

Cardboard City

The street documentary looks at the lives of elderly Asian cardboard collectors in the city-state of Singapore. This used to be a rare sight some 10-15 years back. There has been a surge of cardboard collectors in the last few years owing to the widening income inequality and poor welfare for the elderly who are considered extremely vulnerable in the expensive island city. Cardboard collectors are often classified as abandoned by family due to illness or personal differences, ignored by social safety nets and sometimes it is the Singaporean pride that leads to such pitiful sights. And with the recent covid-19 circumstances leading to the lockdown of the country and lack of aid, many elderly have been forced to the streets to collect and sell cardboard as a source of income.

In Singapore, an elderly or senior citizen is an individual anywhere in and above the 55- 65 age group. Why such a big gap or grey area? One would have to clarify with the government. Different ministries in the country classify an elderly with accordance to their policies. Singapore is facing a rapidly increasing elderly population due to high standards of living and declining birth rates. As with Asian countries such as Japan and Korea, the elderly are becoming lonely and often face discrimination at workplace and in social settings. High standards of living have become a double-edged sword that has led to an increase in the cost of healthcare and daily expenses such as food and accommodation. The retirement culture is often seen as “lazy” or “must work or else die”. The Asian mindset is such that to work in old age is seen as healthy and that one would live a long life. But on the contrary, the old are prone to workplace injuries, burnout and health issues arising from stress and lack of sleep. The government has rolled out many policies and efforts to help the elderly but these often fall short due to physical and digital limitations. Some may require translators, others may not be able use online portals and applications due to lack of knowledge in operating digital devices. Some refuse help due to ego issues and others simply see it as a waste of time and effort due to lengthy processes and paperwork. Singaporeans be it the young or elderly would have to meet certain requirements to qualify for government aid and welfare payouts. When help is denied or not provided, the elderly either withdraw within themselves or turn to less promising solutions. While most view cardboard collectors as vulnerable, others see it as a personal choice. Although donations and kind words offer momentary respite, to truly feel compassion is something we have lost and that we would have to learn to feel again.

As of 2019, a cardboard collector earns 4 cents per kilogram of cardboard. A cup of coffee in the cosmopolitan island is a \$1 on average.

Artist Statement

Elancharan Gunasekaran is a Singaporean photographer inspired by Dadaist movements, butoh and anarchism. He believes that humans are capable of governing themselves without the need of political systems. His art often involves experimenting with visual and literary forms on the raw aspects of the human condition, climate change and man-made/ natural phenomena.