Solving the mys-tree

When the clock struck midnight, Lucy Davis was not sound asleep at home, but up and out on the streets of Little India. The artist, together with her partner Philippe, was searching for something, thrown away. Unlike the “karung gum” workers who scour the streets, Miss Davis was not looking for tin cans, cardboard boxes or old electrical items to recycle.

Instead, she was on the search for unwanted wooden objects for an art project. Armed with a trolley and filled with enthusiasm, she found what she was looking for: a rolling pin, a washing board, a wooden stool.

These were some of the items she collected during her trips out on the streets of Kampong Kapoo, Tekka and Pek Kio. But, could these unwanted items really be transformed into art?

"That's exactly what Miss Davis did. Just like in potato printing, she made prints of the objects on sheets of rice paper. She then cut the paper into smaller pieces and recombined them to form huge collages of the trees that the wood originally came from."

I wanted people to be conscious and to look at wood differently, so when they look at the object, they remember the tree more," she says.

Her recent art exhibition was called Together Again (Wood: Cut). "The objects tell a story," she says. "The rolling pins look like they're flying and the stool looks a little bit like an alien or a little robot." She says that through her art she tries to imagine the "secret life of objects". "That life has something to do with the trees they come from," she says. "Even though wood is dead or supposedly dead, it still has so much of a life force that dominates."

Root of the matter

Miss Davis needed scientific help to track down the wood's origins. She turned to a timber tracing company, Double Helix. The company tested the DNA in the wooden objects.

As you may already know, DNA is found inside all living things. It contains the necessary information required for organisms to live and grow. Every tree has a unique DNA. Through DNA testing, Double Helix was able to give Miss Davis some surprising information.

She found out that the objects were made from a wide diversity of wood coming from many different places.

Some of the trees belonged to the rainforests of Philippines and Myanmar while others could be found in the neighbouring countries of Malaysia and Indonesia. She had expected a lot of the wood to be teak, a popular hardwood that is used for furniture and flooring. But, many of the objects were made from other wood such as meranti, mangrove and kapur. These trees used to be common but are now endangered, she says.

Illegal logging

One big reason why certain species of tree become endangered is illegal logging; people cut down trees without permission. It doesn't help that people around the world like wood. (Take a look around your house and count the number of wood products you have.) The high demand only encourages the wrong doers to continue logging illegally.

Illegal logging doesn't just threaten endangered trees. It also contributes to global warming, and threatens other plants and animals that depend on those trees.

One way to control illegal logging is to make sure that wood that reaches factories doesn't come from protected forests. That's where companies such as Double Helix come in: they can use DNA testing to check exactly where the wood came from.

If you think that Miss Davis' art project seems to have a lot of science in it, you're right. It's a combination of art and science. For the project, she imagined herself to be a natural historian searching for clues to the objects' past. She became a mini-expert on wood as well.

"Art that interests me is art that changes a way we experience the world," she said. "I think what's important is a curiosity, and not to be limited by boundaries like what is science, what is not science; what is art, what is not art. Use your imagination. Ask questions and enjoy the journey - wherever it is that these questions lead you."

By ADELINE ONG

IT'S ABOUT THE PEOPLE, TOO

In Lucy Davis' eyes, the life in some wooden objects doesn't come only from trees but also from "the energies of the people who have touched the object and passed it from one person to the other".

For example, the washing board in her exhibition was given to her by another wood collector who she calls "David with the big eyes from Rangoon road". "I really liked the washing board. It's got grooves, carves and gashes in it as though it's been used a lot, and you really feel the power of the people who have used it," she says.

Another example is a stool: "The first stool I found was kind of nice because it was just sitting on a street next to a karung guni man on Kampong Kapoo Road, and the man was very friendly."