

Incidents (of Travel) chi too and Simon Soon Terengganu, Malaysia April 20, 2016

Itinerary by chi too

There are two running themes throughout in this itinerary: “work and labour” and “dreamtime”. Both are ideas that are central to my art-making practice.

My appreciation for “work and labour” comes from spending an extended period of time in the state of Terengganu, in northeastern West Malaysian, where these concepts are most apparent. Being in the rural hinterlands of Malaysia, what was supposed to be an attempt at art making saw me develop a new found appreciation for work and labour that is often taken for granted where I live, in the Malaysian capital city Kuala Lumpur. In Terengganu, I am surrounded by men and women who work multiple jobs as fishermen, house builders, boat builders, farmers, coconut pickers, food producers, and everything else that matters.

The second aspect of this itinerary, “Dreamtime”, is something I took from Marion D’Cruz, a senior artist and friend who I greatly respect and admire, and whose cup I have the pleasure to drink from. In a time of great personal depression, Marion introduced me to the idea of dreamtime through her performance *Gostan Forward*. Besides working and making work, every artist needs dreamtime, where he/she does nothing but dream, because ideas can only come from dreaming. To be still, to stare at the horizon, and to do nothing... Terengganu was the ideal place for that and I spent the most part of those two months doing so. Sitting idly on deserted beaches, staring into the sea, cycling aimlessly around villages (which also feeds my appreciation for work and labour), going on joyrides with friends to faraway districts... By the end of those two months I was raring to return home to start making works.

That was close to three years ago. This itinerary proposes that I revisit those days which have been so important to my current practice. I therefore propose the following:

8am

Breakfast at Pasar Payang, Kuala Terengganu’s main market.

This would be followed by an exploration of its giant maze of stalls selling produce, food, textiles, wares, and everything imaginable. Here the fruits of work and labour come to reside and meet their purpose. This is the largest market in town and it is located by the river, next to the sea. Located at this intersection, one gets an overview of the economic life that makes up Terengganu. Essentially it’s a town of small traders, from craftsmen to farmers to fisher-folk. This could be my last visit to Pasar Payang as it is scheduled for demolition to make way for a modern shopping mall and hotel. I should be more alarmed but I am not. Over the past five years, Kuala Terengganu has had many of its historic districts and landmarks demolished for modern development. The disappearance of these districts affects the artisans and craftspeople who very much rely on their surrounding communities for their livelihoods.

10am

From Pasar Payang, we will take a RM 1 (=Euro 0.25) boat ride across the river to Pulau Duyong.

Here we will visit Awie, a boat maker who blew me away with his ability to make massive boats with nothing but his hands and simple tools. While he still makes some small sampans and fishing boats for the local market, Awie now spends most of his time taking orders for luxury yachts from overseas. Some of his orders take up to two years to produce. His boats made me see that I too can create with my hands and it made me venture into woodworking. We will then take a boat to Seberang Takir to visit batik makers, fish-cracker makers, and prawn paste makers. I am especially fond of the batik makers — I am a big fan of this technique, especially the kind that is made here: chop batik. As the name implies, chop batik is a method of printing via dye-resist process using hot wax that is applied using a pattern chop made of tin. I could stand in front of an artisan and watch him work all day long as he dips the chop into a vat of hot wax, and then skilfully stamp it onto a piece of fabric, applying

various chops to achieve a desired pattern. There is one problem though: all the men we are likely to see toiling in these workshops will be elderly. A “hive of activity” is not exactly how you would describe the place, as many workshops are either closed or are just working at a very slow pace. It’s not hard to see why this is not an attractive job option for the young. The work is dirty, tedious, and you stand behind a boiling vat of hot wax all day long. It also pays just as much as working as a cashier in a comfortable department store. We will then take what could possibly be the last boat ride across the river back to Kuala Terengganu town. When the bridge linking Seberang Takir and the mainland opens, it will most probably sink the service offered by these boats.

2pm

Travel to Kampung Mangkuk.

Kampung Mangkuk is a village 60km north of town, where I stayed for two months in 2013 to learn traditional kite making with a local artisan, Zaki. He is my master and I would like to pay homage to him. Zaki has three jobs: he is a house builder, a fisherman, and a coconut picker and yet he still has time to indulge in the tedious art of kite making. We will ask Zaki to show us a few of his works-in-progress while we sip diabetic-inducing sweet tea. We usually talk and talk, but I honestly only ever understand half of what he says in his thick Kelantanese dialect (Zaki hails from the neighboring state of Kelantan). In the past we made plans to work on a kite flying competition together in the village.

Afternoon

We will then drive off to Pantai Telaga Papan (literally translated as “Wooden Well Beach”). During my previous visits here, I often bicycled to this beach that is 10km from the village. These endless kilometers of uninhabited beach served as a dreamtime spot where I could stare into the ocean for hours without a single soul passing by me. Here we will do what I always have done: jump into the sea and swim as far as we possibly dare.

I’ve always worried that if I were to be swept away here, no one would ever find out what happened to me.

6pm

Going to Kak Mah’s stall by the beach.

Kak Mah once fed me both food and village gossip, as well as trying to hook me up with the local girls. I would reply that I was only interested in widows with land by the beach. Sitting down at Kak Mah’s stall meant listening to stories of the achievements and failures of other people’s children, who was cheating on who, and occasionally who had cast a black magic spell on who (in these Malay hinterlands, the practice of spiritual healing and the dark arts still has quite a foothold). I have great love for Kak Mah. She may be living well below the poverty line with four children of her own to raise, but she will never let me go hungry. She often cooked for me, and there I sat consuming her generosity in the form of fried fish and vegetable soup.