

SCHOOLSTEXTUALWORKS

VALENTINE
WILLIE
fine ART

SCHOOLS

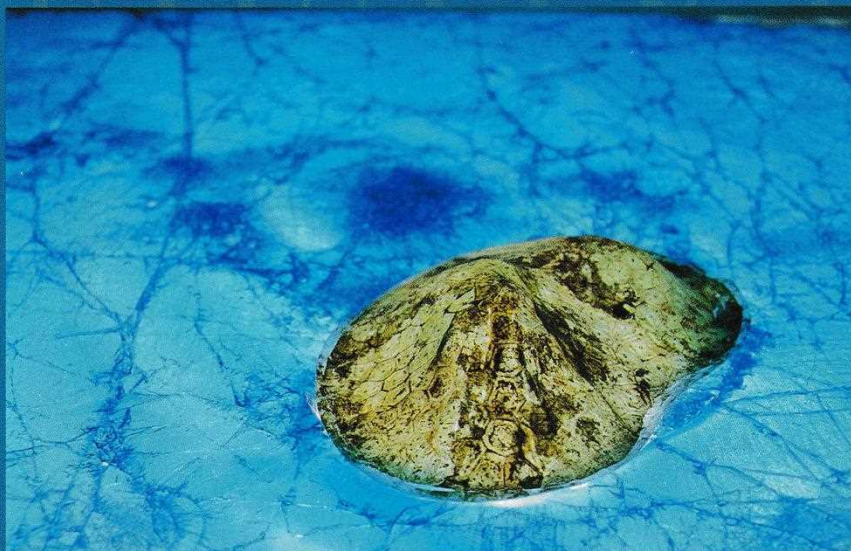
hayati mokhtar

Hayati Mokhtar was born and raised in Kuantan but has spent periods abroad studying in both England and Australia. She recently completed her B.A (Hons) in Fine Art at Chelsea College of Art and Design and will soon proceed to Goldsmiths' College, University of London to undertake an M.A in Fine Art as a recipient of The British High Commissioner's Chevening Award. Aside from her experiences in the performing arts, she has also contributed to a Malaysian panel as part of the 'Moghul Tent' project at the Victoria and Albert Museum and is currently preparing for a forthcoming group exhibition at the London School of Economics. Hayati Mokhtar's recent work emerges out of her ongoing preoccupation with issues of cultural identity and the sense of loss and displacement which are caused by the experience of migration and the legacy of colonialism.

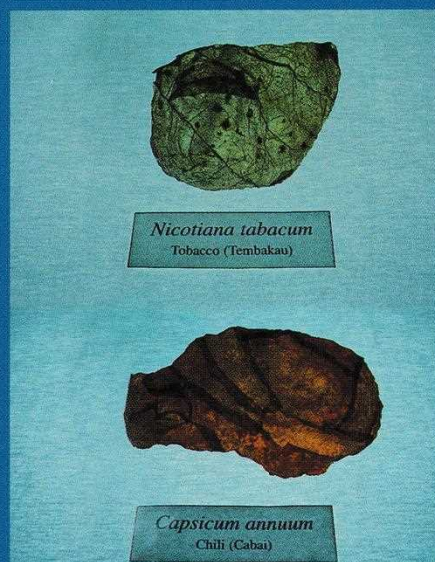
simryn gill

Simryn was born in Singapore and is now currently based in Sydney, Australia. She has shown at the National Gallery, Kuala Lumpur [1995]; Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney [1994]; Venice Biennale [1995]; Art Space, Sydney [1996]; Istanbul Biennale [1995] and Secession, Vienna [1997]. And in collaboration with Marian Pastor Roces, she designed the interior of the shrine to the Philippines National Hero, Jose Rizal in Intramuros, Manila.

TEXTUAL



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Art has a home. At the least, it has a context. So say the three Malaysian artists whose installations constitute the exhibition *Schools*. Hayati Mokhtar, Wong Hoy Cheong and Simryn Gill each expresses this concern with place in different ways.

All three have lived as well as produced and exhibited their works in other countries. Hoy Cheong spent about a decade in the United States in the 1980s. Hayati completed her first degree in England and will return soon to pursue an MA. Simryn currently lives in Australia. The artists' lives in these countries have not been passing experiences. They have engaged with each place that they have called home, much in keeping with the Malay expression *walaupun di mana bumi dipijak, tetap di situ langit dijunjung* (wherever on earth one may step foot, it is there that one holds up the skies). While the installations in *Schools* are inevitably inspired by other places, the engagement with Malaysia is an element the works have in common. Malaysia – the place, the people, the flora and the history – has been formative to the development of each artist's visual sensibility.

walaupun di mana bumi dipijak

By her own admission, Simryn's visual sensibility has been profoundly shaped by the littoral world of Port Dickson where she grew up. The stones, driftwood, shells, and plant life once generously scattered along PD's rugged coastline have largely given way to hotels. Nevertheless, the memory of walking down narrow paths through bushes to arrive at beaches composed of coarse sand continues to light up her imagination. This memory has informed the very way in which she creates her artwork. As she puts it: "For me it's very much about the process of the production...I've done works where I've walked up and down the beaches in PD and in Singapore, collecting stuff. I'm doing a work at the moment where I'm walking on beaches and in rainforests collecting seeds... It's very much about that act of walking..." Simryn's artistic process may thus be likened to the native Australians' walkabouts that chart and celebrate their land in image and song. Like the art produced by them, Simryn has rendered objects collected in her peregrinations into artwork that resonates with the terrain where they were found.

Simryn's works have juxtaposed identity and place through her unusual use of found objects. In *Wonderlust* (1996), coconut-bark became the material from which she crafted a business suit. The stuff of tropical beaches that is transported across waters to regenerate in new lands became the material for the modern uniform. The suit's angular and smooth styling were juxtaposed by the rough and frayed surface of the material, thereby adding to the quintessential modern icon an aspect of the Eskimo jacket or a Kazakh hat. In *Washed Up* (1993), Simryn engraved words on sea-washed glass, juxtaposing text and found object, signifiers of meaning and pieces of litter. The juxtaposition of text and object has characterised much of her creations.

Carbon Copy, the title of Simryn's installation in the present exhibition, represents a break from the past. Her images are created out of text alone. Nevertheless, the present work is consistent with the perambulating process of production that is intrinsic to her creative life. *Carbon Copy* came about as she slowly sifted through newspapers and collected cuttings, accumulating a shoebox-full in time. She also set out on a quest for an Olivetti typewriter from the 1940s, as Italy the country where the antique machine

From Hanson's contemporary racist repertoire, Simryn picked two fragments of statements: "we are swamped" and "foreign miscreants and parasites." Both refer to foreign migrants in Australia.

Simryn deliberately accentuates the image rather than the text in *Carbon Copy*. Indeed, she typed up the quotes to form, in her own words, "a patterned surface which refuses the eye's wanting to read." As in previous works, she presents text in order to undo meaning and to shift the viewer's attention from reading to looking, two activities that she believes are quite distinct from each other. She values the power of the text itself as object or surface, rather than the message that may be delivered.

Simryn's patterned images do successfully deflect reading but not necessarily a layered recognition. At first, the images may invoke the often attractive mechanical doodlings of bored office workers in the past – typically created through repeated key strokes of the letter "x." A passing glance may invoke no more than that. However, words emerge from the patterns upon a second look.

was manufactured was under fascist rule in those years. While this quest was in vain, she came to own three typewriters of different makes. She spent hours on these machines engaged in the repetitious activity of typing fragments of text into images.

Simryn's images in black and red type form strikingly simple geometric patterns. The heavy stock paper upon which the

Hold

ipijak, tetap di situ langit dijunjung

images were typed nicely carries the form and depth of each indented letter, accentuating the patterns and colours. Type rises from paper in a manner once familiar but now replaced by the stark flatness of the laser printed page. Duplicates recast the images in the faded denim blue of carbon paper and provide a sharp contrast.

The contrasts between the era of the typewriter and today's computer-driven text presentations do not for a moment render nostalgia. The forms and colors produced render a bare and geometric contemporary aesthetic.

A good number of Simryn's images consists of a quote extracted from statements by Mahathir bin Mohammad or Pauline Hanson – two public figures in the international spotlight who need no introduction.

Two examples of Mahathir's utterances are "shoo" and "if a thing is often repeated it will be regarded as the truth." The former harkens back to the early 1980s when Vietnamese refugees started landing on Malaysia's beaches. Mahathir claimed that he had said the authorities would "shoo" these refugees away rather than "shoot" them as reported in the international media. Mahathir uttered the second phrase in a recent speech to suggest how untruths about Malaysia's economy were spread, and attributed the quote to the notorious Nazi Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels.

Reading is almost inevitable at this point and many will recognise the catchy phrases. Recognition in this layered manner perhaps more readily impresses upon the viewer the propagandistic uses to which such texts are put, especially when they acquire an axiomatic quality once printed and reproduced through the mass media.

Given the above reading of *Carbon Copy*, the concealment of text in Simryn's images may be analogous to the subtle and insidious workings of political propaganda. Buried in a mass of newsprint, catchy propagandistic phrases defy reading, not in its literal meaning but in the sense of producing a critical response. Simryn may have intended to provoke this kind of response through her deflective text-images.

Both Hoy Cheong and Simryn have used plants as material and for framing ideas in their artwork. They also admit sharing similar political and social commitments. Nevertheless, the two could not be more different in terms of artistic expression. Where Simryn avoids rendering text with meaning, Hoy Cheong often complements his works with narratives.

Hoy Cheong has been versatile as an artist. He has acted in plays and co-directed with Krishen Jit the visual performance event *Family* (1998). He produced the experimental documentary *Sook Ching* (1993) on the Japanese occupation of Malaya. He created the two-part installation *Lalang* (1994) where the indigenous weed of the title was used as a cultural, historical and political metaphor. His installations in *Schools* pursue new dimensions to the themes that he explored in the exhibition of drawings and installations *Of Migrants & Rubber Trees* (1996).

The principal artwork in *Of Migrants & Rubber Trees* was a series of charcoal drawings depicting the artist's roots in a rubber small-holding family. The stories in these drawings were complemented by an extensive history of the introduction of rubber as a cash crop from South America to Malaysia under the British. The migrations and sufferings of his own family were linked by image and word to the great political, economic and social changes in the British colony that were initiated by the rubber plant.

ling up the

Hoy Cheong's two installations in *Schools* – *diPULAUKan* and *Non-Indigenous Skins* – are new twists on his previous investigations of the indigenisation of plants. Unlike *Of Migrants & Rubber Trees* where the images often centred on the actual rubber plant, in the present installations the artist fashions objects from the skins of plants. The plants themselves recede into the background, though their cultivation for trade and the migrations of labour that they initiated are suggested in the artwork.

In *diPULAUKan*, Hoy Cheong juxtaposes islands of exile with the image of the island as an exotic tropical paradise. The core word in the Malay title *diPULAUKan* is *pulau*, or island. The compound verb of the title renders the meaning "to be exiled." The connection between islands and exile is pointedly made in Malay. A much more romantic picture was encouraged at school. The artist remembers that classic books such as *Robinson Crusoe*, *The Swiss Family Robinson*, and so forth cultivated a fascination with the tropical island. Referring to the image of the tropical self found in these books, the artist notes that "as kids we [saw] ourselves from outside." *diPULAUKan* juxtaposes this "view from outside" with six exile, detention, and quarantine islands: Pulau Jerejak, Pulau Sentosa, Pulau Senang, Pulau Buru and Pulau Bidong in the Malay-Indonesian archipelago, and the Andaman Islands in the Bay of Bengal.

Hoy Cheong created casts of the six islands and coated them with the skins of chili, tobacco, breadfruit, corn, banana and rubber respectively. He used sugar and indigo to render the sea. The islands are placed on school desks reminiscent of younger days imbued with fanciful images of the tropical island. Lit from underneath, the islands glow with the distinctive hues of the different plants. The translucent quality of the membranous layers distribute the light unevenly and provide the illusion of topographical depth. For instance, the former leper colony Pulau Jerejak, off the coast of Penang, conveys the reddish orange hue of chili. Patches of light and dark texture the contoured surface. It appears as a beautiful island set against an expansive sea of sugar.

who belong

Fragments of colonial and post-colonial texts float in the sea surrounding the islands. These writings were extracted from books that exoticise the tropical island. *diPULAUKan* nicely conveys this exoticisation through the highly stylised islands. The texts convey the same by offering readings of the "view from outside." Yet the very same stylised quality of the islands conveys a sense of the unreal, a tension.

The island is a motif for exile in *diPULAUKan*. The histories of the islands modelled in the installation contrasts sharply with their stylised representation. Most of the islands chosen have at one time been used as prisons. The Andaman Islands, Pulau Buru and Pulau Sentosa were notorious prison islands where thousands of nationalists and political prisoners were exiled, often for decades. The skins applied to the islands add a further dimension to the motif of exile. A number of the plants that give a luminous beauty to the installation were associated with the

skins

cash cropping and trade that historically grew on the backs of thousands of workers if not slaves whose lives saw untold suffering.

Hoy Cheong's second installation *Non-Indigenous Skins* raises questions about identity by exploring the indigenisation of plants. All the plants chosen had once been unfamiliar to people in this part of the world, hence the title of the work. Since their introduction, the plants have been cultivated, have grown in the wild (naturalised), or have become very much a part of the local diet. They are no longer recognised as foreign. These plants are juxtaposed with individual Malaysians or those for whom Malaysia is home. All of them have shifted identities and many had to obtain the state's approval to do so. Among the nine people selected are a person of mixed Chinese, Italian and Japanese descent, a Buddhist and a Christian who converted to Islam, a person who has migrated to Canada, and a Muslim who has left his religion.

The artist created partial masks out of papier-mache of the nine people's faces and layered them with the skins of "non-indigenous" plants such as chili, papaya, tobacco, tomato and corn. The completed masks are displayed in light boxes much like the exhibits in botanical museums. A brief description of each item provides details about the plant such as the family, species, place of origin and naturalisation. Light fills up the membranous layers of skin, bringing to life the different colours of the plants that coat the masks; recognisable fragments of the human face gently form themselves.

In *Non-Indigenous Skins*, Hoy Cheong poses the question what is indigenous? In addition, the question might be modified to ask: does the quality of being indigenous matter at all? The plants used have long since lost their foreignness and become very much a part of Malaysia. For instance, few would believe that the quintessentially Malaysian chili is not indigenous to this land. One can easily extend the question to life in Malaysia. Like the chili, so many people who were once foreign are today an integral part of this country and recognised as such. Yet the "indigenoussness" of these people is questioned as well.

According to Hoy Cheong, he used the skins of plants that had been indigenised on the masks because these plants like the people they represented had shifted identities. Like plants, people are also classified according to "race," national origins, religion, and so on. For people, shifting identities is not quite as problem free because it is not without its share of official, social and cultural dislocation as well as hardship. In many cases it cannot be done without an official stamp of approval. As the juxtaposition of the ordering human life with taxonomy in *Non-Indigenous Skins* suggests, no small measure of the state's power is exerted to control identity as well as who may or may not be indigenous.

gs in the picture and who does not?

Hayati's untitled installation in *Schools* departs from the artworks of Hoy Cheong and Simryn in terms of visual sensibility and technique. Her artistic work has embraced acting, scriptwriting, set design and writing. Her appreciation of a wide range of artistic expression renders a multi-dimensional quality to her installation that is less obvious in the current artwork of the two other artists. Nevertheless, she shares their interest in the themes of cultural control and identity.

Hayati's installation explores ideas about cultural authenticity by juxtaposing a range of Malaysian faces and voices with classic English texts. Since the colonial era, the exposure to elements of English culture has profoundly shaped this part of the world. However, things English become accented and appropriated, perhaps even unrecognisable, as they are recast by Malaysians. Still, the cultural tensions in the Malaysian self remain, and articulated through images, sound and word in Hayati's artwork.

This artist, of Australian-Malaysian descent, created her installation while she was a student in London. She found art circles there to be largely ignorant of the profound impact of British colonialism on Malaysia. Many were unable to comprehend the culturally hybrid environment of Malaysia that she in her person represented. As she puts it, she created her installation "as a Malaysian student in a very British kind of atmosphere, trying to speak about where I'd come from and also to address the audience who I felt had very little knowledge of the effects of...British cultural dominance during the colonial era." Her response to this atmosphere was not an unthinking Anglophobia. Instead, her mixed ancestry prompted her to ask herself "how to create art which is neither an appropriation of traditional cultures in Malaysia nor an appendix to Western art and civilization? How to reconcile and transform the meanderings and clashes of cultures within herself into significance?"

Hayati's installation consists of a series of photographs of Malaysian school children of different ethnic groups – among them Malay, Chinese, Indian and "Chindian" – that are juxtaposed with culturally laden texts in voice and print. The photographs are developed on clear silver gelatin coated on glass. As a result, they rest on a transparent surface. The children's faces are thereby visually accentuated and carry an ephemeral quality as they "float" in the glass. Through a speaker attached behind the glass frame, the recorded voices of children reading from Enid Blyton's classic books can be heard. Library books are displayed open with the names of school children of diverse ethnic origins inscribed in them. A blackboard displays extracts printed in crushed chalk from Blyton as well as a current school book in Malay.

For her, the Blyton texts construct an England that does not exist or is irrelevant to the lives of young students here. Yet they continue to be read. She notes that students of the Assunta Convent in Kuantan, the school that she attended, still read Blyton. Her artwork explores such inherent cultural tensions by playing the recorded voices of children reading Blyton excerpts. They read numerous excerpts like the following, stumbling over words like "chilblain" and accenting others in Malaysian fashion, never mind the unfamiliar context: "Gwendoline looked at Darrell with her usual scowl. She felt really miserable in the cold weather, for she came from an overheated home and could not get used to the fresh atmosphere of school. It annoyed her to see Darrell without a single chilblain, and to watch her race out happily into the frosty air for her lacrosse practice."

In this installation, Hayati takes up the challenge of visually articulating the dominant cultural elements in Malaysia from the colonial into the post-independence era. Where the Blyton texts represent the Anglocentric legacy of colonial rule, contemporary school books convey the "official" voice of Malaysian history. For the artist, both constitute "fables" that have constructed politically laden and exclusive notions of culture. Her inclusion of a post-independence history text that trivialises the breadth and complexity of Malaysian culture is significant. It provides historical continuity to the focus on the cultural potency of dominant texts. On the whole, the installation prompts the question, what does it mean to be Malaysian? Put in terms of the images in the artwork itself, the question may be rephrased as, *who belongs in the picture and who does not?*

Schools brings together three artists who in their different ways share an interest in cultural control. Each one uses text to convey their ideas, though the degree to which text is rendered with meaning differs sharply. Cultural control and text are two clearly identifiable elements that are common to all the installations and to the institution of the school, hence the title of the joint exhibition. Each installation conveys far more in terms of aesthetic breadth, tension and dialogue. Together they represent a range of uncommonly beautiful and incisive visual engagements with Malaysia.