

The Shyness of Trees: An Arts Residency in Penang Malaysia

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I am a social animal. Working in regional Queensland, I spend countless hours in my studio constructing mosaics wondering why I chose such a meticulous medium that often lends itself to a feeling of isolation. As an artist I have taken part in many residencies. These are usually in schools close to Cairns, galleries or community arts centre's located around Cape York and the Torres Strait. The residency is usually focused on my teaching mosaic practice within those communities or training in the area of public art. For me, a residency is my chance to get out of my studio and locale – providing me with human contact and a chance to demonstrate to others – what it is that I do.

My recent residency at Hotel Penaga in Georgetown Penang was different. This residency was about coming together with 3 other peers - Helen Bodycomb (Vic), Glenn Romanis (Vic) and George Fishman (Miami, USA); and working for a month together to create a piece of work for patrons, Hijjas and Angela Kasturi.

Background

A few years ago I was working with fellow artist Helen Bodycomb writing *Adhesive Techniques for a Range of Applications and Climatic Conditions*, in preparation for our trip to the United States to attend The Society of American Mosaic Artists (SAMA) Conference in Miami, and visits to several other key locations. As we wrote the book, we often were stumped by the various nomenclatures that exist as cross cultural differences. For example, the term “thin-set” in America is applied as a *product* whilst here in Australia it is a *technique*. As well as the obvious metric versus imperial system, we wanted to try and put forward a cohesive universal language of mosaic adhesive technique that accounted for the huge variations involved in the construction of mosaic worldwide. Helen and I spent countless hours on the phone or writing emails – relating the various technical procedures involved in our work. Helen suggested that it would be great if we could organize a project that brought several key artists together to work on a project in which we could experience these differences and work

towards a common understanding from which we could further develop the dialogues that exist within the mosaic world.

In 2006, Helen had been a resident of Rimbun Dahan, the home of patrons Angela and Hijjas Kasturi (architect) in Selangor outside Kuala Lumpur. Believing them to be receptive candidates for such a project, she contacted them with a proposal that we all came together to create a piece of public art for one of their projects. After many emails, budgets, questions etc, they confirmed that they would host us in Georgetown at the new boutique hotel, Hotel Penaga.

As a lead in to the residency, we all took part in *Art for Nature*, the annual WWF exhibition that is hosted by Angela and Hijjas at Rimbun Dahan. (At this stage there were 5 of us, as Carolina Zanelli (Italy) was to be included, but later was unable to come for the project due to work commitments). In April 2009, Helen and Glenn travelled to visit Angela and Hijjas and the opening of “Tanah Air”, the theme of the show. From there, they all travelled to visit the site under construction and talk over several possibilities for works whilst researching suppliers, tool availability, cultural sensibilities and other requirements. Helen and Glenn were particularly drawn to a work in the exhibition called **“The Crown Shyness Effect” a photograph by Erna Dyanty**. This work was to form the basis of our conceptual development for the artwork. When I saw it, it immediately reminded me of **William Robinson’s “Revelation of Landscape” 1992**. It was initially proposed that we would create a “river” of foliage and light in glass set within salvaged granite ballast blocks as a meandering river of pavement that linked the courtyards of the buildings on the block that was to become the hotel complex.

Georgetown Penang at last

We arrived at Hotel Penaga in late March over a few days. Celebratory gin and tonics and wonderful Peranakan cuisine were the order of the day as we settled into the humid tropical heat that prevailed there at that time of year. It was an exciting feeling to be together after more than 2 years of preparation and so many phonecalls and emails. The work began with a review of the materials that had been delivered and the various tools we had brought with us. The site

construction was running behind schedule and we had altered the idea of a pavement to a wall work before we had left for Penang. We had 2 huge crates of architectural stone samples, about a tonne of coloured glass shards, several kilos of Mexican Smalti and adhesive. The stone samples were exquisite, all 100x100mm and various thicknesses representing stone from the world over. We set about organizing a workshop enlisting the aid of site carpenters to make a work table, benches and some knapping stands. I went on several wild motorbike rides to various locations in the noisy congested traffic to seek required tools and materials. Whilst all this was happening, we had continuous discussions regarding our *concept* and what we were going to present to Angela when she arrived. This was no mean feat. We were all strong minded and as no one was in charge, we often would debate various points until we were exhausted. It was a somewhat “to and fro” situation as we slowly resolved the concept. I now have a better idea of what the United Nations Assemblies must involve when trying to achieve consensus! It was a relief when Angela arrived and listened to our proposal before remarking “I’m sure whatever you make will be good”. It was her wish, she said, for them to provide us with the opportunity to create a piece of work together. They were, indeed, the most wonderful hosts.

Concept: (as written by George Fishman)

The Shyness of Trees refers to a phenomenon of the rainforest canopy, in which abrasion of growing tips of individual trees (and possibly the actions of insects) “prune” the trees and prevent hostile interaction among neighboring trees. This action causes a visual effect in which an observer looking up in the forest may see “rivers” of light streaming through those gaps separating the trees. This is the negative space the artists incorporated in their wall-mounted composition, that otherwise principally consists of rough split-faced stones of many varieties, in a relatively soft palette. Close scrutiny of the main wall mosaic reveals an illusory portal that reflects the actual door at the opposite end of the passageway and suggests travel through place and time, discovery, awakening, etc.

The blue-and-white disks, scattered throughout the composition, are the decorative centers of Chinese bowls, salvaged from a 17th-century shipwreck off

Vietnam. They're also stand-ins for the coins purportedly shot into the forest by British Captain Francis Light at the beginning of Penang's colonial period to encourage Malay residents to clear the land. Additionally, an array of narrow chromatic gradient strips in a vivid palette of glass suggests prismatic light effects within the moist air of the rainforest. Both elements reflect the geometry and color of the large stained glass roundels on the flanking wall, part of the architectural design scheme provided to the artists. The wall mosaic "spills" onto the archway, side walls and ceiling to better engage the architecture in which it is sited.

Activating the long granite pavement of the passageway, a meandering course of engraved lines conjures the Penaga River, now lost to development. It connects the wall and floor elements, creating an ambiguous continuity, as the "water" becomes "air" and "light" when it encounters the wall. The floor also contains a large mosaic Penaga leaf insert, made up of smaller stone leaflets. The Penaga tree, once prevalent, was said to have stained the river red; it is now quite rare in George Town, but part of the owners' landscaping plan.

Method/Implementation

We had decided to fabricate the work using the *direct on mesh method*. This involves laying down the material onto a fiberglass mesh that lays over clear plastic that acts as a barrier membrane over the top of our *cartoon* or design. We were using a 2-part cementitious adhesive by Mapei called Kerabond and Isolastic (polymer). Basically, it is a cement adhesive wetted up with latex liquid. We had to divide the cartoon into several large pieces to fit our working platform. The negative space areas of the work allowed some easier separation and we would make a section and cut it off, put it aside for curing, before continuing onto the next panel as we worked our way up the wall. The flexibility of the adhesive system enables a fair bit of manipulation of the panels without the material falling off. Working in this technique, which is derived from Spilimbergo in Italy, mosaicists are able to construct "fabrics" or "skins" in a controlled comfortable environment away from the hazards of a busy worksite. It is crucial that the panels have indicated registration points for lining up the panels when installation

finally takes place. As the work was quite abstract with lots of negative space there were moments when the pattern became confused and we had to stop and work out where to proceed. Once all the panels were adhered in place, we set about piping adhesive into the areas of negative space and patting it down with a damp sponge to a smooth finish. This produced small shrinkage cracks which we thought added somewhat to the work. Several smaller extensions of the work were then applied out over the adjacent walls and ceiling to project the work out thus preventing a purely 2 dimension appearance.

The floor work was done mainly by Glenn Romanis, basically because he loves his grinder and is only really happy when he is tired, dusty and dirty. But we all helped in our own way with that too. We were still laying the leaf at 10pm one night and hadn't had dinner!

Conclusion

Whilst all this work was taking place it was always in my mind that I should be out soaking up the culture that Penang had to offer. As it was, the hours were long and continued right up to the last day. I had a few great half days visiting several temples adorned with the famous *chien nien* pottery mosaics. Meaning "cut and paste" in Hokkien, these sculptures of bowl shards were incredibly expressive and adorned nearly all the temples of the area. The nights were our main opportunity to explore and this mainly focused on food. We had many a balmy night enjoying the myriad of cuisines that are on offer in restaurants and food markets alike. Refreshingly cold Tiger and Carlsberg beers, or my favourite, *Ais Kacang* – a colourful concoction of red beans, sweet corn, agar-agar, green noodles, fruit cubes, sago, palm sugar and condensed milk all sitting in a bowl on top of a scoop of shaved ice. Sounds weird, but it was strangely indicative of the colourful exotic tapestry that is Penang.

As we made ready for our respective departures, we had time to consider the work and overall experience of this "hybrid" residency. As George Fishman aptly described it, it was something of a "performance", as we worked alongside the

Bangladeshi laborers and Penang tradesmen, whilst they all tried to politely understand these westerners who were so passionate (and sweaty), about their work – which some of them saw as a wall of mixed stone. We all had moments when we questioned what we had made, it being something that we would never made under another set of conditions. The final verdict I think we all agreed on was that it was a subtle work, organic in nature, sitting well within the built environment that bore it, and that it contained a relevant message that will only become more important as time goes on.

As I ponder the experience back in my studio, I find that I have a renewed vigor in my approach to my work, disregarding the “slings and arrows” of GFCs, eagerly anticipating my next residency in another far off location.