Wood splintered into stories in "When You Get Closer to the Heart, You May Find Cracks . . .," an exhibition surrounding research undertaken by the Migrant Ecologies Project since 2009. Initiated by Singapore-based artist Lucy Davis, the ongoing project is a part-scientific, part-anthropological and part-magical-realist excursion to seek the material origin of a teak bedstead that Davis found in a local junk store. Aided by DNA-tracking technology that led to Muna Island in Sulawesi, Indonesia—where there was a timber boom in the 1960s and '70s—Davis and her team traveled to the site, only to find in its place multiple erasures that resulted from histories of industry, colonialism and indigenous lives that had transformed (and were transformed by) the area’s wood. The exhibition showed “woodcut” prints, photographs, texts and archival documents that sprang from the project, with a chronologically dispersed display that suggested an uprooting of the genealogical tree and its pulverization into sawdust.

The cutting up of the arboreal was most viscerally expressed in an impressive series of large “woodcut” prints. Images on each piece were constructed by painstakingly patching together numerous strips of ink prints, which were made by pressing paper against the inked surface of the teak bedstead. Some images portray botany and resemble natural history drawings, while others reproduce archival photographs capturing timber-boom-era Sulawesi. The most extraordinary of these images play up the tension between the paper’s surface and the depth of the composition, as the materiality of the print threatens to swallow its depicted subjects, with figures collapsing into ground and tree into wood. In one print, from a distance one can see a banyan’s entangled branches soar toward the sky and implode into scratchy surface rubble upon closer view. That the ink strips resemble DNA sequences may seem to belabor the point of imbuing a sensuous dimension to the positivist science of genetic tracking. Yet one can also see how Davis, in “belaboring” through a literally laborious, mimetic act, evokes the histories of industry behind her found, teak bed.

As attested by the exhibition’s generous archive of materials, the rapid expansion of the Southeast Asian economy from the 1950s onward was fed by an unchecked exploitation of nature and the severance of the indigenous population’s primordial relationship with their land. This began when Dutch settlers, drawing from an imperialist viewpoint that saw the forest as no more than a reserve of capital, instituted laws that made it criminal for native populations to cut down trees for their own use. This complex history is captured in project member and photographer Shannon Castleman’s series of austere, monochromatic prints of “wounds” that were inflicted on the trunks of Sulawesi trees. The cuts were made by different native villagers over a prolonged period and aimed at eventually felling the tree—a strategy devised so that no one individual could be held responsible for the deed.

The relational nature of these tree cuts gains a cinematic dimension in Davis’s stop-motion animation Jalan Jati (Teak Road) (2012), in which woodcut prints morph from one form into another, as multiple stories unfold. The vigorous, staccato quality of the animation recalls the kineticism of early cinema, its jerkiness the result of continuous movements that have been "cut" into individual frames. The "cutting" process registers both connection and disjunction, bringing to light the disturbances that the timber boom brought to the native ecology of Southeast Asia.

The cinematic motif is further mined in an installation held in a darkroom, with animated shadow puppets made of the same woodcut fragments featured in Jalan Jati. A kind of proto-cinema, the work initially seems to refer to Plato’s Cave, but is more reflective of Aristotle’s observation of how tree leaves eclipse the sunlight to cast a “shadow theater” on the ground. As with the rest of the exhibition, and the project as a whole, the images portrayed in this work are not derivatives of a world of higher forms, as allegorized by Plato, but traces of a material ecology of which both humans and trees are a part. 

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