

"...YOU
HAVE TO
LOSE
YOUR WAY
TO FIND
YOURSELF
IN THE
RIGHT PLACE"

SELECTED WORKS BY
GILLES MASSOT

NUS MUSEUM

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“... you have to lose your way to find yourself in the
right place”: Selected Works by Gilles Massot

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Cover
Still from **Meeting in Macau**, 2019. Digital video,
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A Song from Home, 2019 (left)
Reflections in an Electronic Eye #1-5, 1986 (right)
Collection of the artist



Retro Specks Future Pixs: The Tanjong Pagar Station #1-4, 2004
Collection of Kelvin Ang

Placed centrally in the gallery is Gilles Massot's *Retro Specks Future Pixs: The Tanjong Pagar Station*. It is a work first exhibited at the Sculpture Square and the National Institute of Education in 2005 as part of the artist's project *Retro Specks Future Pixs*. Centring around the Tanjong Pagar Railway Station, the project was organized along the notion of time and space, the station as an entry point into an investigation concerning perception and memory. The work consists of four freestanding constructions, each made from photographic prints mounted onto panels assembled to convey their subjects – tactile, and having a force of presence. These subjects are the stone statues that stand above the façade columns of the Railway Station, bearing the engraved captions “Agriculture”, “Commerce”, “Transport” and “Industry”. Beyond critical readings into Singapore's and Malaya's history as a British colony, the naturalization of the Greco-Roman anatomy into the tropical setting proposes ways in which we regard the broader questions of the formation of contemporary identities where the categories of the itinerant and the domiciled sit uncomfortably in relation to their conventional meanings, where localization simultaneously forms a function of the predicament for the global, and for Massot, his projection of Singaporean-ness that necessitates an acknowledgment of his histories; growing up, wandering, living, France, Asia, Singapore, and not necessarily in this order and inferred relations. Here, the terms “transit”, “departure” and “arrival” referenced

from the Railway Station become conceptually ambiguous, even interchangeable. Massot attends to this necessity of ambivalence, translating it into imaginaries of the self, bifurcating as multiple constituents to a whole. “I am MA” he proclaims, “MA” being an abbreviation of “Massot” and other names he created to accentuate distinct approaches, attitudes, and social dispositions deployed as complementary, rhetorical or dialectical devices to point at the interlocking ideas that inform the self. The Railway Station has been a subject for many, referencing the residues of the colonial state-craft, and contemporary restatement of its history as a site of resistance against the totalizing feature of progress. However, Massot does not seek or insist a positioning limited by its political dynamics, but rather a dialogue to be performed, centred around the poetics of the gesture and its potentials. Text – written, read or sung – is among the devices deployed by Massot to achieve such aims. The title of the exhibition is taken from a voice over featured in his video work, *Meeting in Macau*, which accounts an imaginary encounter in Macau, where discovery sits vexingly between expectancy and submission, where personal subjectivities are afforded and celebrated as ceaseless titillation of thoughts. They can refer to sensations of surprise, wonderment, boredom or irony. In one of the passages he writes, “She read ‘Waiting for Godot’, to kill time”, a one-liner defined by its comma. Elusive, Massot stands irrepressible, “I am MA” can be emphasized by its first two words.

INTRODUCTION

The Charles Dyce collection in NUS Museum comprises 35 paintings of the landscapes of Singapore, Malacca, Penang and Batavia, and an accompanying manuscript enumerating the geography, sociology and economy of these towns. The collection has been widely studied as a genre of representations of the Far East by European artist-travellers visiting the region in the 19th century. At NUS Museum, a recent example was the project by artist Donna Ong – *Five Trees Make A Forest* (2016) – who presented a comparative survey of antique lithographic prints of the tropics alongside Dyce's works.

The exhibition proposal by artist Gilles Massot on the daguerreotypes of Jules Itier (1802–77) was first explored with the interest of discovering parallels and divergences between Dyce and Itier, demonstrated in the framing adopted by the two men in their image making ventures. Itier was a French customs officer appointed by his government to join the delegation travelling to China in the 1840s for trade negotiations. He travelled with a daguerreotype camera and took photographs of the stops in his itinerary. Although the Chinese ports of Macau, Whampoa and Canton were the key destinations of the trade mission, Itier also visited towns in Southeast Asia, including Singapore. Massot's interest in Itier began with his discovery of an image Itier had taken of the Thian Hock Keng temple in 1844 during a transit stop in Singapore. As his research progressed, Massot came across "intriguing coincidences" between his life and that of Itier and it reached a point where they "turned out to be too many and coherent to be merely accidental".¹ Massot elaborates: "I could see how the world map of his life superimposed almost exactly with my own, as if our respective lives and the work that went along with them had been always linked by an invisible bridge stretching across time and space."² Massot's conviction of the spiritual connection with Itier, particularly their Asian bound journeys and mutual fascination for image making, was a key consideration in the selection of artworks from his large and varied oeuvre. His photojournalist project *From Saigon to Hanoi: Nine Towns in Nine Days* (1993), comprising images with an engaging written account of social encounters, provide a fitting juxtaposition to the journeys of Itier.

The photograph is the primary medium that Massot manipulates in his art making. He experiments with shades and tints and introduces colourful lines and dots to animate the original photograph. His practice also involves capturing the site as a series of progressive frames each offset from the next and assembling the shots into a "fragmented whole". An early trace of this approach appears in a self-portrait entitled

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Time Frame (1977). This artistic expression may be seen in two ways. Firstly, as a strategy to arrest our attention and drive us towards a particular narrative, lest our interest wanders along multiple subjective lines. Secondly, to deny the photograph its status as an irrefutable representation of the moment that it records. Massot is critical of perceptions that a photograph is evidence of reality: "[...] far from having comforted the notion of reality, it has on the contrary blurred the thin line between fact and fiction, evolving eventually into the virtual reality [...]".³ Fragmenting the composition is perhaps a device to jolt our consciousness of the photographed image as an incomplete depiction of what really is.

While Itier's sojourn in Asia spanned a few months from 1844 to 1845, Massot has lived in Singapore for over three decades. One of his early works on Singapore was a series of images of the National Day Parade photographed from a TV screen (*Reflections in an Electronic Eye*, 1986). From those initial days when "everything felt strange", Massot has immersed himself in multiple facets of Singapore life through his work as a multi-disciplinary artist. He reflects that "[c]oming to Singapore has proven to be deeply liberating because for the first time in my life, my deepest inner feeling was harmoniously attuned to my social position. I was a stranger in a strange land, an "other", and everything was fine since there was room here for me to be just that."⁴ Artist-curator Woon Tien Wei views Massot as an example of a non-Singaporean resident who has developed a deep sense of citizenry for the nation.⁵ Woon refers to Massot's earlier projects to discuss the artist's place in Singapore's contemporary art scene and a practice that defies easy categorization, becoming 'in-curatable' when subject to conventional expectations. For this exhibition, Massot made five video works of which three – *Pink Moon over Whampoa*, *Time Frame v 2.0.19*, and *A Song from Home* – relate his evolving encounters with Singapore. Viewed collectively with projects such as *Coffee Shop* (1992), we have a sense of Massot's immersion in the social and cultural life of our nation-state. We begin to contemplate – has the artist found his way to the right place, right here among us?

Foo Su Ling is a curator at the National University of Singapore Museum.

1 "Conversations with Gilles Massot" in this volume.

2 Personal communication with artist.

3 Massot, Gilles. *Retro Specks Future Pixs: The Book*, 2006. The quote is from the article in the section "Retro Specks, Future Pixs".

4 "Conversations with Gilles Massot" in this volume.

5 Woon Tien Wei, "On Being In-curatable: Between Nations" in this volume.



Stop, Look, Walk, 1991 (front)
Time Frame, 1977 (rear)
Collection of the artist

A Singapore-based French artist, Gilles Massot. We could very well stop at this description, and it may just be a good enough framework to start defining Massot's practice and life.

I have been looking at Massot's work recently as I am working on the concept of the in-curatable as a way of thinking about curatorial practice, art history, independent space-making in relation to censorship, nationalism and ideology & hegemony.

The in-curatable occurs when an institution lacks the curatorial vocabulary and the curatorial will to allocate resources for the care for the art in question. So what kind of art cannot be curated? What kind of art has no place in our museums and national collections? What kind of art has no place within the script of national art history?

I would say that there are varying degrees of in-curatability and the in-curatable is never fixed but relational and can change.

Massot turned up in my inquiry of the in-curatable as I was reflecting on the work of independent art space, Grey Project and their project *Tints and Dispositions* (2017), an exhibition of Massot's prints and photographic material.

Most of us in the art world here would know Massot who has resided in Singapore and has been participating in the art scene since 1985. Where do we place him, a Singapore-based French artist, within Singapore art history which is often an exercise in essentialist ideas of 'nation' in exhibition-making?

Tints and Dispositions re-contextualizes Massot's work in Singapore and provided fresh perspectives of queer belonging and transnationality; showing that a non-Singaporean resident like Massot is capable of having a deep citizenry to this place. Something which would illuminate the world so differently – in light of a world with increasing anti-immigrant sentiments.

Massot does not have a straightforward practice. His works are done in an inter-disciplinary and at times collaborative way. Despite people's well meaning advice to him to 'focus', he recounts from his earliest memory that he is unable to restrict himself to a 'specific box'.¹

The nature of his practice appears 'inconsistent', out of place and as the title of this exhibition suggests, 'lost'. Massot's work resists and complicates modernism's idealization of the artwork as the unique object of individual creativity. Not fitting in this box is a reason his work becomes in-curatable and the institutional gesture of NUS Museum in curating his works questions and critique the modernist reification of the artist as an autonomous individual within modernist art and its insistence on the primacy of the artwork.² In that sense, curating the in-curatable is not about putting something back into the box but a process in making this more than just about the 'box'.

¹ Massot, Gilles. Biography (Professional), Biography (Narrative). Accessed May 2019. <http://www.gillesmassot.com/biography.html>
² Enwezor, Okwui. "The Artist as Producer in Times of Crisis" in S. McQuire & N. Papastergiadis (eds.), *Empires, Ruins + Networks: The Transcultural Agenda*, Melbourne: Rivers Oram Press, 2006. 11-51.

Massot adopted the name MA because as he explains MA 'works on the space in-between'. He became involved in event organizing where he worked with the group, Talking Eyes and Art of Parties. The events they organized allowed him to combine different disciplines, "a dancer, a painter, a photographer, a singer, a curator, a decorator, all in one place and with one group of people". Massot worked as the technical director for the 1988 Fringe Festival which saw him use the whole city as a canvas – as a place for creation. These experiences shaped Massot's practice and allowed him to create the project *Coffee Shop* (1992).

Over the years, Massot becomes more than 'just' MA. He would create different personas. *Coffee Shop*, a 3-day happening, installation and exhibition at Chye Hong Coffee Shop on Bukit Timah Road was where Massot 'curated' the works of four fictitious artists – Lu Ma Su, a Chinese ink painter who developed his technique of Chinese scroll mounting; Gila Masok, an expressionist Malay contemporary artist; Jill Nasso, the New Zealander photographer who took quiet black and white photographic works; and Ma Geylang, the naïve Peranakan painter.

Coffee Shop is a work where Massot performs five personas. The four artists in their production of different artistic styles are references to Singapore's art world in the 90s. Yet, we can almost imagine that these artists exist today, and they seem situated within the margins of the art world. They are what we call the 'dark matter' of the art world – dark matter is essential to the survival of the mainstream because they provide imagination and creativity and yet they remain at the margins.³ One could sense Massot's empathy for these four artists who are marginal and in-curatable like him. The fifth persona is Massot himself who attempts to curate the in-curatable as he performs the role of an arts organizer and an interlocutor of sorts. He, as the arts organizer, would need to convince the owners of Chye Hong Coffee Shop for this project to take place.

Massot's editorial work for travel magazines allowed him to have a travelling lifestyle as he covered different cities. Singapore remains his base and paradoxically, France his 'exotic interludes'. His commute between worlds and cultures lasted for more than 10 years. Massot shared in one conversation that he found himself when he came here in the 80s, something that did not happen in France.

If, as this exhibition suggests, being lost is a strategy to finding oneself in the right place, then where is the right place for Massot, and what is his place in all of this? Fortunately, there is a good and broad selection from Massot's body of works in this exhibition for us to ponder on these questions.

Woon Tien Wei is an artist-curator based in Singapore. His research interests include cultural policies, collectivity in art, social movements, land contestations and urban legends. Woon works with Post-Museum to curate, research and collaborate with a network of social actors to create events and projects. Post-Museum's work explores how inhabitants can practice in the city in 'meaningful' ways to seek the 'right to the city' – to claim some shaping power over the processes of urbanization.

³ Sholette, Gregory. *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture*, New York: Pluto Press, 2011.

There are always Two Shores to an Ocean, 2019 (left)
Panorama of Canton, 2014 (centre)
In the Footsteps of Jules Itier, 2014 (right)
From Saigon to Hanoi, 1993 (bottom)
Collection of the artist



“COINCIDENCES ARE SCATTERED ELEMENTS OF NARRATIVES WAITING TO BE DECIPHERED AND ASSEMBLED”:

CONVERSATIONS WITH GILLES MASSOT¹

FSL: We had initially prospected your project proposal in relation to our collection of sketches by Charles Dyce, who travelled through Singapore, Malacca and Penang in the 1840s recording scenes of natural landmarks and towns which he eventually compiled in a folio intended for a British audience. Dyce, a merchant, arrived in Singapore in 1842 and as a peripatetic, his glimpses were informed by subjects and vantages of value to a condition of itinerancy, and in the spirit of adventure and discovery during a period of colonial consolidations. His manuscript enumerates the places and peoples encountered, associated economic activities and social habits. He was among innumerable Europeans who sought experiences that at a basic level were for the sense of self fulfilment, linked to a given context of economic and political dominance within the colonial project. The individual attitudes to the accompanying privilege of belonging to a colonial class may be antithetical to contemporary encounters. For this reason, your attention and research on Jules Itier is fascinating. As a lecturer and artist, what drew you to him?

GM: Two things. First of all, the fact that Itier was known to have produced the first photographs of China. This historical fact directly connected with my academic work on the theory of photography. I regard the apparition of photography as the true threshold between the ancient and modern worlds, an energy that generated new discourses on our perception of reality, and possibly even reality itself, the moment it manifested in the mid 19th century.

So Itier's daguerreotypes were already acknowledged as the materialization of that very moment for China. But then, what about the rest of his work? In particular, in Singapore where he made the first use of his camera in the trip, a good three months before reaching Macau. Clearly, here was a possibility for original research material. And indeed this is what I did, with among other things the identification of the first extant and dated photograph of Asia: the daguerreotype of the Thian Hock Keng temple dated 6 July 1844.² Singapore has given

me a lot in the course of the four decades I have spent here. I was really glad to be able to return a favour in my own way by placing the Little Red Dot as a place of world importance in the chronology of early photography history.

The more personal, almost spiritual, side involves the reading of facts and occurrences in an approach that has guided me in life for the longest time. It is based on the belief that so-called coincidences are scattered elements of narratives waiting to be deciphered and assembled to make sense of my relation to the world around me. Along with the purely historical aspect of my work mentioned above, this subjective and even poetic approach to any subject I might be working on was very much part of two earlier projects, my book on Bintan and my Master of Arts (Fine Arts) work on Valbelle. Already in these two projects, the subjective narrative grew along with the historical one, to the point of even substantially contributing to the factual content by illuminating it from an unexpected angle. The same thing happened with Itier. The intriguing “coincidences” between his life and my life quickly turned out to be too many and coherent to be merely accidental. Clearly there was a story that was begging to be told. The list would be too long for the format of this interview, suffice to say that one of the most improbable but irrevocably meaningful coincidence was discovering that his grave in Serres in Provence was framed by two graves bearing the same family name as mine. Walking in his footsteps was also about discovering myself.

The colonial context you refer to in your question is of course indubitably linked to who he was and what he did. As such it had to be taken into account to first understand and then interpret the events I was studying. But this aspect of things was a sort of secondary necessity in the project.

FSL: In your research you traced the footsteps taken by Itier as he traversed from Singapore, across locations along the South China Sea into China. You studied the photographs and

their locations, set your own camera in place to reproduce the scenes in their contemporary settings, not to simply prompt contrasts, but to affirm almost ritually, a form of kinship where origins and destinies converge. Where his daguerreotypes are missing, you sought the lines from his journal and in the descriptions you reinstate connections. You saw through him a wonderment of places and cultures where each encounter was an occasion to stage the fascination of the new, and one would imagine not without a sense of awareness about the nature of the gaze, and the ways a subject is being framed. Whether for reasons connected to wanderlust or to promote goodwill, such encounters cannot be regarded as neutral. In your studies on Itier of which you wrote: “He was an idealist hoping for world harmony, [...] generated by free trade”, how did he come to terms with the conditions surrounding his practice?³ Do you relate to his sense of optimism and anxiety?

GM: One thing that quickly jumped to my attention when reading his journal was not just how few the mentions of the daguerreotypes were, but most significantly how little attention many of them were given. It was as if a mere five years after the apparition of an invention that had forever changed the human perception of time and space, the medium had already become ordinary, taken for granted just as it is today. There were however instances where he developed slightly longer narratives and considerations on encounters arising from his photography excursions. What needs to be stressed is that the use of the camera became on a number of occasions the support for very personal exchanges with local people. Sometimes this took on a bizarre twist in which the locals were gently turned into naïve victims of his image making trials, as in the case of the photographs of the three mandarins. On the other hand, his exchanges with Lam Qua and Cum Chou were occasions for meaningful understanding and appreciation.

What is interesting with Itier, and somehow rather puzzling when deciphering his life from a post-colonial angle, is the way he prioritized his positioning in relation to the situations he was confronted with. First of all, he was an employee of the French government on an official mission, a task through which he hoped to achieve the most advantageous trading conditions for his nation. He was deeply nationalistic and faithful to his country, giving undivided commitment towards his duty to the nation, not just during this journey but in life in general. This is what we see at work in his analysis of the potential for Vietnam to become the Asian colonial outpost so badly needed by France if it was to compete with England in Asia. He was so driven by his professional commitment that

the humanist catholic republican in him remained conveniently oblivious to the fact that this would require an oppressive military intervention to begin with, not to mention the ensuing forceful occupation of the territory of another.

The humanist side of him was expressed on many occasions and it found a particularly heartfelt moment during a trek in the jungle with his Tagalog assistants on his second visit to the Philippines. He met a couple from the Papua ethnic group and another aboriginal man whom he identified as a Negrito. Having brought cigars with him, the group lit up their cigars from a common fire as if sharing a peace pipe. Each one of them was representative of a different level of achievement in the long history of civilization, yet he convincingly expressed how he saw the same human dignity in each of them.

This mismatch of positions, that saw him bouncing back and forth between acceptance of cultural differences and authoritarian assertion of superiority throughout his journal fascinated me, in part for a lack of self-awareness, but also as a manifestation of an intellectual freedom, possibly schizophrenic, that allowed him to be repeatedly one thing and its opposite while always believing in both with a clear conscience. And yes, much of his optimism and anxiety were still pretty much there as I walked in his footsteps. The world in which I travel might look vastly different, but only in its superficial appearances. Colonialism is supposed to be a thing of the past, but in many ways it still lingered around in both positive and negative ways, in the form of various power plays, human exploitation, or technical achievements. Itier's optimism and anxiety are pretty much still a reality of the world.

FSL: Photography as reportage, whether in the form of a daguerreotype folio or prints in a magazine providing a visual glimpse of a faraway place, is often accompanied by texts that serve to instruct the reader on a series of facts. Such entries mitigate the “muteness” of the photograph, but they may also reveal something of the author. This passage is written in Itier's journal dated 28 October 1844: “[...] Today I still found complacent Chinese who agreed to form motionless groups, provided they could see first the image reflected on the frosted glass; their astonishment, however, had nothing very profound; it was rather that vague curiosity which the children feel at the sight of a new object; [...]”.⁴ Itier was in Asia as a French colonial official and this instance of casual ethnography must be seen in a wider historical context of conquest and domination. Even so, he did show a great deal of respect to a few such as Lam Qua and the Canton artist's accomplishments.⁵

¹ These edited texts are from the conversations between Gilles Massot (GM) and Foo Su Ling (FSL) during the course of preparing for the exhibition.

² Massot, Gilles. “Jules Itier and the Lagrene Mission” in *History of Photography*, 2015, 39:4, 319-347.

³ Massot, Gilles. “Placing Jules Itier's Body of Work in Perspective” (article pending publication)

⁴ *The Probability of Veracity - Part 1: The Missing Daguerreotypes*. Accessed 30 April 2019. <https://www.gillesmassot.com/2017-the-probability-of-veracity---part-1-the-missing-daguerreotypes.html>. A translation of this passage is also provided in Gilbert Gimon's research “Jules Itier, Daguerreotypist” in *History of Photography*, 1981, 5:3, 225-244.

⁵ Ibid.

If we may posit here a comparison with your photojournalistic work “From Saigon to Hanoi: Nine Towns in Nine Days” published in 1993. You wrote: “Tuesday, Saigon. I meet Kim Hue and Lin on my first afternoon in Vietnam as I stand at a road junction [...] they invite me home for lunch [...] If I learned anything today, it is how ambiguous the Vietnamese are. Apparently, they had befriended me in order to practice their English. Now that the country’s relations with the outside world are turning the other way round.”⁶ Did you find the post-colonial reception a burden, either then in the early 1990s or now looking back?

GM: The extract you selected is part of a longer narrative in which Kim Hue and Lin became real friends of mine and from whom I learned a lot about how to behave in a country that was barely coming out of decades of war and learning to navigate the still underlying traumas. I still feel deeply indebted to the two of them for the care and attention they extended during my first few days in Saigon, the eagerness with which they tried to make it interesting and meaningful, something I still regard as one of the most enriching experiences in my years of travelling.

So is post-colonial reception a burden? Of course yes. Of course no. Post-colonial reception is first of all a matter of exchange between two persons. There is nothing fixed to anything and it comes in all sorts of flavours and colours. Sometimes the exchange feels forced, demanding, possibly even aggressive. The white man is still regarded in some places as having an essentially privileged place in society. In such cases, yes, it turns into a post-colonial hangover, it is hard to break away from the circle of entanglements. At other times it is a conversation that spontaneously starts while resting in the shade of a tree or having a cup of coffee in the *warong* round the corner. If the intention is right, it can develop into a really powerful conversation depending on the participants’ level of reception to the exchange. I don’t see any post-colonial baggage in such situations. It is just the way today’s world is, a place where peoples from places far apart can learn from one another for a brief while in a mutually enriching experience.

FSL: When you came to Singapore in the early 1980s, you took commissions from magazines, mostly dealing with travel. Yet you sought among such work ways to prompt a key question about photography and its agency, which is about the image and its meanings, and the artistic hand. You dealt with this in two ways. First, working with black and white, you introduced colour into the image to emphasize

conceptual interests that would otherwise be left to the viewer to locate. At times they are heavily painted over with vibrant colours or whimsical lines and dots to isolate and animate elements in the original photograph. Second, your approach of “sabotaging” the pristine status of the photographic image. An image is sliced, cut into parts and its continuities disrupted, followed by re-rendering into newer compositions.

This leads us to the theoretical concerns that inspire your practice. In your recent writing “The White Space Theory”, you relate your perspectives on the beginnings of photography, technologies, quantum mechanics and the philosophical question of reality. At the end came the foregrounding where you wrote: “I intuitively sensed at a very early age that there was a lot more to a photograph than the self-absorbed air of certainty floating on its surface. This understanding gradually led me to painting, as I wanted to disrupt the sense of assurance or belief in the reality created by the illusion of the photographic image. A photograph exists only as a probability.”⁷ Your early work – *Time Frame* – completed in France during the summer of 1977 explores these ideas. Is it indicative of such concerns?

GM: One of the things that I hope to achieve with this exhibition is to make the audience perceive and understand that despite the seemingly haphazard use of a medium that sees me jumping from one practice to another, all this is actually solidly supported by the persistence of a particular focus on the artistic interpretation of the nature of time and space. So yes, I regard *Time Frame* as a decisive turning point in my practice. Everything I did since then, or at least most of it, is in one way or another connected to that work.

Another thing is my eventual understanding of what truly makes me an artist. One decisive moment in this quest was when my childhood friend Jean Jacques, an artist himself who greatly influenced my development from childhood all the way to my departure from France, told me with very simple words: “in fact you are your best work”. I had already for quite some time framed my artistic identity by saying “I am Ma and I work on the space between things”, something which now makes the very opening of my website. Jean Jacques’ few words then made me realize that my work is primarily what I am in my relation to the world rather than the objects I produce to express my perception of it. My work is what I do and not what I make.

FSL: There is yet another approach to your practice as a photographer, which is the way you allow for interactions of

the photograph with the moving image. You had mentioned a film, *India Song* (1975), based on a book by a French novelist Marguerite Duras, whose writings were informed by her own experiences in Indochina. Of significance to you is the use of the moving camera over the static image of a map, tracing a journey through Burma eastwards to Cambodia, before encountering the Mekong River and moving along it into Laos. There are obvious connections to a condition of wandering and arriving, but first let me ask you about deploying the static photographic image to a video or film. I am particularly drawn to your video *Meeting in Macau* (2019) where photographs become part of a narrative device, but you are also concerned with how they are presented on screen. Can you elaborate?

GM: Something that puzzled me for the longest time was the way over my years of practice I could so easily and shamelessly call myself simultaneously a dancer, a photographer and a writer, yet found it impossible to bring them together in a work. The natural, almost obvious merging of these disciplines would appear to be found in the making of action movies. It was something that came from the guts, something that had to spring from the outcome of my interaction with the world and not born out of professional ambition. Eventually there was *Love Hurts* in 2013, a movie for which the gut element turned out to be that I wanted to sing the Hokkien song of the Taiwan TV series “ai”. Then came *Singapore from BW to C v.2.0.17*. This is when I realised that I really enjoyed playing with still images as material for a motion movie. Interestingly enough, most of the new works created for this exhibition are videos. So the time must have come for me to make this medium part of my palette. I am still not quite fully proficient with the editing software, but I sure have great fun with it.

One of the movies in the show is *Meeting in Macau* where the text was written as a fictional story and published in a local magazine in the early 90s.⁸ Doing this video project, I rediscovered the black and white photos originally done to illustrate the text and I realised that I had somehow overlooked them. For some reason, I didn’t see them as particularly important in my portfolio then, maybe because what I was most proud of at first was the text. So the photos became secondary. I think the movie now puts them in their rightful place.

FSL: In the early 1980s photography was not a medium popular among artists here in Singapore, painting being the default medium. Within the dynamics of culture making in Singapore, you were negotiating the unorthodoxy of photography, styles of paintings in circulation, and not least,

your status as an expatriate. Your experimentations over time speak to these situations, with exhibitions organized in a local coffee shop, an industrial building, a cafe and the occasional gallery projects. You put to advantage the opportunities offered and in doing so activated distinct settings and conditions for gathering and experiencing your works.

The *Coffee Shop* project from 1992 comes to mind. You placed an array of photographs, paintings and sketches in the coffee shop located at Bukit Timah with the artworks mounted onto walls, pillars, on tables, cabinets and even over the cash counter. These were works done by your hand, but attributed to four fictional artists – Lu Ma Su, Jill Nasso, Ma Geylang and Gila Masok – each conceived by a play of your name; personas defined by your Singaporean multi-ethnic experience. The guests of the opening party mingled heartily, a soiree. Did you have a specific perspective about the approaches in making your art public? Was this made necessary by your status then as an expatriate? Or was it that the modest scale offered a more conducive setting for making human connections?

GM: Viewed in today’s context, *Coffee Shop* might give the impression that there were strong underlying conceptual elements. In fact, it was purely intuitive and playful. It grew over a period of about three or four years, and as far as I can remember it developed in the most spontaneous way simply because the place was just down the road from my home, the food and the coffee were great, and the furniture and work environment had the air of a living museum. In short, it was the perfect place to express my relation to something that had become central to my life in Singapore: a lunch of local food, preferably Malay, washed down with a strong local *kopi*, and followed by a cigarette, preferably a fragrant *kretek*, the aroma of which would make the apex of the meal.

The four different personas are associated to the different styles of works. But again, there was no intellectualization on my part in this curatorial choice. It was just a game of hide and seek, something matching the atypical location and made it more exciting for my guests. In the case of *Singapore from BW to C* held in 1985 in Lucina Talib’s carpentry workshop in MacPherson, this show was first and foremost a party. The four different persona, the atypical location, all these were things that I remember as coming together without really thinking about it. I was just doing. Not making. As it turns out, these projects have been particularly meaningful in capturing a snapshot of a side of Singapore that was already on the way out.

6 Massot, Gilles. “From Saigon to Hanoi: Nine Towns in Nine Days” in *Marie Claire* magazine, 1993. Accessed 1 March 2019. <https://www.gillemassot.com/90s---1-travel-magazines.html#20>

7 Massot, Gilles. “The White Space Theory: Understanding Photography as Energy” (unpublished article).

8 Massot, Gilles. “Meeting in Macao” in *Accent* magazine, 1989. Accessed 1 March 2019. <https://www.gillemassot.com/80s---travel-magazines.html#18>

FSL: We can perhaps end the interview by looking back at one of your earlier works, *Reflections in an Electronic Eye*, published in 1986.⁹ It is a series of photographs of the National Day Parade in Singapore taken off a television screen. Cropped to adhere to the shape of the screen, they feature images of marching soldiers, dancers with flowing scarves, the dragon dance and even “The Singapore Girl” forming the Singapore Airlines contingent. Much can be said about the Parade as a yearly ritual of nationhood, and I am sure you saw in these choice of images ways to suggest the reproduction and maintenance of relations between state and society. Participation by way of spectatorship was key and television was the mediating instrument. The images you produced, with highly saturated colours, correspond to a hyperbolic moment of collective identity affirmation.

Arriving during a period of great economic change that brought with it all sorts of tension relating to modernization and cultural authenticity, Singapore would have been of some fascination if not a curiosity to you. What were your initial thoughts then? How do you look back at it now and contrast these early interests to your recent work *Pink Moon over Whampoa* (2019) which is an ode to your long-term neighbourhood in Singapore? And in Whampoa too we come back a full circle to Itier...

GM: Truth is that I had never felt attracted by any kind of Asian fantasy. I came to Singapore just to work. At first everything felt strange – the humidity, the food, the amazing diversity of places of worship, and yes... the compelling scent of incense. Unexpectedly, I also found myself in awe at the sight of skyscrapers crowding the business district. Life was at first a submerging flow of oddities to the point of being destabilizing. But soon, I began to enjoy the ongoing discovery, the inner sensation of being constantly thrown off balance. Being an anonymous “other” in a multiracial society was refreshingly different. By June 1982, I met a partner and with him Singapore became home; not a “second” home, just “home”. Over the next three decades, the commuting between France and Singapore made me shift my position many times on what “home” was. It was a patient search, made all the more ambiguous by my lifestyle as a travelling artist and photographer. In the process, I came to perceive the widely accepted notion of “belonging” to a place as being a construct tied to a sense of rooted identity. In 2010, this quest peaked in an epiphany, an experience brought about by the passing on of my grandmother. I had to clear from her house the drawings from my teenage experiments and university days. These archives, mostly made of paper, meant a lot to me. I decided to burn them to ashes, and chose to hold a

ritual celebrating the transience of life in the garden between her house and my family home. That day, I realised that I had never belonged there, at least not to the point of making it the sole root and definition of my identity. Coming to Singapore has proven to be deeply liberating because for the first time in my life, my deepest inner feeling was harmoniously attuned to my social position. I was a stranger in a strange land, an “other”, and everything was fine since there was room here for me to be just that.

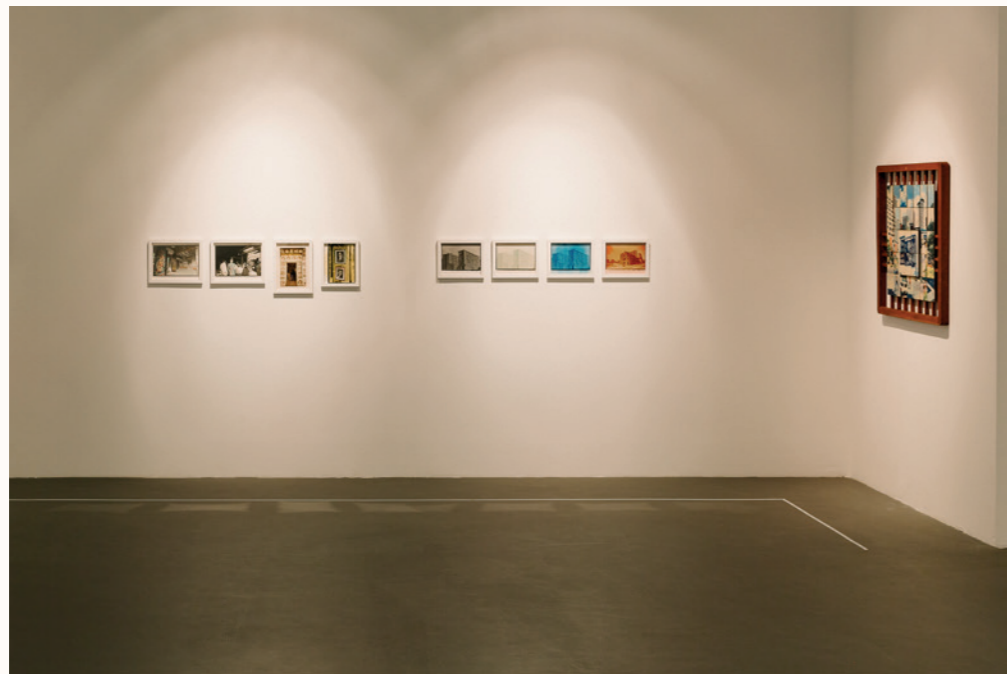


Calcutta Sketches, 1989
Collection of the artist



From left
Coffee Shop installation documentation, 1992
Coffee Shop party photographs, 1992 (on both sides of triptych)
Coffee Shop Triptych, 1992
Pink Moon over Whampoa, 2019
Collection of the artist

⁹ Massot, Gilles. “Reflections in an Electronic Eye: Recording the “Real” NDP in Singapore” in *Perspective* magazine, 1986. Accessed 1 March 2019. <https://www.gillemassot.com/80s---travel-magazines.html#5>



From left
Thian Hock Keng Temple, 1984 - 1985
The Real Thing, 1984 - 1985
Si Hu Art Studio, 1984 - 1985
Singapore from BW to C Works in Progress #1-5, 1984 - 1985
Stop, Look, Walk, 1991
 Collection of the artist



Meeting in Macau, 2019 (left)
Retro Specks Future Pixs: The Tanjong Pagar Station #1-4, 2004 (centre)
The Shanker Hotel, Kathmandu, 1992 (right)
 Centre artwork – Collection of Kelvin Ang
 Left and right artworks – Collection of the artist

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