



The Artist of Everyday Things

The artist Leow Wei Li paints pictures using ordinary household materials and ingredients, navigating the intersections of art and the Singaporean identity in the process.

By Terence Poh

WHILE SINGAPOREANS COLLECTIVELY retreated to their homes (or embraced “circuit breaker,” as the nation terms it) in April this year to contain the spread of Covid-19, the artist Leow Wei Li had been doing so since 2019, working from her home studio. When people were beginning to innovate myriad ways to live life wholly in confinement, she had already found ways to work with things in the household and created pictures out of them. She brings her latest body of work, “Homemade,” to show at SPRMRKT at Dempsey Hill, an upmarket, contemporary café-restaurant founded upon converging culinary craft with retail, art and culture.

The “Homemade” series of mixed-media paintings takes ordinary household materials and ingredients and cements them onto a wooden canvas — like jam on toast — to “trace the labour of love and methods of care that go into shaping the daily lives of everyday Singaporeans.”

“I usually visit art stores for my materials,” Leow says, “but for this series I was checking out places selling day-to-day necessities near my home in Woodlands.” She foraged for things that mean something in places as mundane as the kitchen, toilet or storeroom, and on trips to supermarkets and grocery stores. “The more I welcomed these domestic items into my studio, the more I discovered their character, qualities, and what they mean to me,” says Leow. “My curiosity to know and explore them led to the final work.”

The resulting 16 paintings honour instances that make up her Singaporean experience. Golden yellow longevity noodles acquired from an old mama shop are mashed onto a slate in “Long Life,” acknowledging the central role the little convenience or sundry shops played in shaping micro-enterprise in the heartlands during Singapore’s earlier days. Most Singaporeans would cite the mama shops,

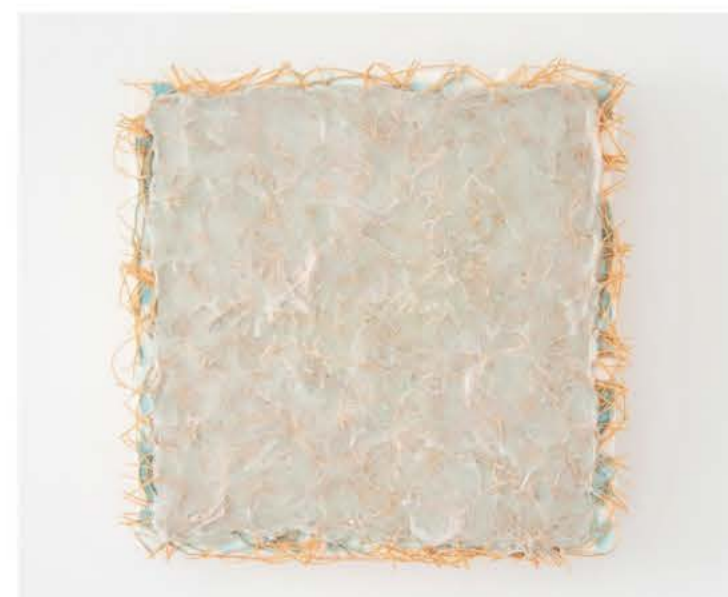
ingeniously organised to shelf an improbably wide array of goods, as a source of fascination in their Singaporean childhood experience. “Rocket” immortalises a house gift of arugula from Leow’s friend by suspending the vegetable in a paste which resembles Roquefort cheese, in an attempt to preserve the perishable. She confronts the fleeting nostalgia of family conversations in “Secrets,” filling in sunflower seed shells — remnants of the communion enjoyed by family members — with rainbow sprinkles. Memories are whole again, protected under delicate white mesh, a symbolic renewal laminated with some kind of permanence.

Leow tells me over email that she only started feeling truly comfortable to call herself an artist in January this year. “And that was before the making of any work that represented my heart,” she says. “For me, it wasn’t the social or cultural factors that caused this ‘delay’ but more of an internal, spiritual struggle of identity.” In Singapore, art remains relatively far from being widely recognised as a worthwhile pursuit,

despite gaining significant support from the government and community. But the young artist, who has received the tcc-Lasalle Artist-Curator Alumni Award, staged an exhibition at ION Art after winning the Young Talent Programme Winners’ Solo Exhibition 2016/17, and been commissioned to paint several murals for local cafés and community spaces, argues it’s a question of faith. “I believe you can be in a country with no support for the arts at all and still declare yourself a professional artist,” she says.

An artwork is finished when it surprises an artist, a lecturer had once told Leow, who majored in fine art at Lasalle College of the Arts and graduated with first class honours in 2016. “I love that and have been using that benchmark since, for it gives me so much joy and pleasure when it happens,” she says. Her husband reckons her weirdest quirk is painting without her glasses, but Leow recognises that, in the grand scheme of things, she remains in the “very early” stages of practising art. For inspiration, she has been following the Japanese-American artist Makoto Fujimura, whose works tread the boundary between abstract expressionism and Asian ink painting. Of the writer and speaker who offers perspectives in recalibrating current conventions of art-making, Leow says, “I was deeply moved by his work on ‘Culture Care: Reconnecting with Beauty for Our Common Life’ (2017) and his interview, ‘Art Can Teach Us How To Live with Integrity’ (2017).” Fujimura’s works and lessons for life have given her solid hope for the arts and doing art in Singapore.

The months of sheltering in place haven’t bothered Leow, who calls it “a great season of perfect conditions to incubate.” She’s used the time to carve out her own Singaporean journey in art, looking back while “looking forward to see what hatches in our next season.” As Singaporeans prepare to emerge from the confines of home, Leow will still work from home. “Right now I am still developing this series and will hopefully explore new materials,” she says. “As for the future, I am taking it one day at a time.” ■



Clockwise from top left: The Singaporean artist Leow Wei Li’s solo exhibition, “Homemade,” shows at SPRMRKT at Dempsey Hill until 12 July 2020; “Long Life” (2020), made with longevity noodles from an old mama shop, honours the centrality of the little convenience shops in shaping the everyday lives of Singaporeans; “Rocket” (2020) immortalises a friend’s house gift of arugula.