

Exactly Foundation Residency #23 – *With and Without You*
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Artist Statement

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Introduction and personal intentions

I first began projects about low-wage migrant workers in 2017 when I started thinking about male conservancy workers, particularly those operating within public housing bin centres. I often found traces of lived-in-ness – laundry hanging, footwear, parked bicycles – in these places and wondered why and how they became quasi-living quarters. Not having the tools or courage to speak with them, I peered in from outside the bin centres to reveal glimpses of domesticity in hopes that readers will examine their own understanding of these spaces and people. This project became a series of over 100 documented bin centres titled *Aesthetic Screening*.

During this time, I started to read about a range of unsavoury treatment towards Work Permit (WP) holders in particular: contract agreements not being legally binding, withholding of passports and mobile phones, lack of social freedoms or imposed isolation, lack of legal recourse, and contentious living arrangements in dormitories or the private spaces of employers. More severe incidents include abuse or maltreatment of employees and employees committing suicide in their place of work. To be fair, the reverse is certainly true; there are also employees who are dishonest or treacherous towards their employers or their wards. It is highly likely that the vast majority of employers are good-natured or ethical parties thrown under a critical lens by a handful of irresponsible ones.

I eventually gravitated towards creating responses towards migrant domestic helpers as this network of stakeholders felt more accessible to me and more authentic to my life experience. I grew up with Indonesian helpers and my parents' last domestic helper left for good midway through the earlier days of Covid. Many friends and family members around me also hire(d) helpers of their own. Personally speaking, domestic help has always seemed like an exceptional form of employment because it is the only job in Singapore that mandates an employee to live with her employer.

I embarked on a couple of projects to encourage viewers to think about how we house and treat our helpers. *Live-in (Mattress provided)* was a photographic series of mattresses and beds set aside for domestic helpers by their employers. These images were accompanied by textual vignettes describing my visit to these homes and details my relationship with the employers and helpers involved. *Neither In Nor Out* was a collaboration with Rolinda Espanola, a prominent poet and an ex-domestic helper who agreed to participate as she was returning to the Philippines for good. Not fearing consequences, she went on the record about some unsavoury experiences with her previous employer and shared some frank thoughts about the employment of domestic help in Singapore.

In hindsight, most of my projects were rather reactionary and I tried to represent things that were wrong about the system, which sometimes ended up being difficult for people to look at and engage with. I was also mired with the ethical and emotional dilemmas of working with people in my immediate environment and it proved very psychologically challenging.

On a more personal note, it took me some time to acknowledge the deeper reasons for my strong focus on domestic helpers, which is that of accepting my own family history and encountering the domestic helper as a proxy for my distant caregivers. It has spurred me to reflect a lot on parenting and caretaking at large, and prompts further thoughts on the impact of domestic helpers on the children of the employers, and also the impact on children in the domestic helper's own family. Domestic helpers are the pressure valves for our duties, and perhaps we don't always remember how much is placed onto them.

Li Li's invitation to participate in this residency has given me a window to redress concerns that I did not manage to in my earlier projects, most notably including people in the images, and also making work of a different tone. It took me a long time to internalize that a sensitive topic sometimes requires a palatable entry-point. In *With and Without You*, I focus on positive

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and heart-warming stories of employer-employee relationships, in hope that they will be inviting and inspirational, proof that great relationships with domestic helpers can and should be forged. In my interactions with the project's participants, I am surprised at how long some helpers end up staying, and I am also heartened at the depth of gratitude and loyalty they express to their second, Singapore family.

I am often asked about my personal stance on hiring domestic helpers. While I was more averse to it in the past, I now think that I will hire a helper if the need arises. While difficult circumstances often compel women from source countries to travel abroad for work, it is still important to regard their decisions as acts of agency and to support them or their families where realistic. Success in their employment is also possible; I hear casually of domestic workers, for example, using their earnings to purchase land or build multiple houses and businesses back home.

I have come to see that this form of employment can be a win-win for both parties if navigated ethically and compassionately. For one, agents can play a role or employers themselves can take the onus in ensuring more formal and structured "HR practices" such as: facilitating queries for both employer and employee, ensuring that employees have some form of visual access to their work area for confidence and assurance, and orientating employees properly to Singapore and their residential setup which is often completely different from the employee's own home.

My relationship to the project's participants

Finding participants was challenging as privacy was a prime concern for many who were approached. I was requesting for privileged access to frame not only their families but also their position as employers and Singaporean citizens. Thankfully, four families came through, each with a different proximity to me.

H and J's family I know through my temple community; I am relatively familiar with their home and have visited on a handful of occasions. T, their daughter, and S, their helper, recognise me and are comfortable with me.

My parents are close contacts of Irene, I have spent time with her on a few social occasions and have also been to her home several times and eaten Lolit's delicious cooking.

Ida is a recent acquaintance of mine who responded to the open call for the project. She convinced her mother, Mas, to grant me access to their home, and also sought permission from their helper, Sri.

Lastly, I got to know Susie through H; she put me in touch with J's father who is Susie's nephew and legally adopted son. He convinced Susie and Wati to participate and arranged for the photography to happen in Susie's home.

All participants agree to be interviewed and also vet through the write-ups and captions on their families before printing.

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