

***A Social Portrait of Singapore  
The Critical Years 1963 - 1985  
Photography by Loke Hong Seng***

Yeo Workshop presents a solo exhibition by Singaporean photographer Loke Hong Seng, whose photographic practice captured the rise of Singapore between 1963 and 1985.

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*On our way to Pasar Malam, 1968, Digital print on archival paper*

**OPENING RECEPTION**

Friday 3 July 2015  
6pm – 9pm  
with catalogue signing  
from 8-9pm

**EXHIBITION DATES:**

3 July – 6 Sept 2015

Loke Hong Seng is a fine art photographer shooting street portraits of Singapore during the period 1963 to 1985. These 22 years parallel a period of tremendous change in Singapore – from the fight to Independence through modernization of the country – during which he captured the emergence of a new republic against the backdrop of vernacular architecture and colonial buildings. He made a conscious decision to shoot more realistic images of daily life. Though his photographs adhere to classical modes of composition, his style has a contemporaneous aspect of depicting modern life. This is the first time the works have been exhibited.

The photographs in this exhibition are a selection of 20 photographs from Loke Hong Seng's extensive body of work focussing on scenes of the development of Singapore from the *kampong* to high-rise apartment blocks, specifically Housing Development Board (HDB) flats. Although today the HDB flats are an inalienable structure of Singapore's landscape, their development and construction methods are hardly known.



During this period, a large portion of construction workers in Singapore, including those involved in the building of HDB flats, were Samsui women. Samsui women were immigrants from the Canton region of China to Singapore in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They were employed as manual labourers, especially in the construction industry. They continued their labour into old age; by the 1960s, the Samsui women were hired to build HDB flats. Loke has captured the Samsui women as his subjects at a time when these women were – and still are – invisible, with their sangfroid composure at work.



*Built from the ground up, a layer at a time, 1970, Digital print on archival cotton paper*

Unbeknownst to many, the design and planning of HDB flats were based on Modernist principles. The straight clean lines and the HDB flats are made with concrete, a material commonly used in Modernist construction. The high-rises were seen as symbols of power and wealth – and therefore modern – as compared to low-rise kampong houses. That the HDB flats were built during the period of Modernism in Singapore – a time of freedom, birth of a nationalist spirit, and technological advances – have not escaped art historians. The hegemony of HDB flats was a way to unite the diversified citizens of the new republic.



*Blueprint for a Beautiful Homeland, 1971, Digital print on archival cotton paper*

Loke Hong Seng's photographs are not merely nostalgic reminders of the past. It reminds us of the sacrifices made in the name of progress. These photographs demonstrate how strong the Singaporean spirit is and how her citizens are willing to undertake hardships in order to achieve progress.

This exhibition is the first time Loke's photographs will be exhibited together and the first time street art photography will be revealed by a Singaporean photographer who was working during the time of Singapore's historic beginnings as a modern independent nation. In the first decades of the newly independent Singapore, it was rare to find a photographer in Singapore taking "street portraits" for the sake of fine art and not part of a journalistic assignment or a government project. This exhibition will encourage a new reading of early photography at a time when photography as an art form struggled to establish itself as internationally viable. Other than its former uses in documentary and archives, this selection exemplifies the simplicity of 20<sup>th</sup> century life.

While these photographs were captured by film in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they were printed onto archival paper in the past few months specifically for this exhibition. As with artists – especially photographers – of the pioneer generation, Loke was unable to find a gallery to represent him or even an audience for his photographs. Today, with the expansion of art in Singapore, Loke's photographs have found an audience in both the older and the younger generations – the older generation who wish to preserve their past and the younger generation eager to learn more about their art history.

This exhibition is accompanied by a catalogue of the same title. It will be available for sale at the gallery and various bookstores for SGD\$80.

### **About Yeo Workshop**

More than just a commercial art gallery, Yeo Workshop is a project space that produces a series of exhibitions, represented artist projects and gallery-based programmes such as talks and guiding research. The gallery focuses on presenting a programme that is ambitious and educational, and that will also aid in developing the next generation of art collectors. The space also houses its current production of the Arnoldii Arts Club, a course-based arts club in Singapore.

## BIOGRAPHY

Loke Hong Seng was born in Singapore in 1943. The artist is part of the pioneer generation in Singapore, graduating from Chung Cheng High School in 1960, after which he was hired by the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation as an announcer in 1965 where he produced numerous Radio Dramas in Mandarin and Cantonese. Around this time, he began taking amateur photographs with his older brother's Topcon camera. His passion for the craft steadily grew, and soon he acquired and used cameras such as Topcon, an Afga folded 6X9 and a Rolleicord 6X6. In 1968 he joined the Photographic Society of Singapore (PSS), mixing with photographers like Quah Shang Wei, Doctor Wee, Yip Cheng Fen, Tan Lip Seng, Foo Tee Jun, David Tay, Goh Kim Hui, Benedict Toh, Royston, Henry Lee, Ho Kok Kin, and Francis Tan, amongst numerous others. Following the advice of his peers, he began shooting with a Leicaflex 35mm camera.

In 1973, he received the Golden Award from the 3rd Singapore Photo Art Photography Society, and in 1974, contributed one work that was selected at the Photokina Exhibition in Cologne, Germany, with "One World for All" UNESCO Award. He also exhibited at the Unesco Headquarters in Paris in 1975 with "Human Settlement".

A watershed year was 1982, when he digitalized his collection of images. This included digital editing of his photographs. He started to also use video as a medium and became a professional videographer.

In recent years, he has been in high demand for talks, presentations and exhibitions, and his photograph was selected as the main feature of Clifford Pier's 80<sup>th</sup> Anniversary photo contribution. He conducted a talk at the Photographic Society of Singapore (PSS) in 2013, which was featured in "Life Behind the Lens" at the Arnoldii Arts Club in Gillman Barracks in 2014 (moderated by photo writer Zhuang Wubin), and he also gave a presentation of his work to the lecturers at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts in 2014. In April 2015, he was the keynote speaker for Nikon's "Iconography 2015" seminar at Hwa Chong Secondary School.

Exhibitions for the artist include group presentations at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts entitled *Vernacula As Seen Through Art, Film & Photography*, 24 April – 19 May 2015; *The World Around Us* at The American Club Singapore from 1 May – 30 June 2015; a public display of *Singapore River and its Trade* at the Raffles Place Park MRT station from 1 July 2015 - 30 August 2015; and at the UOB public plaza during August 2015.