Interview with Lucy Davis  
Art, Features, Interviews, Performance, The Rojak

Appeared as '5Qs with Lucy Davis' (Time Out Singapore Aug 2009)  
Visual artist, art writer and cultural theorist Lucy Davis is working on an ambitious project to track down endangered South-East Asian wood. Hsieh Nizhen gets semantically corrected

On the subject of tracking one’s origins, what are yours?

There is this colonially inherited Singaporean obsession with pigeonholing people according to ethnicity and ‘origin’, which can at times be very problematic. I am a Singapore PR and British citizen born in Uganda. I came here at the age of nine in 1980, went to CHIJ Primary, UWC and was at university in Copenhagen. I stayed on in Denmark for ten years before coming back in ’97. My father is married to a Singaporean and is a Muslim convert. My mother lives 1km away from me on Dover Road with her partner from Australia. Aiyoh, enough already!

You had an exhibition at Post Museum, ‘Together Again (Wood: Cut)’. What sparked this concern with bringing ‘dead wood’ to life?

I originally intended to make woodcut art and carve, for example, the part-fictive, part-scientific journey of the woodblock into the block itself. However, when I began to investigate, the wood sold at places like ArtFriend was of highly endangered jelutong wood (an overharvested hardwood that’s grown in the forests of Malaysia, Borneo, Sumatra and Thailand). So I began to experiment with discarded furniture lying about in my neighbourhood of Little India.
Are you qualified to do DNA testing?

I was put in touch with a company, Double Helix timber tracking, who were able to make analyses of the timber and tell me which trees the wood came from. From this came the necessarily impossible childlike idea of ‘putting Humpty Dumpty together again’, re-creating the trees from prints of the wood we found.

What does the knowledge of being able to trace the source of the timber change exactly?

There is a very banal irony when it comes to our everyday experience of wood. There is a reverence for wood products… but this is in stark contrast to our interest in where and how this ‘living wood’ got on the floor of our funky new designer building. Rainforest destruction is an issue. A serious amount of timber from our region is ‘greenwashed’ – forwarded on elsewhere with an environmentally friendly stamp when it is actually from Indonesian, Thai, Cambodian and Burmese rainforests. DNA testing is as close as you can get to being irrevocable.

What are your thoughts on the current swine flu hype?

As an imperfect vegetarian – I’m trying to stop eating fish and dairy – I see this scare as another stage in the way capitalism abstracts food consumption and distances us from the life experiences of sentient animals we eat. It saddens me that animals are scapegoated here [and] that the consequences of these scares are not to question our intensive, industrialised meat production but to instead up the technology [and] science and contrive even more industrialised, camo-centric economies.
Readers' comments

Rose said: “Swine Flu?”
Just so you know... swine flu has absolutely nothing to do with the act of eating Pork. The reason its called swine flu is because its the strain of flu virus that was mutated within the swine population and the was transferred to humans, Not through eating pork.
Posted on Sat 03 Oct 2009 12:37:24

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