and Chua indicate, beyond the sheer bulk, there is little that is of aesthetic interest or even human scale about a container port and the ships that dock there.

Sometimes, the sea comes looking for us. The results are often tragic, and, for that reason, illuminating. On 30 December 2010, the body of a man washed up on a beach on the Indonesian island of Bintan. A rucksack found on the body contained the man’s passport, so he was easily identified. Mr Ng Kian Teck was one of five Singaporeans who drowned when their over-laden boat capsized between Sibü, a holiday island off the east coast of Malaysia, and the mainland. Sea currents had carried Mr Ng 150 kilometres from the site of the accident. At the time, a Malaysian coastguard said that it was unusual for a body to travel such a distance. Unfortunately, however, we are all too familiar with such phenomena. Whether it is migrants washing up on the shores of Southern Europe and North Africa; refugees in Southeast Asia and Australia; or the appalling aftermath of the tsunamis in the Indian Ocean in 2004 and, most recently, in Japan, these bodies bear mute witness to turbulent times in global geopolitics, and to roiling anxieties over our relation to – and impact on – the environment.

In comparison with the vast upheavals of which many of these bodies speak, Mr Ng’s seems to tell a more modest though no less tragic tale, of a family fishing holiday gone horribly wrong. But in the 150-kilometre drift of a Singaporean from Malaysian waters to an Indonesian island, passing unchecked through fishing grounds, shipping lanes and immigration controls, there lies a salutary reminder of the limits to the borders of territory and national identity that all three nation-states work so tirelessly to protect and police. Indeed, a very similar fate had earlier befallen two Singapore Navy servicewomen while engaged in that very activity. Turning against the flow of shipping while patrolling the waters of the then-contested Pedra Branca on the night of 3 January 2003, RSS Courageous had its stern sheered off by a merchant vessel, with the loss of four lives. Two days later, the body of 1st Sergeant Heng Sock Ling washed up on the same beach as Mr Ng’s would later; that of

1st Sergeant Seah Ai Leng soon emerged nearby.

In all three cases, a powerful sea current, unseen and unfelt by all except those who routinely ply these waters, came briefly to light, and reasserted the indifference with which the elements tend to greet most human endeavours, as well as a geographical reality too easily overlooked in the light of recent postcolonial histories of national self-determination, and of locality-denying global aspirations.

One of the words we can use to recover some understanding of that geographical reality is ‘archipelago’. When we talk about globalisation, we often think in terms of urban world cities like Tokyo, Hong Kong, London, New York, Sydney. When we consider geopolitics, it is regions, land masses and economies of scale that dominate. But although Singapore is a global city and a nation-state, it is also a cluster of 63 islands in the largest archipelago on Earth. In English, ‘archipelago’ can mean a group of islands, or the sea in which they lie. This ambiguity underscores the distinctive combination of integration and differentiation that all archipelagos represent, albeit to different degrees. Joining islands to their neighbours without regard for political borders highlights geographical continuity where often there is regional or national division; commonality in the experience of island and maritime life not shared by more proximate mainland neighbours; and how a historical combination of insularity, influence, maritime trade, natural resources and colonial expansion has shaped any number of present-day territorial disputes, political alliances, economic relations, national identities and cultural practices.

Such cultural practices can vary widely, and may be as obscure to outsiders as they are meaningful to initiates, especially when they appear to bespeak an enduring, sustaining and yet precarious coexistence with the sea over many years. The results are easily romanticised, and it is tempting for contemporary urbanites – landlubbers, as the Britishism would have it – to over-simplify what it would take to reintegrate an island like Singapore back into its geohistorical surroundings. Nevertheless, given the imbalance between the region’s economic importance and cultural under-representation, it makes sense to try, and in what follows I interpret two works at the Singapore Biennale 2011 as giving some indication of how one might begin.

In his short film *the meaning of style*, British artist Phil Collins explores a cultural dimension of archipelagic island life by presenting a highly aestheticised portrait of Malay skinheads on the Malaysian island of Penang. Lasting the duration of an instrumental track by the Welsh pop musician Gruff Rhys, the film shows the skinheads in mid-shot in a variety of locations around Georgetown, including a cinema showing Indian movies, and the Cheong Fatt Sze mansion, an elaborately restored 1880s house that combines Hakka, Teochew and





Zai Kuning: *From The River* (forthcoming)  
Image courtesy of the artist

Victorian English design motifs. Against these culturally hybrid backdrops, Collins juxtaposes the youths' fastidious attention to sartorial detail with beautiful butterflies whose description in books like Alfred Russell Wallace's *The Malay Archipelago* (1869) exemplifies the colonial naturalist's impulse to capture, categorise and trade.

In so doing, Collins acknowledges the ethnographic undertones of his approach, but studiously avoids social commentary. Instead, we are shown the point where the globe-spanning skinhead archipelago laps at the shores of the Malay archipelago: how a style born in the working-class housing estates of post-Imperial Britain is quite literally rematerialised amongst the tropical exuberance of a postcolonial port-city several oceans distant. In a place where the swastika remains more recognisably an image of Buddhism than Nazism, skinhead style and subcultural belonging emerge in the straightening of a Ben Sherman collar, or the pre-fight shrugging-off of braces. And in the curious mixture of similarity amongst and difference between individuals, we are reminded how integration and differentiation create social archipelagos; how, while none of us is an island, we may be archipelagos unto ourselves.

The inflow of cultural influence explored by Collins found its corollary at the Biennale in *All Lines Flow Out*, an installation by the Singaporean artist and sailor Charles Lim. Two large nets, known as 'drain socks', hung from the ceiling, containing

the detritus captured from an outflow pipe, while a video showed a series of water-level views, captured at drifting-pace in the *longkangs*<sup>3</sup> of Singapore's drainage system. The multi-screen video was subsequently adapted as a self-contained 21-minute film, with an ambient soundtrack of music and water sounds that varied widely in volume and intensity.

The perspective of the camera does not align with any one person, although over the course of the film, the viewer is encouraged to identify with a figure who – at least for a Singaporean audience – would appear to be a migrant labourer.<sup>4</sup> As such, the work raises obvious questions about the status and perceptions of migrant workers in a city built on their labour, but not always respectful of their rights. Like *the meaning of style*, though, the work does not dwell on social commentary, and instead this subaltern identification feeds the larger effect of the film, which is to present an uncanny perspective on the urban landscape.

Singapore is both small and relentlessly imaged on mass and social media, as well as by its many compulsively snapshotting inhabitants. Much of the time, Singapore-dwellers have personal knowledge and experience of the environments they see reproduced on the news, in films, or on other people's Facebook sites. *All Lines Flow Out* presents a city that is instantly recognisable to its inhabitants, yet it does so from an angle that is novel and disorientating. Singapore is notoriously clean and efficient, and key to that characterisation is the speed and thoroughness with which rainwater, detritus and effluent are swept out of sight, mind and smell. Lim's film returns parts of this system to his viewers' attention, while drawing them slowly but inexorably towards and out into the sea. One is prompted to think about the relationship between the complex network of drains and canals that play an integral role in the island's ecology, dissolving any internal distinctions we may be tempted to make between land and water, while at the same time joining it to its marine environs. In so doing, one comes to understand Singapore island as itself archipelagoed by its waterways, further fjorded every time we turn on a tap or flush the chain on the toilet, newly firthed whenever we open our mouths to drink a glass of water.

<sup>3</sup> As the *Coxford Singlish Dictionary* puts it, 'longkang' is: "The Malay word for 'drain'. It is used to describe any form of man-made water passage, from small drainholes to big canals."

<sup>4</sup> The figure appears to be of indeterminate South or Southeast Asian ethnicity, and near the beginning of the film, he fashions a small fish trap out of a water bottle. In my personal experience, it is often the migrant labourers who treat as a resource features of the landscape that locals are more likely to overlook or view as ornamental. I have seen Filipinos harvesting mangoes from a tree, Bangladeshis washing clothes and casting fishing nets in a longkang, and Vietnamese plucking leaves from a roadside planting for their medicinal value.

<sup>5</sup> For more details see, respectively, Zai (forthcoming) and Yee (2010).

These two examples – *the meaning of style* and *All Lines Flow Out* – provide an opportunity for city-dwellers to reflect on the cultural and environmental dimensions of their maritime location. As art works presented within gallery and screening contexts, there is a clear limit to the claims that can be made for them in relation to the wider geophysical actualities that also provide, however indistinctly, the contexts of their creation and presentation. Other artists have created practices and works that reflect more directly on their archipelagic identities and life experiences. Most notably among the current generation, this includes Zai Kuning, who was born in Singapore and has travelled extensively in the Riau archipelago, and the Malaysian Yee I-Lann, whose home state of Sabah in Borneo represents a kind of hinge for looking both West, towards mainland Southeast Asia, and East, towards the Sulu archipelago of Malaysia and the Philippines, whose ownership is contested by Malaysia and the Philippines.<sup>5</sup> These and other territorial disputes – such as the six-way arguments over the Spratly and Paracel archipelago in the South China Sea – remind us both how peripheral artworks can be in the face of brutal *realpolitik*, but also what is at stake, in human terms, in the relations between sea and land.

The artworks I have discussed here allow those of us for whom such relations have become obscured, to begin to reimagine them, beginning not from the perspective of a romanticised vision of island life, but from where we are: in a city and a nation that views its immediate geographical surroundings through the fractured prism of both economic resource and existential threat. But this can only be a beginning. The unfortunate fates of Mr Ng Kian Teck and the servicewomen of RSS Courageous reminds us of the volatile reality of sea-going life in the archipelago. But for developing a suitably relational sense of where one lives, there can ultimately be no substitute for setting sail.

**Phil Collins:** *the meaning of style* (still), 2011  
Image courtesy of the artist



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