

Encounter Under The Banyan: Jason Lim's Site Specific Performance at Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore



Jason Lim, Under the Shadow of the Banyan. Performance still. Courtesy Elaine Chiew

The banyan tree within the Singapore context and regional mythology has a lot of symbolism. Huffington Post, for Singapore's 50th anniversary of its independence, compared the nation and its diversity and heritage to the banyan tree, known for its extensive draped above-ground overhanging roots and its malignant properties, its unique formation accounted for by the fig species called 'stranglers' which implant itself within the host tree and eventually strangles it to death. In Malay mythology, the banyan tree is also a favourite hang-out of the bloodthirsty female ghost who died in childbirth, the *pontianak*. Interestingly also, the banyan is considered a heritage tree, as the majestic version sited in front of the National Museum Singapore might testify.

As such, the banyan is an apt metaphor for Jason Lim's site-specific re-enactment at the Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore, using 1500 kg of unfired terracotta clay, invoking at once Singapore's legacy and history, as well as its rapid urbanisation and the ironic connotation of nature and the banyan's malevolent 'strangling' properties. Clay too, as a medium, invoking the essence of the earth, of dust, of mortality, work in tandem with the performativity aspect of Lim's work, concerned as he is with ideas of change, duration and matter. In reshaping and reconstituting the banyan with unfired clay in a daily multiple-hour exercise for a period of 5 days, enhanced by the quietness and reduced foot traffic of the Earl

Lu Gallery during school break where this takes place, Lim's performance becomes a poetic and spiritual meditation on the transformation of elemental substance into a flourishing of form and meaning, and a philosophical contemplation of the interactions of land with nature, particularly its tensions and compromises within the socio-economic demands of a growing nation. It is perhaps not entirely coincidental then that the base and component parts of this installation, seen from a distance, resemble the shape of the island of Singapore.



Lim, *Under the Shadow of the Banyan*. Performance still. Courtesy Elaine Chiew

Lim is trained as a ceramicist at London's Central Saint Martins, and is also an alumnus of Lasalle College of the Arts, graduating with a Masters in Fine Arts in 2003. Lim's intense investigations into clay has its own roots: first conceived as *Three Tonnes of Clay*, made in collaboration with Ng Siew Kuan at The Substation in 1995, reconstituted for the first time as a banyan with aerial roots at Lim's solo exhibition at Gajah Gallery Singapore in 2017. That same year, Lim also presented a 1.9 metre high, 8 metre wide installation, utilising 3000 kg of unfired terracotta clay, for the Jakarta Biennale. The 'unfired' nature of the clay alludes to Lim's own artistic history -- for ten years, he was unable to access a kiln, and thus had to 'finish' his pieces without this traditional process. In itself, this aspect produces a break between a traditional practice of ceramics versus a contemporary one and questions the role of ceramics in art production today.

In addressing his making of ceramic 'objects', Lim emphasised the encounter with the individual, rather than objects of art made for himself or for a conceived 'public' (The

Artling). It's a deliberate focus on the 'one' instead of the 'many'. How this squares with the medium of 'performance' bears contemplation: a ceramic object as art is permanent but performance art is ephemeral; once over it survives only as documentation, which is never equivalent to the original and a rehashing at a future time is usually in a different place, thus arguing for a treatment of it as a new work. Lim's banyan too is ephemeral, its very size means that it can't remain a permanent work. Secondly, performance entails the body of the artist inserted into the artwork itself to be accounted for as a basic component thereof. The body of the artist here also represents the maker/inventor of the object and a producer of meaning. This injects a physical complexity as well as Heidegger's bodily consideration of 'present-at-hand' versus 'ready-to-hand', a philosophical inquiry that travels the trajectory from passive onlooker to active participant for the audience. It also looks at the meaning of creation and the process of becoming of an artwork. Lastly, performance art is interdisciplinary, blurring the line as it were between theater and art, thus marking an indeterminacy in materiality that accentuates all the possibilities of unfired clay as medium. As we watch Lim build his banyan, it doesn't resemble anything yet, or perhaps it resembles many other things in our minds, but its *to-be* nature also asks us to hold in our mind its final form. Even the word 'encounter' in the title is a synecdoche for multiple streams of meaning, each one layered onto another like the base roots of the banyan, reinforcing the *dasein* (Heidegger's terminology of *being-in-the-world*) that underscores the very concept of a system of flux, that of art, artist and audience intersecting, relating, *becoming*, and exchanging flows of energy.

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