ILHAM ART SHOW 2022

ILHAM

AZIZAN PAIMAN
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BLANKMALAYSIA
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CHENG YEN PHENG
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DHAVINDER SINGH
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AZIZAN PAIMAN

ALP
2022
Mixed media
132 × 246 × 109 cm

Salivations

Text by Aminah Ibrahim

From a distance, *ALP* appears to be an old two-wheel pushcart with a spinning dome on the very top. Upon closer inspection, the outer structure is similar to a vendor pushcart, complete with a handle on one side and wheels on the bottom, but also acts as a vitrine with glass sides. There's another display encased in the first, reminiscent of a perfume cabinet with double-doors and handles. This second display is lit from within, showcasing vial after vial of saliva, labelled *ALP* and numbered. On one of its sides sits a technicolour diagrammatic painting of a tongue where the head would usually be on a figure. Each side of the sculpture begets a different perspective.

The work looks and feels distinctly like Azizan Paiman, whose practice plays with current events, politics, and society with a focus on Malaysian contemporary life. Playing is important to Paiman and is ever-present in his works. His artworks are inspired by changes that Malaysia has gone through as a nation over the years, often presented with hints of humour, satire, and irony.

I met with Paiman over a long lunch to discuss *ALP*. We've worked together before and we spoke interweaving Malay and English between eating, joking and stories of his youth. Below is our conversation translated and edited for an audience.

Aminah: What was your thought process behind the work?

Paiman: My artwork is the result of how I seize all the experiences and the essence of what surrounds me. I can't do work unless my soul is disturbed. I don't believe in the practice of going into the studio every day and forcing myself to work on the surface of a painting and experiment. If I did that, the final product would not have me in it. For me, the studio is in the brain. I take after the perspective of artist Gustav Colbert. He was on-site and inspired by the everyday activities that he witnessed. My work isn't just about politics; it's how I look at our social history.

For this work, I looked at the current political situation. I feel because of our situation. We, the people, fight because of the way politicians use ideologies to convince their followers. In the end, politicians have their own agendas, and the people are left in disbelief!

There's a saying in Perak, *"dema bermodalkan air liur"* (they all use saliva to campaign).

Politicians use *air liur* (saliva) to convince people, which is why I named the work the acronym *ALP*. *ALP* could also stand for *Ahli Lompat Parti* (members jumping parties) or *Air Liur Pemimpin* (leader's saliva). The title is open-ended.

I created what I call fictional history—a story about a *dewa* (demigod) whose mission is to bring goodness to the land he received, the Nusantara archipelago. He teaches his followers about *rasa* (feeling, essence, and sensibility). His teachings are about maintaining balance and moderation. The concept of *rasa* is unbounded and generous, not controlled by race, hatred or dominance, bringing peace to the land.

One day, the *dewa* has a vision that he must go to the middle of the ocean, cut his tongue, and throw it into the sea as a sacrifice so that the land will be prosperous. He floats in the sea until he disappears, telling his followers to share his ideals in his absence. A group of his followers begin to disagree, constructing their own ideologies. Their diverging accounts are what divide us today on *rasa*. Eventually, their land was broken up into 13 parts.

I see what you mean by fictional history, *ALP* references both. Why did you choose to create a mythical narrative to pair with the sculpture?

I thought about the words *tanah air* (homeland), as Southeast Asia is not landlocked. We are a collection of islands. That's why I made up a story about islands and waters; land and sea.

I've always seen *tanah air* translated as "homeland". How you're thinking about it literally, "land water", has a deeper connection to Malaysia being an archipelago. Also, magic realism is entrenched in Southeast Asian history. *ALP* as a structure is a fascinating portrayal of this mythical narrative. How do you decide on the materials and how to put it together? What's the process from sketch to real life?

As I don't have a studio to experiment in, I begin by experimenting with diagrammatic drawings to express my ideas. Then, I produce based on a budget and choose my materials around it. The bulk of the work is idea orchestration. The rest is production. I know who can produce each component. I just try to be a good composer for the orchestra.

I go to different warehouses to produce all the components and build alongside my friends. Also, I'm always with my students, so I like to make my work in the workshops to give them motivation and inspiration.

I've been using this method of structural work since 1996, but as I get older it gets more complicated. When I was thinking of this work specifically, I remembered the vendors with pushcarts on Petaling Street, peddling to the people.

ALP peddles to the people. Essentially, I'm making a roadshow about our leaders. For the display, I wanted to separate the audience, because whatever the politicians say in Parliament, the people can't touch. These politicians have immunity.

At the very last stages of this work, I took specimens of saliva, like all the RTK tests we've had to take recently and displayed them in vials. There are 222 samples in total.

My work is rustic and evolving. For example, I added ventilation into the final structure because I wanted to represent sucking up all the hot air being delivered to us.

So, you pick materials and structures based on the metaphors that they represent. What inspired the diagrammatic painting of the tongue?

I had a specific idea behind the image of the tongue. There's a Malay idiom, *"Lidah kita kena rasa pahit bersama, manis bersama"* (our tongues should taste bitter together, sweet together). We should share our experiences.

The politicians only share the good with GLC companies and the *rakyat* (people) must pay for their failures. Yet, their followers don't *rasa* (feel) that they failed. Their followers aren't educated about the currency or the structure of the economy.

I remember learning that *peribahasa* (idiom). In English, the words "taste" and "feel" are distinct but in Malay, the word *rasa* encompasses both feeling and tasting. The image of a tongue alludes to the other meaning of *rasa*, "to taste". *Rasa* is also in the English dictionary, rooted in Sanskrit and defined as "the agreeable quality of something, especially the emotional or aesthetic impression of a work of art". Samples of saliva paired with the diagrammatic painting of the tongue allow *ALP* to be physical, visceral, and quite literally tongue in cheek. Your oeuvre is spitting with satire and caricature.

Yes, I'm representing our culture, but I don't approach the subject too seriously. I leave that to the academicians. I like my work to be both funny and serious, though not everyone will understand what I'm trying to do. I present the object and allow people to interpret from their own angles. The sharing develops more ideas, builds meaning and creates reach.

Any last thoughts or feelings? *Rasa bagaimana* (How did you feel throughout the process)?

I am passionate about doing the work, art is my mistress. She knows that I can't sleep because of her. The challenge for me is time and juggling other projects. Also, I don't want to be static or repetitive. Maybe when I pass and people see my retrospective, they'll see how my work has changed. I'm becoming older, but I don't want my work to feel old. I'm the oldest artist in the show and I wanted to see if my work was still relevant. It was validating to be chosen for this show. For me, emerging art now is amazing, it's open-ended and less constrained than before. If people buy my work, it's from my experience as an artist. It's because they understand and enjoy it, that's enough for me.

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AZZAHA IBRAHIM

After Monsoon
2022
Single channel video
Duration: 5 min 48 sec

Azzaha Ibrahim over Zoom
Text by Ellen Lee

"The kelantanese coast, unlike the pristine blue waters/white sands of 'Ganu, is often wild and grey. The waves tepid in some parts, more unforgiving in others. When the monsoon hits, there's often chaos. The coastal communities stay indoors, no work is done—there's wind, storms, floods. The monsoon is destruction. It is also a thing of great beauty. Its myth flows through almost every art form calling this land home, its temperament both poison and cure for anyone fated to be born, to belong, here".

My friend, Iqa Nabeera, wrote this in her Instagram Stories when she went back to Kelantan with her family for Aidilfitri this year. As someone who's never been to Kelantan, her perspective helped me to understand the magnitude of the monsoon in the everyday reality and symbolic imagination of those living in Kelantan. Rain can be heavy in the urban centres too, but its impact usually manifests as traffic jams, incessant complaints about said traffic jams, leaky ceilings, bad signal, and maybe some repairable damage. It's easy to ignore the spectre of nature, but for those living along the coasts, nature is an ever-present force, a high agency with the power to decide men's fates. Last December, the country experienced extreme flooding that gave urbanites a taste of how it feels to be at nature's mercy. Nature snuck in, trespassed, it went where it wasn't supposed to go—but saying this implies that there are places where it is "supposed" to go instead.

Monsoon season in rural Kelantan often causes all work to grind to a halt. Nothing can be grown, fishing is impossible, the land just rises with new layers of mud and silt, and also: garbage. Rubbish, waste, junk, detritus, debris, trash, refuse, filth, scrap, crap, slop, scum, shit, muck: lots and lots of it. Azzaha Ibrahim's phrase for it: *muntahan laut*, the sea's upchuck. Monsoon season usually comes for Kelantan around November to December every year and it's a season of reckoning with nature, and all the things that humans have taken for granted. It's like the sea is finally doing its checks and balances on our consumerist indulgences.

After Monsoon was filmed by Azzaha over a 2–3 year period during the pandemic. Though a native of Kelantan, he currently works between Kelantan and Cyberjaya, where he runs a restaurant. During the seasons of lockdown, he had to apply for letters of travel from the authorities in order to travel back to Kelantan to shoot the video's content. He is insistent on returning to Kelantan every year after the monsoon season in order to document the changes in the landscape; he calls the beach in Tumpat, Kelantan, his "open studio".

The work is composed of various panoramic and close-up shots of the beach in the aftermath of monsoon season. Rubbish is strewn about for miles, with fishing nets, plastic bottles, seashells, driftwood and tarpaulin all ground up in junkyard piles along the beach. A wrecked ship lies sunken in the horizon. A particular close-up angle of a dinosaur toy makes it seem as if it's a real dinosaur powerfully silhouetted against the setting sun. Interspersed between these on-site shots are various clues and artefacts from across the ages, such as old maps and drawings, compiled by Azzaha through his self-initiated research. In one of the shots, Azzaha lies naked from the waist up on the beach, and this footage is overlaid with the blueprint of a ship, creating a visual link between humans and their waste, their wrecks. Through mapping the anthropology of the waste that the monsoon vomits up every year, you can start to piece together a picture of the disparate lives who might have once been the products' consumers.

The *muntahan laut* are not dead, dumb products lying on the coast. The ejecta takes on a life of its own as the new landscape of the Kelantanese coast, shaping the regional geography. For some of the coastal kids, the waste becomes their playground. The video includes short interviews with some of these children, who tell Azzaha about the sorts of things they find after the sea settles down. Together they sing, "*Tulang tulang tulang...*": bones, bones, bones. The video fades out with an image of a child resting face down atop a mound that could be a large tarpaulin or net. As the saying goes, "one man's trash is another man's treasure", but perhaps "treasure" is an overstatement here. The coastal children are not treasure hunters who pick through the waste for things of value, they just don't know any different. This is not waste, this is their life.

This fact should not arouse our undue pity. In the children's playing among the bones and debris of civilisation, Azzaha sees the poignant fact of nature's cycle: from life, to waste, to life again. The video tries to emphasise a concept that Azzaha, in his artist statement, calls the transformation of "object into subject". From an urban standpoint, we might be inclined to feel pity or righteous anger on behalf of these kids, but this would be to deny their own agency in the matter; it would be to discount their lives as pitiful rather than, simply, another way of living. Azzaha, as someone who lives between Cyberjaya and Kelantan, is in tune with this tension. It's the tension of suspecting that a community deserves more than their lot in life, but also not wanting to champion any particular way of life over another, especially when urban lifestyles produce more waste and disappointments than a life growing up on nature's side. In his video palimpsest, Azzaha makes a journey through time, finding links to the present condition through past artefacts, equalising all experiences.

The video closes with Azzaha asking the children what they each want to be when they grow up. The answers are pretty predictable—policeman, fireman, doctor—except for two children, who made an impression in Azzaha's memories. One boy shyly says that he wants to be a *jaga*, a security guard. Another says that he wants to be an astronaut, which brings pause to all his friends: they've never heard this word before. Even amid the constellations of waste, children dream all the same. *After Monsoon* draws out the imaginative potential of waste on the Kelantanese shoreline, seen through the naive, exploratory eyes of children. The dinosaurs returned to their old stomping grounds, illuminated against that ball of fire; the shipwrecked vessel like a Homeric Galley; the bones of roaming creatures; the dunes of plastic bottles and driftwood. You could be anything here. The monsoon may bring life to a halt, but nature's brute force also inspires mankind to see anew, to begin again with the task of imagining life where it isn't.

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BLANKMALAYSIA

50450/220510
2022
Mixed media
Dimensions variable

Have We Really Left the Past Behind?

Text by Khat Mirzan

In 1974, Syed Hussein Alatas coined the term the "captive mind," which he described to be the "product of higher institutions of learning, either at home or abroad, whose way of thinking is dominated by Western thought in an imitative and uncritical manner" ("*The Captive Mind and Creative Development*"). As an example, Alatas posits that although a Malaysian historian may be able to correct the facts that a colonial historian may have gotten wrong, a "captive" historian may not be able to rethink the fundamental presuppositions that those historical misinterpretations were based upon. This would require the "captive mind" to transcend persisting colonialist frameworks of thought.

This term came up in a conversation I had with Blankmalaysia when he described the concepts behind the piece he made for the inaugural ILHAM Art Show. Blankmalaysia is a multidisciplinary artist, based in Kuala Lumpur, interested in the temporal modes of history. Currently pursuing a Masters of Visual Arts at Universiti Malaya, his focus is on historical art practices, specifically decolonisation within historiographical studies. Even one of the etymologies of his name is rooted in these themes, which revolve around the process of "filling in the blanks" or gaps that exist in hegemonic historical narratives. He did admit a preference for the name "Blank" but unfortunately it was already taken.

This process of "filling in the blanks" may remedy the problems posed by the "captive mind", but Blankmalaysia acknowledges the difficulties of including silenced narratives into the canon of art history as art historians are held to an academic framework that comes with specific modes of exploration and presentation, often rooted in Western thought. As an artist and researcher, he's able to straddle both worlds in order to achieve the same goal without adhering strictly to the academic process, thus expediting the presentation of data to viewers. Perhaps this could contribute to a creative development that counteracts a form of thinking constrained by "intellectual bondage".

Blankmalaysia noted, "The gist of Syed Alatas' writing is that although we [Malaysians] are liberated, physically, there's a lot of Western structures, which continue to exist within our state, and frame how we view our world. The idea of Merdeka isn't really true in that sense, as there's still so many cultural hangups. I am very interested in comparing Malaysia and Singapore because, although we seem so similar, how we approach history is so controversial. Only because in Singapore, based on my readings, there's this rejection of the past... I think in 2019, they celebrated their two-hundred-year anniversary. The two-hundred-year anniversary was to celebrate the 'modern founding', which traces back to Raffles, a colonial figure... So many objects that signify this colonial past continue to persist. Malaysia on the other hand, is constantly torn between the idea that we must celebrate our multicultural pasts and our nationalistic pride, which kind of manifested itself in really horrible ways to put it mildly".

Concepts surrounding the "captive mind" are reworked within the video component of Blankmalaysia's *50450/220510* and projected onto a portion of the 2 by 1 metre painting. The ten-minute-long video loop presents a montage of black and white landscape photographs. Both rural and urban landscapes are played in succession, and the lack of labels used to identify the dates or locations of each photograph sways the viewer to rely on environmental familiarity. Therefore, it would be likely to situate them somewhere in the region of Malaysia. Some photographs seem to pan horizontally across, mimicking the motion of a surveyor, while others follow an intense trajectory of zoom-ins and magnifications, meticulously inspecting the various details that lie within the photographs.

"My video work touches on all of these things. I'm not going to overtly show 'Oh, we are still being colonised'. For this work, I actually went through the process of revisiting archives. I looked at copyright-free images from before the 1900s. Photography is both a historical tool, because it captures the 'past,' and a historicising tool as it is used to tell History. It's narrative-based ... a lot of these old archival photographs were taken by the surveyors and are actually viewed from a very colonial view, very extractive economy... There's a gap between the colonial powers and the subjects. And there's always this separation in the pictures", explains Blankmalaysia.

This particular separation between the colonial powers and subjects, led Blankmalaysia to pose an introspective question surrounding "colonial hang-ups" in the present day: "Did [colonialism] manifest itself in how I view my world"? He found his answer within his personal archives, which he had started in 2005, after he realised a lot of the landscape photographs he had taken were reminiscent of the colonial photographs he had looked at before. Noticing this, he saturated his photographs and made them monotone to blur the distinction between the old photographs and his own recent ones. In addition, these photographs are ambiguous in their depictions of locations between Malaysia (Penang, Ipoh) and Singapore. Only landmarks (e.g. HMS Pluto, Fort Canning, Fort Cornwallis, Elgin Bridge, mosques, Blankmalaysia's favourite childhood hill) are left to hint at the specific geographical location. He notes that the video component's aim is not to explicitly state the ongoing continuations of colonialism, but rather works to highlight the temporal structure of history in order to challenge the mainstream view of temporal linearity and the permanent past.

Blankmalaysia adds: "When we look at the past features, we conclude that it is the past and is no longer happening. When you start muddling them all together, the line really blurs and at the same time you suddenly realise 'Oh, it hasn't been resolved'? Past narratives are continuously being inserted back into the present and revived for different things. So this is just a way of having conversations and creating discourse on the narrations of histories that we have, which people assume is the past and therefore done. But actually the past is a created narrative and is continuously being revised, being added to, and even subtracted from. So, if you look at education, for example, of history in both Malaysia and Singapore, there's a lot of things that kind of devalue what history is, in our education systems, because we never see it as a vital skill, compared to more modernising skills, such as science/STEM".

This recontextualisation of the past into the present disrupts the belief in the linear chronological progression of time. The play on temporality is echoed not only within the video piece as Blankmalaysia explains, but also in the physical component of the work: the canvas. This particular canvas is one of three that Blankmalaysia started during the Movement Control Order back in 2020. It took the artist two years to complete, and although it encapsulated his experiences of "being trapped indoors", he's more interested in the various ways the painting can be read in a temporal sense. The large scale of the painting allows viewers to have a physical connection to it as they move around and approach it from different angles.

In terms of how a viewer would read his work, Blankmalaysia notes that "depending on how you approach it, they [viewers] will notice time signifiers... So, within the piece itself, you can see things that have been peeled off, and cracks that have appeared. We could read it in different ways, like how erasure has happened, how I added things in, and of course, the piece that was before that has evolved into this piece now. So, actually, it was a very rigorous and long process to create this work... The brown parts are actually from the piece that was before. So all these conversations are happening, but it's just strands, which viewers can pick up on if they want to get into a framework of thinking about what time means".

The themes of time and erasure are also seen within the video element, specifically in relation to Blankmalaysia's favourite photograph located at the end of the piece. "The whole area is actually my hometown, where I come from in Penang. I used to cycle on that hill when I was a child and did a lot of jumps up on it, but over the years, soil from the hill was extracted and was used in the development projects in the surrounding area and across Malaysia... So this hill disappeared and on a geologic time scale, it takes millions of years to form only to be gone within 100 years. It's now not even a hill, it's a hole in the ground. It's a mini *lumbung*".

As Blankmalaysia's painting and childhood hill make evident, erasures and alterations remain physically permanent, within the linear progression of time. However, the remnants of their existence continue to persist through memories and within the collective framework of consciousness. In other words, the past is never fully gone, as multiple narratives have the power to persist and affect the present and the future.

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Everybody Has A Chance
2022
Colour pencil on paper and colour pencils
Dimensions variable

Hilarity Ensues: CC Kua's studio at 3 A.M. on a Thursday

Text by Ellen Lee

CC Kua's work spans a single wall, occupied by coloured pieces of paper of varying sizes. Off to the right, a little acrylic shelf displays a neat, even row of the colour pencils used to colour the paper. The more she used these colour pencils in her usual drawings, the shorter they became, but not all at the same rates. As she watched them "grow up" (or rather, grow down) at increasingly uneven lengths, she started to feel bad for the less-used ones. In contemporary parlance, you might call her an empath.

With *Everybody Has A Chance*, CC wanted to create a work that minimised her role as the artist as much as possible. After all, it was her own artistic vision that prevented the colour pencils from fulfilling their teleological purpose as colour pencils. The work's premise is simple: to use up all the colour pencils in her set until they reach the same length as the shortest and most-used one, which is the black colour pencil. By this logic, the colour she least enjoys using will receive the most prominence by taking up the most space. This rather extravagant act of humility ("Now, I am their maid", she says in the interview) recalls the hushed, gentle tones of Marie Kondo talking about possessions that "spark joy", or David Shrigley's doodles of mundane objects.

The physical work is incidental to the concept, which opens up more recursive lines of inquiry the more you think about it. For example: what about the paper, why doesn't this material get a chance to show itself "as is" instead of being buried under layers of colour? At the same time, the work's title provocatively recalls the framing of the ILHAM Art Show as an open call, so what about the artists who didn't get selected? Does "everybody" really have a chance? Or perhaps the impulse behind the work comes out of a wider strain of horizontality and participatory politics currently being championed in the art world at large — exemplified not just by the open call, but also by such developments as Cecilia Alemani's female-centric 59th Venice Biennale or ruangrupa's "*lumbung*"-themed Documenta 15. Or maybe I'm just thinking too much.

Thus begins CC's first forays into the murky territory of conceptual art. With a premise this nonsensical, anyone wishing to write about the work is also forced to ask nonsensical questions. The best format is a Q&A with the artist, who serves as the spokesperson for this charity of exploited and uncredited artist tools.

The following conversation has been edited for publication.

Ellen Lee: So, Faber-Castell?

CC Kua: I bought these colour pencils during my college years — just randomly la, I didn't even think about the brand. I just needed colour pencils. And I've been using them ever since. I've been wanting to do this work for a very long time, like for three years now. I was looking at this box of colour pencils and thinking, how come I used the black one so much? Black always remained the shortest. I felt bad for all the other colours.

So the final work won't feature the colour black then. The black pencil is the benchmark and you have to get all the other colour pencils to that length.

Yes, yes, correct. I thought the work and the concept are so simple, but I find it quite hard to explain it to people. I explained the work to my mom and she was like *Hmmmmmm. Hmm.*

How come you proposed this for the ILHAM Art Show? It has a very simple outcome, pure colours, when normally you do quite detailed pictures.

Yes, normally I do drawings with forms, shapes, characters, stories. The more I practise art, the more inspired I am by artists like Martin Creed, David Shrigley and Andy Warhol. I also enjoy looking at pictures by Marc Chagall and David Hockney. My studies in Taiwan helped push my thinking further on whether art should only be about form, expression and content. You can see a lot of my character in my previous drawings, but maybe not so much in this work. Maybe in a more indirect way.

If people just saw the work displayed as is, without your name or an artist statement, they might not even know it's by you.

Yes, I think that's quite good. Artists sometimes try to own a visual style too much. But I try not to be so protective over my style, because sometimes I also get bored of it la. Artists have to take one step back. You don't always have to tell people that a work is by you, you don't need to "own" a particular style. With this work, I tried to minimise artistic intervention; I'm just a medium to help the colour pencils show themselves.

You used the black colour pencil to make proper drawings, which is why it's so short. But now you're using the rest to simply colour. Don't you think you're treating them unequally?

When I thought about how I should use up the colour pencils to make them shorter, I did consider doing something like my usual drawings. But that didn't seem like the right thing to do either. I wanted to show them just as *themselves*. So I thought that by using them up in a single block of colour each until they reached the height of the black colour pencil, this would be a more powerful way to show off their colours. When you look at one big block of colour as opposed to a detailed drawing, it's the block that allows you to focus on the colours. If the final visual had a form or story to it, you wouldn't focus on the colours. You'd be trying to understand what I'm trying to say, as the artist.

Normally the colours would be in service of you, but now you're in service of them.

Yes, yes, that's right! Wow, now it sounds very fancy. Say that again. Write that down. Very good.

First, the colour pencils are in service of *your* vision —

Yes, they're like my maid.

But now, you are in service of *them*.

Now, *I* am their maid.

I think this work is pretty badass la. I mean it's badass 'cause it's very... low effort?

[CC laughs]

Like, it's straightforward.

The execution is quite easy, but the thought process is there. I actually took a lot of things into consideration while making it, things like whether I wanted to colour methodically or in a more free, impulsive way.

It's difficult to remove yourself as an artist.

Yes, to me it's easier to make my usual drawings and paintings. Those come more naturally. I don't like to make decisions, but I felt like I had to make a lot of decisions with this work. I'm not trying to be a badass. I'm like a sweet little girl. But I like badass stuff.

I think you don't need to justify your work by saying, like, "I deserve to be selected for the ILHAM Art Show because I'm a skilled artist, it's a detailed work, it's a long process, I worked very hard". The confidence required to propose such an idea is also part of the work. It's part of the feeling of the work.

Thank you. Please do something fun for the essay! Do whatever you want. But we get to check right?!

Er... OK, I'll send it to you before I send it to ILHAM...

So nice of you.

I was thinking that I could just reprint this conversation because you have a strong personality; your personality is very embedded in your works and it also comes through in your artist statement. There are a lot of artists who make great works but aren't very good at talking, or their personality is buried deep inside them. So writers have to draw it out of them when they write their essays. But for your text...

Yeah, you can make it very surface but very deep like that.

Er... What? Anyway, I don't want to write too much. I want to use your words. I think the way you express yourself is the best way to talk about your works.

Thank you. So is this interview over yet?

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CHANG YOONG CHIA

A Leaf Through History: Family Tree
2022
Batik, remazol dye on cotton cloth, wooden rods and rubber tapping knives
Dimensions variable

Histories of Rubber and Wax

Text by Denise Lai

Chang Yoong Chia's trip to ILHAM Gallery in 2016 triggered a dormant memory. The exhibition on display was a survey of modern batik works curated by Simon Soon and Rahel Joseph, entitled *Love Me in My Batik*. It was concerned specifically with three threads within the history of modern batik: the first, the development of a national batik textile industry in Malaysia; secondly, works by contemporary artists that aim to pluralise batik's ideological undercurrent beyond the national; and finally, contemporary batik works from Indonesia. Walking amongst these examples, Yoong Chia recalled the vague memory of a group of batik painters active during his childhood, who seemed to have disappeared from his radar or the discipline entirely.

Yoong Chia's pivot to batik was not merely an attempt to revive a perceived dwindling appreciation for the medium. It was a response to that specific aspect of the exhibition that asked: what is so Malaysian about batik, really? And if he, as a Chinese-Malaysian artist, were to attempt to explore the medium, what would his contribution to the history of modern batik look like?

As it turns out, Yoong Chia's articulation of the batik medium would come to be informed by his relocation to the town of Tangkak in Johor during the pandemic, and before this, his experiments in batik in Hokkaido, Japan and Kelantan, Malaysia — two locations each with their own tradition of wax-resist art. In *A Leaf Through History: Family Tree*, Yoong Chia gathers the lessons in batik from these prior residencies to delve into the history of Tangkak's plantations. Twenty-eight batik paintings — saturated portraits of various unknown rubber tappers — are hung on lines evoking rows of rubber trees. In this installation, Yoong Chia's evocation of Tangkak's plantations expands into the telling of a history of exploitation and colonial extraction. Below is an edited transcript of Yoong Chia's response to my enquiries into the process and ideas behind this monument to forgotten rubber tappers.

I treat batik firstly as a craft, a Malaysian craft. And then as a Malaysian craft, what does it mean? What is so Malaysian about it? Batik has garnered so much association with our national identity. For example, on certain days of the week during Parliament sessions, the MPs can wear batik. It has become a national symbol. But what is our national identity? I'm not asking that through what the government says or what normal perceptions of religion or identity are. I'm trying to identify another way to discover it. Then the exhibition at ILHAM was presented and it brought back all these memories. It made me rethink: what is Malaysian batik? What is Malaysian art? What is Malaysian identity? If I were to make batik, how would I make it?

Firstly, I got an artist residency in Hokkaido, Japan. In Hokkaido, you get one metre of snow in the winter. When I went there, I had the idea of bringing the Malaysian heat to the winter of Hokkaido. So, one of the things I was thinking about was batik, because you need wax, and wax needs heat. As I started to make some batik, I discovered that in Japan, they also have a similar technique using wax. But instead of the *canting*, they use a brush. They melt the wax and dip the brush into the wax, then they paint on the cloth and that acts as a resist before the application of coloured dye. In Japan, I got a sort of very high-tech and professional dashboard, in which you can control the temperature and the dyes, and the chemical reaction is very stable. Basically, it's batik and not batik, because that identity is different. But it's the same technique and material. So I thought, what is the difference?

To answer this, I went to Kelantan to learn traditional batik, to find the difference and how I want to express that. I eventually got an opportunity to go to Kelantan through an artist residency, and it also happened that Kota Bharu, where my residency was, is where the Japanese came and invaded Malaya at the start of the Pacific War and WWII in Malaysia. I then realised that I was using batik as a means to learn about our national identity, and I realised I could use this history to talk about this identity.

When I went to the beach where the Japanese Imperial Army first landed, it was full of coconut trees and many coconuts had fallen onto the beach. Around the same time, I discovered through my research that Malaysian batik usually has floral motifs, because Islam forbids animal images in decoration, except for the butterfly. So I thought, why don't I use floral images that are not normally used. In the case of Kelantan, I was using the coconut trees as a way to talk about the Japanese invasion: "coconut" in Malay is *kelapa*, and it sounds very similar to *kepala* (in English, "head"). I associated the fallen coconuts with WWII, when a lot of Malaysians were beheaded by the Japanese army. This was at the end of the residency.

Then I came to Tangkak and was stuck here for a few months, where I started to discover the plantations. From the coconut trees in Kota Bharu, I thought maybe I could use floral motifs I find around here. This led me to focus on plantations, or more specifically plantation trees like rubber trees and palm oil trees — using these examples to talk about the history of plantations and the history of Malaysia through these floral motifs.

For a long time, I was also struggling with how to make batik, the techniques, the material, and the look. I used crackling in my work because I feel that the crackling look in batik is synonymous with contemporary batik and what people are used to. This was important to me because I was also looking for the identity of Malaysian batik, or how Malaysians associate Malaysian batik. If we can recognise wax-resist techniques from Japan, and we can differentiate Indonesian batik from Malaysian batik, then how do we define Malaysian batik? I thought about traditional elements and common techniques that are employed in Malaysian batik to find an identity, whilst also questioning this identity. For example, I see batik techniques as more than just decoration, and maybe these techniques can tell an extra story. The jagged feel of the crackling method in one piece looked to me like barbed wire, so I adjusted it a little bit to make it more obvious.

Because batik also has a lot of association with Indonesia and Southeast Asia, I use another symbol from pre-colonial Southeast Asia in the Naga image. The plants are not indigenous; they are brought in for economic purposes, but because they have touched the ground and drawn nutrients from it, maybe they have taken some kind of spirit from the land. The image of the Naga is a way for me to say that these plants that are foreign have absorbed some spirit of the land. And it just so happens that the curve of the rubber cutter knife also reminds me of the Naga head, especially the Langkasuka type. I simplify the image so that now it's just an eye on the blade.

I'm third-generation Malaysian Chinese, so I'm very aware that my ancestors came from China. And I'm also very aware that in Malaysia we are separated as different races and ethnicities. And a lot of the other races, particularly the Chinese and Indians, came because of the industries that the colonists introduced. That is their entry point into Malaysia, and therefore, I am here right now. So, there is the connection of non-indigenous plants and people that come from different places but ultimately belong here.

Whilst there are images that I can talk about or are based on research, there are also others that I cannot describe. They are very much intuitive. And I feel that this part of the work is also important, because it was also the process of me discovering the past of the rubber plantations and the plantation workers. Some of the images are slowly forming into what I understand of them, but it is also part of my journey into this work.

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CHENG YEN PHENG

When the Land Tortoise Meets the Sea Turtle Test Fly: I Believe I Can Fly
2022
Mixed media
Dimensions variable

Testing, Testing, 1, 2, 3

Text by Lim Sheau Yun

As we were speaking over Zoom, artist Cheng Yen Pheng remarked that she often feels that she doesn't communicate well through language. When pressed, she told me that the way she talks is jumbled up and that she tends to jump between ideas. "My garden is in little piles," she said to me as a metaphorical aside.

I see Yen Pheng's works as these little piles, discrete acts nurtured not through the linear logic of endpoints but through a situational ethos of care. Yen Pheng's series *When the Land Tortoise Meets the Sea Turtle* (2021) chronicles her research into *wau* (kite) and puppet practices on the East Coast of Malaysia, where she decamped for a time with her young daughter. She worked stepwise, filming several YouTube videos chronicling flying kites and puppet performances, running *wau*-making workshops for children, and finally making an open studio exhibition at the Wetland School of Setiu featuring *waus* and paper puppets made both by herself and by members of the community.

Her latest work at ILHAM, *I Believe I Can Fly* (2022), is an extension of *When the Land Tortoise Meets the Sea Turtle*, chronicling the flying patterns of the failed *waus* she made with her daughter. The lines in the sky that they drew were erratic, turbulent, quite unlike the relaxed infinity symbol they were aiming for. To Yen Pheng, these tests stand not as evidence of inadequacy but as joyful testaments to process. Failure is not to be dismissed but to be nurtured.

While Yen Pheng originally practised as a painter, in recent years, she has turned towards mixed-media assemblages. While her works have always been large in scale, they are now constructed by accumulating small aggregates rather than by making singular paintings or objects. In other words, she makes evident the scale of the hand: she cuts, stitches, sews, knots, threads. She told me that she installed the work at ILHAM itself: she herself wasn't certain how the final piece would turn out when she walked into the install. As with the title of her work, Yen Pheng has a penchant for the what-could-be of fables.

Our call was cut short by her daughter, who had just realised their home's hot water had stopped working. Apologetic, Yen Pheng rushed off, attending to another test in the rhythm of life.

The conversation below has been translated from Mandarin, with Malay and English interspersed. It has been edited for length and clarity.

Lim Sheau Yun: Why the *wau*? In recent years, it has become co-opted a symbol for a commercialised, idyllic rural of Malaysia. What does this symbol mean for you?

Cheng Yen Pheng: I didn't have any particular interest in the *wau*. I wanted to express something related to the weather, *cuaca*, 天气. Before the project, I used to fly *wau* in Selangor with my daughter, who is now seven but was then five. No matter what I did, I could not figure out how to fly it. But when I went to the East Coast and bought a *wau* for my daughter, I didn't need to learn at all—it just flew. This was not a problem of craft but of weather. And I thought that maybe I'd do a project on the East Coast. In a different space, a different weather, what kind of person will emerge? The environment nurtures you, gives you a different personality.

Facing the sea, I thought my daughter would grow up differently. The children I made *wau* with were able to let things go, but my daughter was much pettier. I thought she would be stronger in a place with big waves and big winds. I was talking to an artist who is moving to Terengganu, and he said that people there are better at *melepak* (hanging out). But I think it's that people there are better able to accept what the weather gives them and make their lives around it. It's not resignation to fate: everyone works hard and makes work from this environment. Everyone has multiple jobs, carpentry, baking, fishing. Their work shifts with the seasons. People on the East Coast are especially sensitive to the weather.

There is no *wau bulan* in this project—that is the wau of the nation, of *kebangsaan*. We went to discover kampung-style *waus*, like the *wau lang*, which is only flown during monsoons. In Kampung Chendering, where residents are all fishermen, residents leave the seas and play *wau lang* when the weather is bad. So *wau lang* is made for this weather, requiring winds of 42km/h. *Wau bulan* cannot fly in monsoons. *Wau bulan* is made for quiet winds, after harvest and on lands. The bamboo for *wau lang* itself is special, the wings of the *wau* are thicker, and it needs a long tail to stand against these fierce winds. I realised that *wau* also has seasons: playing *wau*, catching fish, it's all according to the weather.

Why a test? Why not show us conclusions?

My actions (动作) are all tests. The idea was a test. I didn't know if the *wau* I made would work. It flies, then it falls. Maybe the head is too heavy, or the tail is too short, or maybe it's not balanced (*seimbang*). The bamboo needs to be soft, and we need to constantly adjust. We'll try four or five times redistributing weight, and if not, it is a problem with the material. When it is successful, the *wau* just flies. At its most beautiful, the *wau lang* likes to relax in an infinity symbol. Kampung-style flying lets *wau* move, but national-style *wau* flies straight and at 90 degrees.

The lines in the installation are all failures. These *waus* can fly but will fall after a minute. They don't fly smoothly and go in circles, revealing these different and strange lines. The installation is my recording of different failed tests. I also wanted to add space with colourful *wau* paper, *kertas jagung* (literally, corn paper). A line is just a line. A line doesn't have the joy and energy of the times we played *wau*.

Art has long been beholden to this Romantic-era idea of the male artist, solely dedicated to his work and artistic vocation. Writer Sheila Heti has pointed out that women with creative pursuits are often expected to put them on hold as they pour their making-energy into children. But art also becomes the grounds upon which she asks these questions: Heti calls her book *Motherhood* "a wrestling place." How do you think of making art in relation to femininity and motherhood?

Artists need quiet, not loneliness. I was even more energised and motivated to make work after having my daughter. My child is not my artwork. But to go from making a new work of art to making a new life, I felt very formidable. When I decided to have my daughter and grow up with her, I thought that maybe she could be pasted together with my work. I bring my daughter into the work.

I am a very slow person. If you see this slowness negatively, you will feel disempowered. But if you see it as a good thing, then you can find ideas in the slow. These slow actions find themselves in my work, like sewing, and making paper. Now, I'm getting to know new materials. Bamboo is very suitable for women because it is light, and we can move a lot of it easily. Look at light but strong materials.

When I care for my daughter, I can look back at myself. If I make, she can see it, and I can see her, and we can grow up together. I don't mind bother and slowness. I need time to make. After having children, I want to make work even more. Sheila Heti is right; art is a wrestling place. But we need to do this.

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CHONG YAN CHUAH

Atl-Aequus and the Five Phases
2022
Interactive Digital Installation
(UE5 Game Engine)
http://aequus.io

Mythos, Meta, Manifesto

Text by Lim Sheau Yun

atl. (*abbreviation*): Atlas.
Aequus (*from the Latin*): Equal; Level, even, flat, horizontal; Calm.

#MYTHOLOGY

Chuah Chong Yan's studio is littered with relics. He brings my attention to a defunct 2014 MacBook and a dated iPhone from his time in university, covered in cryptic drawings made presumably with sharpies and coloured pens on white-out, like the classroom doodles of a hyperactive child's imagination. These artefacts of his creative identity are placed on display pedestals, prized finds in an archaeology of his digital life.

While Chong Yan is primarily known for his expansive digital works, he begins not with making worlds but with crafting their constituent objects. It is a simple question of scale: objects and stories first, worlds later. A series of sketches on paper, not unlike his MacBook drawings, was what began *atl-Aequus*. His mark-making is intentionally rough, each amateurish scratch of the pencil belying the chlorine-free paper it is made on. These sketches ultimately culminated in a five-by-one-metre large map of atl-Aequus's world, drawn with ink on canvas, its background washed in the blood-red acrylic of a Taoist altar tablecloth. Scale matters. As the adage goes, "The higher the altar, the closer to the gods".

Since moving back to Malaysia, Chong Yan has been exploring the esoteric Buddhist-Taoist traditions he grew up with. In particular, *atl-Aequus* draws from the fivefold conceptual scheme of *wuxing*, a Chinese theory of five phases (Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal, Water) that govern and explain interactions between all phenomena, from politics to medicine. *Wuxing* is — in Internet parlance — an aesthetic, furnishing *atl-Aequus* with its Oriental, elemental Sino-futurism. But it is also the governing structure for the way natural elements interact in-game, a universal system upon which everything can be explained and made known. It is not unlike the function of God, or Science, or even the hyperlinked Internet: it is the relational fibre that stitches pockets of information together. Perhaps more accurately, it is God and Science made for the era of the hyperlinked Internet, a yassified, beauty-filtered myth made maximal.

#META

There is no end in *atl-Aequus*. There is no death, no final stage, no linear time. Instead, there are centres. Each world in this game of exploration is built around a central anchor object, or a series of objects arrayed in a field: a sun-like orb, a columbarium made of bodies, gridded megaliths piercing the sky. The worlds we see are made from the inside out; in other words, these worlds are built, asset by asset, brick by brick.

Trained as an architect, much of Chong Yan's work imagines architecture in the digital realm, asking what role an architect could play in a fully digital future. Ever the provocateur, he is a futurist who thinks in hypotheticals. With the grandeur of a twentieth-century urban planner, he seeks to envision possibilities of the human in the era of the metaverse. "What if you could design not just an environment", he says, "but design a Meta-God?" Chong Yan sees the role of the architect as a "techno-paganist" or a "digital shaman" who understands the blueprint of the world, where an architect's understanding of structure is abstracted from the scale of a building to the scale of a world. Where architects once had plan drawings or the knowledge of structural engineering, in *atl-Aequus* they have *wuxing*. "Shamans make gods, and gods make a universe", he tells me.

Built on Unreal Engine 5, Chong Yan makes an unrealistic world look as hyperreal as possible. Gone are triangles of geometry; detail is made at the level of the pixel. Light is thus a recurring obsession, both in-game and in his thinking about the game. In addition to walking around the world, players can throw balls of light or hold up a torch to brighten the world around them. Force feedback jolts through the console when a player throws a fireball. The fireball blazes a path in nocturnal worlds, each ray it emits traced onto an existing cache of surfaces to simulate firelight. The engine whirs.

Chong Yan shows me the back end for *atl-Aequus*. The logic of the game reveals itself as a tightly knit set of parameters. Simply put, it is a case of "If this, then that" — taken to the nth degree. My guide through the flow of the machine, Chong Yan takes me through a pathway for sound activation. The background music of monks chanting, he says, was his own voice, recorded on his iPhone in the bathroom of his apartment. I imagine him standing in the shower, a towel wrapped around his head with a glowing screen illuminating his chanting voice.

#MANIFESTO

This is the fourth world of Chong Yan's creation. In *27 Years of Lazarian Delights* (2020), he conceived of an abstract explorer in a foreign land. But now, he is reinventing himself not as a traveller but as a creator. Unlike *FAC3D* (2021), which questioned the role of artificial intelligence in authorship, here, the maker reigns supreme. *atl-Aequus* is ultimately a human-ist pursuit, in the sense that the human is the ultimate arbiter of truth. Worlds are created and destroyed as easily as we might perceive them.

From the *Lubanjing* to Le Corbusier, architectural theory has historically been written in manifestos. With *atl-Aequus*, we see its latest iteration. Chong Yan frames this project as an interface, bringing closer the socio-political world and his digital one. In the era of the mythologised architect, Chong Yan envisions utopia, with his meta-gods having the "digital intelligence to distribute power". "Aequus" is Latin for equality, but it can also mean flat, even, horizontal. It is an all-consuming totality. This world is a closed-loop system with its own laws of physics, time, politics, space. At the end of worldbuilding, we find *alt-Aequus*.

Chong Yan began showing me the game just after lunch. By the time we were done at mid-afternoon, it was raining. The sky seemed to me a strange facsimile of the game-world. I spent the rest of the day blearily blinking away the high-definition images behind my eyes. I'm not sure whether it was a dream, a nightmare, a vision of what is to come, or all the above.

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The world of *atl-Aequus* grows beyond the game. See more at https://aequus.io.

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DHAVINDER SINGH

Jaga Life
2022
Charpoy bed (located at the Ground Floor Gallery Lift Lobby), **time recorder, card holder and mini motor siren** (located in the Gallery)
Dimensions variable

Text by Lim Sheau Yun

Dhavinder Singh grew up in a factory in Chan Sow Lin, an industrial area off Jalan Sungai Besi in Kuala Lumpur. His grandparents were caretakers of a factory, where they would "*jaga*", or care. Jaga, a particularly flexible word linguistically, is both verb and noun. To care is the same as the one who cares.

While the concept of *jaga* has taken on new significance in the past two years during the pandemic, Dhavinder here points to its deep history in Punjabi families like his own. Before Malaysia became a net importer of security guards, *jaga* was a family endeavour performed by all ages and abilities, including women, children and the elderly. Frail and feminine bodies were also able to *jaga*, with no expectation of having to be combat-trained professionals. Presence was enough.

This politics of care animates the spirit of Dhavinder's work, while the factory's textures, rhythms and shapes are its formal basis. The artist works like an archivist, collecting objects he's drawn to. In *Jaga Life*, Dhavinder has paired his grandmother's charpoy (a South Asian rope bed), and a time recorder like the one he saw in the factory he grew up in. Time becomes a central feature in his work, both in the accounting of work hours and in the age of these objects harkening to a different era. Taken out of their original contexts and installed into a gallery, these objects transform the gallery into a factory of art. The artwork becomes art at work. With the accretion of dust, the recording of time and the presence of bodies, *jaga* comes alive.

The text below is derived from a transcript of my conversation with Dhavinder; it has been edited for length and lightly rearranged for clarity.

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I grew up in an ironwork factory that made vertical timber sawmills. It was two cousins who owned two separate factories. One cousin had a moulding facility where raw metal was melted and moulded into parts. Where I used to live with my grandparents was the factory that refined and assembled these parts. In a factory, you're surrounded by dangerous objects everywhere. I grew up around milling machines, huge industrial saws, cranes, all of which I used to play with without my parents knowing. Workers had specific places where they put their tools and instruments. I used to get into so much trouble because, as a kid, I'd move stuff around. My grandparents used to get scolded by the boss, and I would get beatings. All that grime in my work is from the factory. These elements of decay, I'm still using it.

I like to keep things simple; I don't like to overcomplicate things. I represent an item or object the way it is. I would not like to alter it, to add colour to it or polish it or clean it up. I select based on the provenance of the item. Who did the item belong to? What was it used for? These objects cannot be presented in a factory again. Once you remove it from its original space and bring it to a new environment, it loses and gains an essence. It's been taken away from my original place of belonging. Something that's gritty and grimy is going through all sorts of contrast, this total flip. Whatever dirt or debris that comes with it is an extra layer, one that I do not need to add myself. Time has done the work for me.

That's why my grandma's bed, the charpoy, is such a strong piece I can relate to. It's 60 years old, I think. As a child, I used to go to town with my grandma to see her friends. Her friends all used to be watchmen too. They would look after, live and work all in the same building. I used to see the charpoy everywhere: in front of a bank, in front of a *tokong* (temple). Sikhs of those days were frequently typecast into watchmen, policemen and soldiers; it was always something to do with security, with defence. That's how my grandparents got the job: my grandpa was a civil servant by day, and he had a night job as a watchman. The factory gave the family a house or a cabin to live in in the factory. So, I grew up in that factory for fourteen years, between one to fourteen.

Chan Sow Lin is a predominantly Chinese and Punjabi area. The workers were all Chinese uncles. The Punjabis were caretakers of the factory. There were about a hundred to two hundred factories around the area, and each factory had one Punjabi family. *Jaga* is real; it's honest. This *jaga* was during the 60s, 70s, 80s, before the privatisation of security, CCTV systems and technology. Everyone did *jaga*, even my mum did it when she was a child, and my aunties too. I also did *jaga* as a kid, on Sundays and Saturdays when my grandparents were not around and I was in the factory alone. They always referred to it as *jaga* — "*itu orang jaga sana, itu orang jaga sini.*" You can relate to *jaga* life; you must look after yourself.

The charpoy is at the entrance of the lifts. Everyone who walks in will see it. My grandma will greet them in spirit. The spokes are my idea. I wanted to incorporate something of my own. I custom-made the holes and used a pulley system to tie up the mosquito net. There's a lot of tension in the poles that are stretching the mosquito net in all four directions. The time recorder is upstairs next to the reception counter. The work is utilised; it's working. It's not a stagnant, static piece. There will be a siren every morning at eleven fifteen when the gallery opens and workers clock in. And another every evening at six forty-five when the gallery closes and workers clock out. That's when my grandparents would clock in; the factory closes, and the charpoy comes out. When the charpoy is put aside, it means the factory is open.

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DIPALI GUPTA

Membawang (Gossip) I
Duration: 5 min 43 sec
Located in the Gift Shop

Membawang (Gossip) II
Duration: 5 min 12 sec
Located in the Gallery

Membawang (Gossip) III
Duration: 4 min 39 sec
Located in the Gallery

2022
Single channel video

On Gossip

Text by Samantha Cheh

What of the gossip?

She is a weather vane spinning in the direction of a whisper, sussing out "our morals, our securities, our aspirations, our fears," writes Jessica Goldstein. The tools of her trade are instantaneous texts, tweets, screenshots and emojis. Gossip is also (usually) a woman, associated with close female friendship, but also "idle, backbiting talk". She is untrustworthy because she is malleable—mutable—requiring context, while also existing independent of it. Her shifting quality makes gossip a space of possibility and change. Gossip is collective, and thus anti-hierarchical. Anti-authoritarian. Her investors feed on speculation, but her valuelessness makes her persistently anti-capitalist. She invites you to the dinner table, offers a trust fall, a gesture of solidarity. The gossip is a nexus for all our feelings of fascination and revulsion; our desires and tendency for cant.

To gossip, really, is to be human.

If gossip stands in opposition to the structures of certain fact, then we might think of multidisciplinary artist Dipali Gupta's *Membawang* (2022) video collage as its visual manifestation. Through an amalgam of video, audio and text, Dipali collects, adapts, riffs on and connects ideas with a feminist eye. The feminisation of "informal talk" is peeled apart as a hallmark of gendered oppression, and social conditioning.

Membawang splices together three main storylines from various pieces of media Dipali consumed over the last two years. Fragmented and grasping, what connects a mak yong performance with clips from the Hindi film *Thappad* is Dipali's effort to "break" pejorative definitions of gossip, and recontextualise it as something fundamentally concerned with solidarity and collective truth.

Throughout *Membawang*, there is an awareness of the value of whisper networks as a way of circumnavigating the restrictions and expectations of patriarchy through the careful destabilisation of prescribed "knowns". Dipali's works reflect a sense of personal conviction bolstered by the authority of academic theory, without being drowned out by it. Theory offers her the "courage" and "validation" she needs to make art, but also the language to defend it against baked-in misogyny.

Bolstered by Donna Haraway's cyborg theory, Dipali reimagines the gossip as an adapter of truth, riffing to the needs of narrative. Womanhood becomes the site of a re-assembly—the gossipy shadow-self, the cyborg housewife, the independent thinker, all culminating in something more expansive, collaborative, complex. Something to set us free.

Samantha Cheh: You're very interested in female relations and presentation. What is it about them that interests you?

Dipali Gupta: I think it's all about the small things that go unnoticed, even when we feel uncomfortable about them. We don't let ourselves think about it, though it keeps returning—that stuff catches my attention.

For *Membawang*, I use a scene from an old Indian movie, *Thappad*. In one of the film's side stories, the protagonist's mother talks about having stopped singing once she got married. She says to her husband: "You know I've compromised?" He says he never asked her to do that and his wife agrees, but she says that her mother always told her that the home and her children are important. It's a simple example, but what I wanted to highlight was that this is just how we've been conditioned. The husband doesn't realise that she's tied up in her own cycle of compromise.

I mean, he's right in that he's not stopping her, but he doesn't have to. In a lot of ways, the world will do it for him.

Yeah, yeah, exactly. If men had that kind of empathy, or knew what women were going through, maybe they could deal with these invisible conditionings.

That societal conditioning, it's so subtle, isn't it? Even recognising it is such a hurdle.

Last year, my family had this argument where everyone got mad at the dinner table over who should get up to fetch a spoon or a pickle. I felt like there was something bigger going on here, and later, I realised it was the site itself—the dining table. It's a space where, symbolically, the man of the house sits at the head and the women circulate. He was playing out those dynamics unconsciously.

It sounds like there are these structures that are so deeply embedded in our brains. Almost primordial, instinctual. The moment you sit at a table, no matter what you do, the patriarchy will just reassert itself. Now with growing awareness that women are real people with actual agency, those ideas are coming into conflict with rigid patriarchal structures.

Yes, even my vibrator drawings are about those androcentric structures. When I began researching the genesis of the vibrator, the problem of hysteria and the repression of women, I realised that the sexual behaviours in bed replicate the structures of patriarchy. It's not different from my or other women's experience of the world: how men get threatened by vibrators, what they demonstrate, how pleasure is deprived, and what effect that deprivation has on a woman's life. How do you talk about what happens behind closed doors? I'm interested in how we move forward as women.

The whole idea of the "cyborg housewife" centres around assemblaging machines to circumvent these internal structures to break out of our own conditionings.

You're making something out of what already exists: the housewife is an existing trope that you build on, despite housewifery having connotations of submissiveness.

The past shapes how you behave today. You need to be aware of it so you can adjust—and those little adjustments help us break what holds us back.

Let's go back to the idea of the dinner table, which I think is also coded as a site of gossip. How did you get to thinking about gossip as a concept?

As a girl, when you're at school or in college, you'll have guy friends or boyfriends who will complain about how all girls want to do is meet up and gossip—and I never wanted to identify with that, which is where this whole bad name for gossip starts, right? Looking back, I think I lost out on a lot because I didn't stand around with those girls.

It makes me go back to what we were talking about earlier about how the modern woman is coming into conflict with stubborn patriarchal structures, and our internalised misogyny in the ways we think about women's conversation. From the figure of Rumour in Chaucer's *House of Fame* to the rich kids of *Gossip Girl*, the idea of gossip is figured as something very decadent and untrustworthy.

Right, but in actuality, gossip is how people communicate. For women, it gives us a sense of solidarity where we might feel completely alone. It's about building a collective identity, and reclaiming the spaces we've lost. Yeah, when you gossip, you're probably talking about bad things, but I don't think that's all it is. When you gossip, you're also encouraging, supporting.

Women have always been collectivist, to some extent, and I think we've always known there's power in that. I don't know why men have taken it on as their personal mission to break that collective.

There's validation in it. In some ways, it makes me think about how reading theory helped reinforce the ideas you had. Knowing that other women are experiencing the same things is validating because you don't feel trapped in your own head.

And one step further would be to reclaim that space. Let's assert ourselves in gossip, so in the future when someone tells you you're gossiping, you don't view it as a bad thing.

Maybe one reason why gossip has a sense of wrongness comes from the fact that gossip can be a little vague. Rumour and gossip sit very closely together, after all.

The characteristics of gossip you've listed out are the ones that have been perpetuated for us—maybe you could say projected onto us—by men who have decided what gossip is all about. What I'm trying to do is break that definition of gossip, and bring it to a different level with stories about solidarity, about feminine creative energy. Stories about the erotic or the housewife. There are still some tropes of the "gossip", I'm making it new, into something that doesn't subscribe to any aspect in which women are weaker, or envious of one another.

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EDDIE WONG

Portrait of the Jungle People / 山芭佬 (San-Ba-Lou)
2022
Single channel video
Duration: 15 min

An AI Ethnography

Text by Denise Lai

A few years ago, Eddie Wong was let in on a family secret. It had to do with the story of his grandfather, who in 1949 left his family and disappeared into the Malayan jungle as a Communist guerrilla fighter. He was eventually found, captured, and shot dead after three years of fighting the British armed forces. In a gruesome account, Eddie's family recalled how the body of his grandfather was dragged out and displayed for the public eye, including those of his grandmother and her children who were forced to deny relations with the rebel. The figure of his grandfather remains an enigma for Eddie, an empty cemetery plot representing the forced disappearance of his grandfather from the world and from the collective memories of his closest relatives.

Since learning of this secret, the subject of his grandfather's demise has haunted Eddie's practice. In 2019, Eddie's installation, *The Unknown Person*, used machine learning processes and facial recognition algorithms to imagine how the machine of the post-colonial city would process the data of an unknown person. If *The Unknown Person* (2019) was once about questioning the surveillance apparatus of the city and the potential to disappear from the records as his grandfather once did, *Portrait of the Jungle People*, *山芭佬 (San-Ba-Lou)* is about inventing new records that embrace the slipperiness of memory and the "sense" of inheriting its myths.

This reformed approach to his grandfather's story was partially inspired by a viewing of Lau Kek Huat's documentary, *Absent Without Leave* (2016), in which the director interviewed descendants of ex-Guerrilla fighters. In absorbing Lau's film, Eddie realised that whilst his history was uncommon, it was not unique. An aspect of this revelation involved the artist's acceptance of the inadequacies of his family's archive: "This made me realise that the family tree doesn't really go vertically, it goes sideways. So I wanted to explore more of these wider histories of being a descendant of these so-called 'bandits' or 'terrorists', and how it feels to be inheriting such a vilified narrative".

The summa of Eddie's exploration is a series of AI-generated portraits that extend the artist's search for his grandfather to the stories of the wider community of descendants of the early Communist Insurgency in Malaya. Eddie composes this search under the banner of "fictioning", a method that can be most simply understood as the writing and imaging of reality in different ways. More specifically, Eddie takes from David Burrows and Simon O'Sullivan's study of "mythotechnesis", or the ways technology can be mobilised to explore future modes of existence. His chosen technology is a VQGAN+CLIP model, a text-to-image machine learning model that allows him to translate the stories of the community into images through a selection of keywords or prompts. Using this model allows Eddie to journey through the visual worlds iterated by the programme to curate an imaginary fiction that resonates with his own.

His chosen technology is a technique called CLIP-Guided Diffusion, a text-to-image machine learning model that allows him to translate the stories of the community into images through a selection of "text inputs" or prompts. CLIP can label images, and diffusion is a mathematical process that removes noise from an image. When combined, CLIP guides the diffusion process to create an image that closely resembles a text description. Using this technique allows Eddie to journey through the visual worlds iterated by the programme to curate an imaginary fiction that resonates with his own.

The programme builds these visual worlds out of historical and personal image databases, but Eddie is acutely aware of the biases built into public datasets. Currently, large-scale AI systems are developed almost exclusively by large tech corporations, and much has been said of the threats of "data violence" which often disproportionately harm communities of colour. "You could say that the colonisation has extended into a different form", he says. So, upon returning to Malaysia, Eddie began to build a custom library — seeds for the machine's imagination. He contacted old family relatives, with whom he shares a surname (Wong) but not necessarily blood ties; they came from the same village and the same colonial rubber plantations where his grandparents began their life in Malaya. From the audio recordings of his interviews, Eddie extracted emerging themes which would later form prompts for his AI-generated images. These were combined with sources in the British Pathé archives, the Imperial War Museum collection, and the National Army Museum of Australia archive, the latter of which he notes as having a rich collection of photographs from the Malayan Emergency.

Far from being inhuman, the resulting machine-generated images are memories in motion; alive and borne by the living societies who inherited them. Fragment 1, entitled "Jungle Person", is a continuous dolly shot transporting us through shifting natural landscapes. A palm leaf emerges up to the point where we can begin to discern a recognisable form before quickly dissolving into the image of a farmer's jacket. The effect is that of intoxication, as if being hurtled through pharmaceutically induced visions existing just beyond the reasoning eye. Occasional slippages between text and image emphasise the futility of representation in this hallucinatory tour, and in parts the words of Eddie's essay disappear, leaving us to seek meaning in this fictive jungle on our own terms. "Fragment 3: Jungle Remnants" conclusively embraces this sense of the otherness of this world. Stories about memories trapped in the jungle and spiritual encounters with the dead accompany scenes of grassland and prayer tables glowing in rich gold hues to the sounds of a crackling fire. What archive did these scenes emerge from, and what keywords were used by Eddie to summon them into the composition?

These images elicit many questions, but it may be most useful to ask: what is it that Eddie sees in his images that he cannot access merely through the accounts of his interviewees? Towards this, Eddie briefly guides me away from a focus on imagery towards an engagement with machine visioning and what it reveals about the blind spots of human memory. During the process of gathering his data, Eddie realised that "truth", in the story of his grandfather and other descendants of ex-Communist guerrillas, always remained elusive. Even his grandmother's accounts were fraught with uncertainties; her memory of her husband was of an arranged marriage to a man who left for the jungle twice.

This lack of definition is mirrored in Eddie's shifting portraits which are always just slightly out of phase. They serve to remind us of the imperfect nature of human memory: always in flux, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting after a period of dormancy. Indeed, having gathered his dataset of audio recordings and keywords, Eddie found that he had less control of the narrative than he presumed, in that the way the AI responded to his prompts required a more "poetic" approach to the story: "For example, if I write 'a Malayan communist jungle person, British Pathé archive, National Army archive', it doesn't really give me a very good picture, creatively or compositionally speaking. So after a lot of iterations, I realised that it responds to more poetic prompts and more obscure and vague descriptions of text. That changes the way that I tell my story, and it becomes more hallucinatory or poetic, instead of talking about hard, cold facts."

Embracing the role of fiction and poetry in this memory exercise, the artist is able to take certain liberties with his story. One "lie" he confesses to has to do with the importing of styles or genres by keying in artists' names as prompts. Text-to-image models respond very well to the use of artists' names, he tells me. At times, the artist found it interesting to use keywords like "Nanyang artists", which imported the Social Realist style of a group of graduates from the Nanyang Academy whose works recalled the memories of the Malayan Emergency. In other instances, he filters his images through the style of the Polish illustrator, Zdzisław Beksiński, who has next to no kinship with the story but whose style offers Eddie the opportunity to present the intense, fantastical lens that he desires.

Returning to the question of how we may understand the role of machine learning in Eddie's understanding of his family history, we could say that its purpose is not illustrative but generative. From his story, inspired by the stories of many, Eddie is able to multiply his reality by the thousands through the resulting compositions churned out by the machine. The ones we see here are the chosen allegories: the ones Eddie has singled out for the unspeakable way in which they conjure some semblance of Eddie's grandfather and his contemporaries. Because his grandfather left no material traces, we must concentrate our attention on what his memory left on earth in the form of Eddie's personal and public database.

In the beginning, Eddie had a testimony, carefully hidden by his family for years. Then he invented a soul for it, a series of compressed memories calculated and embellished at computational speed that serve to make sense of the legacy of the jungle people.

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ENGKU IMAN

Tanah Niat
2022
Air dried clay on board
100 × 100 cm

Sebalik Niat
(*Tracing Intention*)
Text by Kat Rahmat

Engku Iman was apologetic from the moment I invited myself over to her studio. When asked for the best time to visit, she replied that I shouldn't worry. "I don't think it'll be long, because my work pun *takda apa sangat*". Her studio is like her art as I remembered it—clean, sparse, shaped by few but strong decisions. Past the doors, she wasted no time presenting *Tanah Niat* in its half-built form, at the time only a one-metre-by-one-metre frame of exposed, raw wood. It lay on the floor against the wall, while the corresponding clay letters sat neatly stacked in a tray at the opposite end of the room. She had left her computer on to show the variation in patterns and background colour.

I assured Iman, as we settled down, that the discussion would be about process, and that she must not worry if there was not "enough" to share. We began by discussing what physical decisions were left before ILHAM come to collect it. She was still deciding on colour, and the exact sequence she would like the letters to be arranged. There were a few variations of the letters that made disjointed patterns. At present, she was leaning towards a clean uniformity that suggested a songket-like motif. The letters were shaped as if through a cookie cutter, a repetitive act she enjoyed as it gave her work a meditative quality. Coming from a family of artists, her sisters would join in the "cookie-making", which offered some pleasure, but she is resolved to never use clay for future pieces. She did not like the lack of control the medium gave her.

"I asked my ceramicist friends for advice, but they seemed pretty resigned that it is just the way clay is". Did she hope visitors would touch it, could they touch it? Iman was unaffected by the question. "I don't mind if people touch it, as long as they don't break it, I guess but..." Her eyes shift to the floor. "Are people that interested in art anymore"?

When asked about hanging and lighting decisions, Iman was planning to keep it conventional, upright, comfortably in the eye line. "When they came to see it, they told me it'd be the smallest piece in the exhibition," she said. I assured her that a minimal gesture in a large group exhibition, which can invite a sense of the territorial in artists, could be the most maximal. She laughed at the thought, as if considering other artists sharing the room for the first time.

Once material concerns were considered, our conversation shifted to more internal decisions regarding her history of ideas. As she began feeling for her answers, the sense of apology kept threatening to appear. "It's pretty basic...I've had the words *Tanah Niat* written in my notebook since 2018... ILHAM gave me a way to bring it to life. That's it, really..." After an anguished pause she continued, "I don't know if you *sedar*, Kat, but I'm just not an artist that, you know, wants to overthink a lot. I just...want to make things. I'm just...playing around with how the idea feels. I mean, I *bagitau* you honestly, okay, I overthink like crazy...it's why I've been on hiatus for so long. I need to just get past that and make."

Iman's emergence from a four-year pause and her honest confession of carrying the internal tension between thinking and not thinking in her process, offers some clues to how *Tanah Niat* stands so differently from the rest of her oeuvre. In the past, her works were never without an obvious political sting. The puzzle sculpture of a puzzle mat, the simple black and white drawings of *tak manis* Malay women, to name a few signature examples – often meant that to enjoy Iman's pieces was to taste a particular flavour of anger towards Malaysia's sociocultural hypocrisies. This is not to say that *Tanah Niat* is not without its own dark humour or that it does not hold some commentary. The piece silently emits the sound of a laugh through its letters (each one spelling 'ha' in Jawi), so that upon viewing and reading, a chorus may slowly bubble in one's mind. The connotations of *tanah* (earth) and *niat* (intentions) leave open the political overtones to do with race and religion. Yet it holds a secret for the artist herself, as a new trajectory. It is as if, and I could be wrong, the anger is hidden now, I said out loud.

Iman's tentative demeanour melts away at the mention. "Oh, the anger's always there. I've been told I have anger issues and...I think it explains partly why I need to make, and why I always will make, and why I chose this life." She admits this freely, comfortably, as she affixes the letters carefully to the frame. As the pieces collect, our meandering conversation begins to trace together stories many Malay women would tell, stories that often intertwine with historical contingency and the equally arbitrary, equally vicious expectations on the female body. The body, after all, one can never leave. This brief written piece cannot do justice to the discussions we delved into, but it is enough to remind the viewer how this necessary anger rests in whatever path she chooses, regardless of whether at the surface it is quiet or loud. "I'm in my thirties *dah*. I don't want the anger to be the same." Her hands remain focused, placing the letters in cautiously without skipping a beat. "Look around, you know. How can you not be angry? What is the point if you don't feel angry?"

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HAFFENDI ANUAR

Sites
2022
Mixed media
Dimensions variable

Between Making and Remembering
Text by Kat Rahmat

Haffendi Anuar has not been back to Kuala Lumpur since completing his Master of Fine Arts at the Ruskin School of Art, Oxford University. After graduation, he has spent the subsequent two years in furious activity, regardless of the interruptions of a pandemic, producing piece after piece from an idea that struck him during his studies: his mother told him once of how, as a child, he would play under his father's *kain pelikat*, or sarong.

One sees the first glimpses of this idea when Haffendi won the 2020 Vivien Leigh Prize awarded by the Ashmolean Museum. The institution selected two pieces, *Family Archive Midday II* and *Family Archive Midday III* (2020), for their permanent collection, featuring two family photos taken at his family's place in Seremban. Much of everything else is masked by oil paint but for the sarongs, leaving only the fabric's contours to delineate intimate, bodily presences. The sarong is known popularly in Malaysia as a casual garment, suitable for home use or perhaps the briefest walks around the neighbourhood. A male figure is often seen with little else, as its claims to domesticity also allow a particular privacy. One is at home in a sarong, one is with family, and the image's stark omission of all else brings a startling sense of home.

For all its simplicity as an idea, Haffendi appears overtaken with its possibilities, with permutation after permutation of this source of inspiration gathering into an oeuvre that has its own family resemblance. They shift from photography to sculpture to possibly even performance—but the running thread is the *kain* as its basic grammar. Haffendi explains that he enjoys having a single object of study, and often awaits the *kain* itself to dictate his artistic choices. "Ready *kains* already have their own geometric patterns, and when I incorporate them into the work, when I stretch or hang them maybe, I'm extending or adding to those patterns that are already there. Also, their colours are already naturally bright and colourful—I don't know if you've noticed how psychedelic the colours can be," Haffendi laughs.

Preparing the fabric pieces is perhaps when Haffendi is most animated in conversation, and one senses his genuine pleasure in explaining the laborious detail of his craft. "Well, in my studio I currently have hundreds of pieces, and I work on several of them, like ten of them, at a go. Then I try different materials, painting styles, I try it on both surfaces, front and back, and see what colours will merge—they really are canvases, just hundreds of canvases. I play with gesso too, and dye—I'm experimenting with natural dyes next...".

There are so many steps in experimentation Haffendi is almost breathless in capturing the detail. "For months I just try different styles before I attach *kain* on them, or pieces of fabrics from bags of rice. They're like little windows, you know, and then I drape them and see how to make them sculptural. Sometimes, based on different materials, painting styles and how I've treated a piece, the colours can merge once I sew them together. Sewing is the last step."

Sewing was a surprising step in a process that has felt, from ideation to creation, like it carries consistently masculine themes. Untreated metal structures, archival works of fathers, brothers, uncles, the *kain*, collectively hiding contrasting undercurrents in the path of completion. Haffendi does not agree or disagree, only adding, in good cheer, that the sewing machine suffers a great deal throughout. "I'm on my second sewing machine, and I may have to get a new needle soon, which sucks, because they're really expensive. But you have to be kind of aggressive with it, because the pieces have been treated so much, some with gesso, so they're quite tough, and it's such a toll on the sewing machine, so yeah, the sewing machine isn't treated in a conventional way. It's not really sewing proper, either. Some lines are better at the top, some at the bottom. I use different kinds of thread that have different results on one side, not the other. They're a kind of drawing in a way."

I attempt a personal question. "Is this body of work about home, about missing it, or about fatherhood?" Haffendi is hesitant. "It's about home, I think, but not about missing it. It's a general idea of home. But it's not about fatherhood, no. I don't know." Haffendi feels it is closer to the goals of soft architecture, where memory and organic materials determine a structure that affects the blurring of boundaries. He is fascinated with the idea of a body becoming a piece of architecture. Another of his *kain* series, *Rumah Berkaki* (2021) or the legged house, will be exhibiting in Birmingham for the 2022 Commonwealth Games at the same time as his piece in ILHAM. "That's me playing under my dad's kain, basically."

Perhaps we both noticed his reserve in linking the personal and the professional, as Haffendi slowly adds a few reflections to my gentle provocation. "It's been quite challenging, this new body of work. Not just because it's so research-driven, but in the past, there's always been this kind of distance, like, coldness or distance in my previous work. So I would never include myself in my work. This is quite a personal exploration for me. So I guess, moving forward, I just feel like there'll be more of me in it. But then, once you're in it, it's hard to take out, as well. You just can't remove yourself after that. It's very hard... but for now, I just want to be in the rhythm of making. And enjoying making."

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HARIS ABADI

Surrender
2022
Mixed media
Dimensions variable

"Sometimes, it is okay to surrender."
Haris Abadi bin Abdul Rahim,
in conversation with Denise Lai

Out of the pandemic grew white flags. Across rows of various Malaysian streets, dazzling white fabric decorated the façades of empty shoplots otherwise sick with cobwebs in long-abandoned corners. And then more came to form a laundry line of financial distress. Spring had sprung, except that the stems that emerged signalled loss rather than new life—the loss of the right to space, most commonly.

Haris Abadi is somewhat of a chronicler of lost space. In an earlier work, entitled *Teletopia* (2013), the Kelantanese artist raised an issue about how frustrated Muslim netizens became in response to the disappearance of Palestine on Google Maps. It led him to question how significant this "virtual validation" was, compared to the struggle for the Holy Land occurring irl. At the same time, he watched enthusiastically as his children stepped in and out of AR/VR-based online games like *Pokémon Go*, where digital monsters cast shadows onto real, physical locations. To Haris, there was no argument that the virtual had already taken over aspects of physical territory. And in observing the #whiteflagmovement, Haris saw yet again an example of this blurring between the digital and the physical. *Surrender* is a work whose central questions extend out of these earlier thoughts: what is the difference between physical and virtual struggle? And when we unfurl our white flags, which sides of our lives are really facing the struggle? The physical or the virtual?

In the following conversation, I speak to Haris about this encroaching of the digital into the physical, the materiality of real and simulated elements within his practice, and finally what their combination within this work offers to our understanding of space.

Denise Lai: In this work, you explore the potential threats to "actual" and "virtual" spaces heightened by the pandemic and articulated through the White Flag Campaign in Malaysia. Whilst the threat to actual space is clear, how did you see the White Flag Campaign encroaching on virtual space?

Haris Abadi: The white flag campaign did actually spark havoc online. The medium has constantly been manipulated for political reasons and lots of people have been caught in these traps. I believe most people have been psychologically forced to join/get involved in lots of unnecessary activities within the realm of the Internet. It was at the peak of Covid lockdown sessions—everyone was relying on the Internet for work, finance, reconnection, communication, therapy—and these online political agendas worsened the situation. I was triggered by an insensitive comment by a political figure amidst the hardships of the people. I believe virtual spaces change our behaviour and way of communication. The fact that we are hiding behind the keyboard makes us thoughtless, inconsiderate, and insensitive.

Why was it important to you that the object of surrender—the white flag—take on a virtual form in this work?

What I love about a looped video reel is that we can slow down and ponder moments in the stream that otherwise would zip by unnoticed. The white flag is displayed in slow motion, which unveils every flap and turn of the flag. It is a kind of therapy. We are surrendering to linear movement and letting go to the concept of time. I really love how slow-motion videos can turn unnoticed gestures into objects of inspection. Walter Benjamin wrote about this, which he called the "Optical Unconscious". Videos reveal aspects of reality that are already registered in people's senses but are never processed consciously. Benjamin argued that, before the moving pictures existed, people were locked up in the spaces they lived, worked and travelled in. But then film came along and it "burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second". And that is exactly my sentiment towards the virtual/internet: whilst we enjoy the freedom of online spaces, I wish people would slow down, think, and reconsider every action they plan to make in online spaces. Sometimes, it is okay to surrender.

Secondly, I love how the looped video gives the audience the freedom to engage with the work. They can enter and leave the work anytime they want, as there is no predetermined duration, unlike most video works in galleries. Videos like this supply you with gestures, and let you take your own time to reflect and create personal meaning. It's like watching a GIF, a cinemograph, or maybe watching tile patterns subconsciously while you are daydreaming on the toilet. And I believe it fits the young, contemporary audience whose nature is dynamic, selective and who have shorter attention spans than most of us.

What I find interesting about your treatment of the flag is that sculptural approach that draws us to the materiality of the virtual. Here, the video plays from a chunky and weighted TV screen playing footage of a flying flag; the hosting device makes no pretence of mimicking the movement of the screened object. As audience members, we're made to constantly move between and across modes, and what becomes clear is how the virtual conditions our real space, and vice versa. Do these considerations of materiality factor into your process?

As far as physical and virtual boundaries are concerned, I have always been interested in combining the atom and the bit. My first gallery exhibition in 2009 was a video projection mapped onto a sculpture. Each nature completes the other. When I was a kid, I was a fan of science experiments and magic tricks. The screen has given me the freedom to perform these optical tricks now. It is the cinema of attraction. I rarely make conventional, linear movies or films. I use screens to complement the space and add depth to my installation. Sometimes they just merely act as attractions, like the colourful pendaflour lights hanging in Thai tomyam stalls.

There seems to be a dual-mode of separation from the physical in your work. There's the obvious digitisation of the flag, but even in your evocation of debris, you choose not to use actual concrete but resin-casted blocks that simulate the image of concrete debris. What were your intentions behind the simulated debris?

If we can think of the flag as a simulation of the actual one, why not the debris. I believe the whole installation is supposed to be simulated in any form (and support its functional easability—as discussed earlier). It was intended to be a semi-conceptual visual piece right from the start, and if the faux-finished debris could deceive the audience (in the context of materiality) for the sake of providing meaning, I'm totally glad. The debris has appeared in lots of my earlier paintings—it's meant to symbolise ruptures (or maybe the end) of physicality. It represents our extreme excitement and addiction to the virtual world. In the context of the work as a post-Covid-era reflection, debris is a symbol of frustration of being denied access to physical, public space due to the pandemic. This was the first time I've constructed the debris in 3D form, and I love to see them pairing up with the digital flag.

How do you think looking into the "uncharted territory" of the Actual versus Virtual enriches our understanding of access to spaces?

Honestly, I think in the last ten years, technology has progressed at such a rapid speed that we have lost control of how we should react to nature and the spaces and inhabitants surrounding it. We are adapting at lightning speed. It changed our relation to faith, social interactions, and knowledge in a way that we might have not realised. Looking into "uncharted territory" to me means slowing down my pace and observing. It's like watching the flag in slow motion. It is hypnotic and therapeutic at the same time. At certain moments, you will be subconsciously unsure whether the flag is real or not. That is where we might get lost in space and decide which part of our life needs to be surrendered in order to survive spiritually in time.

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HASANUL ISYRAF IDRIS

Quarry
2022
Graphite on cotton paper and fiberglass sculptures
Dimensions variable

Hasanul's House in George Town on a Monday Afternoon
Text by Ellen Lee

During the Covid-19 pandemic, Hasanul lost three family members to various illnesses. As he made the separate journeys back to his hometown of Perak, he would catch glimpses of the granite quarry where his father used to work as a security guard and recall memories of his childhood growing up in its shadow. The work that he has presented here translates this mountain of granite into a mountain of graphite, a symbolic monument for his grief with three of his severed heads at the bottom representing each of the family members that he lost during the pandemic.

Hasanul's mind moves through associations and references like a pinball machine. In conversation, he alludes to various forms of media in breathless succession, from film to comic books to other artists. His entry point into art as a child was the world of comic books, which form the backbone of his *HOL (Higher Order Love)* series, a collection of works of gigantic proportions that draw from formative events in his life, depicted in a comic book style. One series from this oeuvre, *HOL (Higher Order Love) Chapter 2.3, Wound: Environment of Naga and Doubt* (2017), which consisted of 40 panels, was previously shown at ILHAM in the exhibition *The Body Politic and the Body* in 2019. For those familiar with Hasanul's work, it is likely the style of *HOL* that they have come to associate with him: scenes of bizarre, often macabre, fantasy rendered in painstaking detail, emerging out of a mind with a wicked imagination steeped in cultural references.

HOL Chapter 2.3 was preceded by *HOL Chapter 1: The Fall* (2016) and succeeded by *HOL Chapter 3, Scab: Lucky Draw* (2018). During the pandemic, Hasanul also presented a quieter, more grounded body of works titled *Mini Zoo* at The Back Room, Kuala Lumpur. *Mini Zoo* featured A4-sized watercolours documenting his daily observations and thoughts as he dealt with his father's illness, the deaths in the family, and the general condition of life under lockdown. *Mini Zoo* and *Quarry* are not only the first exhibited works by Hasanul, in recent memory, to present human figures (instead of anthropomorphic comic book-style animals), but also the first to depict the artist's own likeness. Their quiet realism contrasts sharply with the fantasy and detail of the *HOL* series and shows the artist in direct confrontation with his personal pain, instead of embedding it beneath layers of references and whimsy.

Speaking of the work, Hasanul likens it to the offerings made during the month of the Hungry Ghost Festival, which takes place around the latter half of every year. During this month, a custom in the Chinese community of Malaysia, believers burn paper offerings as tokens to those who have passed on. The objects often stand in for real items that the giver wishes for their deceased loved ones to possess in the afterlife. The heads at the base of the quarry, while having the appearance of being similarly charred, are not the sort of offerings typically burnt during the Hungry Ghost Festival but they suggest an offering of a higher symbolic magnitude. There is a lineage here with "higher order love", which was a phrase Hasanul created to represent unconditional, everlasting love; the offerings being made at the foot of the mountain here are sacraments of Hasanul's soul and being. In his statement, the artist wrote that the decapitated heads "symbolise the separation of body from mind, memory and thoughts", evoking the dumb numbness of grief. Each head represents an emotional part of the artist that has been severed from him through the experience of losing his loved ones.

Quarry continues from a series of works Hasanul created at the Rimbun Dahan residency in Kuang, Selangor, in 2016. While there, he undertook various explorations of the medium of graphite by colouring sheets of paper with graphite sticks until they were filled with its chrome-like sheen. During the limbo of lockdown, he would return to these drawing exercises when he felt uninspired. Another notable experiment involved tying a marker pen to a string hung over a piece of paper left in his outdoor studio and leaving it to the wind to push the pen around, dragging lines across the paper. He observed the way sunlight glinted off the surface of graphite, how a sheet of graphite, once crumpled, refracted the light in different directions, and how the rain bled watery streaks of cheap marker pen ink down a page. At certain points during those interminable days, the tragedies occurred and, when he could, Hasanul drove back to his hometown to pay his respects.

Hasanul's work touches on the persistent question plaguing artists during the pandemic years—what can art do in the face of death and disease, the realities of the body? The question ultimately begs a further one: what is the meaning of the creative act? An answer can be found in Hasanul's choice of medium. Graphite is often formed as a byproduct of the metamorphosis of dead plant and animal matter. There is a certain beauty in using a medium born out of the organic matter left over from a life, a medium that testifies to nature's indifferent cycles of life and death. Through the use of graphite as the work's primary medium, the work testifies to the recurrence of life after death and the creative act as a necessary onward journey after mourning. Creation, like death, is inevitable.

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I Enjoy Being a Girl
2022
Single channel video
Duration: 37 min 15 sec

Anita's Story
Text by Khat Mirzan

For those who visited ILHAM Gallery during the pandemic when "*Bayangnya itu Timbul Tenggelam: Photographic Cultures in Malaysia*" became the longest-running exhibition at the gallery, you may already be familiar with some of Hoo Fan Chon's work. Fan Chon is an artist and curator based in George Town, Penang, who, along with Simon Soon and K. Azril Ismail, co-curated that exhibition. A focal point of his curation in that exhibition was centred on a group of one hundred and sixteen studio-portrait photographs, the majority of which were discovered in an antique store in George Town in 2013. These photographs were of Ava Leong, a trans woman from Penang, identified by Fan Chon's friend in 2018. At the *Bayangnya* exhibition, Fan Chon presented Ava's photographs in a way that chronologised her transition. In his thirty seven minute photo-video essay, *I Enjoy Being a Girl*, Fan Chon repurposes Ava's photographs in a digital format. These images, though fleeting within the nature of the new medium, are recontextualised by the memories recounted by Ava's best childhood friend, Anita.

When asked about his choice to present the work in the format of a video, Fan Chon replied, "I think it wasn't a conscious choice… I felt like there's a lot more that the interviews could say than the photos after the *Bayangnya* show. There's just something about the voice — I wanted people to listen to her, and there's something quite fascinating about people telling their stories. So the video essay was a way to force myself to edit and organise all the interviews I had with her, to try to make sense and internalise all these stories to present it in a more structural format. I hope people who watched that photo video essay will get a sense of her growing-up experience, the friendships, the tensions… I feel there's something very powerful about the human voice, and you can really feel the warmth and nuanced emotions. Even though they were best friends, there was a bit of tension in this friendship. Not everyone can say they've known someone for 70 years. This was the one friendship that I really wanted to celebrate in the video essay as well."

Fan Chon's own friendship with Anita began in 2018, a few months after Ava Leong had passed. He was introduced to her by the same friend who identified Ava in the photographs five years after they were found. From 2018 to 2019, Fan Chon conducted a series of ten in-person interviews with Anita. Throughout our own discussion about the work, Fan Chon was self-aware about whether he had any right to show Ava's photographs in the first place, but Anita's support gave him the confidence to express his research through art. He notes, "I just think that I was really lucky to be able to meet Anita and be her friend. And that was important to me. I wouldn't say that I had the artistic license to comment on these photographs, but she gave me the confidence to want to say something. Otherwise, I would have felt that I had no right to show these photos." This support seemed to be confirmed when she won the audience over at Fan Chon's sharing session at the 2018 Obscura Festival in George Town, by whipping out her signature move, the splits. She was eighty-four at the time.

The recordings from these conversational interviews formed the backbone of Fan Chon's work, *I Enjoy Being a Girl*, in which Anita shares her past experiences as a technician in a physics laboratory, a member of the female impersonator group known as the The Wax Follies, and a friend of Ava Leong. Four seemingly abstract videos shot by the artist are interwoven between the photographs and source videos that inspired Anita's musical numbers. Altogether, they provide a visual reflection of Anita's commentary.

For example, the story about stolen convex lenses being used to pluck out facial hair is accompanied by a shot of an ambiguously masculine silicone face mask, which mirrors the action. Fan Chon noted that his "intention was more along the lines of 'it's not easy to be beautiful. It's a lot of work'. … I didn't want to introduce another face because there's already so many names and subjects in the video, so I just used a silicone face that I bought from Shopee. The process of putting the hair in first before I could pull it out was so much work."

Fan Chon notes that he had to adapt his questioning process during their interviews. "In the beginning, I was really stupid, asking her academic questions like 'What is photography to you?' And she gave me a line or two… So later on, I had to tune in a bit more, because I wasn't really speaking her language. I wasn't talking about her dresses. I wasn't talking about her performances… So in the last few interviews, when I was playing all these YouTube clips to her, those seemed to really animate her. That was what she wanted to talk about. So that's how I got this material."

These YouTube clips of the musical numbers she had performed as part of The Wax Follies are shown at points in the video piece when Anita would sing along to the lyrics while critiquing the stars who originally performed them and clarifying what she had done differently in her own renditions. These include Anita Sarawak's version of P. Ramlee's "Dengar Ini Cerita" (*Gala Seni Serumpun, 2007*), "You Gotta Have a Gimmick" (*Gypsy, 1962*), and Nancy Kwan's "I Enjoy Being a Girl" (*Flower Drum Song, 1961*).

The video concludes with Anita singing along to the last track, which also forms the title of the video essay. Fan Chon decided to frame the subtitles as karaoke lyrics at the end of the piece and noted: "In the beginning I was trying very hard to make her sing. She was very reluctant because she coughs a lot. I'm sure you can hear it in the interview; her voice wasn't her best. I wasn't expecting her to sing, so I was just playing different songs that she used to perform before. And then she sang along to the last one in a kind of lullaby sort of way. The song was 'I Enjoy Being a Girl'. When I heard that I thought, 'This is it.' This song defines the entire project for me."

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IVAN LAM

Unforgettable X
2022
Fabric tapestry
219 × 213 cm; 243 × 222 cm

Warp & Weft

Text by Samantha Cheh

I. Warp.

Her name was Leong Mee Lin.

Sounds sweet, right? Don't let it fool you. No one survives a deadly sea crossing and a youth in a country-still-becoming without earning a spirit made of steel.

Mee Lin was 11 when she left Guangdong, the first of many home-leavings. Like the millions of those who came before, she walked into the mouth of beasts in hopes of a life of less hunger, more hope. In Ipoh, her first port of call, she worked as a maid to a wealthy family before a rash of bad luck lost her the job and a direction.

This is where the threads go loose, for a time: we know Mee Lin became a cigar roller, deft fingers curling paper and tobacco into neat cylinders packed away in slim boxes. There were two sisters, driven south to Singapore by the war. In the aftermath, Mee Lin would endure long train journeys with her grandchild, the artist Ivan Lam, to visit them. Side by side, they would watch town and country whiz by through cracked, dusty windows. The cheap seats were right by the toilets, but enduring the foul smells was no real trial when there was so much world to see.

Something that felt like potential. Like love.

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Mee Lin eventually found work as a factory seamstress, eventually going on to stitch together a life and family. There were children and, soon, grandchildren. To this third generation, she would narrate over and over again the fragments of her life: its lessons, disappointments, terrors.

She would continue telling Ivan these stories, even as her eyesight failed and her hands gained an irrepressible tremble. Dementia dug in for a long siege—for its victims, recitation often seems to be the only form of rebellion available to them. She would repeat herself like a broken record on drives to doctor's appointments, or to her children's houses for meals and care.

Ivan hoarded these stories about her childhood, and life under Japanese occupation, like heirlooms. Later, these would bear him through the grief.

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The quilts were the other heirlooms. After work, Mee Lin would spend hours painstakingly hand-stitching scraps collected from the factory floor; pressing and piecing, until voila. A blanket for a child. An inheritance. Memory made real.

Quilts are objects of utility, but they are also "historical documents", able to transmit information about their makers and contexts through selected patterns, images, fabrics and contexts. That for most of modern history these makers were usually women—most of whom were illiterate, disenfranchised, and dependent on their men—lends the art form an added poignancy.

In "Quilt Language: towards a poetics of quilting" (2009), Mara Witzling writes that quilts "enabled women to speak the truth about their lives." In some cases, those "utterances" could be subversive or political, but more often, they were deeply personal expressions of the interior self. A quilter may encode religious or cultural imagery into set patterns and forms, or she may work freehand. Her fabric choice may offer indications of personal wealth, while her choices in the "piecing" could reveal her central concerns.

Look closely at a quilt, and you can glean a wealth of information about her lived reality. Ivan showed me his grandmother's work in his studio. It's a soft, uneven thing, frayed at the edges. Your eyes dance across floral pinwheels shot through with sharp blues and oranges, but turn the corner over and it's a shock of vibrant reds and plaids. Her feminine tastes gently capitulating to the demands of boyhood.

II. Weft

Ivan Lam was born in 1975, into a family of professionals weirded out and worried by the oddball artist in their midst. Despite their incredulity, Ivan has spent the last two decades building a reputation as a sort of boundary-breaker in Malaysia's art scene, swinging between the politics of self and society.

In *Catharsis* (2022), reproductions of human anatomical drawings reflect his explorations of the incommunicability of chronic pain. Between the margins, in curling fonts and messy crayon, Ivan inscribes himself, personalising cold dissection with the vibrancy of an acid trip.

Over and over again, there is this impulse to write himself and his narration into the underlying commentary of what already exists—but you also get this sense that Ivan likes sticking his finger in a wound and digging around. He told me that struggle is the price of admission, a sentiment I don't buy, though I buy that he buys it. Maybe it's true that the only way to earn something—to make it permanent—is with pain, but maybe it's not.

Unlike his previous works though, *Unforgettable* (2022) isn't redolent with processed pain. It feels softer than pain, more yielding. Maybe you could call it grief. Someone offered that it was more "feminine"; certainly the hyper-interiority and alienation of his previous work are missing. I wonder if that is his grandmother's influence, her ghost's hand hovering just beyond.

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Ivan was under no illusions that his grandmother was always supportive of his chosen career, but that's in the past. While she was still well enough to move around on her own, he brought her to several of his openings, and he says she was always smiling. Not necessarily in understanding of this strange, other dimension her grandson had been inducted to, but certainly with pride.

It was only later that he began thinking about her as a collaborator, but her health was already declining.

Mee Lin passed away in February 2018.

Her name is not on the programme sheet, but she is just as much a part of this show as her grandson is. Likely, she would never have called herself an artist, but women are always liable to devalue their own work.

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Without his grandmother's skill, Ivan relied on the help of two seamstresses—older women immediately sceptical of this overeager man who brought with him outlandish ideas about sewing as white-box art. But, in the way that older women are bemused by the eccentricities of young men, they went along with it.

Over the course of eight months, the women taught Ivan how to cut patterns, stitch neat, and piece fabric. They wouldn't let him touch a machine until he had mastered the basics. But, remember, Ivan is a student of struggle; he says art-making is 80% fumbling through.

They did make some deliberate decisions: Ivan's quilt is slightly bigger, and uses higher-quality materials that Mee Lin wouldn't have had access to. Inside, a sliver-thin filament reinforces the quilt's shape, while also warming the body better. Compared to his grandmother's homely, handmade blanket, Ivan's quilt is built like a North Face windbreaker: sleek, functional, aerodynamic. Colourful in the vein of a high-end sneaker. The hexagons of its beehive pattern are cut from his collection of paint-plattered t-shirts, the debris of a 20-year art career, and framed within a thick, navy border.

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In fabric-making, the warp and the weft are the basic components for the weave. Across a loom, stationary warp threads are strung tight over a frame, forming the foundations through which weft threads are drawn through. Over then under, under then over, again and again.

In the same way, Ivan has woven himself and his grief into the threads of his grandmother's life, offering commentary and adaptation to her original. Hung back-to-back, there is a sense of layered history and inheritance, but also progress. Mee Lin in conversation with Ivan, past speaking to present, all arrowing towards some future. An inheritance—a new heirloom—for his daughters, and those who will come after.

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IZAT ARIF

Balada Darah Eksotika (BDE) – (Exotic Blood Ballad)
2022
Mixed media and single channel video
Dimensions variable

(Un)Monumental

Text by Aminah Ibrahim

Balada Darah Eksotika, appropriately *(BDE)*, is hard to miss. The sculpture consists of a Roman column, laid horizontally and cupped by armature of two steel poles, two TV screens playing video work rife with rhetoric imagery balanced on a single steelyard and 13 black chickens. Look closer and you'll see that the roman column is inscribed with lyrics from *Mentera Semerah Padi* by M. Nasir.

I sat down with Izat Arif to talk about his process behind creating *BDE*, which at the time was still in production. Izat began the conversation by revealing a mock-up image of *BDE* from a bird's eye perspective, claiming with a straight face and a cheeky glint in his eye, "From the top, the work is a phallic composition." Irony and wit are pillars of Izat Arif's oeuvre. He is known for making contradictory artwork, so brittle and dry in humour that it may very well shatter expectations. Below is our discussion, edited for clarity, length and context.

Aminah Ibrahim: So, why monuments?

Izat Arif: I've been thinking about monuments and how they contribute to nation building and framing. For example, I've been amused by a huge *keris* that they installed in Bukit Jalil.

Initially, I wanted to create a work that is a collection of objects with an overload of symbolism. I made a representational because that is the attitude of contemporary Malaysian art. Roman pillars have replaced the *tiang seri* (main pillar) in many modern contemporary middle-class Malay houses. It's a symbol I think.

What do you think it symbolises?

I think there's status and class attached to it. It's common everywhere, every kind of class has this fixture. The *tiang seri* is both structural and has a mythical property, the Roman pillar is hollow and merely decorative. So, the roman pillar represents the idea of being a superficial symbol. As for the two TVs balancing on one supportive pole, this is meant to represent Barisan Nasional.

In Malay culture there's the image of the male rooster. I purchased these chickens which I think is an important gesture. They are from China and they are used as sale props to hang in front of chicken rice shops. They're usually a golden-brown roasted colour. The shop had 13,000 units in stock. I bought thirteen to represent Malaysia's thirteen states. I painted them black to lend the impression of being charred.

I wanted to reference antiquity in the armature. It's similar to a museum display, purely an aesthetic choice but I needed something to support the pillar.

Traditional monuments hide their supporting structures, the purpose of these monuments is to generate awe. I wanted something simple supporting BDE, to expose the structure and be counterintuitive to what a monument should be.

The pillar itself is engraved with lyrics from M. Nasir's song *Mentera Semerah Padi*. The song is played at weddings and during *silat* to *bagi semangat* (raise spirits). Although if you read the lyrics, it can be quite sexual. It's not a call to arms or *bagi semangat* type of song. I wanted to use the lyrics to comment on how speaking about sex is taboo in Malay culture. There's also this mention of the chicken, "*bagaikan si jantan yang berkokok*", (like a rooster crowing) so the chicken is a recurring theme in the work.

The videos will also be an overload of symbols—images of everyday tasks that people do, but these activities also have different meanings.

So, a video representation of a double entendre? As in, each image is a figure of speech that has two meanings: one that is obvious and another that has sexual connotations or may be too offensive to state directly.

Exactly. In Perak, when they want to have sex, they say, "*I nak balik rumah cat dinding*" (I want to go home and paint the walls). So, I have images of painting walls and churning cement, amongst other images.

The artwork is a proposal as an alternative to the huge *keris* monument, an empty monument. I wouldn't say it's negative or positive, it's just a proposal.

I want to circle back to the question about the actual physical processes, because you were away in London for your residency.

For this project, the process mimicked the process of building a monument. It turned out to be an exercise of letting go and trusting what I have planned. Chong Yong, the fabricator, is brilliant. This process was a new experience for me and is in line with the whole intention of the work. If you're an artist and you design a monument, you're not going to be physically carving the thing and you have a team. Of course, if I was in the same country, it would be easier because I could pop by the workshop and look at the progress. The only obstacle was me being in London.

I met Chong Yong before I left and gave him all the plans and sketches. He sourced all the materials, which was interesting because it became a collaboration. I trust his judgement. Also, Ryan, my assistant, he's been helping as well while I'm away.

I would say it's a step up in terms of my practice because usually I'd be making in the studio, but now that I'm trying to expand and make bigger work, I need a support system.

How did you come to picki these symbols in the work and put them together in this way?

Initially, the pillar, the TV and the chickens were separate pieces. When I had to do the proposal, I had bits and pieces of everything in my sketchbook, I thought let's just combine everything.

I never had any expectations. I thought, maybe I won't get through. I wanted to see the limit of what their reception is.

So, when they gave their answer, I started to reverse justify everything, trying to make pieces work together and make it coherent—the whole work as one, but also individually.

Being an artist, you see other people making work, and it's a common thing to point out each component of the work. That's even how we describe the Malaysian flag. I think it's a very objective way of looking, sometimes it works, but using that method of thinking for other subjects, for example, spirituality, objectifies it and that's when things get crazy and misrepresentative.

This is an interesting headspace to be in, the conflict between literal and spiritual. Malay culture can be very indirect and other times super literal—an internal conflict. This is an attempt to translate that whole attitude.

I'm finding it difficult to define this contradictory attitude. Could you say more?

Growing up having all this understanding of *sopan santun* (politeness) and literature, it's very in-between. To me, it's funny. I'm just observing it. I'm not trying to be in a higher position and look down and say, "This is what's going on", because I'm also in that headspace.

What is this headspace like?

I think there are many conflicts in the contemporary Malay identity. I grew up in a suburb and in school was taught the idea of being *sederhana* (modest). My parents would say "you should go out and chase whatever you want", but within my immediate surroundings in school although we were encouraged to get straight As, the teachers would still preach "*hiduplah sederhana*" (live modestly). It's part of Islamic teaching but I didn't know if they were being literal in terms of just being average.

I understand restraining or withholding yourself from desire and living a balanced life, but not trying to push as much as possible was counterintuitive to the idea of being a developing nation and at that time Mahathir was building the Multimedia Super Corridor. That was the time that people wanted progress, yet there was a laidback attitude.

I think that is my experience of the in-between: wanting to be *sederhana* and also wanting to go for it. Being an artist, I can't half-ass things because it won't work. The way artists live, their attitude towards everything is different and our goals need to be pursued as best as we can. I think my choice to be an artist was to reject this *sederhana* way of living. I mean, I don't drive a Ferrari but I'm pushing myself, my life, my career and my experiences to the extreme limit that I can. So, there's this conflict within me. That's why I wanted to make this, to portray the contemporary Malay man.

When I'm talking to you, I'm explaining more than what I would generally put out in terms of the work and I think for me, it's enough to say this is a proposal for an alternative monument.

BDE could be read either way, as affirmation or parody, or both. How would you like the audience to respond?

After the work is done, I let go. People could like it and people could totally despise it. For me, I always expect nothing to happen, sometimes things happen and it's okay.

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KAMAL SABRAN

Machine (Not) Learning
2022
DIY, Circuit bending and modified electronics
Dimensions variable

Kita Mendengar Sebelum Melihat
(We Hear Before We See)
Text by Kat Rahmat

Kamal Sabran carries with him the air of a man comfortable with himself, resplendent in a working space that one can see is well-loved, well-used. There are cymbals and wires, edges of keyboards and the signature knobs and dials that have accompanied his appearances and images over the last few years. One can quickly "see" the sounds that have danced through the room, its aliveness pulsing occasionally with individuals, likely his family, appearing politely in and out of frame. I expressed regret that I was not able to visit either of his studios, or see the finished work I was tasked to write, but he graciously told me the view I had was a fair glimpse. "*Orang kata itu macam dapur kita, dapur tu la yang actually reflect balik apa kita masak, kan.*" He laughs.

It is true that the presence of sound, this sense of vibrancy, reverberates from Kamal's screen to our main subject of conversation, *Machine (Not) Learning*. The piece already carries a fluid history from before its installation in ILHAM. It was made in portions, cumulating slowly between trips to Kamal's studios in Penang and Ipoh. In Penang, much of the work involved its exterior, its casing, the overall aesthetic. In Perak, in a space he refers to as his *pondok*, Kamal works on its interior; circuit-bending, connecting the dots, getting to know what he was bringing to life. This fluidity is necessary, for the practical reason that Kamal needs to test its endurance. Though *Machine (Not) Learning*'s first appearance is in ILHAM, it is not made to "exhibit" forever. It has an afterlife where it will travel with Kamal for future performances.

I mention to Kamal that his pieces show a tantalising array of what is commonly inside machines peeking through, with wires and knobs sprinkling the surface as if openly inviting touch. Was this his intention? He nodded, solemnly. They were designed for interaction but after some reflection he was not sure if this was safe. Perhaps, when performing, he may invite members of the audience to interact with it directly, but such engagements require supervision. He was not certain about how it would behave. It is hand-wired, so it is sensitive. It follows an algorithm, but only to disobey. "*Dia tak nak ikut peraturan, dia nak degil.*"

As a critique against the obedience of coding-based Artificial Intelligence which gives humans a false sense of control, Kamal, with remarkable comfort, embraces the unpredictability of his craft as a seasoned wrangler would wild animals. After all, Kamal recognises the sentience of his electronic projects very literally. Each electronic piece is a creaturely creation, revealing its personality as the work develops. "Electronics...especially electronics *yang memang perlukan karan untuk dia fungsi... dia sebenarnya satu kehidupan. Dia macam makhluk kehidupan, dia ada nyawa, dia boleh* reflect, *dia macam kita. Dia boleh buat keputusan dia sendiri.*" His work, therefore, has nothing to do with control. "Everything *yang dia dapat, yang* you supply, *dia akan* mix their own." In surrendering notions of control, Kamal allows for its hidden autonomy to come to life.

As Kamal elaborated on the nature of his electronic creations, as he expounded on the pitfall of believing in human control, I could not help but notice that *Machine (Not) Learning* and his recent projects prior (see Kamal's '*Do-It Yourself*' series in 2018 and 2019 as examples), have entered a new trajectory. That while they remain about sound, his fascination now lies in the intelligence of sound. Kamal nods repeatedly.

"It's true that for a long time my work has always been about sound, but over time, I realise sound is not just sound. It's a frequency." Here Kamal's other life as a lecturer at Universiti Sains Malaysia feeds into his process. "Sound is not just music, it's power. It's a message. *Bila kita* study deeper and deeper, we find that the earliest signals we receive *dalam rahim ibu*, the first *deria*, is *telinga*. *Kita mendengar sebelum kita melihat. Lepas tu*, when I did my thesis research on Alzheimer's, where I studied memory recall, I learnt that sound *adalah* element of memory yang *paling* last *sekali yang akan* be destroyed *dalam* brain *kita*. It can't be deleted, it doesn't go." Slowly Kamal's fascination began to colour the spaces around us. "That's when I *baru* realise that these are pieces of the puzzle, *baru* you *faham kenapa Tuhan adakan Azan, adakan zikir.*" Every sonic message, Kamal feels, is a hidden message. "*Alah, macam* alien movie *tu.*"

"*Arrival*"? I asked, referring to the Villeneuve film.

He is amused. "*Ah, dekat la tu.*"

Machine (Not) Learning is currently Kamal's largest, most complex undertaking. He anticipates great risks in installing it and began to hypothesise a few scenarios. "Maybe when we install it, it may not even work. It's possible". *Machine (Not) Learning* will decide for itself if ILHAM's walls encourage responses. The machine could always choose to stay silent, if it liked. The next steps are to attach wheels to the heavy objects, as it would allow him to travel through the room to find a suitable space. It was refreshing to think of a work of art that held, in this sense, its own curatorial opinions. "What about the sound? Will the sound travel through the long hall, if all goes well?" I asked. Kamal admitted he initially thought this was ideal, but had second thoughts. People do not like it when others spoke loudly, so why should it be any different for *Machine (Not) Learning*? He'd rather it spoke softly in hopes visitors would feel compelled to draw nearer.

As every human being has their own voltage, the work would individuate responses and encourage novel interactions. Drawing close, listening carefully, are the best ways to get acquainted. Introduce yourself and pay close attention.

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Skin Time 1119
2022
Single channel video
Duration: 8 hrs

Time Marks the Skin

Text by Khat Mirzan

In order to understand Kim's work, one has to delve into the artistic process of his creator, Chong Kim Chiew. Chong Kim Chiew, is a multidisciplinary artist and curator based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. His childhood was spent in the traditional Chinese medicine shop run by his father, which contained a diverse selection of herbs and relatively idiosyncratic animal parts. When these ingredients were combined specifically to form medicinal tinctures, they exhibited distinct properties that were beneficial in the treatments of various ailments. Similarities to this alchemy echo within his own artistic process. Instead of forming new compounds, however, Kim Chiew is more interested in the individual components that make up the whole. This fascination manifested in the formation of his avatars.

These avatars were first introduced in 2013, and their identities and artistic backgrounds were meticulously crafted by Kim Chiew. He felt that through the use of avatars he was able to freely explore disparate mediums, topics and identities without being constrained by his own practice. Two years later, Chong Kim Chiew participated in a "group" show entitled *Be Careful Or You May Become the Centre* at Wei-Ling Gallery alongside the three avatars: 0, Kim, and TOPY. (He currently has nine avatars.) Although he admitted to it essentially being a solo show, he noted that these avatars gave him the mobility to navigate different styles and mediums without being pressured to include the projects within his own repertoire of works. He aimed to transcend the biases that the art world inherently places on artists, which are often tied to their socio-geographic identities.

In an attempt to combat the constraint induced by categorisations (stereotypes), the artist introduced Kim, an Asian expatriate living in New York, USA. Kim's intentionally ambiguous name has led others to mistake him for being from Korea, China, Taiwan, Vietnam or the Philippines. Due to his enigmatic identity, he remains a stateless person. Kim works mainly in the medium of video, often focusing on the relationship between body and time.

In the ILHAM Art Show 2022, Kim's piece is displayed near the front desk of the gallery and is titled *Skin Time 1119*. It is an eight-hour single-channel stop-motion video that mirrors ILHAM Gallery's operating hours. The video consists of 480 images that depict each minute that passes between the hours of 11:00 A.M. and 7:00 P.M. Each image fades smoothly into the next and is synchronised to the actual time of day. He created this work after noticing that white cube galleries and museums tend not to contain communal clocks or windows, giving these spaces an illusion of isolation and temporary absence from the boundaries of time. However, by creating this video piece, Kim sought to unveil the presence of time in the gallery space through the series of photographs, which mark each minute on the surface of the skin. Kim notes that "you can say that this artwork connects the outside world to the inside of the gallery, and even if the visitor find[s] this artwork to be uninteresting at least they can use it as a clock. It's functional."

This isn't the first time that Kim has explored the clock concept in his works. He showed a similar video piece with the same title back in 2015. However, this rendition displayed at ILHAM Gallery has slight differences. Since 2015, Kim upgraded his camera and used a better set of stamps to imprint numerical times on his skin. As a result, the current images are clearer and of a higher resolution. Most images in the video are shots taken of Kim's left palm, wrist, and legs. Kim's favourite photographs to take were those of the inside of his left wrist and palm, as the colours had a green hue and looked more "bloody" due to the veins that run beneath the skin. As the 480 photographs in the video were taken during various times of day, the intensity of light in the photos also fluctuates. The use of LED studio lighting in conjunction with natural sunlight contributed to these visual discrepancies, so the images were edited by Kim to achieve some degree of consistency.

Skin is an interesting medium to use as a constant background for the imprints of time. It implies the existence of a corporeal identity, so when I asked whether the skin should be interpreted as Kim's skin or Chong Kim Chiew's, the artist replied: "On the surface, of course, it's Kim Chiew's, but in spirit it's Kim's... We know that it's impossible for Kim to have a real body."

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KUMPULAN UKIR KITE' KELAB KEBUDAYAAN MAH MERI

Hatat Yut
2022
Mixed media
Dimensions variable

Carving Spirits

Text by Lim Sheau Yun

It is often said that grief comes in waves. "Grief has no distance. Grief comes in waves, paroxysms, sudden apprehensions that weaken the knees and blind the eyes and obliterate the dailiness of life," writes author Joan Didion. But if cresting waves of grief can engulf our emotional shores, what if we could also send the source of grief away with the water? Kumpulan Ukir Kite 'Kelab Kebudayaan Mah Meri', a collective of indigenous Mah Meri wood carvers and their colleagues, are attempting this very act. Led by Mah Meri elder and advisor Batin Nengkak Anak Mat, carvers Yunos Anak Peon, Ayor, and Rashid Esa are constructing a *paho' lanchang*, an ark, filled with spirit figures, to send away the misfortune and disease that have plagued our world for the past two years. Joined by Puan Norlia and Mah Meri translator Diana Ross, the team are orchestrating an ambitious panacea to heal the world's ills.

In Mah Meri culture, each disease has a corresponding system of healing. Coronavirus, and the death and devastation it has left in its wake is no less than a "*kemali*" or calamity, says Rashid. "Everyone is suffering. The appropriate healing system is the *lanchang*", one of the most potent methods of healing, reserved only for dire situations. In Mah Meri culture, there is no permanent death, merely a continuous cycle of rebirth between the parallel worlds of life and death. The same is true for disease; since illness comes from the other world, all we can do is send it back, to "turn it back to where it comes from." As Rashid says, "We are trying to persuade the disease to go, rather than to destroy it with our cures. This is healing, not Panadol." Rather than a positivist vision of the world where disease can be eradicated through the forceful will of technology, Mah Meri healing rituals negotiate pacts between the living and the dead, the visible and the unseen. It is a vision of the world populated not merely by people, but that also recognises the non-human forces embroiled in making our "thick present", as coined by Donna Haraway.

Pact-making through launching a *paho' lanchang* is a complicated process. First, carvers must build the *paho'* (sampan) boat itself out of *nyireh batu* wood. Shaped like a chicken, the *lanchang's* head is painted in striking colours—this one is red with a yellow beak. Carvers then make a crew of effigies out of *pulai* wood to protect the ark from evil spirits. The figures are preferably in odd numbers, including a captain, rowers, and an anchor-man. Essential supplies, both material and spiritual, for the week-long journey are carved as well: food, drink and ritual objects. The requirements of the *lanchang* are determined by a *pelimbai*, a shaman-like figure, who becomes the spirits and informs elders about what is required. Once the sculptures are completed, the disease must be persuaded to enter the ark before it is sent out to sea in the middle of the night, where it will carry its passengers into the dark expanse of water. The whole village of over 250 people will be in standstill for weeks preparing for this moment. The physical *lanchang*, and the bodies of its inhabitants, will eventually be destroyed as their spirits travel to another world.

The version of the *lanchang* we see at ILHAM is not the one that will eventually be sent off. The carvers are preparing not one, but two *lanchang*: one for ritual purposes, and one to be displayed at the gallery. Once a *lanchang* has been seen and touched by other hands, it is considered second-hand and cannot be used in fear of upsetting the spirits. The date of release for the spirit *lanchang* has yet to be determined by the *pelimbai*, but no photography or videography is allowed. It is a sacred ritual not meant to be seen by outsiders.

The Mah Meri have long been known to the world through a series of interlocutors, most notably doctor-turned-anthropologist Roland Werner, whose encyclopaedic works *The Mah Meri of Malaysia: Art and Culture and Bomoh Poyang* have become the basis for much knowledge about the Mah Meri. Rashid, formerly a civil servant who worked on the Mah Meri Cultural Village, was once also an outsider. In 2017, he belatedly found out that a *lanchang* was launched. Its rationale was not made explicit to him, but he suspects it was due to threats of re-development around Pulau Carey. "Mah Meri will not speak about this explicitly. They entrust the *pelimbai*", he says. For him, sculpture was his point of access, as knowledge "is all written in the sculptures. This is what scholars before failed to see... These are not just beautiful things." Often, carvers will make sculptures to express and to, quite literally, work through emotions. In the absence of clarity of language, Rashid suggests that sculptures become a system of feeling, each coded with specific affect. Meaning is inscribed not merely in oral traditions but visual ones as well—they open worlds of knowledge and emotion.

Five years after the previous *lanchang* was launched, Rashid suggested making another one in response to the pandemic. Over the past two years, the Mah Meri have lost two prominent members of their community, Tok Sidang Kamet Anak Kadir, the head of ritual, and carver Zulen Anak Dayong. Due to government restrictions, their funeral rites could not be held according to proper Mah Meri tradition. In addition to dispatching disease, the *lanchang* will also take on a personal dimension as a symbolic sending off, or *Hatat Yut*, for them.

The title of the work, *Hatat Yut – Hantar Pulang* (2022), is indicative of the everyday negotiations that have contributed to the complex decision-making as the Mah Meri community necessarily contends with an external world. When Rashid raised the idea of making a *lanchang*, Diana, who serves as both a linguistic and cultural translator, suggested the title *Hatat Yut*. But when speaking to the elders, they suggested that there were other terms that could more precisely describe this sending off, such as *buang sakat*. In a back-and-forth between Rashid, Norlia, Diana and the elders, they finally settled on the original title, *Hatat Yut*. Diana's role is in the critical work of mediation, much like how a *pelimbai* speaks between worlds. Even though she herself is Mah Meri, she sees the Mah Meri Cultural Village as a way to "learn her own culture". This is the first time she is witnessing the *lanchang* being built. Diana navigates the landscape of the globalised, deterritorialised world in which we live, learning her heritage as an indigenous person in Malaysia while contending with how to keep these traditions alive. While many still romanticise indigenous people as a pure category, untouched by the outside world, we see in these small negotiations that a sense of the local is ever shifting, allowing new possibilities and different kinds of relations to emerge.

Upon his death, the carver Zulen left behind an unfinished carving. Passed on, the carving has been completed by his brother, Danny Anak Dayong, and will be included in the *paho' lanchang*. We are necessarily tied to each other, in this world and the next. The etches of one world are picked up in another.

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LEON LEONG

Stilt Houses – The Floating World of Kampung Baru
2022
Gouache on eggwash paper mounted on wooden house structure
241.6 × 368 × 275.8 cm

Making Room
Text by Lim Sheau Yun

Kampung Baru comes alive in the rhythm of everyday life. A small settlement in Kuala Lumpur founded at the turn of the twentieth century, its market bustles on weekend mornings, its food streets fill with motorcycles in the evening, the zinc roofs of its homes and lurid umbrellas of its stalls domineered by the skyscrapers in the background. To many, it stands as a romantic symbol of a simpler "kampung life" in a world overtaken by the urban. Yet this unassuming Malay enclave belies a far more complicated history. It was both where the first Malay Congress was held and where the May 13 riots were sparked. Urban poverty is widespread, and its residents live in fragile conditions: the village was nearly destroyed by floods in 1971 and again in 2021. Its lack of development is often conflated with a sense of quaint anachronism, with a CNN article declaring Kampung Baru to be "lost in time". Now gazetted for re-development, a Malay Heritage Park has been proposed where eleven wooden stilt homes will be conserved so that, according to Bernama, "the Malay image and the image of Kampung Baru are retained". Being outside of time has endured so persistently in the popular imagination of Kampung Baru that its commemorative park captures this very sentiment: lost, frozen, floating.

Over the past year, artist Leon Leong spent two months living in Kampung Baru, where upon his stay and his frequent visits back, he familiarised himself with the nuances of its narratives and geographies. The image that emerged was not of a place frozen in time but a palimpsest of lived experience compressed by the density of the city. In search of a formal response, Leon turned to Indo-Persian miniatures, itself a mode of representation conspicuously belonging to the fifteenth and sixteenth century. Taken as a series, *Stilt Houses – The Floating World of Kampung Baru* roughly tracks the one hundred years of Kampung Baru's history, tracing the lives, loves and dramas of residents, from the story of its founding to its political turmoil in the late twentieth century. But within the world of each painting, time is suspended. Distinct historical events exist alongside each other in *Theatre of History* (2021), while *Progress of Love* (2021) tracks the seasons of a family's use of a house, allowing what Leon calls a "spontaneous temporality", that "compresses multiple spaces and temporalities on a same plane". Stories and myths ordinarily recited in linear time are superimposed on the spatial logic of a page: the tale unfolds with the eye as it travels across the rectangular bounds of paper. As Leon puts it, rather than a "realistic depiction, pictorially it tells a story." His image of Kampung Baru tracks the thematic tendencies of memory, grouped not by sequential time but by feeling.

Leon's intricate paintings, like miniatures of the past, put people in space, as "we are always living in an environment, it is the context for who we are." Each painting is anchored by a structure or a set of structures, and past and present residents of Kampung Baru play out their lives in these architectures as if in a stage set. Buildings and landscapes are depicted in mathematically idealised isometric projection, but within them, bodies in skewed perspective are put to work as they enact their aspirations onto the space of Kampung Baru: men hoist wooden beams to build homes, fists are raised in protest with the conviction of political beliefs, residents whisper into each other's ears as tycoons eye the dollar signs of development. No one person's story is given more truth, although some are given more narrative space than others.

Like an anthropologist, Leon's diligent recordings are combined with an awareness of his status as an outsider. The result is a series of images characterised not by a flat, omniscient eye that sees all but rather by a perspective that simultaneously zooms in on certain characters and zooms out to a larger plot structure. Leon noted that in recent years, he has shifted his representational strategy from the more "objective", optical perspective of the Renaissance to the more "subjective" perspective of miniatures. "Like a kid's drawing, we don't dream in perspective, we dream in whatever comes out first, and whichever appears first." Told in tiny details, these images are verbose. Like a Jane Austen novel, it is as if we both inhabit their stories while being coolly distant from their turmoil. Things are observed as they were and they are. In the words of art historian Oleg Grabar, "Nothing is happening, has happened or will happen. It is all a dream, a fantasy, and that fantasy without event, without story, has been expressed with a stunning visual clarity in which every part, every brick or tile, every bit of inscription has been defined with utmost precision." In repose, residents exist in a ceaseless alternation between their specific, mortal entanglements and the universal structure of the image.

We might think of these fantastic images as resigned to the inevitable fate of Kampung Baru, just another commemorative project within — in Leon's words — a "cemetery of artefacts". New malls will join the pantheon of urban recreation space, luxury apartments with their geometric metal facades will dot Kuala Lumpur's skyline. In an issue as politically charged as gentrification and re-development, what can art do?

Historically, Indo-Persian miniatures were made to be seen behind closed doors, contained within the covers of books or albums. The art form was largely private and privatised, made for an owner's pleasure and stored in the homes of royalty and wealthy colonialists. In this display of the *Stilt Houses* series, Leon does away with miniatures in a book and instead mounts his paintings on the social space of an installation, entitled *Stilt House No 1*. Modelled after the stilt homes he depicts but painted in the baby pink of anonymous millennial airspace, the installation speaks to coded neutrality: what is apparent also has a lineage. These paintings may speak in dreams and float in front of our eyes, but their allegorical fictions chart the hopes of generations and speak the entangled truths of time, history and capital. In Leon's words, "In the act of observing, in the act of creating, we must think beyond just preserving the house." In ILHAM Gallery, located just across a highway from Kampung Baru, he makes not images but room.

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MIMI ASLINDA

Aiyier Di Aiyier Tarjun Lambah Anai Taruih Mangalier (Air Di Air Terjun Lembah Anai Terus Mengalir)
2022
Fabric
108 × 140 cm

Borderlands

Text by Samantha Cheh

Mimi Aslinda's life is textured by borderlands.

At times, these are literal borders, like the sea-line between Malaysia and Indonesia, Nusantara siblings. In the late 80s, her parents migrated to Malaysia from Padang, Indonesia, to eke out a living, first by selling vegetables and (now) hijabs. As immigrants, her parents hold red identity cards, connoting their status as permanent residents, unlike Mimi and her four sisters, who have full citizenship.

But in Malaysia, even citizenship is no true shield against discrimination. Mimi's application to study at UiTM—the only public university with a fine arts course—was rejected on the basis that she wasn't bumiputera. For someone who had spent her whole life understanding herself as Malay—as Malaysian, in a sense—the episode was a shock to the system.

Was she Indonesian or Malaysian? Was she still Malay if she wasn't bumiputera? Did her Minang ties exclude her from the privileges of a blue IC? Despite being born and raised here, would she be perpetually considered Other?

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Then, there is also the more-difficult-to-parse border between individual self and familial history. Mimi's family comes from proud Minangkabau stock, a deeply-embedded and underacknowledged community in Malaysia. When we met for the first time in late April 2022, Mimi told me about her family's close ties to local Minang communities, and the gatherings they would host in celebration of their shared roots. How Minang people are gold-obsessed, and have good heads for personal finance. About their food and love of partying.

She told me about childhoods spent journeying back and forth between Malaysia and her parents' rural hometowns in Padang. The dusty kampung roads, little more than dirt paths, and children running wild in a tangle of forest. There is fondness in her recounting, and pride in her identity as a Minang, but when I ask her if she feels Indonesian, she says, "Sometimes yes, sometimes no."

What she means (I think) is that there are limits to acceptance, even among family.

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And then of course, there's the border between an artist and the world. As a government school student, she said choosing to study art was tantamount to declaring that you've given up on any semblance of a future. Even when she decided to enrol in art school, there was the opposition-couched concern of her mother and sisters. There was also the subtle judgement of being the only Malay girl in a classroom stocked with mostly Chinese students.

Mimi speaks softly, but with conviction, about the hard-edged and lonely reality of living in these borderlands, but also art's provision of a way to chart the difference between her various identities.

"When I realised I was different, I suddenly felt like I was in the middle of nowhere—but who could I talk to about this? But then I thought, I don't have to accept that I don't belong; I can decide if I belong to a place. That's my choice."

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Mimi's "studio" in Serdang is really just a corner blocked off by two standing plastic screens that her family bought to give her the space to work in private. Against one wall are shelves stacked with clear plastic bins full of fabric scraps, to which an easel and a vibrant yellow painting stands kitty-corner.

Sat on the floor, Mimi decanted a shoebox-sized bin of its contents: fabrics in pinks, blues, purples, florals and whites, shorn and frayed at the edges where a blade had cut clean through. In the house's bottom floor, the family runs a small business making and selling hijabs, the source of her fabric scraps. When I first arrived at the house, a shirtless man sat by a whirring machine, drawing a purple cloth through as an Indonesian power ballad blasted out of a radio.

Aiyier Di Aiyier Tarjun Lambah Anai Taruih Mangalier (Air Di Air Terjun Lembah Anai Terus Mengalir) (2022) is a continuation of her *Keluarga Ambo* (2020) series, which she initiated for her graduate show. *Keluarga* consists of a series of fabric works formed from an innovative layering technique that features hand-embroidered renderings of her family. In the photo used for *Aiyier*, Mimi and her family pose before a waterfall, expressions neutral. Mimi, dressed in a white dress with ruffles, stares out impassively. It's a classic image from the turn of the century.

She told me that when she started the series back in 2020, the initial idea was to piece a single layer of cloth to black backing. However, the softness of the material would have compromised the work once it was hung, which is when she began layering the fabric. In a technique recalling quilting and darning methods, Mimi pieced scraps together, layer by layer, playing around with colour and shape, following some harmony that's more jazz than straight composition.

What is most remarkable about the work is the clarity of each figure's features. With nothing more than a needle and a thread, Mimi hand-embroiders each person's face: time-worn lines, her mother's swooping brows, the boredom on the girls' faces. Through the work, the memory of that time comes back to her in pieces, though she is unsure how much of it is a true memory, or something constructed. But the memory that might have only lived in the past has been brought into the present.

Behind them, a waterfall rushes on eternally.

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Samantha Cheh: What was it about portraits that drew you in?

Mimi Aslinda: My mother used to tell me the most unique things in this world are humans. Humans are so unique, no one can copy them, not even robots. There's something about us that some people just can't bring themselves to study. For me, the face brings out a lot. It has a lot to say. You can show emotions on your face; your face shows everything. Even if your words do, your face cannot lie.

I like to read people through their faces, so in my work you'll see that it's just the faces that are colourful. That's because sometimes you have these emotions that you cannot explain, and so I put them into colour because I can't describe it in words.

When you were selecting the photos to base your work on, what were you looking for? What was it you were looking to depict?

I was looking for a memory. Sometimes you have a memory, but it's hard to tell someone about it, so all you need to do is to show them this photo. Every time I see this photo—I can't even remember when we took it—I think about how nice the waterfall is.

How did you come up with this technique?

I was just playing around, and didn't like how the fabric felt. I was worried about how it would hang, because this isn't just about my family's business, but also their struggles. My parents struggled to earn enough money for us, by selling fruits and now selling headscarves. It's something I don't want to waste.

Do you feel a very strong sense of pride in being not just in your Indonesian roots, but also in being Minang?

I'm not great at explaining how I feel, and with art, you can't just write things and make it up. Sometimes it is like that, when I can simply draw something and be expressive—but that's not my main artwork because those feelings are temporary. For me, my main artwork is about things I can go through with, and something that is already in me. That's already in me forever, which is my parents' roots. Artwork is something that changes, and so I need the feelings and memories to be something that remains.

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MINSTREL KUIK

A House in Motion: Repair, Restore, Reimagine, Rebuild
2022
Mixed media installation
90 × 180 × 150 cm (3 pieces)

The Restorative Power of Imagining a House

Text by Denise Ho

I checked in with Minstrel Kuik on 9 April 2022 at her studio. The last time we sat down for a talk was in November 2020 for her solo exhibition, *Memory Games for a House in Motion*. This series was a result of repeated acts of homemaking, or more specifically, the act of connecting the psychological import of the various homes Minstrel has occupied over her lifetime.

The impetus came during the pandemic when Minstrel was forced to reorganise her living space into a space that could simultaneously act as a studio. Hence, the artist began to feel the pressures of limited movement. Outside, the house of the people—Parliament—was beginning a similar concern. These various instabilities awakened Minstrel to the importance of preserving a space where the artist can play and experiment. "You can take your art away, you can take your lover away, but, eventually, if you take away our creativity or our drive to make things, then we are really nobody."

Building from this series, she extends her search from interiors of the people to the history of the land in *A House in Motion: Repair, Restore, Reimagine, Rebuild*. Searching through online archives deepened Minstrel's understanding of the exact of Malaya's colonisation and the enterprises a still-life composition of a durian sandwiched between a pair of yellow gloves. The artist and the nation are cleaning house once again. When asked why she chooses to revisit the histories of exploitation that circle her home, Minstrel explains it as part of identifying patterns: "There are systems in the house that you never want to open. But if you want to know yourself and if you want to really understand the dynamics of a house, how it works, then we have to unfortunately declare war with ourselves, with our parents, or with our nation." Her archival impulse thus offers her an opportunity to experience the tensions of the house as not inevitable but historically contingent.

I was curious to find out what image drives Minstrel in her quest for the ideal house, or what her ultimate goal is in conjuring its form. Here, Minstrel emphasises not the final image but the act of imagining it as crucial to her recovery. The houses she shows me in her studio today will likely look different to their final installation at ILHAM, she reminds me. Everything is in transition and unfinished, and she calls this a rehearsal: "The unfinishedness—I understand it creates problems for people because they are expecting something else. But to me, it's intentional because the encounter is always temporary."

Minstrel takes her reference a step further by letting her "skins" fall heretofy to the ground, unsashmedly useless as walls. And there's a certain power to the useless home; the home that offers little hospitality for its visitor but that which sustains us with the ability to stand in defiance of motivation, rather than utility. Were Minstrel's installations real homes, a tropical heatwave might pass through one of the windows in a wet-season afternoon. The skins would wrinkle in the condition or liminality of the gallery space, placing in stark focus the tensions that linger in the artist on this industrious act of yearning for a safe dwelling space.

This act is occasionally interrupted by a different kind of pain; the emotional and physical toll of imagining her homes becomes more challenging as Minstrel is diagnosed with a frozen shoulder. At the same time, she has her own patient to diagnose. Upon review, the cuts she made along the grid lines of her laser-printed assemblage of images on fabric were too big and begun to slouch under the weight of the fabric. She has to find a way to fasten them together again, whilst allowing the seam at the corner in a position of flexibility for the suspension. In an Instagram post on 1 March 2022, she recounts how the pain of the frozen shoulder "slowly but surely broke down the dream-machine that helps to form a memory for the future.

On one such evening when she is awakened by the pain, her solution comes to her: zips sewed along the edges as fastening devices that allow the artist to control what she shows and, conversely, to conceal. She got out of bed and fished for a bag of zips kept in storage and proceeded to experiment with joining the fragmented sheets together. Now, she arrived at two revelations: 1) the remarkable tenacity of her fabric and its compliance with the material; and 2) the ease with which her paintings, a process which creates a tough, leathery material, and 2) the ability of the fabric to handle the weight of the zips, but also to be manipulated by the artist so that openings can be made where other areas are zipped shut.

In a talk at The New School in 2019, activist Marci Blackman recounted an exercise he's practised in asking people to imagine a black-loving world where the artist to control what she shows and, conversely, to conceal. She got out of bed and fished for a bag of zips kept in storage and proceeded to experiment with joining the fragmented sheets together. Now, she arrived at two revelations: 1) the remarkable tenacity of her fabric and its compliance with the material; and 2) the ease with which her paintings, a process which creates a tough, leathery material, and 2) the ability of the fabric to handle the weight of the zips, but also to be manipulated by the artist so that openings can be made where other areas are zipped shut.

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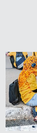
IMAGES USED IN MINSTREL'S WORK:

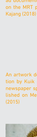
A photomontage (2022) composed of Kuik's personal photographic archive. On the top of the composition is the combination of two staged images (2013 and 2014). One shows the artist's sons bearing the traditional sugarcane rains while the lower part of the photomontage is a Malay kampung house located in Perak. The kampung house, decorated with Bh Bagus, was photographed in 2013 during the 13th Malaysia general election. The durians were captured later in 2014.

A stained photocopied reproduction of a photograph by Karatage Tanah Melayu, Ministry of Information, Federation of Malaya Kuala Lumpur, in 1896, an anonymous photographer and photographer's date unknown between a train and an elephant in the Malayan Peninsula. The photograph was published much later c.1930 in the form of a postcard during the British Malaya years under its original caption elephant, titled, Tanah Anson, Perak. However, in KITM's reproduction, the title of the image has been changed to *The elephant that caused the trouble*. In this installation at ILHAM Art Show, the artist has used a photographic image taken by her father, she and her partner "hated" the elephant from the display wall, and the artist rephotographed the object at her apartment balcony at Sepultuh in 2011.

Image documented by the photographer McGregor under the caption, *Group of aborigines dancing*. Photo appears in the book, The Pagan Races of the Malayan Peninsula by Walter W. Skeat and Charles O. Blagden



Two images showing the same Brazilian Wandering Spider (Phoneutria nigriventer) in a pain-filled 2014.



Kuik photographed a Malay female protester at the Bersih 4 Rally taking a break on the pavement to eat a strawberry (2015)

In 2012, Kuik staged this photograph, inspired by the Bersih Rally, in her house in a setting that is unmarked as she is in Tropiano. Other objects include a hammer, yellow cloth tape and a pair of yellow rubber household gloves.

BN electoral campaign ad documented by Kuik on the MRT platform in Kajang (2018)

An artwork documented by Kuik showing a Malay Muslim family visited on Merdeka Day (2015)

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PANGROK SULAP

Cahaya Kehidupan (Living Light)
2022
Woodcut, offset ink print on blackout cotton
128 × 274 cm

Carving Customs with Pangrok Sulap

Text by Aminah Ibrahim

Cahaya Kehidupan (Living Light) is a landscape, alive and abundant with imagery of customs far beyond the walls of a modern art space. The woodcut print on blackout cotton is the result of collaboration between Pangrok Sulap and the community of Kampung Penulangon.

Pangrok Sulap is a collective of artists, musicians and social activists with the purpose of empowering communities through art. Pangrok means punk rock and Sulap is a hut used as a resting place by Sabahan farmers. Their name expresses their philosophy of community and DIY approach.

I interviewed Pangrok Sulap over Zoom. I must confess as the writer of this piece I've taken some liberties in translating and editing our conversation, which was spoken in Malay, for length and clarity. First, I broke down "process" into four smaller components, ingredients if you will—inspiration, making, feeling and audience reaction. Then, I asked Pangrok Sulap as a collective the following questions:

Aminah Ibrahim: What were the thoughts and inspirations behind *Cahaya Kehidupan* (2022)?

Pangrok Sulap: The purpose of the work was to fundraise for Kampung Penulangon Ranau, Sabah. We've been planning to make a work that would help us with fundraising to install a hydroelectric system in the village. *Cahaya Kehidupan* was the result of several workshops at the village and reflects the community's historical narratives, ethnic heritage, agriculture, art and culture of Kampung Penulangon.

Prior to this, we participated in close to ten hydro projects around Sabah. For this specific project, we worked collaboratively with the villagers. First, we visited to measure the water meter. Then, we met with the villagers to discuss how we could succeed. Once the villagers agreed, we continued to hold workshops with them, teaching them the process of making a woodcut print. The production of this work included carving on MDF boards, colouring using a special ink, stretching fabric, and printing manually using feet.

In this work, we included the process of making the hydroelectric project. The work also acts as a visual guide to present our next hydro project. The artwork itself is an exchange of knowledge; it is the result of us learning from the villagers, and the villagers learning from us.

We want people to see the process and encourage them to become fans. We try to delve into the villagers' life when making the woodcut print. In the city, we are too dependent on the system—we must have money so we can live; we must have electricity and then we can live. The villagers live based on what nature provides. They aren't too dependent on the system. Even if they may not have much money, in many ways, they are richer than us.

What was the physical process of the artwork?

We don't follow a structure; our process is more relaxed and organic. We spend time together and share stories. The information we've collected isn't from one meeting or occasion, but over the entire ten days we were there. We joined the villagers in their daily activities—harvesting rice, going to the river—and we asked many questions. During the day, we talked to the children and at night, their parents returne from work and hung out with us, we did everything with them.

One of our challenges was bringing the materials over from Kota Kinabalu (KK). It took us about five hours from KK to get to the *kampung*. We brought tools and placed MDF boards on a four-by-four, going through mud and rain to the *kampung*, located in a forest reserve.

At this point of our conversation, I asked Pangrok Sulap to share memorable stories of their process. Below are some of the members' recollections:

Rizo: When we cycled into the *kampung*, we had to get through gravel and mud. We struggled getting to the village, sunburnt and soaked in sweat. We wanted to use green energy—bicycles. It was a mission to get there. *(laughs)*

When we were in the *kampung*, we had the opportunity to witness an air doctor enter the village via helicopter. Every month, a helicopter flies into the village from the Ministry of Health. The doctor distributes medicine. We had the chance to see for ourselves.

Jerome: I was inspired by how most of the residents were not from just the one village, but from other villages as well. They came to Kampung Penulangon because there is road access. So, these other villagers also shared stories from their own village with us. It was inspiring to see so much solidarity. I was happy to be in a jungle reserve, to see green that is still lush and I was surprised at how much *harta karun* (treasure) was left there; ancestral treasures from the past.

While we were crossing a river, I was on my motorcycle and a chain came loose in the middle of the river. It was terrifying! The water was flowing intensely; the height was almost half of my tire. I managed to get out and it was a good experience in the end. At least next time when we go in again, I'll know what I'm doing—I was lucky!

Adi: Everyone stayed in the town hall—the villagers, us, and their children. The children taught me the games they invented. If somebody lost, another child subbed in, or we would play simultaneously. They were competitive. I'll never forget it!

Bam: Indirectly, the children of the village connected us with their parents. It was the school holidays when we visited, so even before we all got up, the children were already playing outside. The kitchen team, Memet, prepared food for the children. At first, their parents were concerned, "Don't go and ask for food!" they'd say, but then they began to trust us once they saw that we took care of their children. We built our relationships organically.

Mc Feddy: On my first day while we were drinking *tapai* (traditional rice wine) with the villagers, I accidentally drank a beetle! During my days there, I was sick because it was stuck in my throat!

Bam: We paid attention to what needed fixing, too. If there were leaking parts of the roof, we went to fix it.

Rizo: We built a place to shower and bettered their piping system. We cut firewood every day to eat.

Memet: There were challenges building trust with the villagers in the beginning. Some were shy or suspicious of us and some did not want to accept change or help, while others were happy to accept our suggestions. We had to build trust by showing them we were willing to live the way they did. They were happy to work with us and participate as soon as we built trust.

How did you all feel throughout the process?

The process was fun! We wanted to learn from everyone, so we felt good throughout. Each place we visit there's something new to learn and gain.

However, for us this is just the beginning and only when the villagers get electricity, will we feel truly satisfied. Our original purpose is for us to give back to the community. All this time we volunteered for the installation of hydroelectricity with the NGO *Light Up Borneo*, but this time, from beginning to end, we tried to do it ourselves. For the future, we will continue with this method, making artwork and giving back to the community. We will continue using our art as a means of fundraising.

We also left boards and tools in the village for them to use. The villagers themselves told us that they will use the tools to fundraise by creating pictures. The villagers are planning to build a hut, a village gallery space for them to display their artwork.

Whenever we create woodcut prints with the community, we leave a piece with the community, the purpose is not for sale but to be the property of the community and for public display. This piece is a paste print and is not included in the editions for fundraising.

What do you hope the audience will take away from the process and piece?

We hope that when the audience looks at the work, they see it as the result of Pangrok Sulap collaborating with the community. We want the audience to know that art can manifest change and empower communities.

We'd like for educational institutions to use our artwork as a source for research. In each work, we include materials and stories that are steeped in culture and history. Sabah is rich in culture that is becoming extinct because people don't talk about it. Perhaps it's not possible to preserve all the history, but at least we can preserve some stories. We want to showcase *kampung* way of life—having a sense of community and living more naturally based on the elements.

Our hope is that our work will spark conversation. Even if we don't hear the conversation ourselves, if people talk about it, the artwork itself will be a reference for everyone who sees it and it will continuously grow.

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SAMSUDIN WAHAB

Ibu-Pegun (Mother-Still)
2022
Mixed media
200 × 140 × 132 cm

Sentiments on Source

Text by Aminah Ibrahim

Ibu-Pegun (Mother-Still) stands peacefully composed. A large, bulbous sculpture of a mother's head made from coconut husks evoking maternal love, patience and resilience.

I walk into Samsudin Wahab's (Budin) studio and see a large, enmeshed structure shaped like a head in the middle of the room. The half-finished sculpture is large, taking up most of the studio. Surrounding it are a canvas, shelves of paint tools, a plethora of books and files, a table, two chairs and a coffee table. We sit down and begin to talk about his process in creating Ibu-Pegun. *Budin starts by showing me sketches of* Ibu-Pegun *—a complete collage of the finished sculpture, sitting in an art space accompanied by black and white images of an imagined audience from another time. The sketches are exemplary of his collage style, both realistic and fictional. We speak in Malay: his gentle and lilting with an accent from Perak, mine a little broken. Below is our conversation, translated to English and edited for length and clarity.*

Aminah Ibrahim: What was the inspiration behind the work?

Samsudin Wahab: During the lockdown, there was widespread panic and I found it hard to do work. I would often sit here in the studio and call my mother to reminisce. I had an idea to make a monument, a marking to represent this time. I wanted to use a material that would make sense and communicate the emotion clearly.

I started by drawing a portrait of my mother, representing mothers in general, a maternal figure. I knew I wanted the sculpture to be made from coconut husk.

Why did you pick coconut husk?

I chose coconut husk as a material based on the *peribahasa* (Malay proverb), "*Untung sabut timbul, untung batu tenggelam*" (loosely translated: our life depends on luck. If we are lucky, we will float like *sabut* [coconut husk] and if not, we will sink like *batu* [stone or rock]). The *peribahasa* is apt for the situation we faced during the height of the pandemic.

There was so much risk, no one knew what would happen and it's all based on luck. People were left to their own devices. The proverb actually continues: if the coconut husk washes ashore, a coconut tree could grow.

So, the material works to both evoke memories of your hometown, your mother, whilst also commenting on society's ability to navigate crisis and possibly grow from tragedy. What was the physical process like, from start to finish?

I started with the drawing and then picked the material. When I make the drawings, I have no specific idea of how the material is going to work. I tend to use materials that I understand, can engage with and that evoke memories. I grew up in a village. So, we often looked for coconuts to make coconut cream.

In my previous work, I've used *ikan masin* (salted fish). I try to break the theory that artwork needs to be long lasting. Perhaps other people might say that using coconut husk does not follow the law that a sculpture is built to last but that doesn't matter to me.

Once I found the material, I had to create the structure and there were challenges. I needed to try to find materials for the structure that are light, flexible and easy to transport because my studio is on the third floor. I faced technical and logistical issues. Finding stock of coconut husk was challenging because there were floods. Pantai Barat, Banting and Klang were all flooded, so there was no material.

I waited and made the structure first. Finally, I managed to find husk in Klang. I wrapped the structure with fiber as a cover and will eventually sew on the coconut husk. I will have to cut and shape the coconut husk, then add features of the sculpture for example, her *sanggul* (hair bun). The structure has glue and nuts to hold the wire netting together and is made of Styrofoam underneath to hold its shape. It is light and can be taken apart.

Eventually, I will sew everything together with nylon thread and needle.

The coconut husk has different dimensions, scents, textures and sounds. It's a material that is alive and every component of the coconut tree is of use. In my *kampung* (hometown) in Perak, we would use old coconuts as floats. I thought to myself, do I want to make work that has reference to the demography here in the city? No, I'd rather pick materials that I understand. This material holds many memories for me.

Are there any instances that you found memorable throughout this process?

Once I finished the proposal, I called my mother and during that time she couldn't hear properly. My sister eventually brought her to the hospital, but before that my sister brought her to the *bomoh* (practitioner of traditional medicine) who said she had a disturbance. I realised that when I was making the drawing, I didn't draw ears!

She's okay now, it was a simple matter—there was liquid stuck in her ear. For a whole month she couldn't hear, I went back to the village and would talk to her, but she couldn't hear me. She doesn't understand sign language either, so it was hard.

For a lot of my work, my mother is an unofficial technician. She helps me solve technical issues. She advises me on how to dry the material, how to use it and so on. It's sentimental. My work is not necessarily always serious, but fun.

What were your feelings during the process?

When doing work like this, I must be engaged with the material—how the material evolves with the current situation; how it evolves with politics. When I was living in my hometown, it was normal to use grass but creating a large-scale sculpture with grass in the city is entirely different. Creating the drawing is easy, but physically making it is difficult because I must re-engage with the material. Sometimes I think I understand the material, but it's been a long time. It's a process.

Let's say I wanted to use copper, an industrial material, that wouldn't be a big deal, but these organic materials are difficult. When I used *ikan masin*, I thought it wouldn't be a problem, but I was wrong. It was a big deal! I couldn't simply buy *ikan masin* in bulk at the market, it's based on availability. Also, conditions on the East Coast and West Coast are different. The size of salted fish isn't standardised.

I once used *asam keping* (tamarind slices). I ordered it and it wasn't enough, so I re-ordered and it arrived a different colour!

These organic materials are relevant to Malaysia, they aren't simply industrial. That's what it means to me to pick the right material.

I imagine *Ibu-Pegun* as a painting in three dimensions. Sculptures have added considerations: logistics, space, material and condition. It's about playing with all of that.

How would you like the audience to respond to the piece?

I would like people to engage with it, the form and material. There are limitations when doing three-dimensional work like this. When painting, there are no limitations. Hopefully, the work triggers their memories. Hopefully they understand the material, but they may not. Maybe the audience is not Malaysian and coconut husk is foreign to them. Perhaps they will be disgusted by the material or allergic. I don't mind, my hope is that they do engage one way or another. I don't mind if they touch or smell the work. The audience reaction, for me, adds different elements to the work.

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SHARON CHIN

Rich Country
2022
Intaglio prints with Tetra-Pak milk cartons
7.5 × 9 cm (300 pieces)

Port Dickson on a Rainy Monday

Text by Ellen Lee

Rich Country comprises 300 intaglio prints on paper, made through drypoint technique with recycled Tetrapak milk cartons, measuring only about 90 × 75 mm each. These 300 prints are little portraits of 30 microorganisms that exist in the soil and keep it fertile, with members from the communities of the arthropods, nematodes, protozoa, fungi, bacteria, flatworm, and tardigrade.

During the lockdown, Sharon became fixated by the idea of making a very tiny print. In her trawling of the Web, she discovered a Mexican printmaker named Enrica Ruiz, who makes miniature prints of domestic subjects. No biographical information could be found about Enrica, only images of her works online. Sharon created the shapes of the prints by tearing scraps of paper and tracing their outlines on Tetrapak sheets, then cutting them out to make her printing plates. While the paper is a consistent size, the printed images are all in shapes as odd and tiny as their subjects: cameo-sized, fit for a locket.

On a wet day in April several weeks before the opening of the show, I visited her in Port Dickson, the little tourist town she now calls home. Port Dickson may not be Malaysia's best beach in terms of its views or cleanliness, and its proximity to Kuala Lumpur doesn't give the same satisfaction to urbanites' wanderlust when it comes to holiday destinations, but, even an hour out of the city, the air feels better. The rain, when it falls, feels cleaner, sweeter, like you're discovering water for the first time. I visited her along with two friends: Boon, a hairstylist, and Poodien, a fellow artist.

Sharon was born, raised, and spent many years living in Kuala Lumpur before she finally moved to Port Dickson in 2011. In 2021, she organised her first exhibition in Port Dickson in a rented bungalow by the beach. The exhibition, her first solo in several years, was simply titled *I Like This Place*. Being out in Port Dickson, with its quiet, flat town and rainy beach, you can understand how such a place could inspire simplicity and directness in the way you go about life. Your head is cleared, and you feel the restoration of brain cells previously mauled by the Kuala Lumpur exhaust-haze. When I asked her what kids in the town do in their free time, she replied, "I don't know. Probably nothing."

When speaking about Sharon's works post-move, it's inevitable to look at them in light of the move because the works are so rooted in place. *Rich Country* emerged out of a newfound relationship with the soil and her surroundings, kindled during the Covid-19 lockdown, when Sharon started gardening more often. "My relationship with the land and with nature was changing. Now I feel at home, I feel more rooted to the land, this place."

The title of the work arose from feelings of unease when thinking about herself in relation to the nation. What does it mean to be a citizen? This discomfort of being a citizen answerable to/for a country seemed to plague her the most in Kuala Lumpur, but now she has settled into an easy, natural answer in Port Dickson. There is no great philosophy about belonging to a nation, but rather an intuitive revelation. Kuala Lumpur is so stratified into the haves and have-nots but, in Port Dickson, Sharon understands herself as a resident not just among her human neighbours, but also among the frogs, the snakes, the mangrove trees, the beach, the rain, the land, the soil, and the microbes of the soil that make it fertile. The wealth of the soil is the real "rich country", the unacknowledged wealth that we're plundering every day to generate superficial human wealth.

Her artist statement is an optimistic rallying call for collective thinking: "There are lessons in the soil. Life depends on relationships. Our survival will depend not on technology but on understanding and increasing these relationships—with each other, and with the nonhuman. Long life to the rich country beneath—and between—us!"

Sharon's move to Port Dickson and her increased gardening have revealed to her the life beneath all things. How alive the world is, and how sensitive: every act can either sustain or kill the life that is everywhere around us. It can be terrible for the world to be so alive because that heightens our responsibility to it, but it is also comforting to know that we are never really alone in the world. Death and destruction are not as terminal as they seem because there is life everywhere, teeming out of every crevice and under every rock. In the same way, being a citizen of a nation can seem like a terrible responsibility when you only experience your country through the news and media, but it can be a wonderful feeling when you experience it through life, through your fellow citizens.

The place that Sharon likes is a little beach cove where some mangrove trees still grow on their own. The sea washes up to the trees, turns their bark a dark creamy brown, burnt red. A shower of little flowers. Poodien showed her how a sea-washed, mangrove bark-stained rock can be turned into a makeshift chalk. Having grown up on the Kelantanese coast himself, these little stones were his earliest drawing tools. Sitting out by the edge of the walkway, staring off into the copper-blue water, Sharon contemplated the little shifts in the landscape since the last time she visited.

"I learn something new every time I come out here. It's such a small space, but I always discover something new every time. Like today, because of Poodien, I realised that the rocks can be used as drawing tools as well." The world is aflame with life. Even the same place visited every day can reveal new things; even a childhood home, returned to in adulthood, can be the key to understanding the universe. The choice to hang the prints scattered around the exhibition and between other artists' works is an attempt to manifest a relationship to other artists within the community, just like how the various microbes coexist and reinforce each other to protect the soil's integrity.

Fast-forward a few weeks later, the reality of installing the work opened up more problems than expected. Upon being confronted with the large scale of the other works on show, her understanding of her work also changed; there seemed to be no way of existing alongside others without seeming parasitic or annoying. The challenges of showing the work in the exhibition mimicked Sharon's own claustrophobic sentiments towards life in the city and offers more food for thought about how artists can co-exist within the dynamics of a group show without being indifferent (or, worse, inimical) to each other. In her words, she's "trying to create the condition where relationships can change and things are never fixed". By breaking that fourth wall and drawing attention to the exhibition as a designed space, the installation style was an attempt at pulling herself and other artists out of the ghetto-like competition of the group show and into a more symbiotic arrangement. In line with that thought, she also used the grant provided by the ILHAM Art Show to hire an apprentice for the first time in her career, a younger artist whom she could pass on knowledge to. The anxiety of influence is so passé.

When we were in Port Dickson and chatting about nature's intuitive networks, the cynic in me had to ask Sharon whether she believes even parasites and other predators have a place in the circle of life. She didn't give a straight yes or no but rather, in her characteristically gentle and ruminative manner, offered an elusive but uplifting meditation on harmony in nature. She said, "There are big laws in nature, and some laws are bigger than others. I believe in homeostasis and in the Tao. The universe has its own way of getting things back in balance." And thus I wrapped up the interview, and thus we went to the beach.

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TAN KIAN MING

The Ancestor
2022
Aluminium foil
Dimensions variable

Monuments in Liminal Space
Text by Samantha Cheh

i. "...and the dead shall be raised."

Over the last seven years, Tan Kian Ming has haunted the ridged spine of the Malaysian peninsula, hunting down old WWII monuments and cemeteries, collecting names, ghosts, and histories half-lost in burials of dust and mud. In the privately-owned temple he's made his home and studio in Kluang, Johor, he showed me a small fortune of photos he's accumulated of memorials to the war-dead and graves dating back to at least the late 19th century.

Kota Tinggi. Kuala Lumpur. Bukit Cina. Kulai. Taiping. Segamat. Penang.

Traditional Chinese cemeteries are becoming increasingly rare, giving way to the rising costs of space and modern life, but, when you come face to face with one, the graves elicit a bone-deep familiarity. An undeniable presence. The shallow arch of a headstone flanked by a symmetrical stone embrace. A horseshoe-shaped mound where the bodies are buried.

ii. diaspora

> *"I was a really Chinese-educated person; from primary school to high school to university, it was an entirely Chinese education. Sometimes I wonder if I am really Malaysian, or just Chinese, through and through. In the UEC system, there isn't really a lot of racial solidarity with the rest of Malaysia because of a strong sense of unfairness, so we tend towards China or Taiwan. That's why I feel that feelings of diaspora do not end. We may say we're Malaysian, but these things — these invisible feelings — they continue.*
>
> *"Taiwan was an important space for me, because it encouraged me to think about my identity. Our identity as Chinese people isn't really something Malaysian Chinese think about because we always try to embrace different cultures — but in Taiwan, Chinese people are a majority, so it feels natural."*

Kian's life has been a series of disrupted histories, a rope woven from the splitting of many threads. Born in Segamat, Johor, he is one of the first blood-related children of a family of adoptees — both his father and grandfather were adopted by their respective foster parents. This uneven family history is further pockmarked by the shortcomings of government documentation, and the political turmoil of the last century.

Kian himself spent a significant portion of his childhood away from his parents, raised in the company of monks until primary school, and speaking only Chinese languages until university. Later, he would go on to pursue his MFA at Goldsmiths, University of London, an education that was eventually disrupted by the pandemic.

The liminal quality of his work reflects these various disruptions; there is a persistent sense of distrust of constructed identities. *WW2 Monuments in Malaysia* (2015) showcases a series of aluminium rubbings designed to draw a blurred distinction between the "Overseas Chinese" — born mainlanders gone abroad — and the ethnic Chinese born in new lands.

There are questions about the burden of remembering and commemoration, all inextricably linked through issues of identity. Who are the ethnic Chinese without a direct experience of migration? What does it mean to be "Chinese" when its foundation of symbols, rituals and languages are an ever-shifting amalgam of real and imagined? What of our longing for home, when "home" has been washed away by a sea journey two generations back?

Diaspora for Kian is a feeling without ending — as Chinese people, our sense of displacement seems to prevail over any true sense of culture or language or religion.

iii. house for the dead

Samantha Cheh: Why did you pick aluminium?

Tan Kian Ming: Historical or political issues are very heavy for me, and I don't like the idea of using heavy things to talk about heavy things. I like to play with contrast and material. How can I transform something solid into something fragile and fragmented?

In this series, I reflect on issues of displacement, migration and immigrant history. The artwork references my first ancestor from China. I was wondering how I could help him become a traveller again. Is it possible to make what's "specific" transportable again? Changeable?

Do you think your unusual childhood, with such strong Buddhist roots, played a major role in how you think about death? How has it shaped the form your art takes?

The idea of the afterlife is a constant theme in Chinese culture, even if it manifests in different ways. In Buddhism, we talk about "antarabhava", the dimension between death and rebirth — this concept fascinates me, and got me thinking about how I could incorporate it in my projects.

Here, we only go to the tombs once a year, but in the West, they're not scared of death. Cemeteries are remade as gardens or parks. Chinese people say that during Chengbeng we are remembering our ancestors, but at its most functional, it's about getting lottery numbers.

I'm very familiar with gravestones and cemeteries because I used to help my Master with the funeral ceremonies. I think of the gravestone as a house for people between the afterlife and rebirth, a medium between these two dimensions. I got this idea to apply aluminium foil to "collect" this house, in order to present it in a different space.

iv. stone & air

> *"Tombstones are mediums for preserving a particular family or community's memories, but those memories are invisible. How can I apply a medium to collect what is visible?"*

The Ancestor (2022) is a product of alchemy. Impenetrable stone and the grave's lumbering heft transmuted into the insubstantial shape of memory itself.

To build his structure, Kian uses industrial grade aluminium to "collect" the deep grooves, laboriously pressing names and shapes into unmarked sheets. Reinforced with PVC pipes and hung with thin wire, the work strips back the gravity of the grave, until nothing but light and air are left. Low lights bring drama, emphasising the structure's stark shadows and the voids where the seams should be. When I saw it in his Kluang home, it basked in sunshine pouring down through an air well that gave it an ethereal glow. Seemingly lit from within.

In Christopher Nolan's *Inception* (2010), limbo is a city full of skeletal buildings, half-remembered and eroding. Kian's ancestral recreation enacts a similar feeling, the aluminium's gleam suggestive of substance just a hair's breadth from peeling away. And there is an overwhelming sense of wonder when you first see it: how could something as heavy as a grave — as burdensome as the lineage groaning beneath — become so insubstantial?

v. burial

> *"In Buddhism, we always talk about impermanence, because when we pay attention, we realise that none of it is permanent. The things we can touch, even what's invisible, our mindset or identities. They're also impermanent."*

Admittedly, Kian has a *laissez-faire* attitude towards endings, towards death and materiality. The version of *The Ancestor* currently on show is a recreation of a 2019 original that he got a friend to trash once the pandemic ended any hopes of returning to the UK. I think of the original's destruction as yet another one of Kian's disruptions.

By recreating his ancestor's grave out of fragile metal, Kian decontextualises structure as a symbol of death. Doing so clears the air of its miasma. What's left is nothing but a name, a place, a thin thread to the past. Can you find a sense of self without a clear understanding of what came before it? Is history about blood relation, or is it something manufactured? Is "self" the result of deliberate choice and self-making?

These disruptions don't seem to bother Kian that much; he seems to move through the world with an air of someone who's already let go of the need for certainty. There seemed to be an unspoken understanding that the "clarity" of history is an illusion, and the act of creating, of memory-work, may be all that is possible. And perhaps the fact that history is even possible, that we can chart time passing, mark graves and space — maybe that's enough.

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TETRIANA AHMED FAUZI

Evil Begone, Keep and Tend to Yours Truly
2022
Mixed media on paper
Dimensions variable

Still Processing

Text by Samantha Cheh

Over the course of the last few months, Tetriana Ahmed Fauzi and her art students from Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) (where she lectures) hand-painted over 2,000 circular pieces that she then assembled into loose continents of colour — unicorn, speckles across a spectrum of reds and pinks, tortoiseshell, golds and grayscales. Against the matte grey background of the gallery's widest wall, they seem to drift unmoored, lost. Once you peer past the impressionist splotches, recognisable shapes come into view: an upside-down beach-scape, sharp shapes in Mondrian's primary colours, an intricate pen-sketch of labia, watercolour wheels.

The scale of it makes your breath catch, then loosen.

Despite its looming scale, *Evil Begone, Keep and Tend to Yours Truly* (2022) shares a similar commitment to organic form and colour as Tetriana's previous works, such as the randomised symmetry of the alien orchids showcased in The Back Room's *Common Threads* (2020) group show. There is a sense of design, but chance and accident are equally at play: the size and shape of the paper hems in expression. Similarly, Tetriana's "classroom" structures her students' imaginations.

At its heart, *Evil Begone* explores ideas of restoration and healing. The work's chant-like title and ylang-ylang-scented papers allude to traditional Malay healing practices. Nature is a salve for Tetriana, but so is art and education — her practice lives at this intersection, one informing the other.

In working within the classroom space, a conversation emerges between teacher and students as to the function — and the obligations — of the artist and her art to society. The spaces created by these overarching structures, in a way, offer comfort and order for what remains untamed and wounded within us. In the classroom, we unlearn as much as we learn; we unpick old wounds and untangle problems.

There is space here for processing. For healing.

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Samantha Cheh: What role does your teaching play in your background as an artist?

Tetriana Ahmed Fauzi: I think because my work is teaching, *and* drawing and painting, the classroom becomes my ground for experimentation. The studio area, the syllabus — it all informs my practice as well, and vice versa. And because I'm always working with students, they also inspire me and my work.

I know you said before that the piece was your way of coping with the pandemic and MCOs — which must have been a really difficult time for your students, considering how it was for schools.

Art has always been an escape to me. I make artwork because it makes me happy, it comforts me. It gives me the freedom of expression. With students, having assignments can be quite restricting — having deadlines, rules and restrictions. I tried to give them an experience of art that is similar to what I felt drawing on those round pieces of paper. Something comforting and calming. I don't feel like I'm doing work as time goes by.

I think some of them enjoyed it. I'm sure they felt some obligation to me as their teacher, but I remember one night session where they were all singing and laughing. Afterwards, I gave them a simple questionnaire about how they felt before and after the activity, but for me, the most important results and outcomes came from how I was able to observe their behaviours during the artmaking process. I tried to step out of my position as a lecturer and become more like a participant.

You said that in the abstraction of the work, there's a kind of escape. Of course, at the end of the day, this work is for an art show, so you need to achieve an outcome, but you're talking about this as an activity.

I can control the outcome in terms of the size of the papers, and the materials used, giving it a kind of uniformity. I also gave them the techniques I wanted, which is to combine dry and wet materials, which is what brings me the most pleasure. I also know in the end that I can arrange it in a particular way, but I can't control what the students do. Some of them asked me if they could bring the papers home to work on, and they ended up using different materials. While I can shape the final product, the students can also impose their own way. As an artist, I'm very particular about visuals — but for these students, it's more about the process.

The activity makes me think a lot about the adult colouring books that you get nowadays that are marketed as a kind of calming tool.

Colouring books are quite an interesting form of art therapy at the moment. They're quite stressful for me, but they work for people who love management and control.

Those circles that you use as your base — they're limited in shape and size, but at the end of the day they're still blank, free space. At the same time, the circles are so small, so there is a sense of achievable art. If work can sometimes feel oppressive, maybe *this* can be freeing.

Because my art is also linked to my main job, teaching, it's stressful for me to see work that is unfinished. I *want* that sense of accomplishment, right? A small accomplishment. These round papers I bought come in containers of 22–23 pieces; in a day, if I can get through a set of drawings, I have that sense of accomplishment.

Ever since I was in university, I never had a problem with realistic or naturalistic drawings — but I hated the process. For my final project, I remember my lecturer telling me I had to do figurative work because I was capable of it, but it stressed me out so much. It was achievable, but stressful. It's not a pleasant feeling, being faced with a large canvas, which is why I feel more comfortable making paintings or drawings in small sizes.

It's all in relation to this bigger idea of healing. Is art therapy something you very explicitly wanted to tackle in this piece? Is art therapy as important as art teaching, or are they in separate spaces?

I've contemplated what my role is for many years. I can see some moral or social obligation with regards to teaching because I am getting older, but I sometimes think to myself, *I'm in a university, why am I teaching this way?* I know I get paid every month, but what are these students gaining? Of every batch, maybe 10% will become designers, and one or two will become artists — and are they being paid for their work? What are they getting from it?

As for art therapy, it's really advanced in terms of research and practice, and it's definitely something that's come nearer to me and my colleagues and the people around us at USM. We realised that art has these healing properties. But because we're at a science-focused university, the art department is always being scrutinised — we're always having to justify what we're doing. What is our importance? Science people think art is just for decoration, something you hang on a wall. So, we're always thinking about what is the role of art? What is its importance? One aspect is its healing qualities: not just for the people who make it, but also for those who don't draw, who don't think they have artistic capabilities. It's very important.

As an art teacher who also exhibits in public, what do you think your students see when they see your work in public? Not a lot of art teachers exhibit in that way, and you are part of this art ecosystem that isn't always connected to academia, that is also very driven by money.

It comes to the question of obligation again, but I don't want to talk too much about obligation because it feels like I'm moral policing. I have a salary every month, and I can make it work. I feel happy to be making art, and happy to be able to sell them. It's very satisfying. But I also feel that exhibitions are like our testing ground, an experiment for us to show what's new, what's fresh. What can be done and what can be offered to the public? I'm not saying I'm very experimental, but *this* can be an experiment.

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TAN ZI HAO

The Mercurial Inscription
2022
Video animation, aluminium, touch sensor
Dimensions variable

Empathy with Tan Zi Hao
Text by Aminah Ibrahim

Tan Zi Hao's *The Mercurial Inscription* is a 3D animation rendering of *Terengganu Batu Bersurat* (Terengganu Inscription Stone) floating in space, accompanied by an aluminium sculpture that is the imagined missing upper part of the stone. The aluminium sculpture is for the audience to interact with. When the sculpture is touched, the animation begins, a flood, and the Terengganu Inscription Stone translates.

Looking at the projection of the floating stone, I feel a sense of suspension from time, an otherworldliness and vague futuristic potential. It's serene. Yet, the rendering is undeniably historical, almost recognisable. I squint. Unsettled, I try to make sense of the letters. I feel like I could have seen a stone like this before, maybe in a history textbook? There's a piece in front of me, it's right there. I want to touch it and see what happens.

I sat down over coffee with Zi Hao and had a meandering conversation about the process behind his work. Below is our exchange, edited for clarity, context and length.

Aminah Ibrahim: What was the inspiration behind the work?

Tan Zi Hao: Dated to the 14th century, the Terengganu Inscription Stone marks the arrival of Islam into Malaysia. The stone was discovered in 1887, in a river in Kuala Berang after a flood. I chose the title *The Mercurial Inscription* because of the contrasting ideas of both solid and fluid that the stone represents.

The stone plays an important part of Malaysian history, yet there are many uncertainties surrounding it. There's not enough historical evidence. The inscription that is on the surface is a mystery, people today can't know the exact words on the stone because part of it has been erased. According to an oral account documented by a colonial officer, H.S. Paterson, local villagers state that the stone was used at a *surau*; worshippers attending the mosque would wash their feet on top of it before praying, part of the ritual of cleansing. Thus, the inscription on the stone was erased from the friction of feet. I find it interesting that something so solid is always at risk of being erased, whether it's from water or friction.

The stone *itself* is incomplete. Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas speculates that there is a missing fragment of the stone. The sculpture that I've made of aluminium is the missing piece—it won't have texts but only a frame that indicates the first side of the inscription.

There are more contentions. Historians Naquib Al-Attas and Ahmat Adam claimed different dates for the stone. Naquib Al-Attas dated it to 702 H (1303 AD), while Ahmat Adam read 708 H (1308 AD). Yet, each account claimed to have proposed the "correct date". In reality, the hermeneutics of the stone inscription and its history remain hypothetical.

I am also fascinated by an image of people touching a recreation of the Terengganu Inscription Stone. The idea of touching itself is important, that's why there's a touch sensor in the sculpture. It goes beyond visual representation. In the past, sacred objects were touched affectionately, unlike in the museums today, where the audience is separated by a glass partition.

Why were you motivated to begin researching the Terengganu Inscription Stone?

A few years ago, there was a nationwide discussion on the implementation of *Jawi* in Malaysia's vernacular schools. Different ethnic groups in Malaysia have different sentiments about *Jawi*. Non-Muslims tend to perceive *Jawi* as an Islamic script. It's seen as something that's sacred, partly because throughout the years our national institutions tend to use *Jawi* in the Islamic context. To Muslims, the script is so much more than just being "Islamic" or "Arabic".

This work is a response to some of these issues. I consider the Terengganu Inscription Stone to be a pure icon. Many have come across it from our national history textbooks, but nobody seems to know what the inscription states apart from the fact that this stone symbolises the arrival of Islam and is glorified as one of the earliest artefacts containing the Jawi script. It is a pure image. I always wonder what would happen if we could translate this stone in real time. Will we become more familiar with the stone when we chance upon our mother tongue? That won't be the case because this stone defies clarity. The language is ancient, a mixture of old Malay, Javanese, Arabic, and so on and historians do not always agree on what is being written.

By itself, the stone could convey the depth of history, language, script, and the impossibility of translation, altogether. Something that appears so concrete and iconic, could escape us. Even the dates can be revised and updated. It's due to this contrast between the solid and the mercurial, that I find this stone exemplary for thinking about language, nation, and the *Jawi* debacle.

Why these 12 translations, specifically?

There are 12 translations but only 10 languages. There are two different Malay translations, one from the Terengganu State Museum, the other from Ahmat Adam. There are two English translations too, one from the colonial era, another from Ahmat Adam. The other languages include Sanskrit, Tamil, Punjabi, Arabic, Rohingya, Hokkien, Mandarin, and Javanese.

Some languages, like Sanskrit, Arabic, Javanese, are chosen based on their influence on the stone inscription. Others are chosen due to personal familiarity or simply because I've worked with the scripts before in my previous works. Due to my previous show at Mutual Aid Projects, I stumbled upon the works of activist Muhammad Noor, who developed the Hanifi Rohingya script, created by Mohammad Hanif in the 20th century.

That's record for an entire language!

This goes to show that there is a certain fluidity in language or script—it is developed and digitised to form new relations and encourage political solidarity.

Could you summarise what the actual "making" process entailed?

I spend most of my time reading and researching. The planning is part of the making. Unlike artists trained in fine arts, I was trained in graphic design, so the thought process is different, the tools and materials for experiment can be limited. For this project, I made sketches, considered which languages to include and looked for references of inscriptions in the 14th century. I engaged with a few translators. Then the translations were carefully handwritten by the type collective Huruf, specifically by Tan Sueh Li, Low Hsin Yin, Louie Lee Wei Yi, and Mohamad Hammam Chebel. The Javanese script was written by Aditya Bayu Perdana. Game design company Why Knot Studio works on the animation and touch sensor, while another studio fabricated the aluminium sculpture.

Would you say the process itself was mercurial, did you have to change plans?

Yes, a lot. When translating different languages, the length of the text changes and that was challenging. I used gaps as an opportunity to erase chunks of texts, as many of the translations are longer than Arabic script.

I eventually decided to keep the form and sacrifice readability because the meaning of the text is not as important; no one knows how to read it anyway. The nature of translation is flexible and unpredictable.

We talked about our habit of code-switching, the politics of language and the emotional connection people have to language. What were your feelings throughout the process of making *The Mercurial Inscription*?

I've been dealing with language for so long, sometimes I'm not aware how much I've changed, especially the way I see language. My postgraduate fieldwork in Cirebon has influenced my thinking on the politics of culture. It's a complex feeling, coming to the realisation that understanding the history of other people creates a greater sense of empathy. I feel that the idea of having a nation-state could deprive one of empathy. If nation-states do not exist, there wouldn't be a problem called the "national language". Without nation-states, there is no prescription for how a culture should be practised.

Language is so varied and fluid that it is antithetical to the solid prescriptivism of a nation-state. At a fundamental level, language is always being unsettled whenever we communicate. A pure language does not exist. Every time we speak, a language is compromised. Communication de-territorialises language, because every communicative act necessitates translation, even if we're speaking the same language. We change our accents unknowingly when we encounter a stranger. Our willingness to connect or to be understood may also inflect our speech. If anything, this anarchy of speech teaches one to relinquish control and ownership of language, to allow the possibility of contamination in the course of time. Accepting this contingency of history takes a lot of empathy.

I walked away from my conversation with Zi Hao refreshed from his point of view. In cultural discourse where criticism and despondence are rife, he chooses empathy and studied understanding. Perhaps you think my reading is cliché but I'm stubbornly holding onto the hope that art (and life) is contemplated with more empathy and is more embracing of the mercurial.

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TIN & THEYVAPAALAN S JAYARATNAM

தண் ணீர் THANNIR
2022
Single channel video projected
on mixed media sculpture
Dimensions variable

A "Magic" Disappearing Act

Samuel Tin and Theyvapaalan S Jayaratnam
in conversation with Denise Lai

How do we speak about a violence with no witnesses? We do not have recorded footage of A Ganapathy's death, a forty-year-old Tamilian and Dravidian man who was detained at Gombak police station for an inquiry into his sibling's alleged crimes. On 18 April 2021, he died in the ICU of Selayang Hospital from injuries sustained during his detainment.

There are no witnesses to the event of Ganapathy's death except for the testimony of his mother, who claims her son had told her that he was beaten with a rubber hose by the police. Ganapathy's death was not an isolated event, but one that speaks to a long-neglected legacy of police brutality and racism against Dravidian bodies in Malaysia (a Suaram report in 2021 indicated that ethnic Indians, who make up less than 7% of the population, account for 23% of custodial deaths in Malaysia). Compelled to respond, Samuel Tin and Theyvapaalan S Jayaratnam created *தண் ணீர் THANNIR*, a digital art piece exploring the relationship between water and death, comprising a video diffracting into a container of water housed within a mirrored cupboard.

Tin and Paalan began collaborating as students in Performance and Media at Sunway University. They connected through their shared interest in what they call a "lack of form", or an undisciplined and multifarious understanding of performance. This fluid methodology is mirrored by their focus on the physicality of water, a recurring motif in the collective's practice. In the present work, water is witness. It is a vehicle to enter the crime scene and to fill and infiltrate the spaces in which it occurred, principally the prison cell and the motorcycle workshop where Ganapathy was arrested. In the following conversation, Tin and Paalan reflect on the significance of water to their personal lives and the event, and their reasons for reigniting the discussion in the gallery space one year later.

Denise Lai: I'm interested in how, as performers, you connect with water. Is there something that's particularly personal about that connection, in relation to and maybe in comparison to other art forms? Is it because water is this viscous material that it authorises a response in movement?

Theyvapaalan S Jayaratnam: We thought of water as a witness to the event. We are filled with it. It's in the air. And we were cracking our brains to think: how can we get into this lockup space and how do we record what's in it? And we thought maybe this very powerful element is one of the things that can tell us what happened inside the space. Another thing was that we thought of water as this Tamil or Dravidian spirit: it's wild, it has so many forms, and it's everywhere. But in certain spaces, it's very contained and is set to a fixed form. So, we were interested in how people try to fix elements that are wild and free. How do you try to fix this type of person, control them, and have them take certain shapes? And when they don't take that shape, maybe what happens is that they disappear.

Samuel Tin: You can say we are trying to have a conversation with water. The main reason that I use water in my work is a personal reason: I was drowned before. Three times now. And every single time, someone saved me. So, I feel that all this while, water has been trying to have a conversation with me. It's trying to make me fear. The more I fear water, I think that in order not to fear it is to actually adore it, to use it, play with it, and collaborate with it. Sometimes I think about this: why didn't they take my life? Maybe they were telling me something. I feel like water has always been very close to me, to me living and to me dying. For these reasons, I felt that water should be in every piece that precedes because it was there every single time I was near death. This is why it is so important to me to include water in my pieces, because I'm alive. I'm alive. I am scared of water so I want to make water a friend.

How did you arrive at the choice of looking at the event through site? In your statement you describe these two spaces—Ganapathy's prison cell and the motorcycle workshop where the arrest occurred—as being "liminal spaces". Could you elaborate on what your understanding of liminality is in this context and why it's important to your telling of Ganapathy's death?

We talked a lot about what happened with George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter movement, and we couldn't help but realise that the only reason there was this huge flare-up was that he was recorded. It's almost like no one else could deny this event and that's why it had the response it did. That's why we went to the space. We wanted to look at the other witnesses in this space, to observe the witnesses to this event and to the arrest of Ganapathy. We also felt like this space still had a memory of what happened. And this isn't just a one-off thing; Gombak police station is infamous for having Dravidian bodies die in lockup. We wanted to capture this memory from this space.

What happened in lockup seemed to be like this magic dressing room that people go into and then come out either in an invisible cloak or in a different form. So, we talked about the lockup with this term "liminal" because we don't know what happens, right? This space can swallow people and change their form. And in this case, there were physical changes to his form: his leg had to be amputated. Maybe this lockup is a space where people that are dark-skinned are dragged in, and then after a certain period of time, just happen to change. We felt that maybe that was like us on stage when you go into a zone, and you've done this thing and then you come out with a different state of mind. So we felt like it was this magical, liminal space.

How would you like your audience to listen?

We want them to get curious about the event. There's an active worry that's growing about other Dravidian and Tamilians who come and watch the works. Do they even need to watch it? Do they even need to be in the presence of something that is already traumatising? Because as much as there's distance from the event, there is still anger.

We want to bring the audience into the space. We are not going to be there. By reacting to and opening the cabinet, they are the performer. If let's say, the piece means nothing to you, that can be it. But it should let them know that the arts industry, this platform, this whole gallery is a safe space for them; if we can be comfortable in this space, why not them as well? If we can even contribute to that, that is a big step. Because then, they will know that next time this thing happens, that's when you bring the information in and ask: how do you want to create this thing in this space? So, I would say we have to look in the long term where, right now, we have this privilege, and we'd like to pass on this privilege to others so they can showcase their own forms. I think that's important because I see the gallery as a space that's so quiet, but everyone's piece is so loud.

The issue is not over and it's active. The moment we stop talking about it is the moment when people forget. A lot of people won't know about custodial deaths and this minority issue of how even renting a space requires an ethnic and racial specification. So, we have to constantly be active. When there are things that we know we have privilege on and that people are suffering from, we have to do whatever we can.

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YEOH CHOO KUAN

A Thousand Ways
2022
Video installation
Duration: 4 min

Screen Presence: Choo Kuan's Hillside Studio on a Monday

Text by Ellen Lee

I wanted to start at the simplest and most logical point, by describing what the work is. But before I even complete a sentence, I realise the impossibility of doing so in a way that would make sense. So: it's a video on a loop that's projected onto the gallery wall, but the projection is broken up by a folding screen in the middle of it. The video features one of Choo Kuan's paintings made on a folding screen, but digitised and edited so that it's constantly sliding across the frame. In front of the digital painting, the silhouettes of two dancers prance about, from the left side of the frame to the right. Overlaid on top of the digital painting are silhouettes of enlarged hands (larger than the dancers) making various gestures. The hands look like projections, like they are being projected within the inner universe of the video. The silhouettes of the dancers are shimmering. In the middle of the overall projection, there is another, smaller frame with its colours distorted to look like the colours of a heat map; within this smaller frame is a mockup for the video's physical installation, including the entire set-up in miniature (but without itself, i.e. the smaller frame), creating a mise-en-abyme.

If you haven't seen the work, you won't get what I'm talking about, and this will all sound like I'm giving directions for an elaborate labyrinth.

If I had to condense the premise of the work into a single word, I would say that the work is about screens. In the history of Chinese visual culture, the screen was the first formal surface for painting (long before scrolls, and well before canvasses). The folding screen was often a room's centrepiece and served as a symbol for eminence. History seems to have completed its circle, as we find ourselves now returning to the age of the screen. All of our content, conversation starters, and fixations are gleaned through the screens in our palms. In this work, the screen is equally as important as the content being projected onto it. Visitors are meant to walk around the physical folding screen and disrupt their own illusions in order to question the many layers of what they're looking at. The work is about screens.

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The initial premise of the work is Choo Kuan's childhood memories of prayers and rituals being conducted at a neighbourhood temple in his hometown of Kelantan. In his artist statement, he explains, "There was this ritual session in which the believers would kowtow rapidly for a thousand times while counting in whispers. While the set always looked amusing in my eyes, it did provoke some questions which have lingered until today. Why a total of a thousand? Where and whom was each kowtow trying to reach?" *A Thousand Ways* abstracts these memories from their moment in time. Since understanding via direct experience was inaccessible to him, the work attempts to reach an understanding from the abstracted perspective of the virtual imagination.

Though Choo Kuan is primarily known as a painter, the work is still typical of the cerebral and inquisitive nature of his practice. It appears to be the only work in the show to address the conundrum of the metaverse, a theme that has risen to inescapable prominence during the pandemic years.

As a medium, video is a little bit colder and more calculating, less obliging to expressiveness. But this distance better allows him to explore art from the perspective of the viewer's experience. Through the multiple screens, projections, and overlays of the work ("screen on screen, screen over screen, and screen behind screen", as he described it in his statement), the work draws attention to itself as a crafted, manipulated object.

Since his career has developed around painting, it would be understandable if Choo Kuan, like many other artists working in traditional mediums, were to only remark upon it in conversation rather than allow its spectre to touch his art or even to ignore it outright. But this is not so—he doesn't seem afraid to confront the ambiguous future that the metaverse ushers in, along with its attendant questions of physical art's obsolescence.

By turning to traditions of the screen in Chinese visual culture, the work tries to foretell the future. We have come full circle, with screens now becoming the primary surface for viewing art and serving as mediators of one's status. Before, ILHAM might have transferred critical renown to the artists exhibiting within its galleries by its reputation and position as an institution, but now it transfers prestige through the screen by becoming, arguably, the most TikTok'd and Instagrammed art space in Malaysia.

First coined in 1992, the term "metaverse" has since accumulated in intrigue, aided by Mark Zuckerberg's announcement in 2021 that he would be renaming his Facebook conglomerate to "Meta". The term encompasses what "the Internet" once did, but now with the inclusion of virtual and artificial reality technologies, and their imaginative possibilities. *A Thousand Ways* is interested in exploring the digital image as a legitimate dimension for showing and viewing art. The (unintended) side effect of the ILHAM Art Show's attraction on TikTok and Instagram only adds another layer of screen to the work's many existing screens. Perhaps this is the future of paintings and physical art generally—as visual ephemera, always approached and understood from a cold digitised distance. An aura, a vibe, impossible to put into words, that exists in psychedelic colours in the rainbow grids of images saturating our phones.

Choo Kuan speaks of the digital future as something interesting and inevitable. He cites Anicka Yi's work, *In Love With the World* (2021), a work commissioned for the Tate Turbine Hall featuring floating, AI-operated machines, as an example of a contemporary artwork that feels optimistic about the virtual future, that leans into it with grace and dignity. At least for the current moment, virtual spaces seem to unlock the escapism of the imagination in a much more accessible and direct way than physical art. The current universal acceptance of the metaverse is a loud proclamation that there is no separation between the virtual sphere and the physical one; everything you imagine can be real.

The thousand ritualistic kowtows that the artist observed in his neighbourhood temple as a child have found their contemporary, secular counterpart in our daily rituals involving various screens—the thousand times that we pick up our phone daily, often out of blind habit rather than for any directed purpose. The metaverse (or Web3, or the Internet, or whatever you want to call it) eludes simple description as to its overall impact on society and human consciousness. Similarly, the performers and multiple screens of *A Thousand Ways* reflect the metaverse's own blurring of boundaries between reality and fiction, the tangible and the imagined. Which one is real, which one came first, and does it matter? Where and whom are each of our gestures trying to reach? If you're up for the challenge, you could try your hand at summarising the many layers of the work in as few words as possible.

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