

Stars Beneath the CTE

Exhibition Review: *Gezeitentümpel (Tidal Pools)*

by Philipp Aldrup

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Objectifs Gallery

With his carefully composed photographs serving as archeological meditations, Philipp Aldrup presents hidden parts of Singapore as in-between spaces shaped by different forces of nature. *Stephen Black reports.*

Text by Stephen Black
Photography by Philipp Aldrup

“Every act of rebellion expresses a nostalgia for innocence and an appeal to the essence of being.”

—Albert Camus

Gezeitentümpel (Tidal Pools), Philipp Aldrup’s recent show at Objectifs, is a rebellion, albeit a quiet and humble one. With *Tidal Pools*, Aldrup has rebelled against his own past, having hurled away photojournalism and his own highly regarded documentary approach to embrace the spirits of poetry and philosophy.

There is a lot of dirt in *Tidal Pools*. Aldrup presents Singapore as a collection of earthy surfaces almost devoid of vegetation and traces of humanity. These superficially barren plots of land represent Aldrup’s inner thoughts, just as the brushstrokes in Zen landscapes represent both distant mountains and the artist’s inner mind.

The images were produced during a period when Aldrup often pondered topics like the brevity of life and the vastness of time. In his artist’s statement, he mentions the writings of the French philosopher and Nobel Prize recipient Albert Camus. However, *Tidal Pools* is not an example of “philosophy-is-only-good-for-you- if-it-is-painfully-boring.” Within the exhibition’s dark, carefully composed images, there is a lightness of spirit that saves us from *Pessimismus*.

William Blake wrote about seeing the universe in a grain of sand, Aldrup perceives abandoned spaces as containers which, constantly and extremely slowly, hold and release memories. Just as real tidal pools exist between land and sea, Aldrup’s tidal pools exist between past and present. The images, with their lack of subject matter and indistinct lighting, represent the flow of time. In *Tidal Pools*, a space below the CTE could be the conceptual equivalent of an archaeology site or the remains of an underwater city. Or a galaxy. As Aldrup wrote for his piece in the *Paradise Lost* show at 2902 gallery in 2011:

Right in the middle of the city, behind the bustling streets and shiny malls, in the wayside scrub lie shabby nooks and crannies—temporary faultlines between former places and places-to-be—ephemeral spaces which paradoxically radiate a prehistoric and timeless atmosphere.

Is Aldrup a photographer, a visual artist, a philosopher, or a documentary maker? The differences are not clear cut, especially in Singapore. Photographer/visual artist John Clang won the 2010 President’s Design Award. Among the Singapore International Photography Prizes is one for “best author.” Chua Soo Bin, the photographer who originated the Singapore Girl campaign, produced photo books about Chinese calligraphy and ran a gallery showing paintings. There is now talk of “lens-based art.” Ultimately, we must trust our perception of the work.

Aldrup studied photography in Singapore, beginning with the Shooting Home workshop at Objectifs. Shooting Home urges participants to draw inspiration from their home environment. Aldrup adopted the Golden Mile complex as his “home.”

Threatened to be destroyed, Golden Mile was one of Singapore’s first high-rise developments, a vertical city built in the organic style of the Japanese Metabolist movement. A politician once described it as a “vertical slum.” Aldrup’s carefully composed images seemed to show that the residents were never “at home,” making the work seem to be more about Golden Mile’s architectural spaces than its flats and living rooms.

Aldrup began documenting other places threatened by modernisation. The Mitre Hotel, built over a century ago, was photographed as an uninhabited no-man’s-land full of decades’ worth of decay and fresh renovations.

Istana Woodneuk, an abandoned mansion now in the midst of a massive development area was the subject of another series. A photograph taken from one of its balconies shows a distant clump of housing estates, the sky, and green vegetation. We cannot put a date on it. If the image were converted to black and white it would feel like something made forty years ago.

Aldrup’s beautiful documentation of places like the

now-destroyed National Stadium, the soon to be downsized Bukit Brown Cemetery, and the Punggol area show them without any clear chronological markers. *Past, or present, or glimpses of the future?* Aldrup seems to have often stood in places that have disappeared/are disappearing/will disappear.

In one image, delicate white fans are suspended just beneath the high, light blue ceiling of the Capitol Theatre. Below are floor-to-ceiling scaffoldings, piles of dirt and stacks of elegant seats that wait to be carried away. The image seems to declare that the future is a place where stories and “new pasts” will accumulate. *New movies on the same screen in the same place. Different audience.*

“My work seeks to visualise the value and beauty of the friction between urban development and nature, the friction between reinvention and heritage, as well as the complications of urban planning, which is largely guided by economic imperatives.”

—Philipp Aldrup, personal statement

Pulau Ubin, a ten-minute boat ride away from the coast of Changi, was once a booming mining town of 6,000 people. Now, it has the atmosphere of an abandoned 1960s style *kampong*. Here, Aldrup discovered the Chias, an elderly couple. The simple home where they lived most of their lives is now being reclaimed by the jungle and they now spend more of their time in a



