

Flat views, counter-visions

Samuel Lee

1. Living, drawing, working, reading, painting, writing, and dreaming. These acts of life—when routinely carried out at a certain elevation, within a certain mode of social housing dependent on certain socio-political constructions, in buildings propped up by a certain global division of labour—constitute part of a set of visual practices and habits of observation that I would describe as the visuality of the high rise.
2. The visuality of the high rise is neither a coherent set of strategies nor a repertoire of images, textures, and palettes. Rather, it operates on a material level as the range of conditions and resources available to the artist for art making; as a psychological process, it gives birth to the artist/writer; for the latter there is no being prior to this mode of sensing and making.
3. A mode of visuality makes possible the movement of thought, as with the enchantments of perspectival representation in fifteenth-century Florence and the crystallisation of the humanist subject; or the invention of aerial photography and the inauguration of profound forms of military violence. The visuality I am attempting to describe has produced a different kind of subjectivity: an observer of necessary contradictions and an occupant in a world in which place and time do not converge but are just-so-slightly offset from each other by desire, speculation, and ambition.
4. It produces a syncopated rhythm that feels at times like a jaunty dance, nurturing an attraction to sequins and sparklers, bells and baubles.
5. In the visuality of the high rise, housing units are stacked and divided in a uniform sequence not unlike a New Yorker cartoon of neighbours living in the same urban apartment complex, going about their day with blissful—and comic—indifference to everyone else's lives. Perhaps it represents a return to the grid, canted up ninety degrees from street to sky. The arrangement calls to mind principles of surveillance and legibility, to be sure, but it also works both ways in fixing the relationship between the self and the urban landscape. Though I imagine myself dwelling in a point somewhere along the x- and y-axes, invisible in my fungibility yet visible in my governability, I am also the observer of this series of non-intersecting lives. As I write this, my sight lines extend from the window of my room on the 12th floor to a funeral procession at the void deck of the adjacent block, and I rehearse the surveillance I try to wish away from myself and my friends.
6. A work like Khairullah Rahim's *Shapeshifter(s)* provokes further observations about this mode of visuality. An establishing shot depicts the artist's neighbourhood in Boon Lay, framed by high-rise HDB apartment blocks dominating three sides of the image—are we looking from the guard tower of Jeremy Bentham's prison-rotunda, practising a kind of impossible watchfulness over every granular detail of life? Or are we subjects of the panopticon, already familiar with the injunction to self-regulate? As day cuts to night, close-circuit television cameras installed around the housing estate constitute yet another layer of surveillance, for which the centrality of the visual to our current disciplinary paradigm becomes more apparent.
7. Still, the CCTV's field of vision is a severely constrained source of evidence disguised as the omnipresent eye of heaven. One instance of the partiality of its vision occurs in the thick of a residential incident in *Mimpi Siang Hari*. Attached to the ceiling (one assumes), it can only cast its vision downwards in the direction of some hypothetical abyss. An event has occurred beyond the periphery of its frame, cropped out by the artist, and positioned as something beyond knowability. Later on, a short take of a man performing an exercise routine along a corridor a few floors below mimics the position of the disciplinary CCTV camera. Two thirds of his body, however, are obscured by the walls of the building. If the high-angle shot, much like an aerial photograph, denotes vision from a position of power, it only obtains its effectiveness in shards and fragments.

8. An alternative, more emancipatory category of vision revels in its deftness and exactitude in manipulating tone and affect. It is mindful of the possibility of a countervisuality conceived through visual wit and the subversive tradition of montage editing. The emancipatory camera, as it features in Khairullah's work, is frequently trained towards the sky. Craning its neck upwards, it captures evidence of birds in flight and, in the same breath, plastic bags (*Mimpi Siang Hari*); bubbles cascading down a block (*Shapeshifter(s)*); a military blimp (55); sunlight filtering through trees (*Buah Dahsyat*); cloud formations (*Sunday*); hands flapping in the air (*little birds*). It is curious rather than intrusive, open hearted and without suspicion.
9. These airborne objects spin and glisten with a charisma that, we are soon convinced, is inherent in them. The sequins and glitter on thorny fruit and rubber pigeon heads index the slight disjunct between the way reality has been framed for us and the desire to imagine something transcendent or utopian.
10. What this amounts to is a declaration of the right to look. For the visual theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff, it entails the right to return the gaze implicated within dominant and domineering visualities. It is a demand for mutual recognition, for the possibility of rearranging and revising what can be seen, said, and thought about, in order to construct a subjectivity of one's own.
11. Armed with critical vocabularies for describing space, power, coloniality, image, markets, biology, etc., which swirl around me like a cool October breeze, I am still confronted with the blunt force of metaphor at every point along the road.
12. To desire escape is an absurdity. To embrace the absurd is gain some foothold, at least, on a tenuous existence.

Samuel Lee is a writer and poet whose work spans art history, literary studies, and visual culture. His debut collection, *A Field Guide to Supermarkets in Singapore* (Math Paper Press, 2016), was the winner of the 2018 Singapore Literature Prize. His writing has appeared in the *Yale Literary Magazine*, *Cordite Poetry Review*, *UnFree Verse*, *Antennae: The Journal of Nature in Visual Culture*, and *11 x 9: Collaborative Poetry from the Philippines and Singapore*. He studied art history, literature, and the humanities at the University of Chicago, Yale University, and the National University of Singapore, with a special interest in nineteenth-century art and visuality, global histories of photography, and writing about contemporary art. He lives in Singapore.