RANT AND RAVE
DON'T BE A TROLL
SAYS DENISE TAN

TAKING TOP HONOURS
MEDIACORP BAGS FIVE MEDALS AT PROMAXBDA AWARDS

INTO THE WOOD
NUS MUSEUM'S LATEST EXHIBITION WEAVES A TALE OF TEAK AND A NATION'S WOODCUT HISTORY
Hanging around a bed long enough — and maybe a little over it — and it will certainly take you places.

That is what happened to Singaporean artist Lucy Davis, who, over the past few years, has held exhibitions and created artworks that all seemingly revolved around or were at least inspired by a piece of second-hand wooden furniture.

Ongoing at the National University of Singapore Museum is "When You Get Closer To The Heart. You May Find Cracks . . .", the latest and most comprehensive exhibition on the theme by Davis and her collaborators under Migrant Ecologies Project, which she founded in 2010.

Comprising a wide array of objects — from huge woodprint collage works and dioramas to photographs and archival newspaper articles, even chunks of wood and an animated video entitled Jalan Jati (Teak Road) — the exhibition's scope extends beyond Singapore to the far reaches of Myanmar and a small island in Sulawesi. And the teak bed that started it all is what greets you at the entrance.

In 2009, Davis became fascinated with the histories behind wooden objects. Then a resident of Little India, "I would pick up pieces of wood and began asking where they came from," she said, working with timber tracking company Double Helix Tracking Technologies to actually test the pieces' DNA. At some point, she stumbled upon the teak bed in a furniture store in Rangoon Road, took it home and also had it tested. Made in the 1960s, the teak used apparently came from Sulawesi. The rest, you might say, is Davis delving into history — or various strands of it.

"What fascinated me about Davis' project were the multiple investigations and the different ways of investigating she did," said artist-curator Jason Wei, who guest-curated the exhibition.

What started out as a story about a bed has, in this show, transformed into two parallel tales of wood and trees and its relation to two islands: Musa Island in Southeast Sulawesi and Singapore. In 2010, Davis and photographer Shannon Castleman flew down to the former, an island long known for its teak plantations. Unfortunately, after the timber boom of the '90s that lasted into the '90s, "Singapore, Malaysia and other countries made a lot of money," Davis highlighted, the place..."
The much-missed alternative art space Post-Museum is back, albeit temporarily, in the form of a pop-up space at Gillman Barracks, courtesy of a four-month collaboration with the Centre for Contemporary Art. Dick Lee announced the restaging of his ’70s-themed musical Hotpants in August. This year’s CausewayExhange, the annual multidisciplinary festival featuring artists from Singapore and Malaysia, has kicked off. Two interactive, fun 3D exhibitions, Alive Museum and Trick Eye Museum, have also opened their doors to the public.

Davis’ stories about the two islands dominate the show, but there’s one more narrative that she branches out into.

While Davis presents a kind of “archaeology of the bed”, said Wee, she is also emphasising on woodcuts for the first time. “It’s one of the under-acknowledged art traditions in Singapore,” he said.

Indeed, her huge paper collage works (using cut-out strips from woodcut prints of both the teak bed and the teak log and Oei gave her) offer a direct link between the woodcut and the Singapore and Muma Island threads of the exhibition. A huge thumbprint of the man who sold Davis the bed, an image of Oei’s son as a young boy standing over teak logs based on a photograph, among others.

But, there’s an even more overt nod to Singapore’s woodcut history, located in another section of the gallery space. It is a series of mechanised dioramas that play on light and shadows. And here, the cut-out strips Davis created come to life, recreating fragments of woodcut prints by Singapore artists such as Lim Mu Hue’s Love, Lim Yew Kang’s After The Fire and Lee Kee Boon’s Nanyang University.

It’s a show swirling with art, science and history, while subtly touching on economics, geopolitics and even the fantastical. There’s a lot happening here and if, like Davis, you stick around long enough, you may discover in all these wood grains of truth.

Artist Lucy Davis (left), who founded Migrant Ecologies Project, and the exhibition’s guest curator, Jason Wee of Grey Projects. PHOTO: BONNAMING