

Gravitas

Lee Pheng Guan

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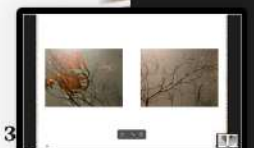
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freedom in how we live our lives? Do we need to be told what to do and how to do it? Can we not decide what is real or fake, and what is good for us?

Perhaps the tembusu ideology is mere idealism and has no place here. We have long forgotten that we need the tembusu.

* * *

One of the habits many good gardeners live by - Feed the Soil, Not the Plants, sums up my thoughts on how this garden (city) of ours thrive. Laying a good foundation, in this case feeding the soil with the right 'ingredients,' leads to nutrient-rich soil which allows all plants introduced to grow healthily. The garden will soon be teeming with beautiful greenery and wildlife. Starting a garden may be the easy part, but maintaining it and fixing unpredictable problems that come with an organically grown garden is not so straightforward. Since we live in this 'garden city,' I often see it as our duty to be 'gardeners,' each having the responsibility of tending to it. I loathe the idea of paying someone to work on my garden, to not be involved in tending to the plants but yet expecting to be greeted with beautiful flora. I want to be part of the process, to have a say in what is grown and how it will be shaped so that I do not feel like a stranger having stepped into someone else's plot. I yearn for a sense of belonging in my own garden.

I have grown fond of the tembusu in the past months. I want to celebrate its beauty, its resilience, and its defying silence. It has been on the side-lines for a while now, and fixing it may take the specialised skills of a trained 'arborist,' but I really want to give it a shot, in ways I know best. Yes, it is a humble species: It doesn't encroach on others' space of growth or development, nor does it 'suck' up all the resources that allow other species to flourish. That is why I did not notice them initially.

They were just 'there,' quietly existing.

But they will continue growing, and in time they will no longer be silent.

PLATES



needed by the tree for its growth and development. Flowers and fruit may also be present.³

As described, the tree is a complete system - every part serves its purpose for the plant's survival. Each species requires certain conditions to thrive in, but even when the environment is less than ideal, some tend to adapt and make allowances to grow. Their versatility and strength are characteristics embraced by us as reminders for how we go about our endeavours. When researching on Singapore's urban planning and our incorporation of flora and fauna into the city, I came across historical articles from the early days of nation-building on plans for "the garden city," where images of founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew planting trees (some of which were tembusu trees) were found. I became curious, wondering about the mindset behind incorporating these gardens in our environment and pondering over the significance of the tembusu.

My first encounters with the tree came about not through its depiction on the current SGD\$5 note but through an experience of the fruits splattering all over my car. Unbeknownst to me, there were eleven tembusu trees at my carpark, possibly planted decades ago. Still, they are small compared to the rest of the trees planted alongside them. They grow at a very slow pace. For a couple of times annually, the reddish berries the tree yielded would create Pollock-esque paintings overnight on vehicles parked under them. Why would they plant such trees at the carpark? They do not even provide much shade! Undoubtedly the tembusu is a handsome tree; its strong upright trunk covered with rough, deeply fissured bark, together with its upward-surging branches form a crown of luscious light green, looking its best during the occasional blooming of yellowish-white flowers, and, if given enough space and time (decades), towers majestically over 30 metres.

The evergreen tembusu is very resilient and produces very strong wood. Besides being used for demanding purposes like heavy construction, the wood is commonly made into durable chopping boards in Asia. Its bark, leaves, and twigs have medicinal properties as well. In my earlier research, I found out that Lee Kuan Yew liked the species, and through this discovered what the tembusu symbolised (for him).

"The leaders of Singapore have been likened to the Tembusu for its tall and strong qu

with a smaller canopy that allows other plants - a reference to civil society - to grow around it."⁴

Many key foreign figures were featured planting the tree when invited to Singapore (Garden of Fame on Jurong Hill and Jurong Town Hall) in the 1960s and 70s, along with recent planting to honour Lee Kuan Yew's passing in 2015. With such prominence, one would assume that it is a very common tree, but sadly this may no longer be the case. An accident⁵ in 2017 involving a 270-year-old tembusu falling in the Singapore Botanic Gardens, killed 1 and injured 4. This incident probably informed many of the species' existence but also gave it a negative reputation. Being a nation quick to react, I suspect National Parks Board (NParks) may have temporarily halted the planting of tembusu trees. Still, I was intrigued that the species did not become our national tree (although an informal poll in 2002 placed it as the top), unlike how we have embraced the Vanda Miss Joaquim orchid as our national flower. Perhaps this is due in part to the tembusu also being native to other regional countries and that we do not need another fauna to represent us? Or perhaps the symbolism of its characteristics no longer exemplifies the way we do things here in Singapore and how it is run?

Ambassador-at-Large Professor Tommy Koh has on several occasions used the tembusu as a metaphor to describe how the government under ex-Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong had run the country, allowing the rest of civil society to thrive, as opposed to governance under Lee Kuan Yew in the early days of nation-building being likened to a banyan tree which, due to its large and dense canopy, limits others to grow. Yet, in a recent panel discussion on collaborative governance, he reverted to the latter species, asking Minister Chan Chun Sing if the ruling party would 'trim the banyan tree further... (to) give more room to civic society, to civil society, and reduce the roles that it plays.'⁶ This to me almost suggests a regression on the state of affairs in our country- are we still stuck in the 'unpruned banyan tree'⁷ days? As the nation progress, are we not ready to embrace greater openness and

- 4 www.tembusulaw.com/about/the-tembusu-tree/
- 5 www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/trees-surrounding-fallen-tembusu-in-botanic-gardens-are-safe-npa-7620438
- 6 Page 23 in Singapore Perspective 2016 - We, World Scientific Publishing Pte Ltd, 2017
- 7 www.mfa.gov.sg/Overseas-Mission/Geneva/Mission-Update/2015/08/press_201508032

A TREE, AN IDEOLOGY

Lee Pheng Guan



The tree which moves some to tears
of joy is in the eyes of others only a
green thing which stands in the way.

—William Blake

I have a close affinity to the materials I work with. They exist in my immediate environment or possess certain relevance to my interests and beliefs (spirituality, ecology, temporality, etc.). Trees, being a significant part of our landscape, naturally lends itself as one of these choices. They are embodiments of time, memories, attitudes, beauty, energy, and most crucially bear witness to our existence while absorbing all the changes to our landscape. Their immense presence is timeless and almost sacred, yet many of us only see the practical side of them: timber/wood for making stuff (houses, furniture, decks, etc.) and when they are in their natural form, for shade and to beautify the surroundings.

Singapore is frequently described as a “garden city” for her vast greenery, but while we are surrounded by countless trees, getting hold of unprocessed wood as a material is not that straightforward due to issues of cost and availability. With cutting and pruning taking place island-wide and ‘gardening of the city’ on a regular basis, I often wonder where felled trees are taken and if I can acquire them as materials. However, without a large studio and the right tools, working with full-sized trees remains a dream, so I started picking up fallen branches around my neighbourhood and collecting them. Pondering over their potential for artworks, I began thinking more about what constitutes a tree.

TREE

In botany, a tree is a plant with an elongated stem, or trunk, supporting leaves or branches. A tree typically has multiple secondary branches supported clear of the ground by the trunk. This trunk typically contains woody tissue for strength, and vascular tissue to carry materials from one part of the tree to another. For most trees, it is surrounded by a layer of bark which serves as a protective barrier. Below the ground, the roots branch and spread out widely; they serve to anchor the tree and attract moisture and nutrients from the soil. Above ground, the branches divide into smaller branches and shoots. The shoots typically bear leaves, which capture light energy and convert it into chemical energy by photosynthesis, providing the food

TEXT FOR TEMBUSU

1

A tembusu tree possesses a canopy that offers shade and comfort to passers-by, we simply lie down amid its shades, experiencing the freshness that its leaves provide, watching the subtle beauty of its branches as they move in the breeze.

2

The tree, many to be named beside the a foremost mentioned tembusu, is not just a mass of hard matter with rough texture, it has a life that makes it grow, roots that effortlessly suck up life-sustaining water and innumerable minerals from the ground. It has *this* life that makes it grow, and grow leaves that photosynthesise.

3

It has a life whose genuine attributes lie beyond our grasp, beyond our grasp of knowledge and epistemology. The life of a tree is fruitful as it grows, it becomes responsive, packed with nutrients and an undeniable thirst for water. It funnels its life force outward, all of which cannot be seen with a microscope. A tree possesses more than cell walls, it provides sustained love, love that one should acknowledge and understand.

4

Grounded on the above-mentioned attributes and contributions, *tembusu* will you make an effort to experience truth that lies beyond the exterior 'likeness'? Will we know you more than a sluggish tropical plant that kills?

5

We all know the environment poses no hindrance to your growth and we are proud of your advancement beyond the *many* other eager trees surrounding us. You appear leisurely, lethargic almost, but when you flush, your flowers last for long days and nights unlike many others who appear one quick morning and their existence humbly curtained when night falls.

6

What about your tiny berries, does maturity kick in gradually and slowly, despite the tropical heat and sweltering humidity? It is remarkable how your tiny berries are able to develop, become seen on the surface, after three months of pretence.

7

You do possess more than cell walls, when provided with sustained love, you acknowledge and understand why you are not bounded by formats or methodology. You take no slaves under your charge, you remain liked.

8

You are a stricken existence, powerfully affected by your disease.



TEXT FOR TEMBUSU

Adrian Tan

Not only was the Tembusu selected for planting in the early years of Singapore's greening movement in the 1960s for its fragrant flowers, the tree has also been used as a metaphor for relations between the state and civil society in the 1990s: the leaders of Singapore have been likened to the Tembusu for its tall and strong qualities with a smaller canopy that allows other plants – a reference to civil society – to grow around it.²



With this, we are able to identify his methods in his art. Lee delineates an approach to investigating reality, adopts a pseudo-research methodology that both engages and capitulates the outcome in an act of apparent destruction. He once enthused to me that his hybrid trees are sculptures that form part of a larger whole, where "the beautiful thing that is detached, is not a full tree, it in fact gives one the impression that the tree has been extended by a Frankenstein gardener." His aesthetic enquiry and critical impulses are prevalent as one observes, walks around and experiences the sights, sound, and dissonances in the space. His gesture to heal these detached beings lingers in parts of the work, even after the exhibition ceases to exist. This landscape that he constructs and presents, is *not* a coherent landscape nor a full tree. *That it is incomplete is not a problem.* What resonates and is important is that there is or was a rupture, a scar that was etched as a metaphor for the social condition that the city-state finds herself in, a scar created by a mass of weightiness. It is in these gestures that lend his practice an identifiable, dense and highly reflective subjectivity, where his art invites us to get up-close but at the same time requires one to pull back from it, to observe the capitulation piece by piece.



symbolic meanings in relation to the tree branch and tree, what does the video or audio projections in the space refer to or are related to, what goes on in the artist's mind?

The artist's predicament is often one that entails reversals and indecisions, responding to the materials, giving in and sometimes giving up, succumbing to changes in the properties or intangibility of the forms, oftentimes even succumbing to lethargy, changes of heart and undergoing long delays in waiting; all these before the artworks are mobilised, transported and situated in the gallery. His works when transported, carefully considered and re-configured in the gallery appear congruent and in harmony with the space, despite its apparent dissonances.

In his preparation for the show, Lee worked on his subject matter extensively. He researched the historical, ecological and symbolic meaning of the tembusu tree. In his sketchbook, he translates the signs, symbols, and objects related to his idea of the tree into imprecise sketches and short annotations. His work makes frequent and undisguised references to the local landscape, not in representing the landscape but in critiquing the state-driven social, political and spatial decision-making and how it has influenced and *mattered* in his life. From the mundane gripe about the planting of the said tree at his home's carpark and the lack of cover due to its sparse foliage; the planting of the same trees functioning as commemorative trees for foreign dignitaries who visit Singapore; to the apparent affinity Lee Kuan Yew had to them; the native tree to Singapore had intrigued him greatly. GRAVITAS consists of a space, a place that confronts the viewer in two parts. Silent, 'mobilesque' and quiet artworks appear as dilemmas of an effort of self-affirmation and identification, dilemmas that carry a collective *weight*. The weightiness of the artist's choice of materials is informed by his affinity to them, his research into them and his handling and dismantling of them. This very specific artistic process started with a compulsiveness in amassing materials and sifting through some of these prospective materials for the *one* material, form or subject matter. The one material, form or object that he will work with *will* tell a story.

For GRAVITAS it is the *timbusu*. A tree that he still wonders about. Why did it not become Singapore's national tree? With his evident distrust of doctrines and truths, the artist seeks to investigate the origins, materiality, and significance of these trees in his own way and using his personal methods. He researches the species' genealogy, its human and metaphors that relate to Singapore and our leaders who liken themselves to the tree for its tall and strong qualities. Lee ponders over these findings and the potential for

trees to become artworks. In time, he starts to collect fallen branches and other fragmented parts of the tree and attempts to heal these trees, not treating them as wood, but possible artefacts. Lee's process of identifying objects, forms or things to work on is subjective, where he does not get carried away with meaning but starts with already having the materials at hand. He shares that one should show gratitude towards materials and objects as they have "spirits." He goes on to self-assertedly proclaim that every object, being, form or thing has *potential*, justification evidently for the many things he has salvaged through the years. Collecting forms a large part of his process. Lee selects, collects, arranges and situates them in his studio space for a period of time. He selects the *one thing* and spends considerable time with it, being cognisant not to mix or situate two things together at this investigative stage. Not until they take on a more mature form, where the investigation bleeds into a research process that influences an almost eventual form that it takes. The *one* with potential undergoes a series of manipulation, stretching, combinations and convolutions. The form of these works can take multiple incarnations as drawn or painted forms, sculpture, performance and/or installations. His works oscillate between two or sometimes three iterations, deliberately borrowing from existing works on the one hand and producing intentionally privatised moments on the other.

His works reinforce the impression that real and tangible objects and its representation coincide- where opaque, textured and heavy *real* objects are poetically linked or connected to fragile, frail and thin *hybridised* forms. This collision asserts a tension that permeates the space; a place where Lee has focused for months; sketching layouts and attempting to bring the space beyond the paper edge. In drawings, in his head and in conversations, the artist attempts to intuitively find solutions for the arrangement and occupation of the gallery space, solutions that are more evocative than functional or illustrative. Through this iterative process, the objects acquire *considerable* weight metaphorically and physically. Tellingly, the intervention to the gallery space produces a "reality" that conveys a likeness to an event that had taken place prior to its introduction to the space. By eliminating explanations and wall text in the gallery, the artist has produced a strangely cohesive environment where the trees can seek respite and grow. Within the pristine gallery space, these newly constructed hybrid forms occupy a space that they do not belong in, not looking out of place but in harmony with the ground, wall, and facade. He occupies the gallery space with these trees, posited as quiet depositories of stories and poetic gestures of healing and blending, where he is certain that after the occupation, he will return it to its original state and leave. Reinstall the existing to its 'pre-gravitas' situation before the cracks or are heard.

AN ARTIST AND A TREE IN TWO PARTS:

NOT A FULL TREE

Adrian Tan



The Tembusu responds very slowly to the climatic stimulus, its flowers opening after an interval of nearly four months. But in all its activities the tree is leisurely. It grows slowly: it develops new leaves a pair at a time, never in flush like so many of our eager trees: its flower-buds need several weeks to open: its flowers last for several days and are not morning-glories or night-dreams like so many others: and the tiny berries require more than three months to mature. Such sluggishness is remarkable in a tropical plant, the environment of which imposes no hindrance upon its growth, but it is not unparalleled for both Mangosteen and Nutmeg are almost, if not quite, as lethargic."

—Corner, E.J.H., Wayside
Trees of Malaya

PG Lee is an artist who reconciles the apparently irreconcilable, and through this essay, an attempt is made to transmute the experiences of observing the artist working in his studio into the realm of his aesthetic enquiry in the gallery space. This essay accompanies the GRAVITAS exhibition, where the artist brings together various ideas about the tree in a space that traces his thought processes, meditations and critical perspectives about art, his subject matter, and his citizenry. Characterised by his close affinity to material forms, there is an intimacy and modest scale in his work, as compared to the enormity of the full-size trees that is his subject matter. As an artist, he at times responds slowly to stimulus, a clear manifestation of the efforts made to comprehend situations and understand them as artistic stimuli, and not to be comprehended as a mark of sluggishness.

This slowness is important as it points to the decisions that artists make, going through many levels of thought processes, going through that open-ended and often irreconcilable process of beginning in one place and finding themselves in another. An artist develops based on a mysterious process of initiating a plan before giving way to sudden changes and going back on one's intended conclusions. In experiencing his work, one must ask if there is some encoding of messages in his art installation, do the materials possess

We tend to get distracted by many things
(consciously or otherwise) and over time we
start to pile them above what is important.

—PG Lee

In the studio where he works and occasionally lives, in a storage room at the back end of an alleyway of industrial stockpile that he uses for his studio, PG Lee keeps his tables perpendicular and slightly parted. One desk is for sketching and constructing armatures, strewn neatly with various trinkets, palette knives, tins packed with paintbrushes and pencils, and an occasional packet of cigarette filters. The other desk is for writing, and sometimes for typing or playing of tunes off the computer, scattered with receipts and post-it notes. Both desks are considerably worn, scratched and rubbed away by the kind of labour that is part of a process of art-making, nearly every day. He keeps his door open, all the time, for the presence of the strips of industrial rubber that occupy more than half of the storage room rubs off an unmistakable smell of plasticity. Elsewhere in Lee's studio, there is a single woven chair and across from it heavy-duty shelves heaving with books. A series of small, medium and large tree trunks adorns the middle section of the studio space, being accorded a centrality that makes the other objects sharing the space appear of less importance. Drawings are laid on the ground and two pasted on the wall behind the trunks, openly seeking to be seen, read and referred to.

To my considerable regret, I have never actually visited Lee's studio until November 2019. Towards the end of 2019, we had a number of conversations about art, people who make art, people who teach art, and about his upcoming solo show. Hours of conversations taking place in the open-doored studio with its unmistakable rubber smell. We spoke about the gallery space, the installation of his work, the closeness of how he works *with* and *in* the materiality of his carefully selected familiar forms. A key understanding of his working process had been formed through these conversations and communications in and through art. There was an intimacy to the affinity to the *one* material- we spoke at lengths about that. The artwork will have no affixed meaning: it will exist in dynamic movement where there was no fixed ending. An artist does not intentionally put up a show to communicate something concrete: he just does it. It is true that the spatial arrangement of a studio says a great deal about who the artist is as a person. The configuration of materials, and trinkets goes a considerable distance in explaining how the many facets of his thinking about religiosity, politics in the city-state and art fit together and co-exist.

There is an openness to the studio, where light shines in from the playground just outside, filtered by a slightly battered window pane and chipped glass. The collected forms, trees and art materials engulf the space in an orchestrated and arranged space full of bric-a-brac or *potential* art. To this end, the artist brings up an analogy about how time and situations tend to influence how one feels about something, an indeterminant, even if that something is important to begin with. Lee emphasises how the influence or onslaught of time will indeterminately enable one to heal from bad experiences or past relationships.

I cannot agree more, from these interactions I have learned about many things, many things not just about trees. I have learned to be his audience and I have come to find out what he finds important in his art. Lee has chosen to name his next exhibition GRAVITAS, denoting a level of seriousness and possibly solemnity on display in the white wall of the gallery. Here in his studio, if you like, is precisely where his gravitas lies. If one commonly associates *gravitas* with the manner in which one conducts oneself, this association could be made to one's studio space. As a bright triangle shines on the grey wall, it manages to catch a bit of the floor in front of the wall. On the floor rests a metal bowl with a carob brown coloured emulsion which the artist says is taken from the sap of the tree bark. A pair of branches are drawn using this same extract. I am transfixed by the images, ignoring him as he explains his process of deriving pigment from the dried bark, where he grounds them into a fine powder, boils them and strains them to extract the sap emulsion. One of the branches looms larger and more spirited, its strokes heightened by a liveliness, energy, and depth of shade. Drawing is a form of recollecting, recollecting is calling out to one's memory. Calling to life, a process to rescue the submerging sight. This particular branch had a gravitas about it, he had drawn it masterfully, reproducing his memory of the tree in the world outside, an ode to his environment. There is a translucency in the transference of the image from his mind to the paper, where the lack of opacity helps in envisioning the fragility of a fallen branch, calling it to life despite its disproportionate dimension. With this image transfixed in my mind, we went on talking about preparations for the show. All this while the incomplete trees remained dangling in the darkening space weighed down by gravity, mass of paraffin wax, and a peculiar seriousness.



AN ARTIST AND A TREE IN TWO PARTS:

THE WEIGHT OF THE WORLD IN A STOCKPILE

Adrian Tan

They were just 'there', quietly existing.



invites the viewer to experience a place made with sincerity and dignity, where the tree carries itself with authority and grandiosity, defying conformity and remaining self-abnegating.



GRAVITAS at **Supernormal** is the second solo exhibition of PG Lee's work. It presents a diversity of Lee's practice, whose sensory and epistemological engagement with his immediate environment is apparent in his meditation of forms set against a multiplicity of media and interventions.

Supernormal

101 Desker Rd, Singapore 209623

20 Feb – 8 Mar 2020

GRAVITAS

An introduction



The exhibition GRAVITAS is an ideological exposition and disquisition of a tree's resilience, resistance, and its *defying* silence. The ideas behind the show are taken from artist Lee Pheng Guan (PG Lee)'s interests in the characteristics, functions, and symbolism behind the venerable tembusu- a low-lying tree with far-reaching horizontal branches stemming from its main trunk. PG Lee is an artist who attempts to reconcile the apparently irreconcilable. For the show the artist mediates, narrates and envelops the gallery space, introducing a place that does not describe the natural and built landscapes that he has lived in but shows his enquiry into procedures of saving it.

GRAVITAS is a place where one explores and intimately experiences the minutiae of the artist's view from his studio window, his daily experience of life, his conceptions of working with the tembusu, not in its mere physicality but in his attempt to *return* the felled trees and fallen branches to their grandeur. This exhibition presents his aesthetic inquiries and ideologies behind art-making where his process of engaging with nature is built around interests in spirituality, ecology, epistemology, and arboriculture. Through disquieting gestures to present 'scars' suffered by trees and his attempts to heal these trees, he trims, cuts and assiduously joins to make them whole again- a gesture that reflects the artist's ideology on the tree and his attempts on healing *certain* conditions in our island-state through his art. In two accompanying texts, artist-writer Adrian Tan probes and traces the works of Lee in GRAVITAS and its place in representing the island-state and reconciling the artist as a maker and a communicator alongside his critical perspectives towards the state of our civil society.

For all its progress, sophistication and urban resolve, what remains of Singapore in many ways is a place that is perpetually being erased, dismantled and reconstructed. These ideas are seen through the artist's relentless and optimistic pursuit of medicating the trees. Behaving like a gardener, he trims, shapes, and grows *his* trees as part of his yearning to create his own garden. The trees rapturously grow, imposing themselves and in so doing, embody the concept(s) of GRAVITAS. This cultivation of gravitas through the tembusu

1 These conditions were raised by Ambassador-at-Large Professor Tommy Koh in his observation of how the country-state is run. Koh used the tembusu as a metaphor to describe governance under Goh Chok Tong; where he mentions that Goh allow(ed) the rest of civil society to thrive, as opposed to governance under Lee Kuan Yew; in the early days of nation-building; he likened it to a banyan tree which, due to its large and dense canopy, limits others to grow."