

BLUEPRINT



PRESENTS

BLEACHED BONES

LAST WORDS OF
THE DEAD SPOKEN
BY A DYING SEA

~~~~~ ERNEST  
GOH



11.01 — 10.02  
2025

AT BLUEPRINT  
ART SPACE

Part Of

**SAW**  
SINGAPORE ART WEEK



## Curatorial Essay

### Ethereal notes and lessons from the undying dead

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Some months back, Ernest and I sat in a coffee shop along East Coast Park to conceptualise the exhibition. We started the meeting sharing anxieties about the global ecological crisis yet left with renewed ambitions that nature can find its way to regenerate. I felt strengthened and supported by the warmth of good company, the excitement of collaboration and a collective sense of purpose that became constant and vital forces in the making of this exhibition.

*Bleached Bones* is an invitation to share this warmth, excitement and purpose through meditating on our approach towards vulnerable marine and aquatic ecosystems, and the dangers they face due to human activity. At the same time, the exhibition is about reinvigoration—to look forward with possibilities and hope drawn from despair, and the re-emergence of life after death and destruction.

Ernest's series of photographic prints of the same name, *Bleached Bones*, is a visual archive of 'notes' arranged with bleached corals to spell out lasting reminders and life lessons from the departed to the living today. These reminders come timely as more articles about coral bleaching have strewn across our local papers lately, signalling the gravity of the coastal emergencies we are experiencing today.

Just last month, The Straits Times reported that an alarming 77% of the world's coral reefs have been subjected to bleaching-level heat

stress. Bleaching is a phenomenon when corals turn completely white after algae in their tissues are expelled when their waters are too warm. These vibrant underwater landscapes of pink, purple and blue teeming with life eventually lose their vitality and colour. The discolouration mimics a loss of life, transforming these corals into ghostly white skeletons.

*“So, when I came across coral fragments shaped like letters scattered along the beaches of Nikoi Island, I was convinced that the ocean was trying to communicate. It felt like there was a message or meaning to decipher, and I took it upon myself to figure it out, resulting in Bleached Bones.”*

**Ernest Goh, Artist**



The striking contrast between the bleached corals pictured against the black background adds depth to the works that reflects the weight of the message presented. These messages were drawn from a variety of articles like Japanese death poems or the *jisei*, last words from the famous, and even random sources like obituaries and ChatGPT. In each work, the bleached corals appear to sink into the dark depths of the sea and arrange themselves, as if to send a message to their readers. The lack of motion and movement in the background suggests an atmosphere of calm and stillness, inviting exhibition visitors to contemplate on lessons of life and living through a familiar language and complementary soundscapes gathered from audio tracks from artists and musicians.

What is most intriguing about this process of art making is in Ernest's innate ability to see an alphabetical parallel to the bleached corals. This process is also an expression of his personality and approach to living—to see life and possibilities in something that seems dead and wield gracious humour to cope with something that seems devastating.

In (Note 2) *The comedy is finished*, he quotes the famous German

composer and pianist Ludwig van Beethoven, to remind himself not to take work and life too seriously. Ernest's take on the note is simple yet impactful. He says, "Life is indeed a kind of comedy where the act of crying and laughing can be so interchangeable when you have a slightly different perspective of looking at things." To him, embodying a slight change of perspective and finding humour in disastrous circumstances is central to the acceptance and faith needed when coping or responding to crisis.

*"I am quite confident that even as the oceans boil, and the hurricanes beat violently against our once safe shores, and the air sweats with the heat of impending doom, and our fists protest the denial of climate justice, that there is a path to take that has nothing to do with victory or defeat: a place we do not yet know the coordinates to... The point of the departed arrow is not merely to pierce the bullseye and carry the trophy: the point of the arrow is to sing the wind and remake the world in the brevity of flight."*

**Báyò Akómoláfé, Poet and Philosopher**

The cycle of loss, death and rebirth in these works are like the *bardo*, an inflection point between living and death and a state of impermanence, taught in Tibetan Buddhist teachings that are a major source of inspiration for Ernest in his practice. The different stages of the *bardo* is similar to the journey onto unfamiliar territories that Báyò speaks of: How will we conduct ourselves when given the opportunity for rebirth?

*Bleached Bones* is like a seance with a balanced mix of satire, comedy, nostalgia and a tinge of melancholy in response to loss and grief. Like any dialogue, the messages from the bleached corals call for response. Rows of black sand in specimen boxes in the exhibition become a medium for this two-way communication and invites the exhibition visitor to respond with writings in the sand.



SO THAT  
I CAN HAVE  
CHILDREN  
GREATER  
than I

FAREWELL  
BUT LET  
THIS BE A  
BEGINNING

This exhibition's thesis is clear: in order to face the challenges by climate change in coastal areas, we need to ingrain a strong sense of belief that nature can and will find their way to regenerate when hope can sometimes be lost in humanity. We are part of nature—and we need to manifest values and traits that encourage possibilities and enthusiasm in everyday life, even in the most challenging times. Humour, satire, anything of the absurd... can be effective coping mechanisms that may very well inspire action for good.

This sentiment is also echoed in the work (Note 13) *So that I could have children greater than I..* In this work, Ernest perused the obituaries and came across a written eulogy penned by the son of businessman Ong Peck Lye who passed in 2016. This work is rooted in the idea of resilience inspired by the young corals that are being planted, and continue to grow despite the warmer ocean waters. Designing a critical path for future generations to thrive is an important aspect of nature's regeneration.

This is all to say that the last words of the dead spoken by the dying sea are just new beginnings that attempt to remake our world for the future. One that has to be stewarded by humankind's conscientious planetary defenders that want to see the possibilities and hope after despair, and life after death and destruction.

Ernest's work, (Note 1) *Farewell, but let this be a beginning*, generated from a prompt to ChatGPT, reiterates his belief that, "The death and destruction we see today does not signal an end, but rather an opportunity of renewal."

**Shireen Marican**

Curator, *Bleached Bones*

December 2024

## Artwork Reference List

- (Note 1) *Farewell, but let this be a beginning* — **AI, ChatGPT**  
(when prompted to write last words)
- (Note 2) *The comedy is finished* — **Ludwig van Beethoven**  
(German composer and pianist, died on 26 March 1827)
- (Note 3) *Oh wow. Oh wow. Oh wow* — **Steve Jobs**  
(Co-founder of Apple Inc., died on 5 October 2011)
- (Note 4) *It is finished* — **Jesus** (Son of God, died on 3 April AD 33)
- (Note 5) *A certain butterfly is already on the wing* — **Vladimir Nabokov**  
(Russian-American novelist and poet, died on 2 July 1977)
- (Note 6) *Pardon me Sir* — **Marie Antoinette** (executed on 16 October 1793)
- (Note 7) *Those without the capital get the punishment*  
— **John Arthur Spenkelink** (Executed on 25 May 1979)
- (Note 8) *Did you envy my happiness?* — **Francisco de San Roman**  
(Spanish merchant and Protestant martyr, burned at the stake in 1540)
- (Note 9) *Love me* — **Madam Low** (Passed in 2024)
- (Note 10) *I can't breathe* — **George Floyd**  
(Former security guard, murdered on 25 May 2020)
- (Note 11) *Those with talent surely they make better manure* — **Morikawa Kyoriku**  
(Part of a death poem by samurai and poet, died in 1715)
- (Note 12) *Spitting blood clears up reality* — **Sunao** (Zen monk, died in 1926)
- (Note 13) *So that I could have children greater than I* — **Ong Peck Lye**  
(Businessman, passed on 8 June 2016)
- (Note 14) *Silence* — **Men and Women who passed in silence  
or whose last words were never heard**
- (Note 15) *I seem to have been only like a boy playing on the seashore*  
— **Sir Isaac Newton** (English physicist and mathematician,  
died on 31 March 1727)

(Note Set 1) *Alphabet from a ciphered message*

(Note Set 2) *Alphabet from a ciphered message*

(Note Set 3) *Alphabet from a ciphered message*



## About the Artist

[www.ernestgoh.com](http://www.ernestgoh.com)

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Artist and photographer Ernest Goh's (b. 1979) practice has been spent looking at the environment and its creatures, trying to understand the complex yet awe-inspiring interconnectivity between our planet and its inhabitants. Ernest Goh founded Ayer Ayer ([www.ayerayer.com](http://www.ayerayer.com))—an ecologically-engaged initiative that reaches out to communities through visual and participatory artworks to further environmental protection and awareness. He is also the artistic director of Ubah Rumah, an artist residency and research outpost on Nikoi Island, Indonesia. Ayer Ayer's focus on ocean plastic in the regional waterways of South-East Asia has led to the creation of public art, digital gamification and social intervention projects.

The artist also created *The Animal Book Co.*, a photography-based project that explores unique natural histories. Ernest's animal portraits have been published in *The Fish Book* (2011), *COCKS* (2013, republished as *Chickens* in the US in 2015), and *The Gift Book* (2014). Ernest's work has been commissioned by and installed at the Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum, Singapore, collected by the Multimedia Art Museum, Moscow, and also resides in public and private collections.

Formerly a photojournalist, Ernest has documented South-East Asia extensively including the Burmese refugee crisis on the Thai-Burmese border and the aftermath and recovery of the 2004 Tsunami in Aceh, Indonesia. He has photographed for Time Magazine Asia, Newsweek, Der Spiegel, Monocle and the Smithsonian.

Ernest is an awardee of the Ministry of Sustainability and the Environment (Singapore) SG Eco Fund, and the National Environment Agency EcoFriend Award (2024). He also received the Discernment Award at the Icon de Martell Cordon Bleu Awards, Singapore (2012), the Sony World Photography Award (2013), the Incentivising Innovation Fund by the Institute of Contemporary Arts London, the Nesta UK for its Cultural Leadership Program (2009) and the Philips Design Award (1999).

## About the Curator

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Shireen Marican is a systems strategist, curator and educator motivated to advance the engagement of culture with people, institutions and organisations for a just and equitable environment and society. Shireen has extensive experience working across multidisciplinary contexts with and other cultural practitioners to co-create practice, programmes and strategy that engages with communities and culture more broadly to advance thinking around critical and social challenges in deeply intuitive and informed ways.

## About Blueprint Art Space

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Blueprint Art Space is a venue for art events and exhibitions. It is managed by Blueprint Art Advisory, which aims to share enjoyable experiences with art and further artistic dialogues through its curatorial projects, especially of Singapore modern and contemporary art.

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