

A few reflections on threads and tensions ... and politics and the pandemic and power and privilege and post-truths

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There are threads here, but it's about the tensions. There is canvas and cotton and tape and tarpaulin in this show, but - really - it's about the politics.

The faultlines in the world of 2020, only now several weeks past, have become violently exposed, like so many barely graspable threads unravelling from a spool. The world, even as we move into what is a collective desire for the brave new future of 2021, hopefully virus-free, seems mired in the memory and the politics of the all too recent past: the violent establishment reactions to the BLM movement in the U.S.A.; the shocking descent of American politics - with the storming of the Capitol building by the conspiracy-obsessed Trumpian fringe - into something resembling civil unrest; the turmoil in Hong Kong and the increasingly hardline stance taken by China towards the pro-democracy movement; the continued emergence of second, third and fourth waves of the coronavirus around the world, along with new strains of the pathogen, and the corresponding restrictive measures to curb the spread. According to the online platform, *It's Going Down* - self-characterized as "anarchist, anti-fascist, autonomous anti-capitalist and anti-colonial" - the outbreak has laid bare "the vast array of contradictions firmly entrenched within capitalist society."¹ The relief at the transition from the Trump presidency to a Biden one, a move tragically accomplished only with a number of casualties and a new low in the existence of the world's most significant democracy, seems like a temporary blip of dry land in the sea of ever ballooning mortality rates, conspicuous fatigue at the relentlessness of the pandemic and its toil, and a sense of hopelessness and despair at the operations of governments and state-sponsored systems at a time of almost global crisis.

The uncertain, virus-ravaged, Trump-ian, post-truth-ian world of 2020, then, provides the context in which to understand the works in the present exhibition. Recent judders have de-sutured the faultlines that have always lain, cracked and treacherous, just beneath the surface of uncritical public discourse and our social lives, and the anger, disgust, paranoia, fear and intense collective soul-searching that have been unleashed by those fractures have fed the spirit and the tenor of *Threads and Tensions*. Informed as the works are, here, by the particular historical moment that we find ourselves uncomfortably wedged in, as the world that we know seems to be careening towards some unanticipated endgame, perhaps the most obvious and ready analogues are also the most directly relevant, urgent and accessible ones. The metaphor is immediately cognizable: textiles are one of the oldest forms of bodily technology known to civilization, a material crafted from interlacing loose fibres and fabrics into a web of imbricated warp and weft, then formed by any number of processes into the product we refer to as cloth. The material vernacular of textiles - its substance and its methods, its histories and products, the forms of ornamentation and adornment that it has been subject to - provides both the physical armature of the works as well as the discursive metaphors of imbrication, unravelling and de-suturing through which the artists articulate concerns of political, socio-cultural, geographical and class structures. In other words, if society may be compared to a piece of fabric (as it has been, *ad nauseum* perhaps), it's certainly

¹ "Autonomous Groups Are Mobilizing Mutual Aid Initiatives to Combat the Coronavirus", *It's Going Down*, March 20, 2020. Accessed January 25, 2021. <<https://itsgoingdown.org/autonomous-groups-are-mobilizing-mutual-aid-initiatives-to-combat-the-coronavirus/>>

coming undone these days, and its unwinding reflected thematically and metaphorized materially here. Embodied in a range of textures and thread-forms, whether natural or artificial, are a variety of strategies and visual syntaxes that evoke the frayed, fraying social compacts of our time: here is tarpaulin, in the form of a tent, encapsulating the almost primal struggle for survival that has come to beset civilization; here is the ecosystem as the chief creative actant, eclipsing human agency and political vicissitudes; here is medical tape constituted as pictorial abstraction, itself gesturing at the phenomenon of the crowd; here is the recontextualized image interrogated as post-truth artefact; here are the agendas of imperialism and neoliberalism deconstructed through the medium of craft.

Maryanto's *On the ground under the trees* (2020) features a piece of ground under some trees - painted across a hand-stitched tent. A pair of tableaux, each rendered on one half of the expanse of moss-green tarpaulin, depicts a dense rainforest canopy and a patch of stone-strewn terrain, both limned in dots made from white acrylic marker in a pictorial style resembling Pointilism. The paintings are based on photographs of actual landscapes around Indonesia, taken by the artist on his frequent camping and hiking trips: the forest from that which surrounds Lake Tamblingan in Bali, and the rocky ground from when he visited the Dieng Plateau region in Java. These trips represent a way of life and leisure that intensified during the long months of the pandemic and its resultant restrictions. Yogyakarta-based Maryanto took to ever more frequent expeditions into the outdoors when the virus hit, in a bid to avoid large urban hordes and the threat of infection they now suggested. The choice of tarpaulin as canvas here reflects, of course, this accentuated turn towards the ecological that was necessitated by the crisis, but also recalled, for him, other not-too-distant disasters that witnessed widespread homelessness and the housing of large swathes of the local population in tents - the cataclysmic earthquake in Yogyakarta in 2006, and the eruption of Mt. Merapi in 2010. The motif of the tent, then, simultaneously signifies the almost uncanny return of the natural environment as a riposte to the havoc wreaked by human civilization, and also the dystopian realities of fraught survival that have been engendered by recent catastrophes, as if doomsday scenarios from science fiction or eco-horror had materialized to haunt a culture run amok. That the painted tableaux are only legible together as a single, comprehensible landscape when the tent is displayed in the manner of a canvas, splayed open like Rembrandt's slaughtered ox, and completely stripped of its utility and primary purpose, to provide shelter, perhaps simply reinforces the dire straits that the artist now sees mankind mired in.

Not unlike Maryanto's anthropogenic concerns, the core of Cole Sternberg's practice is engaged with the natural universe that we inhabit. His environmental paintings are precisely that: works that were germinated in the artist's studio, but have been so heavily inflected by the processes of hydrospheric movement and exposure to climatic conditions and the outdoors that the imprint of the human hand has been largely surrendered to the intervention of time, chance and ecological flux. *a hopeful moment behind the trees, avoiding their red* (2020) was first created with numerous layers of paint and watercolour on a canvas, ranging from shades of blues and green to fuchsia and orange; several layers were rendered in the open, with surficial texture provided by rocks and grass, as well as the force of a rainstorm. The piece was then dragged through the waves of a lake, on a boat, over several occasions, with its final appearance determined, as the artist observes, by factors such the speed of the craft and the temperature of the water. The painting is juxtaposed here with a document from another series, the "Free Republic of California"'s *entry into force of the paris agreement* (2020). The premise of the latter body of work posits the secession of California from the United States of America, with Sternberg creating an entire constellation of

artefacts for the fledgling state, ranging from a full constitution and a state budget to national symbols, a historical timeline and various official papers and documents, of which the notional republic's ratification of the Paris Agreement is one. It was Donald Trump's unilateral withdrawal of the U.S. from the treaty that provided impetus for this particular piece: "The U.S. departure from the Paris Agreement furthered the short-term narcissism of one person over the long-term survival of the entire world. In an attempt to salvage environmental diplomatic standing, California will join the Agreement ... as one step towards a sustainable environment."² The reality of political malfeasance, then, especially with regards to the issue of ecological sustainability, underscores the urgency of Sternberg's environmental canvases. If one individual's heedlessness possessed the ability to impact the free world's terms of engagement with our climate and ecosystems, perhaps the abnegation of human agency and logic in something so fundamental as the creative act is but the sensible, ultimate solution.

The specter of the mob has loomed large in 2020's headlines, from the BLM demonstrations and counter-demonstrations to the far-right hordes that stormed the Capitol in Washington, D.C., to the widespread looting and rioting that is occurring across the Netherlands at the moment, as well as, of course, the fear of crowds that has come to define our collective experience of the pandemic. The salience of mob porn, as one commentator has dubbed it³, finds a parallel in Marcin Dudek's long-held fascination with the hooliganism and violence associated with football and its rabid fans - what is also referred to as ultra culture. The autobiographical impulse there is rooted in his own teenage years when he was deeply enmeshed in the ultra way of life, as a member of a Krakow-based football team's hooligan group. In *Ultraskraina* (2020), or "Ultra Land", the artist has materialized the titular phenomenon out of a collage of medical tape, paint and image transfers. An abstract topography that seems to suggest skies, hills and water, the linear patterning of the composition thickens as it travels down the canvas, almost in the manner of the bleachers in a stadium, which appear larger as they descend. In the lower half of the work are "small tape dots and lines collaged together, as a flowing river of dots flows through just as a crowd pours into a stadium, navigating its path to the stands."⁴ Embedded in this milieu, which flickers between the geomorphology of a natural landscape and the architecture of the spectacle of competitive sports, are image transfers of postcards that pay tribute to the fanatical formations of ultra culture, memorabilia that boast the symbols and slogans - often of a bellicose, anti-social bent - of football fan clubs active in Poland in the 1990s. Dudek has spoken of the intensity of the personal experience of being part of a crowd⁵, a dynamic that is well-testified to: "Brought into being thanks to the loss of conscious personality that was purported to occur when human bodies agglomerate, the modern crowd is not reducible to the average of the individuals that make it up."⁶ Put another way, the individual body slips all too easily into the communal one, the singular will becoming subsumed in the mass entity.

There are several strata of artifice occurring with Fyeroool Darma's *obj* series (all 2021). Mass-produced apparel are recontextualized as textile art, in turn finished and stretched to resemble

² According to the project's website, "The Free Republic of California". Accessed January 26, 2021. <<https://www.thefreerepublicofcalifornia.com/the-paris-agreement>>

³ See Jeffrey T. Schnapp's "Mob Porn" in *Crowds*, eds. Schnapp and Matthew Tiewes (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), pp. 1 - 45.

⁴ As quoted from the artist's own description of the work. See also Elias Canetti's classic study, *Crowds and Power* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1984).

⁵ In conversation with the author.

⁶ Schnapp, p. 3. Schnapp notes that the lineage of the notion of the modern crowd may be traced back to the hordes unleashed by the French Revolution.

paintings, and, finally, presented in a manner reminiscent of screenshots of online images, one category of objects inflected to approximate various others. The canny, tongue-in-cheek masquerade begins with the original items: souvenir t-shirts acquired from Singapore tourist sites such as Chinatown and the Bugis Street Market, featuring glitzy attractions ranging from the Marina Bay Sands complex to the Gardens by the Bay, as well as illustrations of tropical landscapes of palm trees, sun-streaked seas and hibiscus blooms. These iconographies represent a continuation of the artist's interest in the semiotics of, in his own words, "contemporary folk aesthetics", the register of images produced for, and consumed in the form of, mass culture.⁷ Here, the artist displaces these pictures from their original context. He discursively frames these articles of clothing as works of contemporary textile art, deconstructs their physical structures by stretching them around wooden frames like a canvas and varnishing the surfaces the way one would a painting, creating the desired finish, and sizes each piece to mirror the dimensions of an iPad, evoking the most common form of visual consumption in our media-saturated lives. The images, in other words, are deracinated several times over, cheaply-made fashion proffered as contemporary textiles that are made to look like traditional paintings which might well be digitally transmitted copies. The unstable frames of reference and slippages of meaning here, which Fyeroool gleefully foregrounds and maneuvers, certainly speak to what has now become one of the established paradigms of our zeitgeist, the politics of post-truth. If it is one fact that the *obj* works, with their dissimulating play of shifting identities, seem to suggest, it is that facts may be relative and perspective-driven, standards of objectivity retreating before the advent of alternative facts and manipulated knowledge.

The craft-y objects of Cian Dayrit often assume the form of embroidered textiles. As much a social activist and advocate as well as a visual artist, his practice collapses the various roles that he occupies, with fabric and needlework providing the material base for pointed commentary about the exploitation of indigenous communities, the abuse of land by political power, and the ravages of neoliberalism in his native Philippines. *Neocolonial Landscape* (2020), for one, features a photograph taken by the American colonial official and zoologist, Dean Worcester, in 1901, of an Aeta circle dance.⁸ Worcester is infamously remembered today for his stand against Filipino independence from the United States, as for his published photographs that helped shape an image of the exotic alterity of the Philippines in the American mind. Against this picture of an indigenous ritual, framed by the gaze of colonialist domination and captured by the superiority of the camera's recording technology, Dayrit has had eroded, in brilliant red thread, by hand,⁹ an imaginary topography that is informed by the displacement of Aeta communities from their ancestral lands in central Luzon today. The fictive terrain features, for instance, a long highway cutting through hills and rivers, boasting text in Tagalog that refers to a "pathway of big, fancy cars", as well as a mountain that is dubbed the "sacred mountain that is about to be turned into a golf course".¹⁰ While largely hypothetical, the artist's mind-map nevertheless channels the circumstances that the Aeta are confronted with in the twenty-first century, in the face of large-scale infrastructural projects that have seen them increasingly exiled from their own homes. *Tree of Death and Decay*

⁷ The artist's interest in textiles and in the semiotics of Southeast Asian visual culture informed several bodies of work in his solo exhibition, "Monsoon Song", held at Yeo Workshop in 2017, including a series of textile paintings in which he reversed the traditional batik-making process.

⁸ The Aeta peoples are a distinct ethnolinguistic group scattered across the island of Luzon, and considered part of the Negrito ethnic family.

⁹ Dayrit frequently collaborates with an embroidery artist named Henry, with the latter credited by name as "Henricus" - its Latinized form - in many works.

¹⁰ These translations were provided verbally by the artist in conversation with the author.

(2018), which originally formed part of a bigger installation, presents a textual cartography of various illiberal agents and realities that Dayrit views as contributing to the continued impoverishment of the Philippines, the majority of its people trapped in what he refers to as “semi-colonial and semi-feudal” structures.¹¹ The arboreal motif is owed to the iconography of the Tree of Life in medieval visual culture, and the evocation of the theological symbolism of the *arbor vitae* provides a familiar pictorial syntax - the Filipinos being, of course, a staunchly Catholic people - through which the deleterious effects of imperialism are articulated.

Perhaps his practice provides an apropos point on which to conclude this essay. Mediums and genres are distinct phenomena, and not all works which utilize fabrics or textiles are necessarily categorized as “textile art” - or, even more contentiously, “craft”. Of the artists in *Threads and Tensions*, it is Dayrit who comes closest to being included under the umbrella of craft, a mode of making often viewed as being an outlier in the spectrum of mediums and strategies that constitute contemporary art in the twenty-first century. In the context of a brittle, splintering world at the start of the third decade of the new millennium, in the wake of the Occupy movement and BLM and MAGA and a worldwide pandemic, the last of which, in particular, has exposed the stark difference between the haves and the have-nots, it bears remarking that traditional modes of objecthood are being deployed towards critical ends. Craft as a mode of making *and* saying opens up channels of resistance against social privilege.¹² To put it another way, what is of note is less the circumscribed ontology of craft - “premised on “tradition”, “material”, or “process”¹³ - but the notion of craft as a cultural stance, an aesthetic position, one that is generally perceived as culturally inferior or less valuable. Here, the use of thread and needle suggests not so much an embrace of traditional practices, but, rather, foregrounds its own otherness, its alterity - to dominant circuits of art-making, to socio-economic inequity, to political and racial impositions and presumptions. The practice and discourse of craft, then, signals a poor aesthetic that, just maybe, dovetails with other manifestations of poverty. As has been observed of the present crisis: “If poor and working people see within the coronavirus not only a pandemic ... but also the very real crisis that is modern industrial capitalism, then we must mobilize ... This means demanding not only bread and butter ... but also building new human relationships, new forms of actual life.”¹⁴

Really, this is a show about politics.

¹¹ In conversation with the author.

¹² Parts of this discussion were originally included in a paper by this author, *Queer Craft and Radical Cuts: Transgenderism and the Malay-Muslim Body in the Work of Anne Samat*, presented in September 2018 at the annual International Seminar of the Faculty of Liberal Arts of Thammasat University (LATU), “Super diversity and Coexistence in Our Changing World”, in Bangkok, Thailand.

¹³ Louise Mazanti, “Super-Objects: Craft as Aesthetic Position” in *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art*, ed. Maria Elena Buszek (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), pp. 59-82. See p. 59.

¹⁴ “Autonomous Groups Are Mobilizing Mutual Aid Initiatives to Combat the Coronavirus”, *It’s Going Down*.