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Teak Tales

Exhibition Review:
When you get closer to the heart, you may find cracks...
Stories of Wood by The Migrant Ecologies Project
Till November 2014
NUS Museum, University Cultural Centre

Text by Ruyi Wong
Images as credited

When you get closer to the heart is an ongoing collaboration between members of The Migrant Ecologies Project (headed by artist Lucy Davis), photographer Shannah Lee Castleman, and scientists Shankar Lyer and Shawn Lum. Tapping into the methodologies between science and the supernatural, the collective presents a rich body of woodcut print collages, stop-motion and sound videos, photography, and a Javanese wayang kulit-inspired installation, which embody metaphors, magic, oral histories, and historical journeys. Ruyi Wong ponders the highly emotional and poetically loaded stories of the common teak, as well as the meanings people make out of it.

Drawing near to the heart can be seen as an emotional act of fondness, coupled with the courage to arrive at the essence of the matter. The reward of getting close lies beneath these cracks. DH Lawrence spoke of his preference of a broken heart in Pomegranate: “For my part, I prefer my heart to be broken. It is so lovely, dawn-kaleidoscopic within the crack.” Like the cracks in DH Lawrence’s pomegranate fruit, the cracks in the teak tree’s heart reveals an opulence of stories of human relationships to trees, forests, and their produce in Southeast Asia.

One can’t help but be bewitched and humbled by the notion that a ramshackle 80-year-old antique teak bed, found in a junk shop in Singapore, can incite such an extensive and notable body of work. The teak bed kindles a series of questions amongst Davis’s collaborators. Where do everyday wooden household objects come from? What might the history of these objects tell us about our migratory lives? The grain of this one rickety teak bed with the guidance of collaborator DoubleHelix, a Singapore start up specialising in DNA tracking technologies, slipped Davis and her collaborators into poetic journeys to the southeast Sulawesi province of Indonesia. It is not known to many that trees have DNA. Through a match between the DNA sample from the teak bed and the teak trees in Sulawesi, Davis and her team ended up on the island of Muna.

The project spans across time and space, from Singapore to the region. Like a time travel machine, it exhumes the multiple layers of memories hidden in the past and releases them into our present. The teak bed tree carries the Delilah’s “concept of becoming,” which is not a fixed state but the constant action of moving through every event in purpose and form, from the seed in the soil, to a tree, to a house, and to a bed, and back to the soil again—an infinite identity. The teak bed has a history, and a potential for the future. In the present, the teak trees become omnipresent storytellers of individual micro-stories from the past that The Migrant Ecologies Project gathers alongside its research.

Davis mentions that the stories surrounding the teak bed would not be possible without personal recollections like the “seed in someone’s palm” to trigger these memories. From this single “seed” from the teak bed, the Migrant Ecologies Project resolutely diverts from a grand narrative to tell the many local and micro-narratives of “hands” that drive the timber industry both in the pre- and post-colonial age of Indonesia and Singapore. A motif of the hand is spotted at the beginning of Jalan Jati (Teak Road), an award-winning stop-motion animation. Jalan Jati won the Promotional Award of the International Short Film Festival Ouarzazate 2012 and Best Sound and Special Mention Animation in The Singapore Short Film Awards 2015. The hands of The Migrant Ecologies Project and the “hands” that drove the timber industries for decades are indistinguishable.

The subterranean stories of furniture makers and the entrepot timber trade and histories within a community of woodcutters are retold through an archive of news cuttings printed onto diaphanous tracing paper pinned to the gallery walls. The breaking down and building up of stories of trees from prints of their wood characterise the project. This archived materials present the argument that common labourers, the “hands”, have the will to improve their own conditions by their own means and effort. The little-known micro-narratives of the wood sawyers’ frequent strikes in pre- and post-war Singapore; the unheard of colonial merchant and philanthropist Francis Graham who stood for the protection of Singapore’s manufacturing industries and the progress for the labourers; tales of the boom and fall of the timber industry—all these are the fruits that were exhumed, cracked open, and ravishingly tasted.

One prominent micro-narrative was of an old-time Singaporean timber trader and log grader, Allen Oei and his son Simon Oei. Oei’s was one of the typical rags-to-riches stories stemming from the industrialisation of Singapore in the 1950s. Allen Oei left home at 14 and worked himself up to become one of entrepēt Singapore’s most successful traders and legendary timber connoisseurs. Oei mentioned in the photography book I Am Like The Karung Gunu of The Teak! produced by The Migrant Ecologies, “Many people were afraid when they see me go into the tender room. I’m the only one that (immediately) knows the quality and price.” Oei can be seen as a modern-day shaman, as his rôle crosses over to that of a wood spirit doctor.

The wood spirit doctor, an important figure in Muna culture, acts as a spiritual advisor in the construction of wooden houses. Elsewhere, the plant geneticist at DoubleHelix quoted, “Hence
can be said with a good deal of confidence that your sample originated from South Sulawesi..." His authority and power-laden voice are inscribed in Davis’s own handwriting in one of the woodcut print collages. Though their roles are conflicted and contested, yet ultimately intertwined, Allen Oei, the wood spirit doctor, and the engineers at DoubleHelix are “mediums” whose studies allow us to understand and unlock what we cannot know of nature. What science can reveal is not what magic can do, and vice versa. The interchanging of roles is prevalent in this project.

The Migrant Ecologies Project and the teak trees can be compared to the coloniser-colonised relationship that the Dutch and Javanese colony shared in history. The Dutch coloniser aimed to conserve and maintain ecological sustainability in the Indonesian forest, resembling the ecological efforts endeavoured by The Migrant Ecologies Project. It is the coloniser’s end goal to turn the colonised into an object existing only as a function of the needs of the coloniser. We come to understand that the benefits of economic growth under the colonial policy never did trickle down to the local level—Javanese farmers continue to suffer from hunger, poverty, and famine. The individuals in the Migrant Ecologies pondered the idea of the trees being the coloniser: Did the teak “use” humans to colonise so as to conserve areas of Indonesia in the same way as the Banyan “used” birds to colonise new trees so as to spread their seeds? From this the teak trees are perceived to have an inherent magical consciousness.

From the artworks titled Wounded Trees and ranjang jati: the teak bed that got four humans from Singapore to Muna island, Southeast Sulawesi and back again, Davis points outs to us that trees are salient beings. The trees are anthropomorphised, and this complicates the line of distinction between human and non-human life forms. The intertwined identity of trees and humans are visualised in the woodprint of a ripped up log end exhibited side by side with a woodcut print collage of a human thumbprint. The thumbprint image belongs to—in the words of Davis—Mr. David “with the big eyes”, the owner of the furniture junk shop where Davis and her team found the teak bed. Davis uses woodcut print collages to piece together an image of Mr. David’s thumbprint. The woodprint of the log end uncannily recalls humanity. Fingerprints offer an infallible means of personal identification; no two fingerprints are exactly the same. The assemblage of the woodcut collages and thumbprint exemplifies the project’s mode of investigation and identification. The tales of “hands” that lay on these teak trees will be unearthed decades later and inspected further by the Migrant Ecologies.

Drawn to the emotional and primitive quality of these woodblocks, Davis references the vibrant woodcut print movement of 1950s Singapore, and recast this art form to the ecological concerns of the twenty-first century. In the fifties and sixties, woodblock printing was known as a medium of social and political expression in post-war Singapore and Malaya. The team raises queries if these artists are not only aware of the socio-political issues but more importantly the ecological concerns surrounding the production of these woodblocks. In Tan Fee Chee’s woodblock print Persuading (1958), Davis saw the teak tree in the politically charged work as having “a life of its own, with branches that stretch beyond the edge of the scene.” Davis shifted the subject-object relationship of these teak trees from the human spectator and victim of nature, to that of a storyteller that is “charged” to recount its own history. Thus, the identity of these teak trees is inseparable from their historical journeys.

The powerful and poetic images of Davis’s collaborator Shannon Castlesman in Wounded Trees can be understood as “tree wounded portraits.” As a form of memento mori art, Castlesman photographed the same tree, which was axed illegally and stealthily from November 2011, only to return again in April 2011 to photograph the remains of the same tree—a stump. These photographs were shot in the Muna forest with a black velvet backdrop and controlled lighting, migrating indoor studio portraiture into the forest. By doing so, Castlesman’s photographic reveals seductive textures of the tree trunk, which clearly reference Davis’s textured woodcut print collages. To take a photograph is to participate in another’s mortality, as reflected upon by Roland Barthes in his book Camera Lucida. These “tree wounded portraits,” not unlike human portraits, elicit empathy through Castlesman’s lens. The act of naming and photographing them as portraits also anthropomorphises these trees, taking them into the realm of emotions.

Anthropomorphism can be a consciously constructed and intentional means of connecting with the nonhuman world. The stop-motion animation, Jalan Jati (Teak Road) is reminiscent of William Kentridge’s stop-motion style. Davis “breathes” life into the teak bed tree, as fragments of these woodcut print collages inflate like breathing lungs, coming together to form a bed and dividing themselves again. The rickety old bed is resurrected, awakened to raise a notion: What is the message that the dead would like to bring? When we look at the tree wound portraits, we come to understand the long untold history of the Muna peasant resisting the forest control of the sovereign state. These cuts can also be read as self-inflicted wounds as Muna villagers attempt to set themselves free from the chains of the state conservation laws.

The overlapping domains of art, science, and magic radically affect our way of perceiving and thinking, to enable us to articulate the natural world. Davis regards this tension amongst the varied domains as “productive.” This idea of an inexhaustible search is seen in a woodcut print collage of Pokok Ranjang Jati (Teak Bed Tree), which presents a magnum opus image of the teak tree and its measurement of grandeur at 50 metres in height (this is just the trunk). However the rest of the tree, its canopy, and its buttress roots, are hidden away, too massive and extensive to be captured within the image frame. We can try to get close to the heart of the teak tree and appreciate its magnificence and aura, but we can never understand and see it wholly and fully.

The Migrant Ecologies Project has shown a profound respect and humility in its interpretation of the forgotten world of woodcutters, shamans, and ordinary people in Muna, in Southeast Sulawesi. The anthropomorphist approach towards the trees allows the team to make accessible to us the behaviour, thoughts, and feelings of the teak tree. They have crossed successfully from a world in which science governs how people think and act, to one in which the forces of magic also have a deep, equal significance in the beliefs of people. The cracks into which they delve into have proved to be bottomless, and the stories they have exhumed within the cracks, a fraction of countless others. In Davis’s own words, hers is a project of the “stories of wood,” and this may prove to be a chapter amongst many.