

A VIGNETTE OF HOME

What makes a home in the age of a pandemic?

In an era defined by distance and separation, we speak to Singaporean creatives living in four bustling metropolitan cities abroad about the places and spaces that make them feel safe, loved and at ease—wherever they may be.

Words Chandreyee Ray and Amelia Chia

Amanda Lee Koe, writer, and Kirsten Tan, film director

If you look up the term ‘power couple’ in the dictionary, you may find two names lying in wait: novelist Amanda Lee Koe and film-maker Kirsten Tan. Lee Koe and Tan have each cemented their positions in their individual creative fields—the former is the youngest winner of the Singapore Literature Prize to date, with a debut novel soaring across several international bestseller lists. The latter has had films shown all over the world, clinching prizes at festivals like Sundance and Rotterdam alongside an Oscars nod.

New York, where they now live, is a special place for them. “This city is so non-judgmental. There’s no such thing as an oddball here. At the same time, it is judgmental about the things I’m judgmental about,” Tan jokes.

New York is where they first started seeing each other, and where Lee Koe and Tan have now made a home for themselves together, 13 and seven years since they each found themselves there respectively.

While they both hail from Singapore, Tan had spent time living in Bangkok and the scenic South Korean city of Jeonju before coming to the Big Apple to study filmmaking. Lee Koe, too, arrived in the city looking to hone her craft. Neither knew right away that they were going to stay a long time, but it was just how things fell into place. “I’m one in a very long line of literary pilgrims who decided to linger here awhile. And now it’s been close to a decade,” says Lee Koe.

Do they feel like New York is their home, then? For Tan, that’s a complicated question. “It definitely is for now, but at the same time, we’ve deliberately designed our lives to be footloose and fancy-free, so we can change our minds at any point,” she says, adding cryptically: “Home is not always where you’re born. Sometimes, it’s where you’re found.”

One spot you’ll always find this pair at is Mario & Sons, an Italian butchery which has been serving their neighbourhood for decades. Among the bodegas and many neighbourhood grocers they have been visiting for years, Mario is one of Tan and Lee Koe’s favourites.

“Mario is like the chill Italian grandpa you never had,” laughs Lee Koe. “Last week, I asked him how the neighbourhood has changed. He said so much of it still looks and feels the same as when he first arrived, which is one of the things we adore about Brooklyn. As Singaporeans, we’re so used to breakneck progress—to know that Mario still sees the ’60s on these streets that we now live on is strangely affecting.”

Amidst the history, speed and hustle and bustle of the city, what truly grounds the couple is their sanctuary of an apartment in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. The place is what Lee Koe describes as a writing residency and a madhouse zoo. “We’re lucky to be stuck with each other in that we’re both artists with highly particular needs and routines. It sounds sadistic, but writing keeps us going, even though it pushes us off the road into a rut at times,” she muses.

Having sheltered with biological family in Singapore mid-pandemic in 2020, the couple are now back in New York. But they continue to long for the things they miss most about their hometown—*bak chor mee* and the sharp yet soft smell of tropical rain for Tan—and for Lee Koe: “Midnight field trips to Mustafa Centre, my mum’s homecooked food, walking around alone in a park at 4am and feeling safe, and of course, overhearing Chinese uncles cursing in Hokkien while eating ‘big hot’ *mala xiangguo* till my tummy and tongue are on fire.”

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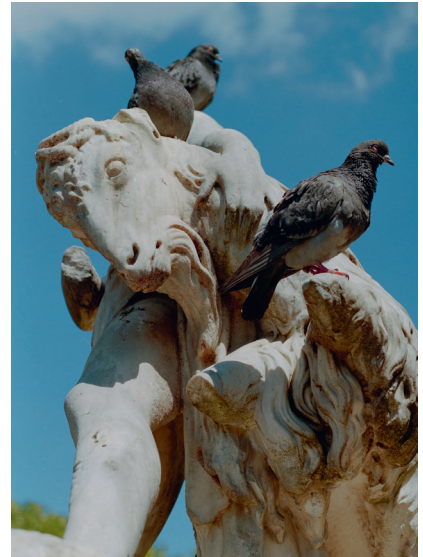


Photography: Kirsten Tan & Amanda Lee Koe

“It is that human connection that makes a place home, like when the auntie knows my curry order by heart.”



Photography: Chuck Reyes



PARIS

Chuck Reyes, photographer

Having lived in Singapore, Manila, Los Angeles and now Paris, Chuck Reyes often thinks of himself as a third culture kid. Singapore remains his default home, however, as he spent a decade on our island. “I miss food and friends in Singapore,” Reyes muses, revealing the last time he set foot in Singapore was February last year before the global pandemic hit. “The warmth of the aunties in the hawker centres is unlike anywhere else. It is that human connection that makes a place home, like when the auntie knows my curry order by heart.”

Reyes moved to Paris three years ago after marrying his French wife, Philaë Rollet-Bouclet, who is enrolling to study perfumery at Ecole Supérieure de Parfum. He describes them as the weird couple as his wife is taller, more outgoing and much younger than he is. “People remember us because we are a funny sight to see,” he says with a laugh. While he admits that home is now wherever his wife is, his mood turns contemplative when we broach the subject of being part of the minority race in Paris. “It has affected me a little—like for example, people always look at my wife whenever we have conversations because she is one of them. I definitely feel the otherness.”

Visiting their favourite Asian haunts—such as a Japanese café called Aki Café near Palais Royal or their favourite bubble tea shop, Teayammi—brings a sense of comfort to Reyes. The couple hop on the metro two or three times a week to get their matcha latte fix. The other thing that grounds Reyes in Paris is the couple’s stylish, cosy apartment in Temple, which is located on the same street as their favourite bakery, florist and bookstore.

“Temple is very ‘bobo’, as they call it—very bohemian and hip—and I love all the cafés and fashion showrooms in our neighbourhood. But the best part has to be the interactions with the community on our street. I get a pain au chocolat from Tout Autour du Pain, the bakery on our street, very often. The guy who runs it reminds me of a bitchy fashion person; he’s often deadpan and just wants to get your order out of the way. But strangely, knowing he is a familiar face brings me comfort,” Reyes says.

He adds: “On our way to the metro station, we will also pass Art Et Nature, our florist, and have a quick chat, and my favourite art bookstore, OFR. The florist provides flowers for the café, the bookstore printed the café’s tote bags, the owner of the bookstore buys his coffee at the café. It really is like a little village—it is these connections, alongside my wife’s presence and my daily *teh si* with condensed milk that make Paris home.”



Warren Wee, country manager and photographer

I find the resemblance of Tokyo's Ginza district similar to the toy cities I built with Lego Duplo bricks when I was a child—perhaps because the buildings around the district are mostly squarish blocks laid out in a grid and the land is fairly flat,” says Warren Wee thoughtfully. “I feel at home cycling around Ginza at night while streaming my favourite Spotify playlist.”

With the likes of Digable Planets and Kaytranada playing in his ears, Wee is often found on his bike hitting up one of Ginza's many ramen shops. He relishes it especially when it's cold and rainy, when hot, flavourful broth proves to be magic. He readily dishes out his little black book of ramen spots, which include Ginza Hachigo, Ginza Kagari and Mugi to Olive. He adds that if one is in the mood for good-quality yakiniku, Sagaya Ginza is a must-try.

Wee is in his fifth year of living in Tokyo, as a country representative for a fast-moving consumer goods company. He does professional photography on a project basis. It was a series of personal setbacks and a push to live life without regrets that propelled his move to Tokyo. “As someone who grew up in Singapore, I have always wondered what life outside my bubble would be like. During my school holidays and in between work, I spent some time travelling to various cities; from Beijing to Almaty, Paris to London, Tallinn to Moscow and eventually thought that Tokyo offered the comforts and efficiency I was so used to.”

Food is at the heart of many Singaporeans and it is the same for Wee. He admits that *nasi padang*, sliced fish congee and *laksa* are some dishes he misses the most about Singapore. Homesickness hits Wee now and again, especially given travel restrictions, but the constant use of technology to keep up with his family and friends helps.

He occupies his free time by visiting art exhibitions, soaking in nature and making trips to cities outside Tokyo. “I love how aesthetics comes very naturally to the Japanese, from the architecture, visual arts, fashion to even dining as an art form,” he says. “I make a visual archive of places I've cycled to by taking snapshots of my bicycle against a unique landmark and post it on @thebikegram on Instagram.”

Home, to Wee, is a state of mind where he feels vulnerable yet comfortable, and not where he is confined to a brick-and-mortar space. While Tokyo is Wee's choice of residence for now, he hopes to retire at a stunning Maldivian resort one day—complete with high-speed Internet connection.

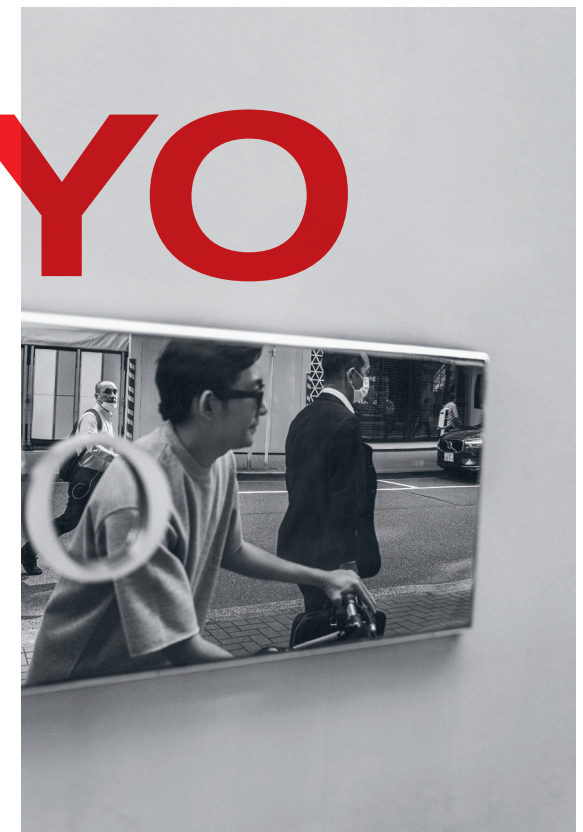


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Photography: Yulia Skogoreva

TOKYO



*“I love London.
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will always feel
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Eshita Kabra-Davies, fashion entrepreneur

The idea of a circular fashion economy has never been more salient than today—and investment professional-turned-fashion entrepreneur Eshita Kabra-Davies’ brainchild app is proof. Hailed as the world’s first social fashion rental app, By Rotation boasts over 50,000 users whom Kabra-Davies has managed to convince of the benefits of a communal closet.

Like many passionate start-up founders, the 29-year-old lives and breathes her company. Her idea of home, too, is deeply tied to it. While she now lives in London with her husband after moving there over a decade ago for university, she doesn’t rule out the possibility of moving away. “I love London. In this city, you will always feel like you belong. I see it as my base, but as By Rotation expands internationally, there may be a need for me to live abroad again.”

Her hometown may be in Rajasthan, India, but Kabra-Davies grew up in Singapore, where her parents still live. “Seeing them is the one thing I miss most about Singapore,” she answers easily, when asked what makes her feel homesick. “I also miss being around fellow Asian faces. There’s that instant connection and camaraderie as soon I meet someone from back home. When I can’t experience that in person, I’m grateful for FaceTime.”

Her last trip before the word ‘lockdown’ became part of our vernacular had been to Singapore, right at the beginning of 2020. Now, she has found spots around London that give her a much-needed hit of home. Her favourite is Old Chang Kee in central London, near where she lives. “The curry puffs bring me back instantly to primary school,” she laughs.

As the world continues on its non-linear path of recovering from a global pandemic, her key to surviving this time and finding a home wherever you may be is simple—taking walks. “I’m surprised at how dependent I’ve become on Regent’s Park. I never quite appreciated how beautiful and special it is until the pandemic hit the UK and all we were allowed to do was go for one walk a day.”

Lockdown or not, she suggests that if you truly want to lay down roots in a new place, pull on your sneakers and step out. “Go for a walk, connect with your local surroundings and begin to develop relationships with the community you are in,” she says. “I used to see my home as a resting place, but over the past year, it’s become so much more. The local community and surroundings are my home and I’ve built so many new memories with them.”

As for how she has kept sane and sated through the unpredictable past year, she shares: “I have most loved spending time walking Saffron, my cavapoo, in parks and in my favourite local pub, The Lansdowne in Primrose Hill. There is something special about that place—it’s cosy and familiar. You always feel right at home.” •

Photography: Sarah Burton

LONDON