

Teh Tarik with The Flag

When it comes to the question of a country's identity, the answer is always tucked within the fabric of its urban life: in street-stalls and the local coffee shops, or in the alleyways of the neighbourhood. It is in these ordinary, liminal spaces that balance in between margin and center, where locals gather to share their aspirations and anxieties, their opinions and concerns, and their hopes and fears. On a hot summer day in a Chinese 'Kopitiam' nestled somewhere in Kuala Lumpur, stories that form the narrative of Malaysia unfold over a cup of 'Teh Tarik'. The hot sweetened milky tea, which literally translates to "pulled tea", is synonymous with the multicultural nation. It is found in makeshift street-stalls and in five star hotels, transcending socio-economic boundaries and bringing together the various ethnic communities that form Malaysia. Whether it is a conversation on the prices of vegetables or the current political state of the country, the daily exchanges over 'Teh Tarik' in informal settings shape the identity of Malaysia, and eventually they find themselves woven into the narrative of the nation and its defining symbol – the flag.

Malaysian artist Anurendra Jegadeva recalls in his work *Prophecy* the story his father spoke of after a morning tea and 'Roti Canai' with his friends. The story, called the RAHMAN prophecy, is a peculiar theory.

"The word Rahman in the Tengku's name spelt out the initials for each Prime Minister that would follow his tenure as Prime Minister. R is for Rahman, A for Abdul Razak, H for Hussein, M for Mahathir, A for Ahmad Badawi ending with N for Najib which seems to imply that with N the dominance of UMNO and 'Barisan' in governing Malaysia would end. What would happen after N for Najib?"

A sense of irony and superstitious audacity sits at the heart of the story, yet the setting and the subject Jegadeva constructs in his work speak of the life of daily Malaysians and their stories that unravel in the most ordinary places.

Prophecy is one of thirteen artworks that hang on the walls of the National Art Gallery of Malaysia as part of the group exhibition *Teh Tarik with The Flag*. The exhibition gathers thirteen Malaysian artists to explore the symbolic power of the flag as a means to reflect on and extend the rich and complex story of the 'Jalur Gemilang' as a potent symbol and a marker of identity, unity, belief, and division.

National symbols – in particular flags – are perhaps the strongest conveyors of national identities. They are symbols imbued with an aura that reverberates qualitatively throughout physical space. The presence of a flag swiftly waving in the wind conjures up strong feelings of pride and patriotism among those who stand beneath it. Its deterioration and desecration send out echoes of a fragmented nation. Unlike ordinary objects, cultural icons transcend their materialities and assume the qualities of living and breathing entities, and even the smallest scrap of an old nation's flag holds within it the narrative of the country. In no way is this more evident than in the work of Sean Lean, *A few Malaysia(s)*, where two separate components form Lean's vision of the Malaysian flag. The first part is composed of two panels depicting the 'Jalur Gemilang': the blue canton bearing a crescent and a 14-point star known as 'Bintang Perskeutuan', and the second panel is a field of 14 alternating red and white stripes on the second canvas. Lean retained the original vision of the Malaysian flag, where elements refer to values ingrained in every Malaysian: blue to symbolize the unity of the Malaysian people, red to signify strength and courage in facing adversity, white to mark integrity, and yellow to indicate the royal colors of the rulers.

However, beyond the intended symbolism of its star, stripes, and colors, Lean sought to invite the everyday Malaysian to complete the imagery of the flag by contributing their own white and red cloth objects – a shirt or a scarf – to a metal rack he strategically placed beneath the two canvases. An item of clothing is inherently a personal one, and it subtly mirrors the materiality and function of the flag, which is to protect. Essentially, Lean asks viewers to carry on a simple yet emotional gesture that dismantles the hierarchy and sews the gaps between the flag and the people it represents.

The rich and complex story of the *'Jalur Gemilang'* finds another interpretation in Ivan Lam's *The Death of a Nation / The Birth of a Nation*. The mixed media work is a political commentary on national identities and race relations in Malaysia. The project began from a small remark about the "race column" that has been a dominant fixture in government official forms in Malaysia.

"Being conditioned to checking the "race box" and defining oneself as "Malay", "Chinese", "Indian", or "Other", Malaysians have grown indifferent to the implications posed by this question. Little have wondered or even questioned the challenges provoked by such a presumption."

Yet, as Lam notes, *"the race category begs to question what constitutes Malaysian. Is one race more Malaysian than another? And aren't we all Malaysians regardless of race, creed, and religion? In a sense, the race question looms on every Malaysian's mind every now and then, despite government's efforts to forge a national identity; the race box reinvigorates racial ambiguity and discrimination."*

In attempting to navigate this question, Lam's four-panel work seeks to make the viewer conscious of the race question by materializing it in a physical way. The four panels are composed of narrow, thin strips of cloth driven from the 16 flags of Malaysia (3 Federal Territories and 13 States). Charcoal, a material that symbolizes rebirth, fills the gaps in between the stripes. In each panel, the ratio of charcoal to cloth is set loosely in accordance to the demographic make up of Malaysia: *"67.4% Malay, 24.6% Chinese, 7.3% Indian, 0.7% Other."*¹

In using charcoal, Lam has materialized the question of race, making the abstract notion of race and ethnicity a physical visualization in space. In looking at the ratio of charcoal, the viewer experiences what it means to be a part of a specific ethnicity, specifically what it means to have so much "space" or to be privileged, and what it means to have little "space" or be under-privileged.

For the unsuspected visitor, the thin strips of cloth could hardly be recognized as being made up of the 16 Malaysians flags. In a way, Lam has effectively stripped a national icon — a sanctified object — from its original quality, thereby destructing its original aura. The stripes of flags bear no difference to stripes of worn-out cloths, but the truth remains that the fraught, ambiguous pieces of cloth were once the 16 flags of Malaysia. Does the act of cutting apart the flag disrespect it as national symbol? Or does it remind the viewers that it is through our minds that we bring national symbols to life and into power?

Symbols come to life, quite literally, in *Rubia 5m Wide*, where Rajinder Singh explores his own relationship to the nation and the flag through a series of movements and gestures. The single channel video displayed by a grid of pigment prints on photo paper investigates the contribution of Sikhs throughout in Malaysian history. The Saffron orange of the turban – one of Sikhism's sacred colours, becomes the central element of the compositions. Through choreographed movements, Singh expresses pain and prayer, questioning his place within the historical narrative of Malaysia.

¹ https://www.dosm.gov.my/v1/index.php?r=column/cthem&menu_id=L0pheU43NWJwRWVVSZkiWdzQ4TIhUUT09&bul_id=MDMxdHZjWTK1SjFzTzNkRXZcVZjd09

In a similar vein, Sulaiman Esa delves into religion, weaving together iconography from the different religions that exist within Malaysia (Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity) into one colorful tapestry. The unity and harmony embedded in the nation is reflected in the title of Esa's tapestry, *One God Many Paths*. Mosques, Buddhist and Taoist temples, Indian and Sikh temples, and churches of different denominations dot the streets of Malaysia, and the serene echoes of the Adhan, the fragrant incense from an Indian temple, and the meditative chants that reverberate from a Buddhist temple neighbor each other in some instances. Likewise, the sight of Malaysians of different racial and religious backgrounds gathering at a local 'Mamak' stall exchanging conversations over a cup of 'Teh Tarik' is not uncommon. In *No Colour*, Cheng Yen Pheng depicts this sight of harmony. Her photography collage, complemented with drawings by children that are integrated in the form of stitches, presents a portrait of the complex diversity of Malaysia that Esa represented in his tapestry.

On the walls of the National Art Gallery, several other works respond to the tension that prevailed throughout the recent election period. Choy Chun Wei and Yau Bee Ling's abstract canvases depict the radiating change sweeping Malaysia, while Fauzan Omar and Hamidi Hadi speak of the turbulent nature of Malaysian politics. In *Battlefield*, Omar collaged the aftermath of the 2018 General Election, collecting election posters, banners and flags from the ruling and opposition party that littered the streets on the night of the election. Layered on top of one another, the leftover materials became a document of the moment of glory and celebration. On the other hand, Hadi's response in *Save the Flag* is heavy with melancholy. The Malaysian flag sits behind waste paper and wire mesh in a state of disintegration, perhaps mirroring the emotions of the everyday Malaysian during times of political uncertainty.

Yet, despite the strong sense of belonging embedded in Malaysians, notions of diaspora prevail. Notions of home and belonging and images of shifting landscapes are the subject of *No. 55, Main Road*. Hayati Mokhtar does not reference the flag, but instead looks at what it represents: home. Mokhtar navigates the question of home. How do physical spaces, whether in the form of a house, a city or a country, morph into recognizable landscapes that house our fears and protect our dreams? In the three-channel video, she intimately contemplates the personal history of 87-year-old 'Uncle' Chang Ching and his soon-to-be demolished shop-house and home that resides in the South of Ipoh. The video installation invites viewers to experience the intimacy of Uncle's home, to note of his stubborn attachment to all that is familiar, and to mourn the fragility of the concept of home. Seen from this lens, the audience is encouraged to contemplate the larger, social, economic and political changes that are transforming Malaysia.

Identity, diaspora, and shifting borders are again the subject of *Transparent Flag (History of the Malay Peninsula)*. The work is composed of separate panels, each depicting one aspect of the flag. Dissected and devoid of color, the 'Jalur Gemilang' is no longer recognisable, and although it is tangible, its invisibility makes it difficult to identify. When overlapped, the panels accumulate to form the history of Malaysia. Chong Kim Chiew renders the familiar imagery of the flag foreign, prompting the viewer to imagine its uncertain future.

Aptly positioned towards the end of the exhibition is *Me, Myself and I*, a conceptual work by H.H. Lim that encourages visitors to contemplate their role as active protagonist in the nation's story. The simple chair beneath a spotlight awaits the viewer in the National Art Gallery and invites him to think critically about the question of identity, belonging, home, and the narratives that are yet to be woven into the 'Jalur Gemilang.'

"What does the future of the 'Jalur Gemilang' hold?"

Line Dalile, Curator

August 2018

Line Dalile is a writer and curator based in Dubai, United Arab Emirates.

She studied art history and earned a Bachelor of Arts in visual culture in 2017 from Curtin University, Perth, Australia.