

PENINSULAR AND ISLAND: TONY TWIGG

This is a talk Tony Twigg gave at TAKSU Singapore to the World Presidents Organization on 10 October 2009.

One of the questions I am often asked is - Tony, so where are you based now? Mostly the question is friendly chat but my answer is consequential. It attaches me to a place that defines me with in the nationalistic structures that govern the idea of Peninsular and Island be it a consideration of Malaysia and Singapore or a broader geographic experience of South East Asia and Australia.

Today I hesitate to answer to the question because of a life changing experience that occurred in the mid 1990's. I had been invited to present one of my short films at a film festival in Ireland. As I would be travelling there from Sydney I decided to call in on some friends who happened to be living in Manila. The experience of the city was galvanising. Visually it resonated in my conscious memories and I think my unconscious ones. The chaotic shanties that are encrusted over the city evoked a romanticism of cubism. High school students dressed in the same formal uniforms they had worn in my Australian childhood. The mysterious religious paraphernalia of my Grandmother's Catholicism was sold at souvenir shops out side churches. The dilapidated city that seemed to be dissolving into an assemblage by Robert Rauschenberg was bathed in an eerie light as people washed along narrow streets beside lumbering jeepneys. It was the film set of an alternate life where, it seemed only the rules weren't remembered.

My thrilling desire was to participate in the life of this new place. The question was how and as I thought of my self as an artist I faced another question, how could my art participate in this new place. At that time my films and art installations examined the history of my Australian ethos, which is inescapably a critique of colonialism. I quickly realised that my work would be of little interest to a Filipino audience and that a reorientating of my Australian social critique to the Philippines was inappropriate. And a waste of time in a country with almost as many solutions as problems and the capacity to absorb layer upon layer of colonial history that stretched across a 1000 year history.

This Filipino experience proposed universal themes to my art, which I saw as a consideration of the abstractions of existence. Here, in the absence of a reasoned debate we are thrown back on to our intuitive responses. As I became comfortable with the copiousness of my new process and began exhibiting the results in both Manila and Sydney I realised that people, perhaps unsurprisingly viewed my work with in the framework of their own consciousness. The work was seen as reflective of the Filipino landscape in Manila, and reflective of the Australian landscape in Sydney and while the exoticism of the other place may have added a little charisma to the work it did not define it as coming from the other place.

After a decade spent working in the Philippines I sought to enlarge my experience of Asia, because the religion in KL contrasted my previous experience and while, courtesy of the British colonial endeavour English was the spoken language I chose Kuala Lumpur. I reasoned that in KL I would be able to easily enter another alternative cultural experience. Perhaps not but I was lucky to be accepted as an

artist at *Rimbun Dahan*, the marvellous project of Hijjas Kasturi and his wife Angela in Kuala Lumpur. A year spent considering my work in the quiet of their rambling garden and in the context of Malaysia threw up a new proposition to my work, which had become a graphic echo of images I found in Asia such walls, fences, or walkways and other urban structures.

Above all I am a collage artist, I make my things out of things that I find. Things, which have a history and a spirit that is separate to my own. In Malaysia I found things that had been made by another person. So when I started working with these things my decisions were conditioned by decisions that the previous maker had already made. It seemed to me that I was making collaborative works and that my process underlined one of the great truisms of abstract art - that is, that as artists we share the authorship of our works with the materials used to make them. In that sense all abstract works are collaborative.

The other legacy of my time at *Rimbun Dahan* was meeting Wan [Suherwan Abu, TAKSU gallery]. We have been working together now for some years on exhibitions and private commissions prompting me to examine of the space between Sydney and Manila in various different ways. It is an articulation of the bridge between Manila and Sydney set up by my work when I began participating in both cities.

Life is constantly evolving, it changes as we speak, but right now my life seems to be migratory. I move north from Sydney and later I move south from Manila but it's not a 7-hour hop that goes by in a blur of warm beer, cold food and bad movies. It's a passage across a place where I live and gather the material for my work. It's an engagement that proposes the future development of my work and which sits starkly against the idea of being based in any single place. I see my work as being of somewhere that lies across any single location and the stereotypical nationalist constructions of culture that are proposed by a single location. I am here and that is all that seems to matter. And while I would not want to lose a memory of, either a personal or public past my preference is not to be defined by it. - So where am I based now, peninsular or island - or perhaps I'm in the water surrounding.

Tony Twigg, Singapore 2009.