



LEE MOK YEE

A Rhetorical Garden

疊山





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A digital catalogue for "A Rhetorical Garden",  
a solo exhibition by Lee Mok Yee

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Cover page: Detail shot of *RG7* (2019)

# LEE MOK YEE

## A Rhetorical Garden

叠山



# Introduction & Interview

with Laura Porter

A Rhetorical Garden showcases ten sculptures by Mok Yee. Inspired by the SuZhou Chinese gardens and traditional bonsai sceneries, Mok Yee creates these organic structures by methodically tearing and stacking cork wood; where the act of making is both spontaneous and rational – organic and artificial.

Much like the meticulously designed bonsai gardens, the sculptures attempt to change the landscape of the gallery space; and where wood is thought of as a natural material, the cork wood has undergone so much process that it's now an artificial substance. Typically used in construction, this wood is made easily accessible by mass production, and these ideas of production are reflected in the way Mok Yee utilises the same actions again and again, within the making process.

盆栽或盆景艺术一直都是一门以盆栽作树木、以石头作山水，讲究与自然要素高度和谐的艺术。而中国园林不仅要表现自然要素的美，还要表现人在自然环境中美的生活和情感寄托。艺术家取园林的视角，尝试把城市中过度发展的生活环境想象成一个园林，而钢筋水泥、道路、建筑都是其“园林”的一部分。

《叠山》灵感来自于中国的苏州园林，展览展示了十件由软木叠起的雕塑。软木碎在经过人工压缩，大量生产后形成我们生活里常见的物品。艺术家随意捏开，然后一片片的建造起整个雕塑，其材料与制作过程对应了园林中如何对自然（植物、石头）加工，从而展现更大的自然微景（山水、树木）。和盆景艺术一样，这些雕塑也尝试与展览空间对话，塑造不一样的观赏经验。





*Detail of RG2 (2019)*



Laura Porter (LP): What made you first think of the cork wood as a material to make art with?

Mok Yee (MY): Originally, I really liked the texture of the cork wood, and it's an interesting material because it's a compound of natural materials formed by the wood dust of a cork tree. It's quite accessible as well, because it's a ready-made and commonplace object that we use regularly in household appliances. I first started using cork wood in 2015, after visiting the Borobudur Temple in Jogjakarta. It seemed to me there were a lot of possibilities of what I could do with it.

LP: You don't modify the cork wood, other than breaking it apart and re-assembling it. You don't paint it or change its appearance in any way. Why is it important to you to keep the characteristics of the material?

MY: I always think that materials have their own language. Where the material came from, how the material is made, where you gather the material - this is all part of its language. For most of my work, I don't paint the objects and I don't alter the material too much in order to keep the characteristics and authenticity of the material, and this is very important to my practice. When I'm breaking the cork, it's about repeating the process to reflect how the cork wood is made; it's compounded and becomes a new material - much like I break the material and rebuild it, piece-by-piece, to create a new form. The breaking of the material is spontaneous, and the process is very organic for me, which is reflected in the organic form of the sculptures.

LP: The sculptures are very tactile - when I saw them, my first instinct was to want to touch them. Why do you think that is?

MY: For the audience, it creates curiosity. What is the material? This is why I like the cork wood; it's normally neat and uniform, but when you tear it apart it looks like a natural substance, like clay or soil. In the sculptures, it looks like one single piece, but when you look closely you can see it is stacked to form the shape. It draws you in.

LP: How did you come to use the imagery of the bonsai gardens in your sculptural work?

MY: Bonsai sceneries are not necessarily common in Malaysia, but I'm interested in Chinese philosophy and traditions, which is represented in a lot of forms. Feng Shui is an important idea in Chinese philosophy, which is present in architecture, painting, landscape design and Chinese calligraphy. It's all about balance, between human and nature. In 2018, I visited the SuZhou Chinese gardens, and I found it interesting how they use plants, stone and ponds to create small landscapes; where ponds represent the sea, stone represents mountains and plants represent large trees and forests. I extended this concept into my own living environment and the places near where I live, and I started looking at how the city is being continuously constructed around us. At the moment, they're building a lot of highways and condominiums near me, and I'm interested in these massive architectural structures, which you can see in the video of the highway that I've included in the exhibition. It's not just about changing our landscape, it's about changing our visual experience as we travel around the places in which we exist. That's why I'm interested in incorporating these ideas of the bonsai garden to our own environments.





Detail of RG10 (2021)



LP: The bonsai gardens are so immaculate that they become man-made by design, and start to look artificial, much like how you've created these organic forms out of the artificial cork.

MY: Yes, I'm interested in the process of making. The Bonsai scenery reflects the process of 'Nature-Artificial-Nature', but in my practice it's 'Artificial-Nature-Artificial-Nature'. It imitates the concept of the Bonsai, but the opposite way around to reflect the artist's role in making. Cork is my medium, much like a sculptor uses clay or a painter uses oil paint.

LP: The sculptures seem both fragile and heavy. What physical impact do you want the work to make?

MY: There are a lot of considerations about the structure and the balance of the material. It's a technical process, but at the same time, the process of tearing apart the cork wood is quite liberating – I do it randomly. But when I assemble it, it's quite technical and rational, almost like building with bricks. I wanted the appearance to be heavy because I'm inspired by the heavy concrete pillars used to build highways – they are very imposing and swamp even the high rise buildings around it. To me, it's interesting how you have to navigate the roads through these structures, and that's how I want people to interact with the sculptures, where the plinths act like pillars and the audience has to navigate around it.

LP: You haven't used a traditional white plinth to display the work. The plinths in the exhibition are like artworks in themselves, and have a clear relationship with the sculptures. Why have you chosen to display them like this? Do you consider the plinth to be an intrinsic part of the sculpture itself?

MY: The plinths are definitely part of the sculptures – it's very important to me. I use a lot of industrial materials, and even though the wood looks very natural, it's actually ply, which is an artificial wood put together using finger joints, where they join all the left-over scraps of wood to create larger pieces. When you look at the wood in the plinths you see traces of machinery, where it's been cut. In my practice I use a lot of accuracy and preciseness, and this is why I like to use industrial materials, and I see the plinths as an extension of this.

LP: How do you decide on the scale of the sculptures? The sizes vary but they still stay within a certain parameter. Is this deliberate?

MY: For every sculpture I create a sketch and work to a fixed shape. There's often a lot of changes that happen throughout the process, and I often change my idea, but it's important to me to consider what the sculptures look like when they're all together, and make sure everything is balanced and comfortable in the space. I also like to consider the perspectives and angles for the audience – some sculptures have to be seen from higher and others from eye-level, and so I decide on the size of the plinths accordingly.



LP: Do you consider the sculptures as individuals or as an installation all together?

MY: When I made the sculptures I considered it as one installation, because I'm trying to create an experience where the audience walks through the sculptures and feels a fundamental experience. I wanted there to be a connection to the space and audience, that is why I called it *A Rhetorical Garden* – it's an open-ended experience.

LP: You talk about the stacked stones at Borobudur Temple, and how that inspired you to stack the cork wood. What do you think is the significance of the act of stacking? To me, it's suggestive of growth.

MY: When you look at the Borobudur Temple, at first you just see the Buddha relief and carving, but when you look closer you can see how the stones are stacked, and are all a fixed size. I find it really interesting, how the structures of the temple reflect religion and faith in the architecture, but the structures also reflect an interesting interpretation of materials. The temples were built a long time ago, and used this simple process of stacking stones, which is a very rational act. You can stack a material unconsciously, but after a while it will collapse, so you have to do it in a way that maintains the overall structure. When I was younger, my family owned a wholesale business, and there were always boxes stacked in my father's shop, and from a young age I would go and help him stack the boxes, and my father always had different ways of stacking boxes to make sure they are stable and space saving. I think these childhood memories of stacking have influenced my artwork now, and stacking has become an important act in my art practice. As you say, with growth, I like to see how things are built up and managed without causing the structure to collapse.



Artist's Studio Image 2



LP: How do you think the work in *A Rhetorical Garden* links with your own identity and sense of place?

MY: Because of my background as Malaysian Chinese, I'm interested in Chinese culture and work with a lot of Chinese Folk materials, like gold paper and incense. I like to incorporate folk culture into my work as well, and celebrating culture is an important part of Chinese identity – it's not about faith or religion, but about cultural identity. I have had a Chinese education and have adopted a lot of Chinese influences from my family. Bonsai sceneries are not commonplace in Malaysian Chinese Culture, but I felt it's interesting to see Traditional Chinese Art through a non-Chinese Chinese.

LP: It's interesting how there's a meditative element to your making process, why do you think this is important?

MY: Meditation has many different interpretations. For me, meditation is trust and faith, like when you do something repeatedly daily. Maybe this is a meaningless act, or maybe it's functional, but for me it's just a dialogue between me and the materials. I think this is a very important process for an artist. When you create, you make something from nothing – you have to believe in yourself and the work so that you put all your effort into it. For me, meditation is about belief, but it's not a faith.

LP: Where do you see your work fitting within the wider context of art in Malaysia?

MY: There aren't as many artists in Malaysia who make material-based sculptures. For me, there's a difference between material and medium. A lot of people have suggested to me that I should work with clay in order to have more flexibility in my working process, but that is not my concern. I'm not trying to make a bonsai, I'm not trying to show you what an object looks like, I'm concerned about the language of the material. It's defined by who you are and where you're from, and when you look at wood we have different ideas of wood depending on where we are from, and this can change depending on different interpretations.

There are different techniques when using traditional materials, such as clay, bronze, marble, wood etc., but I enjoy a lot the limitations of presenting materials in its pure form. I like to transform the utility and purpose of the material. It reminds me a quote "If materials could be presented in such a manner as not to overwhelmed or belied by form, it might possible to introduce into art a new kind of truth" by Philip Leider. That's why I believe there's no hierarchy when we only talk about the materials.

Sculpture is a big part of your culture in the UK - even in South East Asia countries like Thailand, Indonesia and Cambodia – where sculpture is both traditional and modern, but it's not so common in Malaysia. I hope the exhibition can start more conversations about the language of materials and will help me connect with artists working with similar concerns.



# Works



Detail of RG9 (2021)





RG1 2019, Wood cork, wood and lacquer, 125.6 x 90 x 56 cm





RG2

2019, Wood cork, wood and lacquer, 140 x 53 x 53 cm





RG3

2019, Wood cork, wood and lacquer, 116 x 68 x 42 cm





RG4 2019, Wood cork, wood and lacquer, 99 x 70 x 42 cm





RG5

2019, Wood cork, wood and lacquer, 84.6 x 86 x 48 cm





RG6

2019, Wood cork, wood and lacquer, 98 x 68 x 48 cm





RG7

2019, Wood cork, wood and lacquer, 74.6 x 90 x 33 cm





RG8

2019, Wood cork, wood and lacquer, 161.6 x 125 x 65 cm





RG9

2021, Wood cork, wood and lacquer, 166 x 82.6 x 62 cm





RG10

2021, Wood cork, wood and lacquer, 149.5 x 62 x 37.6 cm



# Artist Biography



Lee Mok Yee (b.1988, Klang, Selangor)'s process-focused work often interrogates the role of 'material' in art-making. His use of cork wood explores natural materials that go through industrial and artificial processes. Mok Yee responds to the digital world by exploring the handmade, and how the labour of art-making is represented through the tactile play of material, and the repetition of process. These repetitions become a meditative act, and represent meditation as an act of repeating a belief system. Often using ready-made materials, Mok Yee's work often explores the industrial versus the natural; the organic versus the artificial.

## Education

- 2013 - 2014 Fine Art, Middlesex University, London, United Kingdom
- 2007 - 2010 Fine Art, Dasein Academy of Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

## Solo Exhibitions

- 2021 *A Rhetorical Garden 叠山*, Richard Koh Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2013 *Superstition*, Installation art exhibition, Studio at Straits, Penang, Malaysia
- 2012 *Scepticism is a virtue*, Artseni Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

## Selected Group Exhibitions

- 2020 *Locating Malaysian Contemporary Art: The Echo Boomers*, Richard Koh Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2019 *Locals Only*, Taksu Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
*Bakat Muda Sezaman Finalist Exhibition*, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
*Catalyst*, HOM Art Trans, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
*Superstition II*, Georgetown Festival 2019, Penang, Malaysia  
*INXO International Residency program 2019*, Kluang, Johor, Malaysia  
*Pangkor Island Festival 2019*, Pulau Pangkor, Perak, Malaysia  
*SHIFT*, White Box Publika, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
*Reinterpreting Minimalism*, Segaris art center, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2018 *The Horizon is just an illusion*, Our Art Projects, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
*Echoes of Possibilities*, Core Design Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2017 *Barat East*, Chandan Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
*This is Where We Meet*, Our Art Projects, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2016 *Young Malaysian Artists: New Object(ion) III Exhibition*, Petronas Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
*LOOK TO SEE*, Three Man Show, Shalini Ganendra Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

*OPIUM - Artistic Expression by Malaysian & French Artists*, DPAC, Commissioned Work, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

*Yayasan Sime Darby Arts Festival*, KLPAC, Commissioned Work, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

- 2015 *Young and Blooming*, China House, Penang, Malaysia  
*Presence Art Exhibition*, Gallery @Starhill, Starhill Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

*March Show*, G13 Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

*BioDATA Young Contemporary Artist Exhibition*, Artseni Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

*Malaysia-Korea Asia Art Awards Invitation Exchange Exhibition 2015*, Oriental Art & Cultural Association, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

- 2014 *STATE*, Middlesex University, London

*PAUSE*, Beaconsfield Contemporary Art, London

*Future is Leaving*, Middlesex University Fine Art Degree Show, Truman Brewery Gallery, London

- 2013 *Snake year Art Exhibition*, Oriental Art & Cultural Centre, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

*Nordart International Art Exhibition*, Rendsburg, Germany

*TIGA, Three young contemporary artist exhibition*, Gehriq Gallery, Penang, Malaysia

*Pangkor Island Festival 2013*, Pulau Pangkor, Perak, Malaysia

- 2012 *Asia Invitation Art Exhibition*, The Seoul Museum of Art, Korea

*Nordart International Art Exhibition*, Rendsburg, Germany

## Residency

- 2019 INXO International Residency program 2019, Kluang, Johor, Malaysia



# Writer Biography



Laura Porter (b.1991) is a sculpture and installation artist, currently based in Devon, UK. She is also the director and curator of Studio KIND. in Braunton, and a trustee of The Plough Arts Centre in Torrington,UK.

# Acknowledgements

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and family





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Founded in 2005, with spaces in Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok and Singapore, Richard Koh Fine Art is committed to the promotion of Southeast Asian contemporary art on regional and international platforms. Centred around a core belief in developing an artist's career, the gallery looks to identify understated, albeit promising practices, and providing it opportunities to flourish. Through its regular exhibition cycles, print & digital publications and cross-border gallery collaborations, Richard Koh Fine Art engages the art community with the aim of developing regional and intercultural dialogue.

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