



YOUNG ARTIST AWARD 2021

## ZEN TEH SHI WEI

ZEN TEH SHI WEI (b. 1988) is a visual artist who works primarily with film photography.

Her practice explores photography as an expanded field, where the camera is used for image-making as well as exploring concepts of truths in combination with material and sculptural applications that reflects contemporary urban realities. She collaborates with experts from different fields to engage with the community and to reflect upon how artists function in society. For instance, the 'After Monument series' (2019) drove collaboration across disciplines — with a local geologist, a historian, an architect, an environmental group and residents from Bandung, Indonesia. Their investigation unearthed a web of problems, which necessitated efforts to bring together thinkers and collaborators across different fields.

Similarly, 'Garden State Palimpsest' (2018) and 'A Familiar Forest' (2021) were interdisciplinary collaborations that explored Singapore's urban topography and its evolving human-nature relations. These efforts gained recognition and were featured in media such as 'The Bangkok Post', 'The New York Times Style Magazine', 'TEMPO' magazine, 'The Straits Times' and 'Channel NewsAsia', in turn contributing to environmental advocacy locally and regionally.

This spirit of sharing echoes her involvement in the local arts scene where she fosters collaborative interdisciplinarity and mentors younger artists. Studio Lalang, a not-for-profit initiative by Zen and her studio partner, Hera, brings artists of different disciplines together in sharing their practices.

In her teaching practice of almost 10 years, Zen nurtures young artists by leading and delivering interdisciplinary teaching initiatives and advocates for a holistic view of education. This challenges students' perception of subject-segregated learning and to use art as a medium to guide their exploration across disciplines.

Her efforts were highlighted when School of the Arts (SOTA) nominated her for Ministry of Education (MOE)'s Outstanding Youth in Education Award in 2019. Her belief in the ability of art in engaging human experiences and to critically think about the world continues to push her interdisciplinary practices, leading and shaping the synergistic potential of art, education and research.



Zen Teh making art works at Selasar Sunaryo Art Space, Bandung, Indonesia, during her 2-month artist residency, 2019

Photo courtesy of Selasar Sunaryo Art Space





## A CONVERSATION WITH ZEN TEH SHI WEI

**Tell us about your earliest memories encountering the arts. Who or what were your key influences in the visual arts?**

One of my fondest memories was during my secondary school days. I was fortunate to have met Ms Yong, an art teacher who was passionate about the arts. Her personable and affirmative approach towards teaching made a difference to our perception of art and sense of self. I was exposed to the idea of observing everyday objects and to respond on both emotional and artistic levels. "Aim high in life" was her slogan and that spirit of optimism is important in my journey as an environmental artist and educator. Some artists who inspire me uphold a similar worldview, such as Olafur Eliasson, Gao Xingjian, Sunaryo Sutono, Hiroshi Sugimoto and Sou Fujimoto.



Zen Teh at her installation, 'Mirror of Water', 2019, commissioned solo presentation at Jendela Gallery, The Esplanade, Singapore

Photo courtesy of The Esplanade Singapore

**What were some of the biggest challenges you faced when creating new works, and how did you overcome them?**

My artistic practice has evolved from an individualistic practice to collaborative work which requires forging close working relationships and shared visions. This involves dealing with different individuals. My belief is engaging every person from a humanistic point of view to resolve issues and work together towards a meaningful cause. It requires humility and persistence.

**What is the most rewarding aspect of what you do?**

I find joy in constructing new ways of thinking with other passionate individuals across diverse backgrounds. In collaborative interdisciplinary work, I have found tremendous satisfaction. For example, the 'A Familiar Forest' (2021), and 'After Monument' (2019) series took much time, continuous effort and open discussions with collaborators on how to achieve depth in integration. This would have been something difficult or impossible to achieve if I had continued on a solo trajectory.

**What do you want the audience to experience through your works?**

A sense of relatability on a personal level and an agency towards environmental consciousness. My art works seek to engage people in a humanistic way, conveying meanings or questions beyond a cognitive level, and sharing the understanding through physiological dimensions. In particular, my larger installation works such as 'After Monument: Aquifer of Time' (2019) and 'Mirror of Water' (2019) are experiential and multi-sensory. I like to capture images of both natural and urban scenes of our everyday surroundings so as to trigger the audience's memories. 'A Familiar Forest' (2021), for instance, has engaged visitors from different nationalities and age groups who share surprisingly similar memories such as kampung living and hiking trips with their loved ones.

**Please share what a typical day in your life as a visual artist is like.**

My day begins with a simple breakfast at a local coffee shop. I travel primarily on a bicycle so that I can slow down for anything that catches my attention. I love to take time to observe minute details, such as the quality of light at different times of the day, and how people interact with the environment. Often, these details become points of questions that lead to a new piece of work. For example, 'Mirror of Water' (2019) was a response to the water pollution in the canal in my neighbourhood.





'After Monument: Mountain Pass', 2019  
Photo courtesy of Selasar Sunaryo Art Space

### What are your vision and hopes for Singapore's visual arts scene?

I envision a vibrant and open visual arts scene rich in ground-up initiatives that foster collaborations across disciplines and sectors. These collaborations promote knowledge-sharing and generate fresh perspectives in a more inclusive society.

### What advice would you give to students who want to pursue a career in your field?

Stay curious, be humble and keep going. To live fully, you need to be observant and critically curious of your surroundings, the systemic conditions and the implications of our actions. Humility allows you to examine the strengths and shortcomings of your work. Persistence is key as there will be many challenges and you will have self-doubt or doubt.

### How does receiving the Young Artist Award from the National Arts Council change things for you? Tell us more about how you intend to further grow and contribute to the arts scene.

The Young Artist Award is an affirmation of my artistic practice and contribution to the arts. I am humbled by the opportunities. I see myself contributing in shaping the way we approach teaching and learning. We are so used to compartmentalising our lives, in the roles we play, live and work. Such a mindset has helped with efficiency but it is challenging our collective progress in a globalised world. That is why my current Masters research embraces the notion of a living inquiry and how an interdisciplinary arts practice and collaboration can shape our collective understanding.



## WORDS OF APPRECIATION

I am deeply thankful for the experiences that have shaped my understanding of kindness, humility, and tenacity, and what it means to hold on to one's ideals even during the dark times. This spirit of idealism is only possible because of the many individuals who have shown me kindness and taken a leap of faith with me. To my family and Hera, thank you for your unwavering support and inspiring me with the future we could build.

To the many big hearts who have not hesitated to lend your support in my artistic pursuits – Faith Teh Eng Eng, Pak Sunaryo Sutono, Kenneth Whye Choe, Kwok Kian Woon, Louis Ho, Lum Chee Hoo, Yang Tien, Mary Seah, Honor Harger, Ngauw Cui Qin, Lu Xiaohui, Robert Zhao Renhui, Rebecca Heaton, Jennifer Wong Pui Cheng, Paul Lincoln, Ching Jianhong, Chua Siew Chin, Leonardus Adi Prasetya, AVS Printing, Angkrit Ajchariyasophon, Dea Aprilla, Chabib Duto Hapsono, Made Ananta, Rinaldi Ikhrum, Studio Lalang and many other invaluable partners.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to these organisations for the opportunities and trust you have given me thus far. I hope we can continue to chart our collaborations: National Institute of Education, School of Art, Design and Media, Mizuma Gallery, Singapore Art Museum, and many others. Your openness to my ideas have made a difference to my artistic development. To the National Arts Council, thank you for the Young Artist Award. It is an important affirmation of my artistic efforts.

Finally, to the teachers who have nurtured my artistic interest since young, I am forever grateful to have met you.