

‘It Doesn’t Pedal  
Forward, Only  
Backward!  
Is It Broken?  
It Must Be Broken.’  
– Reflections on a  
Forward-Racing World.

---

**Andrea Fam**

Assistant Curator,  
Singapore Art Museum

---

From afar, the object's silhouette appears familiar: two wheels, a triangular frame, a pedal. For all intents and purposes the visitor would not be wrong to assume this object is a bicycle – because it is. But more than that, this object is also used to relay an idea for a symbol of productive slowing down – an action that its creator hopes can facilitate a greater awareness of one's surroundings and to hopefully prompt a proactive attempt to act upon this awareness. This object is an essential component of the artwork, *Racing Forward*, and its creator is Vietnamese artist, Tung Mai.

*Racing Forward* takes the humble bicycle's operation – the pedal motion of its propulsion – as its starting point. Focusing on the bicycle's primary function as a human-powered, pedal-driven mode of transportation, one that continues to impact the world,<sup>1</sup> Tung turns the bicycle on its head and suggests an alternative function for it. Interactive in nature, *Racing Forward* depends on

the slow and measured backpedal movement of the visitor to activate the rotation of a hexagonal-shaped lightbox. Affixed to each of the hexagon's six sides are photographs of sights and scenes captured in and around Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam, and Singapore.<sup>2</sup>

There are 12 photographs in total; six photographs overlay another six. The bottom image often obscures the top, thus any effort to study the series of photos requires careful consideration in order to effectively comprehend the artist's suggested narrative; attempt to pedal forward and you hit a preventative-stopper; backpedal too forcefully and the lightbox spins, creating a rotating blur of light; backpedal at just the right pace and you start to discern the faintest tracings of a background image.

The composition of each image pairing in *Racing Forward* combines a scene of 'poor people' (Tung



**Figure 1.** Tung Mai, *Racing Forward*, 2008-2009, photo installation. Collection of Singapore Art Museum, National Heritage Board



**Figure 2.** Tung Mai, *Racing Forward*, 2008-2009, photo installation. Collection of Singapore Art Museum, National Heritage Board

2009, 105-106), working on the streets of either Ho Chi Minh City or Singapore, with a selection of settings such as a playground scene, a scene with a group of school-going children on their way to or from school, or an image of grains of rice. Inevitably, the viewer will attempt to draw a link between the merged images: what does a cardboard collector have to do with a playground of children? The cardboard collector does not have anything directly to do with those children at the playground. Rather, through informal conversations with the individuals he photographed, the artist realised that the collective dream of so many disenfranchised is strikingly similar: to be afforded the ability to spend time with their children or grandchildren.

“[...] the virtues of speed are embedded in Singaporeans’ national consciousness, as evident from the narrative of Singapore’s successful transformation from a sleepy fishing village to a modern metropolis.” (Goh 2018)

The photographs included in *Racing Forward* appear to juxtapose Singapore’s built-up environment with Ho Chi Minh City’s more rural and unspoilt landscape.<sup>3</sup> And whilst the work evidently draws from reflections of the artist’s time in both of these cities, it necessitates a broader reading, one that reflects on society at large.

*Racing Forward* comprises the frame of an old utility bicycle, one that the artist used to cycle to and from school, and which has been modified to only pedal backwards, and a rotating lightbox with the aforementioned series of images. No doubt the artist was drawing comparisons between Ho Chi Minh City, where he was born, raised, and continues to live and work, and Singapore, a country he visited for the first time in 2008, the year this work was made. These comparisons surely contain observations of the differing rates in which each society operated and continues to operate at. And yet what caught the artist’s attention most was how two cities that adopt

such different paces of living and operating both contain marginalised communities of individuals that fundamentally yearn for the same thing.

We live in a global age where slowing down in thought and action has now become a highly sought-after skill; no longer are we in a race to become the fastest at everything and anything. We are presently seeking ways to find centredness and mindfulness (Goh 2018) (Iyer 2016). Thus the message put forth 10 years ago in *Racing Forward* – that we need not be racing forward – could have felt almost premonitory. What the concept of this artwork underscores is the artist’s wish for global communities to live in a mindful world, one that takes its time to notice its natural and built environment and the narratives that are woven within them.

Is the bicycle broken? No, it just functions differently. □



**Figure 3.** Tung Mai, *Racing Forward*, 2008-2009, photo installation. Collection of Singapore Art Museum, National Heritage Board. Image courtesy of Tung Mai.

#### Notes

1. Organisations such as World Bicycle Relief for example help provide bicycle transportation aid to countries affected by natural disasters and other devastations.
2. The first time the artist visited Singapore was in 2008 as an assistant to Richard Streitmatter-Tran who was participating in the Singapore Biennale 2008 with his artwork, *September Sweetness*.
3. Even the two photographs that feature the streets of Ho Chi Minh City show indications of a developing city.

#### Bibliography

Goh, Kenneth. “Why S’pore Needs to Slow Down to Go Fast.” *TODAYOnline*. Singapore, September 28, 2018.

Iyer, Pico. “Why We Need a Secular Nation.” *TED.com*. January 4, 2016. <https://ideas.ted.com/why-we-need-a-secular-sabbath/> (accessed April 3, 2018).

Tung, Mai. *TransportASIAN*. Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2009.