

Materiality, making & meaning. Building material knowledge through conservation in Indonesia.

Eliza O'Donnell

*The top of the cliff isn't
the place to look at us;
come down here and
learn of the big and little
currents, face to face.¹*

During a conservation residency in Indonesia earlier this year, I attended the *Bacaan (Terpilih): Menuju Kepulauan* ([Selected] Readings: Towards the Islands) exhibition at Kedai Kebun Forum (KKF), an alternative art space in Yogyakarta. Experimenting with the presentation of theoretical discourse in an exhibition context, the walls of the KKF gallery showcased a selection of publications addressing themes of life and challenges faced in the archipelago, the Pacific Region and throughout the equatorial region. The above quote from Mary Kawena Pukui's 1983 publication on Hawaiian proverbs was included in the exhibition as an excerpt from Teresia K Teaiwa's reading, 'L(o)osing the Edge' (2001), addressing critical issues associated with Native Pacific Cultural Studies. Teaiwa references the proverb as a rejection against "perspectives from the edge", leaning away from non-inclusive methodologies for cultural studies and inviting an intimate "face to face" approach to knowledge exchange, production and understanding.² These ideas of cross-cultural research practices grounded in interpersonal collaboration were central to the aims of the conservation residency as a platform to foster cultural interaction and exchange between art professionals in Australia and Indonesia.

From March-May 2018 I participated in a three-month conservation residency in Yogyakarta, working with the painting collection of Dr Melani Setiawan and based at RuangDalam Art House. The residency was supported by the Australia Indonesia Arts Forum (AIAF), in partnership with Project 11 and the Grimwade Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation at the University of Melbourne. The inaugural AIAF residency program aimed to provide a cultural exchange based on painting conservation knowledge sharing, drawing on my experience as a paintings conservator working in South East Asia and my PhD thesis focusing on Indonesian cultural production and building the artist record. Each year a number of art houses and independent organisations in Yogyakarta facilitate residency programmes which provide an opportunity for artists from abroad to interact and engage with artistic production in a local context. Building on this model, the conservation residency adopted a practice-based interdisciplinary approach to knowledge sharing in Yogyakarta by providing a collaborative framework for engagement with local collections, art collectives and communities. Working with art students from *Institut Seni Indonesia Yogyakarta* (ISI), curators, writers, artists, cultural material practitioners, collectors and members of the local community to examine artistic production in the region and explore the potential for collaboration at the intersection of these disciplines.

The residency began with a visual condition assessment of Melani's painting collection by members of the residency team at *Rumah Melani* (Melani House). Melani's culturally and historically significant collection consists of approximately 600 paintings, sculptures and drawings, as well as an extensive archive of photographic documentation and research material. Part of the significance of her collection lies in the personal relationships Melani establishes with the artists themselves. Melani does not identify as a 'collector',

rather a close friend and support network to many artists in the Yogyakarta art community, and her collection and archive is a testament to the strong relationships she has built. During the assessment period a large-scale triptych by Entang Wiharso, contemporary Indonesian artist and close friend of Melani's, was selected as the focus for treatment and exhibition.

'Landscaping My Brain'

Wiharso painted the oil on canvas triptych 'Landscaping My Brain' (3 panels of 200 x 97 mm) in 2001 at Melani's home while he was visiting Jakarta for his solo exhibition *Nusa Amuk* at *Galeri Nasional Indonesia* (National Gallery of Indonesia). This painting was chosen as the focus for the project due to its personal significance to Melani's collection, level of deterioration, the availability of conservation materials to undertake the treatment and the opportunity to interview Wiharso during his visit to Indonesia in April. The lack of conservation-grade materials in Indonesia limits what can be achieved, therefore, we adopted a treatment methodology based on minimal intervention including stabilisation, surface cleaning and minor retouching. Visual and technical examination, archival research and knowledge gained from interviews with both Wiharso and Melani provided an understanding of the paintings history, the materials and techniques used and the mechanisms of deterioration.

Knowledge gained through these interdisciplinary avenues of enquiry informs a holistic understanding of the artwork and its materiality, creating a historical narrative which contributes to the artist's oeuvre and the cultural record of the collection. The residency concluded with an exhibition of the painting at RuangDalam arthouse. Presenting the painting in an 'active state of conservation', the exhibition aimed to highlight the conservation process and raise discussions around perceptions of damage and to what level artworks should be conserved. Approaches to conservation are values based and culturally grounded decisions, and lead to notions of authority and role of technical-conservation expertise, what approaches, work best, who should do the work and what knowledge informs it.

Going forward

The conservation residency presented an opportunity to critically question and expand disciplinary frameworks and methodologies for conservation knowledge sharing in Indonesia, raising questions of how our knowledge of the artwork and the artistic process can contribute to creating an authentic cultural record, and why a secure artist record is important. As an outside researcher new to Indonesian studies, the residency provided a welcoming and inclusive space to form friendships and close ties with artists and cultural practitioners, relationships that cannot develop from 'the top of the cliff', but must occur 'face to face'. These outcomes emphasise the importance of Australia-Indonesia inter-personal knowledge exchange, relationship-building and action-based research based on a prolonged and collaborative approach to knowledge making and production. The success of this project was grounded in establishing relationships based on mutual trust, respect and understanding, paving the way for further projects that strengthen Australia-Asia engagements with a focus on developing collaborative platforms for skill and knowledge exchange.

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Notes

- 1 Pukui, M.W. 1983. *Olelo No/eau: Hawaiian Proverbs and Poetical Sayings*. Honolulu: Bishop Museum Press.
- 2 Teaiwa, T. 2001. 'L(o)osing the Edge', *The Contemporary Pacific* 2(1):343-365.



Eliza O'Donnell and Andrea Gani Hidayat aqueous cleaning Entang Wiharso's 'Landscaping My Brain' (2001), panel one. Photograph by Harry Arafat, 2018