<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Title</strong></th>
<th>In the company of trees.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Author(s)</strong></td>
<td>Davis, Lucy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Date</strong></td>
<td>2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>URL</strong></td>
<td><a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10220/18780">http://hdl.handle.net/10220/18780</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Look around. Whether you are now in your office, house or in a public space, it will not take long before something green will fall in your field of vision. Plants are around us more frequently than animals, in fact they usually tend to hide them and in doing so, they fill our everyday lives with their silent but indispensable presence. *Why look at plants?* What is there to see, one may ask - an entire world, or nothing at all, one might answer; this entirely depends on your predisposition, just as much as to someone a mouse can be a pest and to someone else a pet.

To this point, plants have been silent witnesses of the animal revolution. Frequently studied for their medical properties and consistently exploited for their aesthetic qualities, plants have played a defining role in the historical and cultural development of humankind. But just as this role comes increasingly into focus, the botanical world is seriously threatened by industrialization and climate change. Forests are razed at an alarming rate as large seed banks scramble to preserve genetic material of the world’s flora before it is too late.

The proposal this issue of *Antennae* puts forward is a daring one and it involves taking a few imaginative leaps in the attempt of outlining new avenues in the experimental research of new fields. What about plants as companion species, for instance? Would there be productive opportunities in attempting to understand plants from different perspectives, just as the field of human-animal studies has proved possible with animals? What contributions to our understanding of animals could a focus on plants make? Could we even envisage that, in a near future, we may have a field of human-plant studies?

Times may be ripe for this opportunity to be considered. After all, on what grounds could we so insistently provide evidence of the relevance animals bear in our everyday lives and simultaneously decide to be blind to plants? The visual arts have embraced “plants as a subject” in a very similar way that they have already embraced animals. The first ever exhibition to present plants as subjects was the memorable 1936 display of genetically modified delphiniums by Edward Steichen staged at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Steichen bred his plants over twenty-six years through a combination of traditional methods of selective breeding and the use of a chemical that altered the plants’ genetic make up. This effectively constituted the dawn of what today is called bio-art, a strand of controversial artistic practice that is very well known to the field of human-animal studies.

It was then George Gessert to bring plants back in the gallery space in 1988, staging a selection of irises that summoned viewers’ memories and fears of eugenics. Today, a multitude of artists engage with tissue culture and transgenic engineering with both, animals and plants. But as the present and the next issue of *Antennae* will aim to show, plants are not only present in bio-art but have appeared in many disparate artistic contexts already.

It is also on the scientific front that perspectives on the botanical world are rapidly changing. The *Laboratorio Internazionale di Neurobiologia Vegetale* (the International Laboratory of Plant Neurobiology) founded in 2005 in Florence, has contributed new key evidence on plants’ cognitive and sentient qualities continuing the line of enquiry initiated by Charles and Francis Darwin who conducted a series of experiments on plants between 1850 and 1882 documented in the book *Power of Movements in Plants*.

As a result, recent advances in plant molecular biology, cellular biology, electrophysiology and ecology, have unmasked plants as sensory and communicative organisms, characterized by active, problem-solving behavior. Plants are not the passive, *ultimate automata* which conveniently many like to think. What are the challenges posed by these new awareness?

This issue of *Antennae* was co-edited by Australian artist Gregory Prior, currently lecturing at the School of Communication and the Arts at Edith Cowan University (Perth, Australia). From a background in painting, Gregory Pryor’s practice has evolved into many different areas, which include drawing, video, performance and object based work. After many years traveling to and making work about his experiences in Europe and Asia, he moved from Melbourne to Perth in 2003 and began to explore the visual language of the country he was born in. His interest in plants has led to the creation of a number of challenging works of art, including the ominous *Black Solander* (2005). We will begin our enquiry by posing
the question: “what is it like to be a plant?” through an adaptation of a book titled *The Beauty of Being Plant* (yet to become available in English) written by Patrick Blanc, a French botanist who invented the now more and more popular “green walls”. His bittersweet narrative is counterpointed by an essay titled *Aspects of plants intelligence* (2003) by Professor Anthony Trewavas. The essay, a straight scientific offering, bravely addresses the concept of *intelligence* in plants and goes on to argue that, that not only are plants intelligent beings, but that they are also capable of learning through memory – plenty of food for thought.

Lucy Davis looks at *Tree Duet*—a performance series by Singapore theatre company spell#7 (Paul Rae and Kaylene Tan)—through a series of explorations of trees in modern and contemporary visual art works from Singapore and colonial Malaya. Heather Ackroyd and Dan Harvey follow the footsteps of Joseph Beuys and travel to Germany in order to collect acorns from one of his original piece in order to create theirs. The issue then explores the work of *Futurefarmers* a group of artists whose work challenges current social, political and economic systems.

*Pil and Galia Kollectiv* brings to us a very unusual performative experience involving asparagus, whilst Renee McGarry’s explores a small subset of Mexica stone sculpture that used materials and technique to naturalistically represent plants. In a curious botanical milieu peopled with costumed creatures born from myths and folktales, Janaina Tschäpe produces extremely fascinating works of art employing diverse media such as painting, video and photography. This issue closes with a look at Lauren Berkowitz’s complex and multifaceted practice concerns issues of humanism, contemporary feminism and the environment, explored through the binary lenses of order and chaos.

Our hope of course is that you will find this issue as interesting as challenging and that above all, upon looking around you, you may begin to see plants in a different way. But in order to prevent any relapse into the older “mode of looking” we have already prepared another plant-dedicated issue that will be available at the end of summer. Spread the green word!

---

Giovanni Aloi
Editor in Chief of Antennae Project
In this essay, Lucy Davis looks at the recurring references to Tree Duet—a performance series by Singapore theatre company spell#7 (Paul Rae and Kaylene Tan)—through a series of explorations of trees in modern and contemporary visual art works from Singapore and colonial Malaya. Tree Duet is a poetic meditation on the “demands” that “trees make of us” in theatre and everyday life. Davis extends this thesis through readings of the “demands” made by trees in visual art works.

Text by Lucy Davis

Tan Tee Chie
Fig 1. Persuading, huang yang woodblock print on paper, 20.5 x 31 cm, 1958. © Reproduced courtesy of the National University of Singapore Museum Collection.
In Persuading, a 1958 print by Singapore modern woodcut artist Tan Tee Chie, a frangipani tree surrounds two men seated on a wooden bench. While speaking, the older man taps the thigh of the younger man with his fingertips, an intimate gesture that the latter does not appear to reciprocate. My students often read this exchange as a sexual overture. However, in a 1950s context Persuading has other resonances. For Tan Tee Chie and members of the left-aligned Singapore Woodcut Society, who produced their prints in the turbulent postwar climate leading up to Singapore's independence in 1965, images of vice on the street—such as prostitution, extortion, gambling and smuggling—were popular motifs. This scene may be a "guidance session" where the older man is asking the reluctant younger man to follow his teachings, or perhaps there is a shady business proposition at stake.

What is less ambiguous is the frangipani. The tree has never been far from the frame of dreams of modern Singapore/Malayan life. At first glance this frangipani is an anthropomorphic mirror of the older man as it winds around the two figures, heavy with flowers. A rosette of leaves opens to the left of the men's heads, drawing the viewer in to a third spherical centre. Another splayed bunch of leaves to the right of the older man mirrors his gesticulating fingers. But what I find particularly persuasive in Persuading is the way that this invocation of a frangipani, carved from a Chinese huang yang (boxwood) block, slowly outgrows the didactic subject matter of the print. The tree appears to have a life of its own, with branches that rise up beyond the edge of the scene and forward towards the space of the viewer, threatening to disrupt the composition. The black ink of the trunk and branches connect the tree to the wooden bench upon which the men sit, to the cavernous wooden doorway in the background, and to the pathway upon which the men rest their feet. The path is uneven and sloping downwards, evoking organic, subterranean forces, which contrast with the controlled, pale geometry of the human structures in the space behind.

This essay is partly a response to a series of performances by Singapore theatre company spell#7 and performed by its co-directors Paul Rae and Kaylene Tan between 2007 and 2009, all entitled Tree Duet. Tree Duet came about in turn as a response to a tree that Rae and Tan had tried to incorporate into the end of an earlier piece Duets, performed in Singapore at The Substation arts centre in 2007:

... at the end of Duets, there was a kind of coup de theatre, where I walked over to this corner of the stage, and lifted up a trap-door to reveal the top of a beautiful tree growing up, as if it were growing out of the stage.

I spoke to it for a while, then I sat down here and the lights went down.

But even as the audience began to applaud, I knew that although the show had ended, it wasn’t finished. It was the tree. You can’t just put a tree on stage and expect it to do what you want it to do. I’m not saying trees have their own agendas—but they are their own things. (1 p.1)

I saw three versions of Tree Duet at different venues in Singapore. All three experiences have now folded in my mind in a slow cycle of recurring images, gestures, words and sounds which resound with music composed by Olivier Messiaen and Toru Takemitsu (who composed pieces about trees in response to Messiaen), played live on the piano and harpsichord by Shane Thio.

Citation, recitation and the taking in and transformation of words and worlds by the “sly work of memory” (1 p.5) were the means by which this “ecology of the stage” evolved. As Rae puts it, “[E]verything is recycled” (2).
“recycling” is rhetorical, symbolic and material. There are recurring stories of people and trees: politicians and trees, children playing around trees, dances with trees, historic individuals and trees, ancestors and trees. These stories are told and retold in layers, which resound through the gentle density of the piece. A considerable amount of water is consumed from plastic bottles by both performers. Most of the materials used in the production are tree products: a piano, a harpsichord, a broom, rubber balls (a reference to the Malayan rubber industry and included in a story of Henry “Mad” Ridley, self-styled rubber seed evangelist who was appointed Director of the Singapore Botanic Gardens in 1888),[x] a book of plays by the revered “father” of Singapore theatre Kuo Pao Kun,[xi] handwritten notes for a eulogy to Rae’s grandmother, and a temple woodblock percussion instrument. And then there were 100 Singapore five-dollar bills, which are green and although no longer made of paper, bear the image of a Singapore “Heritage” tembusu tree.[xii][xiii]

In the play, monologues by Paul Rae—which skirt around the conventions of a performance lecture—alternate with physical and spoken interventions by Kaylene Tan, which complicate Rae’s prolixity. At one point she says, “You talk a lot” and the audience laughs. During my second and third viewings, I found myself zoning in and out of Rae’s sequences of recurring stories—and instead drifted with other rhythms within the piece: the poignant but independently demanding temporalities of Toru Takemitsu’s Rain Tree Sketches I and II and Rain Dreaming; the earnest and somewhat wooden “tree dance” that Tan and Rae return to (Tan assuredly, Rae haplessly);[xiv] the sound of the temple woodblock; the sound of breath; the sound of wind; the sound of the sweeping of leaves on a temple floor.

One particular temple featured in the performance. The Jin Long Si temple, situated in a quiet, nondescript Singapore neighbourhood, houses what is estimated to be the largest and oldest bodhi tree (Ficus religiosa) on the island. (The bodhi is the tree under which the Buddha is said to have reached enlightenment.) Unfortunately, the temple is situated on land that was purchased by the state in 2003 to develop the Mass Rapid Transport system’s new Circle Line. After petitions and letters to the press, in early 2010 the bodhi tree was finally awarded the official status of “Heritage Tree” and therefore permitted to remain.[xv] The temple however, will probably be relocated and the existing temple building demolished.

The last version of Tree Duet I saw, the performance began with Tan entering slowly along a slightly-raised, plankway carrying a bonsai tree, to the sound of a wind machine.[xvi][xvii] Tan walked towards a table and the wind sound increased. When she placed the tree on the table the noise stopped. She raised her right flat palm and traced invisible words in the air, as if reading Braille but also in the manner of the Buddhist abaya or goodwill mudra. Her voice was clear but emotionless, as if slowly learning the words:

Jin Long Si. Viewing sacred tree: 9 a.m.–6 p.m.
Jin Long Si. Viewing sacred tree: 9 a.m.–6 p.m.

But for how long?

‘Rain Tree Sketch II’ by Takemitsu began to play and Tan looked at the bonsai. (3 p.1)

These lines were repeated twice, passed back

Paul Rae and Kaylene Tan
Fig 2: Tree Duet, staged at the University Cultural Centre Theatre, during the National University of Singapore Arts Festival. Video still, 2009. © Paul Rae and Kaylene Tan
and forth between Rae and Tan and then later on, Tan’s hand “read” the sign a third time, without the accompanying words as though they were already absorbed into her body (and our memory).

“For how long?” has a simple pathos to it—asking “how long” (in the days prior to its Heritage Tree status) the bodhi tree would be around before it was chopped down to make way for the train line. “For how long?” also refers to an absurd disconnect between human scales of measurement: between urban Singapore time and tree time, and a recurring theme in the play of our failure to measure tree experience in formats such as “viewing hours” or “heritage”. How long is tree time? How long is a tree? Is a tree long? A few lines later in the play, Rae states:

… faced with a tree, we are caused to behave in particular ways. It is as if trees make certain demands of us, demands we can almost never fulfil, even though we have been striving to do so for millennia. (3 p.2)

I want to trace Rae and Tan’s thesis about the “demands” that “trees make of us” through and around readings of the demands made by trees in modern and contemporary visual art works from Singapore and colonial Malaya. In all these examples, the shelter or symbol of the tree is “on loan” in order to say something or frame something pertaining to human life. The trees lend their presence and/or their material to the art works and compel the artist to do things—in, with and beside them. I will explore the extent to which trees—even in the realm of pictorial representation—are somehow “their own things” beyond the time and space of the other subject matter and perhaps intentions of the artist.

Another way of thinking about the things trees ask of us is to think of human-tree cultures as co-productions, or what Donna Haraway would call companion species relationships. For Haraway companion species “partners do not precede their relating; all that is, is the fruit of becoming with.” (4) That being the case, could our continuous attempts to fulfil the “demands” our arboreal familiars make of us, be considered a “becoming with” trees—even or precisely if we continue to misunderstand their demands in human culture? I will explore how this might manifest in and through the demands asked of us by trees in these particular works of visual art.

OUTPERFORMED?

Liu Kang (1911–2004) was the longest living, best connected and arguably therefore most canonised member of a diverse group of painters of Chinese ethnicity who migrated to Singapore in middle of the 20th century,[xx] loosely known as the “Nanyang Painters” or, somewhat fawningly, the “Pioneer Artists”. “Nanyang” was a geographical designation used by soujourner Chinese communities in Southeast Asia. It means “South Seas” and specifically refers to Singapore and Malaysia (then known as Malaya).

The Nanyang Painters were influenced by experiments in the southern Chinese cities of Shanghai, Nanjing and Guangdong, which aimed to rejuvenate classical techniques and formats by introducing aspects of Western representational painting. They were also influenced (as were many modern Chinese artists) by post-Impressionism, Fauvism and Cubism, and the experimental energies of the School of Paris.[xxi] These Franco-Sino influences were channelled through the specific geo-cultural subject matter of “Nanyang” and can be read as a way migrant artists came to terms with and legitimated their increasingly permanent residential status in Malaya. Paradoxically, however, the foundational dream of “Nanyang” took form famously not in the burgeoning island trading port of Singapore or the rhythms of the rubber plantations of Malaya, but instead on a trip that four of the artists made in 1952 to the island of Bali.

Possibly inspired by a series of exhibitions depicting orientalist fantasies of Bali by the Belgian post-Impressionist painter Adrien Jean Le Mayeur (which were staged in Singapore in the 1930s and 1940s),[xxii] the Bali trip is celebrated as a defining experience for the four male artists[xxiii] from whence the diverse tendencies of what has become popularly known as a “Nanyang style” were consolidated.[xxiv] In contrast to the slightly younger woodcut artists and artists from the leftist Equator Society,[xxv] Liu Kang and his companions did not engage overtly in political or nationalist subject matter. Indeed, they have often been dismissed for being pro-status quo and for decorating or naturalising colonial rule with sentimental kampung (village) scenes and visions of bare-breasted women in idyllic tropical landscapes, far from the political and economic imperatives of modernising Malaya.[xxvi]

The Padang, painted in 1953, is one of
few works by Liu which depict the Singapore city. In this painting the subject is the central green of the colonial settlement that has functioned as the site of military parades, the Japanese surrender after World War II and later, Singapore’s Independence and National Day ceremonies. Ho Tzu Nyen, whose film series about modern Singapore art I will return to later, has this to say about the painting:

In other words, the “Nanyang Style” was a “modern” art style that rejected the face of modernity itself. There is indeed something unbearable about the few paintings by Liu that were “scenes of modern industrial areas and commercial areas.”[xxvii] The broad brush strokes characteristic of Liu’s outlines take on an extreme clumsiness when applied to the geometry of modern day architecture. The Padang depicted the seat of power of the Colonial State, and the twin giant phalluses—the City Hall of the Parliament and the Supreme Court; it repulses the viewer in a way that only the vulgarity of unsheathed power can. Nothing in it seduces, and nothing in it can evoke the idyllic that was Liu’s typical painterly domain. Nothing in the painting can ameliorate the representation of labour that sticks out like a sore thumb in the foreground of The Padang. A lone Indian man, presumably sweating under the extreme heat of Singapore, has removed his top as he mows the lawn alone. There was no way Liu could have painted modern life without the signs of labour. And there was no way labour could have been depicted as idyllic. (5 p.229)
What interests me here is a curious disconnect between an admittedly nauseating homage to imperial power on a violent blue tropical day and the quite glorious rain tree that we peer through in order to view the scene.[xviii] The use of a tree to consecrate a particular perspective of the world beyond it is a device with a rich lineage in both Western and East Asian landscape painting. A lone tree or a small cluster of trees often frames what appear today to be impossibly defoliated depictions of Southeast Asia’s colonial settlements—Batavia, Manila, Singapore—celebrations of conquest over “tropical possessions” which gleam with an affiliated zeal to Liu’s Padang. I say “impossibly defoliated” because although up to 90 per cent of primary forest in Singapore was cleared for construction and plantations during the 19th century,[xix] it is difficult to fathom how early colonial settlements really were kept so clean of foliage when—even in as meticulously controlled a metropolis as 21st-century Singapore—bird’s nest ferns or banyan [strangling fig][xx] roots will sprout high up on
any building left alone for more than a couple of months, feeding dreams (as Kevin Chua has argued in a different vein elsewhere) of our own extinction (6).[xxxi]

The lone rain tree stands, like us, on the edge of the Padang, marking a boundary between the viewer and the colonial architecture and lending us its shade. We do not step onto the grass of the Padang itself, but one has the sense that we might be able to approach the tree, to hide behind it or perhaps lean against it’s trunk.

The motif of the tree as a mediator between people and power also appears in Tree Duet, when sections of Kuo Pao Kun’s play The Silly Little Girl and the Funny Old Tree are revisited:

PAUL: On the face of it, The Silly Little Girl and the Funny Old Tree is a simple, even simplistic play. A girl befriends a tree [Kaylene takes out bonsai and attends to it]. She treats it like her grandfather, and the suggestion is that it compensates for her troubled relationship with her family, and her lack of cultural roots.

KAYLENE: [Quoting from The Silly Little Girl … ] Trees are like people.

PAUL: But what’s interesting is that the tree doesn’t entirely agree. He doesn’t always say the things the girl wants him to say, or do the things she wants him to do. Later in the play, he asks her if she wants to sing and dance with him.

KAYLENE: [Quoting from The Silly Little Girl … ] I thought you can
only sing and dance when there is wind?

PAUL: [in a booming voice]
That's what the wind says. Actually, it's only when we sing and dance is there wind, only when our leaves and branches swing is there wind. Wind mustn't be so proud. (7 p.107)

Rae continues:

According to Confucius, in matters of governance, the figure of the gentleman (on which Singapore’s authoritarian politicians have been known to style themselves)[xxxii] is as the wind to the grass of the small man.

For Kuo, who spent four years in the 1970s in detention for his left-wing views, although our politicians and our governments often think they can bend the people to their will, it’s only because the people allow them to that they can be our politicians and our governments at all. (8 p.6)

Kuo’s allusion to tree experience however, draws us into a time and expanse that transcends political metaphor. In ‘Why there is wind’, an article on trees and performance in Singapore, Rae cites a series of further examples in Kuo’s play where the experience, ecology and time of the tree is beyond the ken of the little girl and unravels an otherwise simplistic allegory (9). In a section entitled ‘Outperformed’, Rae connects these insights to the oft-photographed performance of Singapore politicians planting trees and the inference that the politician, like the tree and the nation, will be there for the dependable long run. Analysing the photographic archive of Singapore’s founding leader Lee Kuan Yew repeatedly planting trees throughout his life, Rae argues how the trees inevitably outperform him:[xxxiii]

Lee grows older. From a stripling bedding down his plant-kingdom familiars, he becomes the octogenarian custodian of spry whippersnappers, and where the formers’ futures entwine, the latters’ bifurcate: now the sapling stands in mute testament to a Leeless future. Worse: although the accompanying plaque may memorialise him when he is, the tree as such is indifferent, a splinter of otherness, materialising a concept otherwise almost as inconceivable as death itself (9 p.206).

The rain tree in Liu’s painting is specific. This is not the projected spirit or essence of a tree from Chinese painting conventions, nor is it a stylised abstraction of the kind painted by some of Liu’s contemporaries. And perhaps because we are supposed to look past it towards the spectacle of power, the tree does not seem overly burdened with meaning. To be sure, its arching branches provide some kind of benediction to the gleaming colonial edifice. But in this tree duet, the vivid, tactile individuality of the tree also outperforms the background subject matter. The Padang behind is a rapidly-painted, toy-town—a mistaken backdrop for an intended image of the tree, where perhaps a flash has gone off by mistake. Curiously, Ho Tzu Nyen’s critique of The Padang, cited above, comes out of a dissertation entitled Afterimages (5).[xxxiv] But when Ho looks at this painting, what he sees is The Padang and Liu’s incapacity to represent labour. From the very first time I saw it all I could remember about it, and indeed all I do still see if I close my eyes after looking at the work, is the tree. Perhaps this duet is not between impermeable colonial buildings and “inconceivable” treeness but is more about an extended arboreality; a personal relationship between the artist/viewer and a tree as individual. We stand with this tree, in its shade, and while we will never be able to know or fulfill what it demands of us, we do sense an invitation to lean in, to touch that orange sunspot on its trunk—so much more inviting than the pat red roofs of the buildings behind. And if we did touch the tree, perhaps spores of those epiphytes would rub off on our clothing, to be flicked off elsewhere on the island. And so the influence of this specific tree migrates beyond the anxieties and pretensions of a 1950s Nanyang artist, and the colonial scenography it frames.
While Paul Rae in Tree Duet elaborates, in a slightly preachy manner, upon the “things trees demand of us”, Kaylene Tan sweeps around him, as though sweeping a temple floor. She continues as Rae says, “whether by praying at the foot of a tree and leaving offerings, dancing around the tree, telling stories underneath it, or planting new ones—the result often takes the form of a performance”. As he concludes, Tan props the broom up on its brush end so that it balances vertically, and sits down on a teak garden chair, opening and drinking from a plastic water bottle. The broom is upright in centre stage—not a person and not a tree, but something in-between and of itself. Rae looks at the broom and then at Tan. The audience laughs.

Talking about Tree Duet, Rae remarked how one reason why we so often project ourselves onto trees is to do with verticality and our perceiving trees as upright beings—familars. This was perhaps one of many reasons why, when he tried to write about trees for Tree Duet, he ended up writing about people (2).

Cheong Soo Pieng (1917–1983) was another of the four Nanyang artists on the 1952 Bali trip. The subject matter of his painting Tropical Life is the Malay kampung or village, and it is in the possession of the Malaysian National Art Gallery. At first glance, the painting appears to be a slightly clichéd quotation of Gauguin’s Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going? and yet another idyllic village scene, far removed from the fraught political energies of the time. Like Liu’s The Padang and Tan’s Persuading, Tropical Life was painted during the Malayan Emergency (1948–1960), during which the communist Malayan People’s Liberation Army—many of whose soldiers had fought valiantly against the Japanese during World War II but who were subsequently pushed out of pre-independence power-sharing arrangements with the British—took up violent guerrilla struggle in the jungles. The political sympathies of rural Malayan kampung dwellers were an object of some concern as British Commonwealth forces feared that Malaya would be the next Southeast Asian nation to “fall”.

The first episode of 4x4 Episodes of Singapore Art, an experimental TV series of four films by Ho Tzu Nyen, is entirely devoted to the painting (10). The first film features a
contemporary Singapore couple arguing about possible interpretations—whether the painting is nostalgic and reactionary or whether it has reflexive, critical potential.[xxxv]

What interests me about Tropical Life is the way that the interactions between the people are both mirrored and mediated by the vertical rhythms of a series of stylised tree trunks. At the far right, a woman combs a little girl’s hair, with a tree bending over her, echoing the curve of her back. At the centre of the painting, a woman appears to be hiding behind a tree, possibly eavesdropping on the conversation of the two women on the other side. A third tree also appears to be bending over towards the two women. And in the far left a man with his back to us, wearing a songkok (traditional headwear) leans against a fourth tree.

The forms of trees have been drawn upon as punctuation devices in Southeast Asian narratives for centuries. The intricately perforated shadow puppet depicting the cosmic Tree of Life begins and concludes wayang kulit shadow theatre performances. Trees both mark narrative breaks and are intertwined with the action on the reliefs of Angkor and Borobudur. A question requiring inquiry outside the boundaries of this essay is how these narratives might read without their arboreal support-structures—if the teak tree branch was not there for Queen Maya to grab hold of, would Siddhartha have been born from her side?

The trees in Cheong Soo Pieng’s Tropical Life do not have the specificity of Liu Kang’s rain tree. Cheong’s emphasis was upon line, form, pattern and rhythm,[xxxvi] and the trees, while they have a certain woodenness about them (a woodenness they share with the human figures, to which I will return) comprise a series of stylised blocks with a somewhat fussy arrangement of leaves beneath. Kevin Chua, who regards the painting as both iteration and critique of the modern dream of kampung life, says of these trees:

The vertical trees break up the rhythm of the horizontal space, yet coordinate the space so effortlessly (bleeding into the border itself), that they seem to emerge only belatedly as trees, as nature. It is as though we have gone through and come out on the other side of fragmentation. (11)

I would argue however, that these trees—even in this reductive form, neither representational, nor expressive, nor essential in the manner of Chinese painting—are both markers of human time while at the same time complicating it, persisting with their own discretely dense coordination—however belatedly they emerge.

There are already at least two notions of human time operating in this painting. There is the way that time moves across a landscape in Western painting, generally from left to right, and
there is, as T.K. Sabapathy has famously argued, the more intimate but fragmentary timeframe of the Chinese hand scroll, which while conventionally unrolled from right to left, only reveals a certain opening in the narrative at any one time, after which the section is rolled up again (like a dry leaf) to be reopened in a different place. Many of Cheong Soo Pieng’s works are characterised by experiments to transfer both the horizontal intimate and vertical monumental formats of Chinese scrolls into modern painting with oil, gouache and water colour (12). Indeed the scale of this 88.9 x 45.6 cm painting permits a transference of the intimacy of the hand scroll—an activity ergonomically suited for only one or two persons—onto a larger format. The long trunks of the trees, like the edges of a rolled-up scroll, create windows for shifting stories, temporalities, subject matter and perspectives.

"But for how long?" And is a tree long at all? Trees, as biology teachers told us, do not just grow upwards as determined by a central control tower or brain in the trunk, which increases its distance from the ground as the tree grows taller (as do so many trees with faces in children’s stories). Trees grow outwards and upwards in density and extremity, around and to the side of, they bud, twig flower, leaf, fruit and seed, with all their coordinates and pathways of water and sugars, interconnected but without determining, hierarchical organs, however hard we project onto them our feet, hearts and crowns.

The branches of the trees in this painting create a border not unlike the foliage in batik patterns and in stone and wooden temple reliefs. They compel us to look through their latticework and into vignettes of romantic rural leisure—or the bird-caged fragmentation of modern life, depending upon our political persuasion. While so doing, they give us a measure with which to stabilise our forms and relativise our histories. And we believe as we discard naturalism for formal experimentation that they follow all the more the patterns we project through them. But even in this reduced form we are not completely in control of these trees.

Theatre director Peter Brook in The Shifting Point remarks how naturalism in theatre "requires that images stay in the frame long after the need is over. If we have a 10-minute scene in a forest, we can never get rid of the trees" (13 p.62). It’s no coincidence that he uses the tree as an example of something we can “never get rid of” or that he refers to an earlier affiliated arboreal inquiry by Edward Gordon Craig: “How much is it essential to put on stage to convey a forest” (13 p.61). Brook’s main point is that with an uncluttered stage, the “physical side down to a simple outline ... then you have more means at your disposal”. But I’m not so sure that the outline of a tree can be so easily disposed. These are the only lines I remember from reading this discussion as a student in Copenhagen in 1994. I still have such a strong “afterimage” of those off/on-stage trees—ghostly outlined, badly painted—even though I never saw them. Perhaps trees—even a reference to trees, tree abstractions or patterns, trees that are on loan to echo our length or to coordinate our positions, or to give rhythm to a rural idyll, even trees that are to be removed to make space for theatre—have a density that persists.

From Tree Duet:

KAYLENE: To be honest, progress doesn’t bother me. The roots run deep. They wrap around the temple, the roads, they run under sewer lines, branching out beneath government houses and big city buildings. Buried under your house, eating the dead while you fuck, drinking the rain as you dream, extending beyond, even as your children grow up, old and die. On and on, for generations after you: family you will never know, and who will forget you—you, their so-called “roots”; you, who once lived sky high on the 53rd storey of a condo in a place where a temple used to be, before they knocked the condo down and built a mall, a football field, a discotheque, an interchange, a temple again ...

(3 p.16)

KAYU

In Tropical Life we don’t have trees with human faces, but we do have a human child without a face. Kevin Chua writes:

If there is a moment of strangeness in the painting it is
the boy next to the solitary backturned figure on the left. His head is odd, with neither a back nor a front: a Janus face within colonial modernity … Suddenly the kampung becomes material as myth shorn of its illusory sheen. Rural and urban inside and outside, past and present everything seems to refract from this one moment of refusal … (11)

I read something wooden in this “refusal”, in this “material as myth” as if the little boy’s head is made of wood. In fact many of Cheong Soo Pieng’s forms appear wooden, inspired perhaps by examples of woodcarving Cheong experienced in Bali or Sarawak.[xxxix]

One of the first forms of abuse I learned in primary school in Singapore was “kayu!”, the Malay term for woodhead or blockhead—an epithet for someone who is stupid and who doesn’t get the picture. Strangely what happened once I realised that in Tropical Life this boy’s head looked wooden, the other figures began to appear wooden too—a material linking of the rhythms, figures and tree blocks might be seen to root their collective forever-presence in rural tropicalia. Or otherwise this blockheaded boy, which Ho’s female protagonist calls a “monster” of modernity, looks both ways and can no longer “get” the picture.

In Ho’s film the boy walks off the left hand side of the picture, arms outstretched as though blind or sleepwalking through apocalyptic documentary footage of construction sites and scorched forests.

But perhaps there is a gentler interpretation of this blockheaded boy—one that requires a bit of “becoming with”. In “Why there is Wind” Rae discusses another section of Kuo’s play, The Silly Little Girl and the Funny Old Tree:

Later, when [the little girl] goes to the Tree at night, she is at first startled that it sees her in the dark, but goes on: “Why can’t humans see in the dark? Because human eyes are made to see only light. (Reflecting for a moment)”*. (7 p.110)

In this reflection lies not only a moment of personal realisation, but a space for the audience,
Simryn Gill’s *Forest* series from 1996 comprises a series of 16 black and white photographs of installations, (taken by Nicholas Leong) which she made by cutting paper strips or plant, leaf and root shapes from canonical texts—the Ramayana, The Origin of Species, The Portrait of a Lady—and grafting them onto plants, trees and walls in Singapore and Malaysia.[xli] One photograph depicts cut-out strips of an English translation of the Javanese Ramayana, embedded into the horizontal ridges of a coconut palm in a garden in Port Dickson, Malaysia. In another, strips of Darwin’s Origin of Species were pasted onto the intertwined aerial roots of two kinds of banyan trees on Fort Canning Hill in central Singapore.[xlii]

The *Forest* photographs tease and complicate essentialist desires pertaining to location, nature and origins via a playful and subversive insertion of paper and text onto real trees and plants. The images are slowly revealing of our anxious attempts to naturalise migrant humans and humanise a migration of flora. But the works also have a capacity to embed themselves in a way that is neither just about Gill’s grammatic gestures and pithy textualities, nor the nostalgic authority of the black and white photograph.

The affective power of *Forest* on the one hand resonates from the powerful presence that the host plant feeds the metaphor and on the other, a breach Gill splices between metaphor and material experience. I am at first tricked by the paper cut-outs and then realise and try and read the text, but the process of parsing text, paper and photograph brings me into closer proximity with the skin of the tree or the plant. I am reminded of experiences of tropical plant and tree textures—fleshy, mossy, damp—and how they differ from the dry paper of Gill’s installations.

While Gill makes explicit our layers of cultural-linguistic grafting onto nature this revelation also opens a space between our projections and a material awareness of the actual plant or tree. We know that under the equatorial sun the text will fade, that the edges of the delicately contrived paper creepers will curl in the humidity, and when it rains that these cut-out slices of dry words will melt into mush and disappear into the soil—but that the swinging red roots of the banyan and the smooth rings of the palm onto which these paper parodies are pasted, and from which arboreal authority, verticality, density, fecundity, excess is borrowed, will persist.

I want to end by returning to another example of modern woodblock art and thinking about a material experience of grafting as a kind of “becoming with” trees. Lee Kee Boon’s Nanyang University consists of an image of another “path not taken” (15).
Simryn Gill

Fig 9a Forest #2. Series of 16 silver gelatin photographs, 120 × 95 cm, 1996–1998
© Simryn Gill
Simryn Gill
Fig 9b Forest #4. Series of 16 silver gelatin photographs, 120 × 95 cm, 1996–1998
© Simryn Gill
It depicts the construction, in 1955, of the predecessor of my current university Nanyang University—more familiarly known as Nantah—with funds collected from diverse, independent members of the migrant Chinese community in Malaya.[xliii]

Nantah has been described as having a “good claim to being the first Southeast Asian university” because although its medium of instruction was Chinese, Nantah was resolutely located in Malaya (16). But the heroic May 4th movement-inspired and left-leaning vision espoused by Nantah founders and students proved to be at odds with the anglophile, pro-capitalist government of post-independence Singapore.[xliv] Nantah was closed in 1979 and merged with the National University of Singapore. An engineering institution was developed on the original site in 1982, and in 1991 this was renamed Nanyang Technological University—where I currently teach.

The energy and anxieties of the Nantah vision, so different from those of the Nanyang Painters, resound through the rough-worked lines of this woodblock print. Here the concrete dreams of a modernising China, transplanted onto a plot of orange soil, carved out of hilly jungle, farms and plantations in western Singapore, are held in place by a fragile exoskeleton of wooden scaffolding and inscribed with much energy—much labour, into a woodblock.[xlv]

May 4th Movement literary ideologue Lu Xun advocated that Shanghai woodcut artists (who were emulated in Singapore) let the woodblock speak via an “aesthetic of vigour”—li zhi mei (17).[xlvi] In Nanyang University there is an unfinished dance between the porous material and concrete dream, between the raw expressiveness of the grain and the construction of a modern that was not to be. Today the Nantah administrative building itself still stands but turned into a Chinese Heritage Centre—an impossible attempt by the institution to co-opt this unruly historical matter into their own legacy—a process not unlike the ascribing of “heritage” to trees.
Grafting then is not just about citing or recycling the energies or projected properties of an existing subject or material to suit our needs, nor is it about critically appropriating the premises of the host from the perspective of the contemporary. When we graft our modern dreams or contemporary critiques onto living material, we enter into collaborations that we cannot control. And sometimes in the process we become more than us.

At the end of *Tree Duet*, Paul Rae lies down, corpse-like, with a book of Kuo Pao Kun’s plays under his head like a pillow. Tan walks across the stage and brings the bonsai tree and scissors. She matter-of-factly opens Paul’s shirt where he is wearing a bandage—as though there is a wound. She cuts the bandage, swabs it with iodine and crudely grafts the roots of the...
tree onto his stomach. She buttons the shirt up around the tree and positions a desk lamp by his side to project a large shadow of a tree onto the wall. The imposing shadow bonsai moves up and down with Rae’s stomach as he breathes. It looks like a tree on a hill in a Chinese ink painting but also somewhat like the filigree of embryonic fluid inside a womb. Tan then attaches a long tube, which winds across the floor from a plastic water bottle to Paul’s mouth. And he drinks the whole lot.

“But even I knew that although the show had ended, it wasn’t finished. It was the tree.”[xlviii]

Bibliography


Notes

[i] The history of the left-leaning politics of Singapore’s populations in the mid-20 th century is contested. Leftist members of migrant Chinese communities and students in Chinese schools have been painted by post-independence histories as communist affiliates if not card-carrying members of the Malayan Communist Party. Others argue that the collective-oriented culture of the Chinese in Singapore in the mid-20th century had more to do with the values of the earlier May 4th Movement—a movement to modernise China and throw off the shackles of tradition, emerging with the 1911 revolution and Chinese territorial loss after World War I—than later affiliations with communism. See for example Yao, S. “All Quiet on Jurong Road, Nanyang University and Radical Vision in Singapore” in Barr, M. and Trocki, C. eds. Paths Not Taken Political Pluralism in Postwar Singapore, Singapore, National University of Singapore Press, 2008.

[ii] In a presentation for my students in 2008, oral historian, archivist and former Singapore History Museum curator Koh Nguang How connected this print and others to a movement amongst the Chinese left in the 1950s and 1960s called the “anti-yellow culture movement”, which aimed to rid Singapore of Westernisation, materialism, vice and corruption. In an interview for this article, Tan Tee Chie was somewhat vague about what it is that is being persuaded in this exchange, as indeed he was with regard to much of the iconography of this woodblock. Although modern woodblock artists are known for their didactic or political prints, a number of Tan’s works stage intriguing urban exchanges whose dark undertones are accompanied by ambivalent titles, such as for example Transaction (1953) and Cigarette Seller/Transaction (1958), in which the dynamics of the communication are not immediately clear. Tan Tee Chie, interview with author, translated by Daniel Lim, Singapore, 29 May 2010.


[iv] The conflation of Singapore with Malaya is due to the fact that prior to Singapore’s independence in 1965, nationalist energies in the island had long been focused on a merger with Malaya. In 1963 Singapore was indeed merged with the Federation of Malaya to create Malaysia, together with the newly decolonised eastern states of Sabah and Sarawak. However, Chinese-majority Singapore was expelled from Malay-majority Malaysia two years later in a climate of political, economic and ethnic distrust.

[v] Frangipanis, and especially the white-flowered Plumeria Singapore Obtusa (originating not from Singapore but Latin America), are popularly associated with death in Southeast Asia by both the Malay and Chinese communities. To the former, the scent of frangipani (kemboja in Malay) is associated with death in Southeast Asia by both the Malay and Chinese communities. To the former, the scent of frangipani (kemboja in Malay) at night is said to mean that a female vampire (pontianak) is in the vicinity. Although things have changed and there is a current vogue for frangipani-fringed Balinese gardens, in colonial Singapore such trees were only planted alongside European buildings (such as, for example, the Raffles Hotel) and/or around Chinese cemeteries.

[vi] Tan Tee Chie states that he intended it to look like there were pretentious modern buildings going up in the background—a reference to the dangers of urban materialism. Tan Tee Chie, interview with author.

[vii] Tree Duet was first performed in August 2007 at the Siam Society, Bangkok (Live Art Bangkok festival) and thereafter in: September 2007 at the Substation, Singapore (Sepfest); April 2008 at the Central School of Speech and Drama, London, UK (Theatre Materials/Material Theatre Coderece); August 2008 at the Drama Centre Black Box, Singapore.
As different versions of the performance incorporated different species from the Edinburgh International Festival in 2010.


[xi] The book was Images at the Margins: A Collection of Kuo Pao Kun’s Plays, Singapore and Kuala Lumpur, Times Books International, 2000. Kuo Pao Kun (1939–2002), alongside being Singapore’s most locally and internationally respected playwright, was “one of the most important figures in Singapore arts and civil society". He was the founder of Practice Performing Arts School (1965), The Theatre Practice (1986), The Substation (1990) and the Theatre Training & Research Programme at Practice Performing Arts School (2000). As Rae states in Tree Duet, Kuo was detained without trial in the 1970s under the Internal Security Act for alleged subversive activities. He produced his main body of theatre works after his release in 1980. He was known for his poetic utopian allegories, his humanist outlook and also for the bringing together of all four official Singapore languages on stage. The Substation, About Us/History/Founder – Kuo Pao Kun. 2007. Available at: http://www.substation.org/about_us/about_us_kuo_pao_kun.html (Accessed: 8 June 2010).

[xii] “I was amazed to discover that the Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation had sponsored the tree on the $5 note. I thought: ‘that’s amazing—a bank sponsoring the image on a bank note!’ It was only after looking at the note more carefully that I realised HSBC has sponsored the original tree that is depicted on the note.” Rae and Tan, Tree Duet, 2008, p.7.


[xvi] Possibly Tan and Rae felt that the bonsai—while evoking clichés about a well-人脉新加坡社会—would have somewhat less of a stage presence, and be more handy than the 2.5-m tall brassia which perished after the earlier Duets performance.

[xvii] “The construction of the stage, with a central wooden area and a wooden plankway stage right, was inspired by Noh theatre. Noh theatre conventionally has three pines along the side of this plankway (replaced by wind machine, harpsichord and piano), and there is a tree image on the back of the stage, which in the case of Tree Duet was where a shadow of the bonsai was projected at the end of the performance. Rae, P. Email and conversation with author, 4 June 2010.
together pieces resonated with another work, Descendants of the Eunuch, another of Kuo's plays, The Coffin is too Big for the Hole. And the sewn-presence too big for the space in which it was exhibited was a reference to tree—a banyan (Ficus benjamin) that Zai had brought to the rehearsal room also concerned a layering of a series of experiences: there was a reference to Wind: Power, Trees, Performance", p.210 But briefly, Zai's performance

I do not talk about Tree in a Room in a room in depth in this essay.

rhythmic woodcut prints, Fruit Seller (1954), was reproduced on the publicity flyer.

Encountering Cheong Soo Pieng (5 March–31 July 2010), one of his works, also founder of The Migrant Ecologies Project (www.migrantecologies.org) and Editor in Chief of FOCAS Forum On Contemporary Art & Society.