John Young *Diaspora, Psyche* (Bunjil Place, 2021) by Cher Tan

'Displaced people... lived in two time zones, the here and the there, the present and the past, being as we were reluctant time travellers. But while science fiction imagined time travellers as moving forwards and backwards in time, this timepiece demonstrated a different chronology. The open secret of the clock, naked for all to see, was that we were only going in circles.'

—*Viet Thanh Nguyen,* The Sympathizer

When I moved from Singapore to so-called Australia in 2012, I had little inkling of what it meant to be a migrant, other than the fact that I *moved*: from one place to another in search of what is simply termed as a 'better life'. Along the way I have since met many other migrants—in both work and social settings; both from my place of birth and elsewhere; both who had family that migrated and those who migrated themselves—who showed me a lived definition of the term. Together we form diasporas, and while reasons for migration may vary, there are common motifs: a wistful memorialising, a searching for belonging, a remaking of the self in the eyes of the new home. There is a sense of movement in time as roots are created anew.

Within this lies the fact of memory, and for some, an undercurrent of trauma. For those of us directly or indirectly displaced by civil strife, economic aspiration and/or existential opportunity, there is, to differing extents, the dual sensation of both loss and relief. Loss, for the formative self that one had built until the point of migrating. Relief, from being able to leave the thing that resulted in our departures. This relief could also coagulate with what is known as 'survivor's guilt'[1], particularly following emancipation from threatening events such as war or political un-freedoms. These affinities are what bind many migrants together; however tenuous, and regardless of our origins, in a new residence sometimes it is all there is.

In *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001), Russian artist Svetlana Boym writes of a 'diasporic intimacy'[2], which according to her can only be approached 'through indirection and intimation, through stories and secrets.'[3] She describes intimacy not through the (western) individualist understanding where it defines itself in opposition to transnational solidarity. Instead, it is an alienated belonging, of those exiled but who are always fluctuating according to the circumstances they find themselves in: this intimacy is 'haunted by the images of home and homeland, yet it also discloses some of the furtive pleasures of exile.'[4]

Relatedly, this is what Palestinian-American scholar Edward W. Said refers to as "contrapuntal"[5]—a term used in music when you can hear a beat or tone independent of the dominant symphony, but instead of being discordant, they play off each other. The fluctuation I mention feeds into Said's idea. As migrants shaped by imperial powers, whether in old or new countries or both, this contrapuntal attitude lends to a sense of self-invention that is constantly evolving, much like the peppered moth in the natural world. According to Said, it is 'an imaginary, even utopian vision which reconceives emancipatory (as opposed to confining) theory and performance [...] a particular sort of nomadic, migratory and anti-narrative energy.'[6]

But it would appear that in the age of the aesthetics of the aesthetic, the psyche of the multicultural zeitgeist stands in a state of stasis. Discussions are excavated from history and regurgitated as if brand new, containing within it a certain revolving fiction. No thanks, of course, to the tides of hegemony which continue to foreground the nation-state despite its superficial evolutions, resulting in a kind of United Colours of Benetton-esque quasi-universalism that diminishes cultural memory and Said's attempt at a contrapuntal attitude. Same same but different.

When I interviewed John Young in 2018, he mentioned that 'the temporal dimension of memory is [...] far more important than the spatial aspect of say, subscriptions to geography and city states.'[7] As an artist that deals with transnational perceptions of the self and others, Young's work thrives within discomfort. When one devotes themselves to making meaning out of memory and ritual, a long view is formed. Why bother with the myopic present if they only serve to further certain mythologies?

Diaspora, Psyche is a body of work that arises out of reflection from the contrapuntal pleasure-malaise. It is an affirmation of the artist's (r)evolving memories as they relate to

transculturalism and place-making. Spanning seventeen years, the thread that connects these multifaceted art works is a sense of hybridisation, particularly one that seeks to remove itself from dominant gazes. Much like Young's previous work (with Jason Phu) *The Burrangong Affray* (2018)[8], the goal is remembrance, not assimilation or integration. The prevailing narrative in White Australia—even if its eponymous legislation has been abolished since 1966—would prefer to subsume our many individual stories under the guise of neoliberal tenets such as "inclusion" and "diversity". But as seen in *Flower Market (Nanjing 1936)* (2010), Young would rather attempt to locate cultural specificity *and* question the act of widespread cultural amnesia surrounding Chinese diaspora who fled the Second Sino-Japanese War. Although it must be noted that different generations and waves of the diaspora—of which Young is a part; he migrated from Hong Kong during China's Cultural Revolution—experience different memories, Young's artistic interrogation acts as a way of grasping at an untranslatability, and which uses memory to refuse sentimentalisation.

To engage in some cheeky wordplay, "belonging" is after all "be longing", a fixation with unchanging desire, and thus, a static memory. It could be used to confer a sense of respite in alien surroundings, perhaps, but at what cost? How do those from varying diasporas pursue a sense of shapelessness while concreting a self that is mutable? Could belonging be perhaps self-delusion? The answer may lie in affective communication, which insists on an ethics of remembrance that does not merely use history as an anchor, but instead welcomes the past into the present to enact an ever-revolving future—Nguyen's aforementioned 'circle'[9], so to speak.

In the City of Casey—in greater south east Naarm/Melbourne, where *Diaspora, Psyche* is shown— there exist more than one hundred faith groups at the time of writing. Home to the largest number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander residents in metropolitan Naarm/Melbourne, it welcomes almost 10,000 new residents each year from all parts of the world. As one of the most rapidly expanding regions on the continent[10], many residents speak a language other than English, some of which include Persian, Sinhalese, Mandarin and Punjabi. Therefore, to subsume so many people under an umbrella of capital-D Diaspora would do everyone a great disservice. As Boym notes, 'Ordinary exiles often become artists of their lives, remaking themselves and their second homes with great ingenuity.'[11]

However, the irreconcilable doubleness of being both a settler and a migrant is something I do not take lightly in my own life and practice: thus, mitigating sites of trauma and loss with romance would be counter-intuitive. Rather, I am concerned with how we as immigrants on stolen land can find solidarity through difference—not by insisting on a sameness across markers such as socioeconomic position and skin colour, but by accessing cultural memories that then bridge these differences and redefine our responsibilities towards one another.

To borrow from Boym again, it is the diasporic intimacy that manifests as 'the mutual attraction of two immigrants from different parts of the world or the sense of precarious coziness of a foreign home'[12]—in this context considering indigeneity is paramount as well. Further, the image of the migrant also tends to be split apart in the popular imagination: that of the "expat", "immigrant" and "refugee", and while there is inevitably the issue of whether displacement is forced or voluntary, as well as class valences that demarcate these distinctions, we may as well embark on the difficult work of intracultural dialogue that then revitalises criticism, rejects universalism and resists nostalgia. This type of communication becomes non-didactic: by asserting our own terms (and it is here I must add that this should be done not in an individualistic "what about me" sense but collectively as the communities we are a part of), a transnational body politic emerges. When we take the amnesia of diasporic self-making and place it alongside our many re-inventions, Said's

contrapuntality is evinced: nothing is "pure"—after decades of trade and imperialism we are surely the amalgamation of many cultures that surround us whether in media, in the old countries or in our new homes. *Diaspora, Psyche*, then, is a body of work that is testament to that.

The remembrance that Young's exhibition insists on—with its multiplicitous faces, such as when we code-switch between languages and relational contexts—is reflected particularly within *The History Projects* series, where an acute understanding of trauma is being presented, yet they are not sublimated under a universalised sympathy as it is understood in mainstream contexts now. Speaking perhaps indirectly to Said's vision of utopia, Lebanese-Australian scholar Ghassan Hage has echoed similarly: in his 2011 essay 'Dwelling in the Reality of Utopian Thought', he writes that 'we can be radically other than what we are.'[13] This is not to say that we should cast aside the cultures and/or traditions we know to be true to us as a result of the rituals and habits we were brought up in, but rather that we need to remove ourselves outside of static labels that find many migrants defined within an unchanging gaze.

In this way, perhaps we can move towards both asserting our respective histories and engaging in a shared understanding of the diasporic condition, while paying attention to the fact that we are living on stolen lands. And so we return to Boym: diasporic intimacy is fundamental —'one discovers that there is still a lot to share.' Time is a flat circle; we can continue to repeat history's failings, or we can radically alter the clock.

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Endnotes:

1 First identified in the 1960s, and observed among Holocaust survivors by therapists, this is a medically recognised condition not dissimilar to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

2 Ibid. p. 251

3 Ibid. p. 252

4 Ibid. p. 253

5 Said, Edward W., *Culture and Imperialism*. Vintage Books, 2003

6 Ibid. p. 279

7 Interview #115 – John Young Zerunge, *LIMINAL magazine*, 2018 https://www.liminalmag.com/interviews/john-young-zerunge

8 Young Zerunge, John; Phu, Jason, *The Burrangong Affray*. 4A Centre of Contemporary Art, 29 June – 12 August 2018

9 Nguyen, Viet Thanh, *The Sympathizer*. Grove Press, 2015

10 https://knowyourcouncil.vic.gov.au/councils/casey

11 Boym, Svetlana, *The Future of Nostalgia*. Basic Books, 2001, p. 252

12 Ibid. p. 254

13 Hage, Ghassan, 'Dwelling in the Reality of Utopian Thought'. *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review* Vol.23, No.1 (Fall 2013), pp. 7-13