

Stars Beneath the CTE

Exhibition Review: *Gezeitentümpel (Tidal Pools)*
by Philipp Aldrup
1 February – 9 March 2013
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 it 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



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modern HDB highrise apartment near Serangoon. (On Pulau Ubin, Aldrup also befriended a three-legged wild boar, but that is another story.) The Chias, who walk and take boats, buses, and trains between the two locations, add a human dimension to this phase of Aldrup's work.

By comparing his past work with *Tidal Pools*, we are given a platform to discuss the relationship between documentation and art. Aldrup's images of the sulphur mines in Indonesia provide us with a way of examining this complex issue.

"I went to the mines in 2008 as a tourist and left with strong images," Aldrup has stated. His images illustrate documentary photography's basic formula: an interesting place + time = an interesting photo.¹

Aldrup's quote indicates that the images were the result of chance. Neither philosophy nor an established artistic practice influenced the creation of the photos. He was a casual photographer, not a painter, film director, conceptual artist, writer, researcher, or dancer.

Let us now imagine Aldrup returning to the same spot in 2013. Let us also assume that he continues to explore the ideas that mattered to him during the creation of *Tidal Pools*, including Camus's analysis of the Greek myth of Sisyphus. Sisyphus was punished by the gods for removing Death from the world. His punishment was to push a huge boulder up a hill. Just before reaching the top, the enchanted boulder would roll back down and Sisyphus would have to start at the bottom again. Forever.

It is likely that the images of the miners from Aldrup's second trip would be much different from the first. They might reference or even visually duplicate the myth of Sisyphus. These "miners as Sisyphus" images would float between the fluid borders of visual art, documentary, conceptual art, and could even be considered as a form of theatre.

There are Singaporean photographers who blur boundaries. Charles Lim documents the waters surrounding Singapore, creating photographs that are conceptual, personal, and political. Amanda Heng's

oeuvre features photographs of planned moments of intimacy. Robert Zhao's work with photography is meant to exemplify his questioning of information and authority systems. Fong Qi Wei's recent *Brush Strokes of Nature* series uses the camera to document collages made of flower parts. Performance artists, performers, and installation artists all use photography to some extent, in some cases the documentation being the only "proof" the artwork existed.

The documentary work Aldrup created previously is important on many levels. Singaporean landmarks and ruins have been documented, stories have been told, and society has seen unseen sides of itself. *Tidal Pools*, with its anonymous subject matter, rebels against this idea. Or does it? Perhaps Aldrup's images preserve something that will be seen differently by those from another era.

"In the future, when nearly everything has been flattened and streamlined into a simulcra of reality, they will embody the impulse for alternatives."

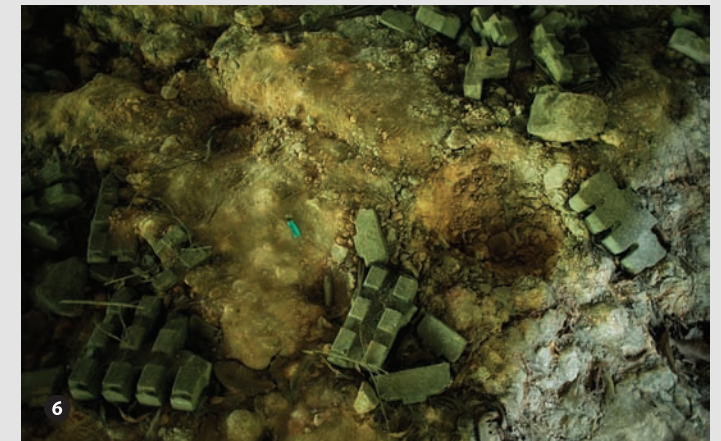
—Philipp Aldrup, personal statement

Aldrup's tidal pools do nothing but exist in time and space. His images provide moments of solitude. They are starting points for contemplation about solidarity, rationality, and absurdism, nihilism, life and death. There is a small, special kind of joy in knowing that he has honestly confronted these incomprehensible ideas. "I have no conclusions," Aldrup seems to say. "I only ask that you look at these places. Whether you see stars or you see dirt, it is okay."

"It is advisable to look from the tide pool to the stars and then back to the tide pool again."

—John Steinbeck ■

¹ A lengthy essay could be written about this formula's relationship to surveillance cameras, robotics, and image-capturing drone planes. The essay could also touch upon the similarity of tourist photos and the "thinking" that occurs when a shutter is pressed in the era of the iPhone. What is photographic art in a time where Instagrams add impact to dull pictures like MSG adds flavour to stale food? To quote Ansel Adams, "There is nothing more boring than a brilliant photograph of a fuzzy idea."



¹ Bukit Brown Cemetery, Oct 2012.

² The Golden Mile Complex, Beach Road, May 2010.

³ The Mitre Hotel, Killiney Road, Feb 2010.

⁴ Istana Woodneuk, Holland Road, Apr 2012.

⁵ ⁶ Tidal Pools.

⁷ ⁸ Leaving Ubin, Nov 2009.