

DECK

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Homeless Chow & Lin

Interview by Sidd Perez



Installation view of *Homeless*, 2018. Photo by Hoong Wei Long. Courtesy of NUS Museum.



Portrait of Chow and Lin. Photo by Hoong Wei Long. Courtesy of NUS Museum.

Homeless

Homeless is a new project by Chow and Lin that debuts in NUS Museum. This photographic installation is complemented by artist books and a sound component that reflect Chow and Lin's evolving ideas around the complexity of scaling first-generation wealth vis-à-vis migration patterns for forced migrants. The exhibition inspects cursory attitudes towards private and transnational economies along the dispossession of groups of people from communities under siege through five sets of satellite views. These photographs visualise routes across borders of Mexico and USA, Myanmar and Bangladesh, North Korea and China, Egypt and Israel, Venezuela and Columbia alongside the localities that are homes to Carlos Slim Helu, Mark Zuckerberg, Lee Kun Hee, Eduardo Severin and Mukesh Ambani.

How do you find Chow and Lin's photographic language to be like?

CL A Chow and Lin project is never just about final visual form. It always starts with what are we concerned about. Are we able to do some research on this? Does the research show up to be different from what our assumed conclusion was? Part of the reason why Chow and Lin went out to do so many projects is because we also saw it as education for ourselves. We establish projects by using ourselves as a benchmark to find where some of our ideas are not well-informed, and that the topic is much more serious problem than we initially thought it was.

Is that how specialists come into the picture of a Chow and Lin project? I was wondering about that. When did you start talking to these field experts, and thinking your collaboration with them through interview? Is this just for *Homeless* or have you done similar exercises before?

CL Since the Equivalence project, we started involving other experts and academics into lending their point of view as part of the work. This is because we realise that there are areas of knowledge that is beyond our spheres of access. Meaning, this is not just something you can read about. It's significant that we work with different experts because they have been doing this form of research or practice all their lives.

Let's look at The Poverty Line, for instance. The fact is it started as a self-initiated project between the two of us and based on both of our worldviews. But the project catapulted us into different worlds where we found ourselves presenting the same project at different conferences, meeting different speakers, meeting other experts. These worlds are where everyone has a different point of view which is very valuable to the project. So our own worldviews expanded because we were able to talk to people that are not just within our realm such as other economics-trained professionals or other photographers. We were in fact speaking to philosophers, historians and scholars. Formalising it into actual interviews makes sense because when we presented at some lectures where other experts came in, we enjoy those conversations a lot more than, "how do you take a picture?" These interactions presented us with more questions that tangential from the opinions we were initially trying to speak about.

We see our work as being a catalyst for conversation. Ultimately, I think the barometer of success for a project is how much conversation and how much critical thinking we are able to generate for people who view our work or for the public at large.

Will you tell me more about how you decided which sources take what form in the exhibition of *Homeless*? You are hoping that the artist books and the sound pieces are not mere illustrations of the themes and topics that are present in your pairings. Rather they are parallel ideas.

CL In our exhibition, we use a combination of large format still photography derived from satellite found imagery, books with excerpts from existing news sources, research papers, along with a synthesised sound installation with various academics and



Installation view of *Homeless*, 2018. Photo by Hoong Wei Long. Courtesy of NUS Museum.

professionals from different fields to shape our exhibition and presentation.

Do you find that they are different forms of representation that visuals/photography alone cannot encapsulate fully?

CL We think that a complicated, multi dimension topic needs an equal and calculated way to engage the audience. It does not answer every query, but rather opens the possibility of more questioning.

After all, the topics that we approach for the exhibition *Homeless* are complicated. It involves themes such as rising inequality, an unprecedented refugee crisis, against the backdrop of rising xenophobia and nationalism. We approach data as the central focus of this project. Data evolves, from being private and confidential to being considered open and mainstream, and this depends on the platforms they are disseminated from. In this internet age of social media, open sourced information and AI, data gets transmitted even faster, and the lines between privacy and openness become blurred and debatable.

If you are accommodating other forms to construct your photographic process, what does it say about your views on photography as a sole, powerful medium and not just a footnote?

CL Photography is a universal medium, perhaps more as a language than spoken or written ones. However, the purpose of photography will also be thoroughly examined in our era, as the medium has drastically changed from a chemical processed form to a visual that you can capture and share with a mere device in your hand.

Words and opinions from experts and factual sources are important in our practice, and we value the different forms they take as equally important. These forms can be examined in tandem or individually as singular bodies of works. Chow and Lin's world view evolves because it relies on the knowledge and perspectives of these sources.

Now that Chow and Lin has a small visual surveying of mobilities and wealth with your five pairings in NUS Museum, what do these works, textual prompts (artist books) show you?

CL Our work is inspired by tipping point global issues. One day, we can look back in time and see how one of these factors may change history for what it is.

Going through our exhibition, there is a sense that not all is well. However, this is not a bleak assessment of the world today. Extreme poverty has been dramatically reduced in our current lifetime, and the world is more at peace than anytime in history. In Asia where the exhibition is made, the continent has developed rapidly—these themes and issues we speak about seemed other worldly.

We want to be critical of the ways media and society focus on the extremes of the society, sometimes in unhealthy doses. We often find ourselves worshipping the rich and famous, while we cast an equal and blatant sweep on the lower rungs of the society on needing them to be exceptionally hardworking and entrepreneurial.

Homeless

The pictures we feature have no context without any form of explanation, yet the scale of the works and the way they are displayed are precisely how they are meant to be shown. The books, featuring excerpts of varying news reports and research papers, show how each topic is framed and explained. The excerpts are short, almost twitter length, and this is emblematic of our times today, where we also suffer from an overload of data and short attention spans.

The exhibition aspires to think about capitalism as having enriched some of the smartest and most entrepreneurial minds out there. Mark Zuckerberg was a freshman in his dorm room a mere 15 years ago. Today, he is worth more than Luxembourg's GDP (68 billion vs 62 billion USD). It is not our opinion whether Zuckerberg does or does not deserves the fortune and fame that he gets today.

On the flip side, refugee numbers are becoming staggeringly high. There are 65 million refugees in the world today, the highest number since United Nations was founded after World War II. What happens if the refugee numbers increase exponentially?

Can you tell me more about your process in making the images? After all, what *Homeless* teaches us in looking at images is that the aerial views and the big picture demand attention to detail...

CL Our work always stems from questions that we ask ourselves. We will then do deep and wide research about the topic before figuring out ways to present these findings. Our collaboration has always been of visual nature, and everything up to the *Homeless* project has been conventional photography techniques.

We find that the language of photography has evolved. The aesthetics, techniques and ethics of the image are undergoing transformation and debate in this era, and our work questions the lines we walk and cross and it fuels part of the conversation on the topics we dive into.

For us, using found satellite imagery is the only way we find that could satisfy our own methodology in trying to answer different questions in varying multitudes and directions; it is still using photography (the satellite images are still taking with conventional cameras), and it brings us close to the sense of reality. The attention to detail, and the print scale are all deliberate to create the contradicting sense of closeness and remoteness to the topics that we engage on.

The nature of Chow and Lin's projects is that your series are frequently open-ended, long-term and iterative. We come into *Homeless* knowing that we are about to witness its future iterations. How do you think the series will look like after this show in NUS Museum? Is this series about accumulating these particular sites of inequality (pairings of the houses of the richest and the forced mobility journeys)? Or are you looking at visualisation of other subjects related to these issues?

CL Our concerns are about global tipping point issues, and the more we do our projects, the more questions and

doubts we have. In our past eight years working together, we have worked on cross continental topics including poverty, consumption, inequality and forced migration issues.

While we are artists, we are humans first. We too have emotions, and we react to what we see, hear and what we gather from our friends and contemporaries.

I think it is hard to speak in concrete terms what the next iteration would be, but the focus of our work has so far been rooted in research and thought analysis. We could well build our next project based on what we learn from this one.

Who are you looking at to engage more in this research demanded of in *Homeless*? Are you looking at particular organisations, or particular fields?

CL We feel that our work should engage inquisitive minds, and this entails a broad range. We want to engage an audience as wide as possible, even possibly outside traditional photography and contemporary art spheres. We hope our work provokes thought and conversation, and in the end, that is why we do what we do. ●

Chow and Lin is collaborative husband and wife duo that takes its beginnings with the *Poverty Line*, a photographic series in 2010. The worldview of Chow and Lin encompasses an empirical investigation into tipping points in current global society. Through a typological, photographic approach, Chow and Lin's projects are driven by the discursive backgrounds of Stefan Chow and Huiyi Lin in economics, public policy, media, and these are further augmented by enduring exchanges with specialists from those fields. The projects of Chow and Lin reflect the changing conditions in humanity, security and post-truth societies through photographic and textual iterations.

Homeless runs from 17 August 2018 to 27 April 2019 in the NET Temporary Gallery of NUS Museum.



Installation view of *Homeless*, 2018. Photo by Hoong Wei Long. Courtesy of NUS Museum.

