

Dialogues

Conversation with Zen Teh

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Environmental artist and educator in Singapore

By A&M

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Zen Teh. Image courtesy of Mizuma Gallery.

Zen Teh is an artist and educator based in Singapore. Her main research interest lies in the human world's intersection with our wider ecology. This manifests itself not only in the final presentation of her various artworks, but also in her interdisciplinary and research-focused practice.

In this conversation, we catch up with Zen to find out more about how her residency at Selasar Sunaryo Artspace in Bandung changed her perspective on the way she works, the resultant works which was most recently exhibited in 'Mountain Pass: Negotiating Ambivalence' at Mizuma Gallery and what is like wearing two hats as both a practising artist and a teacher.



Left to right: Zen Teh, Sunaryo, Hera. Photograph by Adi Rahmatullah. Image courtesy of Selasar Sunaryo Art Space and Mizuma Gallery.

Let's talk about your residency at Selasar Sunaryo Artspace in Bandung, Indonesia. You closed your latest exhibition, 'Mountain Pass: Negotiating Ambivalence', at Mizuma Gallery on 10 August. How did the opportunity come about, and what did you expect going into it?

About three years ago, I chanced upon a book by Sunaryo, 'Wot Batu', in Jakarta, and found his works and dissertations fascinating. I wanted to learn from this artist, and reached out to curator and writer Roy Voragen to help make a residency happen. Eventually, Roy moved away from Indonesia and Mizuma Gallery came in and helped me put the entire thing together. On the side, we also applied for funding from the National Arts Council, and that was how I began my residency.

I have been conducting research on rapidly developing cities in Southeast Asia. The first site was Chiang Rai, the second was Singapore, and I was glad to make Bandung my third. Before arriving in the city, I found out that it had rich volcanic activity, which motivated me to work with geologists and stones. At the same time, I wanted to keep an open mind to see what else was available in the region, and the issues that I could raise awareness about. For a while, it seemed I had reached a bit of a bottleneck and I trusted this residency would be instrumental in pushing my practice further.



Zen Teh, 'After Monument: Intrusion 1', 2019, image layering on found rock with iron off-cuts, 33 x 52 x 21cm. Photograph by Adi Rahmatullah. Image courtesy of Selasar Sunaryo Art Space and Mizuma Gallery.

What surprised you during this residency?

In Bandung, people are more paced and fluid with their work, whereas in Singapore we tend to follow certain procedures. Because of our cultural differences and our different approaches to work, the Indonesians felt I possessed good time management skills. Given the scale of the project, one should spend four to six months working on it, but I did it in two. I quickly prepared a large Excel sheet with the necessary details and presented it to my co-workers and all of them were taken aback! My methodical inclination is probably due to my training as a teacher, but it was in Bandung that I also began to see the merits of being more flexible.

What else did you learn?

For Pak Sunaryo, a lot of his works are about looking within himself and getting a more introspective view on things to produce art. My research-driven approach is different from that. Pak Sunaryo helped to remind me to pay more attention to how I feel regarding the expression of my work, to give viewers something to relate to. Consequently, I created three larger installations that were exhibited in this show to convey more feelings and evoke certain emotions in the viewer.



Zen Teh, 'Mountain Pass: Negotiating Ambivalence', 2019, exhibition installation view at Selasar Sunaryo Art Space in Bandung. Photograph by Adi Rahmatullah. Image courtesy of Selasar Sunaryo Art Space and Mizuma Gallery.

How did you come about making three huge works when you didn't before?

Well, the studio at Selasar is a huge space that I was not used to as compared to the more limited one I worked in back home in Singapore. It gave me a very different sense of time, and everything somehow seemed to stretch and widen itself. I think all these experiences and feelings in turn manifested themselves into the installations, be it in terms of the scale and size of the works, or the materials used, or the way my works complement and contrast each other.



Zen Teh, 'Mountain Pass: Negotiating Ambivalence', 2019, exhibition installation view at Selasar Sunaryo Art Space in Bandung. Photograph by Adi Rahmatullah. Image courtesy of Selasar Sunaryo Art Space and Mizuma Gallery.

What is your working space in Singapore like?

For a long time, I have been working at my home balcony. It was only in February this year that I managed to get a small studio space of my own, thanks to the National Arts Council. This has been very helpful to me because I do not have to pack away works in progress as they are and focus without a break in my process.

Could you talk about the day-to-day activities of your residency in Bandung?

My daily activities varied, but the constant was my assistant, I Made Ananta, who not only got me around Bandung on his motorbike, but provided invaluable support to this project. In addition, his ability to speak the Sundanese language was helpful when I wanted to interview the locals, such as from organisations like the Bandung Heritage to learn more about the city's history. I also got to know my project collaborator and geologist Rinaldi Ikhrum through my assistant!

What was it like working with Rinaldi?

Rinaldi was the second geologist I worked with. The kind of projects I do require a lot of conversation and collaboration, and everyone on the team must be wholly involved. I was initially working with a more senior geologist who was not quite used to working with artists on collaborative research projects. When this did not work out, I became acquainted with Rinaldi, who had worked on a number of other projects at UNESCO, and enjoys working with different people from different fields.

During our site visits, he helped analyse the sites and the stratigraphy to try to understand what my research site was before it became a construction site. Whenever we made a discovery, he would comply readily with my requests for video documentations, which he understood was essential to the project. He also demonstrated a natural keen interest in the arts and was excited about how my practice is as much about story-telling as geological studies are.



Zen Teh, 'Mountain Pass: Negotiating Ambivalence', 2019, exhibition installation view at Mizuma Gallery in Singapore. Image courtesy of Mizuma Gallery.

It must be quite difficult to find someone you can have such good chemistry with.

For my 2015 exhibition 'Sensing States: Healing Spaces', commissioned by The Substation Art and Science Open Call at the ArtScience Museum, the first biologist I collaborated with pulled out from the project halfway, and I had to find another scientist to collaborate with. I think working with people who share a similar vision is very important. Scientists want to educate the public and raise awareness on many issues, but their research is published in journals that not everyone would read, as these tend to be for a more niche audience. With art, visuals can be used to translate these messages to wider public, which I think is helpful to showcase their findings.

Are the collaborators' primary role to help you fulfil your vision?

I do have ideas but I try not to be too fixated on them. I allow for the collaborators' sharing to shape my work, and oftentimes, the end product differs from my initial ideas. Of course, I try not to be overly fluid in my work and still focus on the goals at hand. One thing that will not change is how I want these scientific findings to be translated through art imagery so that it will appeal to more people.

How did being away from Singapore affect your artistic practice?

For a period of time, I was able to forget about my life and worries in Singapore. As a teacher and an artist, I constantly have to switch my mental framework between the two. Because I could indulge in unbroken chains of thought in Bandung, I was able to challenge myself not only in terms of the depth of the research I did, but also in terms of my resultant works' scale and materials used.



The artist and the exhibition team of "Mountain Pass: Negotiating Ambivalence" in Bandung. Photograph by Adi Rahmatullah Image courtesy of Selasar Sunaryo Art Space and Mizuma Gallery.

Could you talk about any challenges or constraints you feel that you have faced as a Singaporean artist?

The cost of living is very high in Singapore, which means a lot of us cannot focus on art full-time. However, I guess things can still work out. I think it is about striking a balance between what feels like two full-time jobs. I cannot see either as part-time, which stretches me in terms of energy and time. I would like to work with more people and have more collaborations, and to be more involved in the scene, apart from the shows I put up. I think nowadays, there are so many events, and for some of the really interesting ones I hate to miss them, but I end up doing so. I feel bad about that and there is so much more that I can and want to do in this community.

How has being an arts educator impacted your practice?

The students at School of the Arts Singapore, or SOTA, are brilliant and passionate about the arts, which is something I see in all practitioners in Singapore. I get inspired and motivated by their curiosity, and at times, students share with me differing views on some matters, which leads to further conversation and exchanging of ideas. Their energy is also infectious; it helps keep me young and more up-to-date!

Do your students support you as an artist such as through attending your shows? Are they curious about your practice as an artist?

Sometimes they do! But students, especially Singaporeans, are more accustomed to being spoon-fed, and I think that is something we need to work on changing. I hope that my students understand soon that for many things, they have to see and experience in person for themselves.



Zen Teh, 'Mountain Pass: Negotiating Ambivalence', 2019, exhibition installation view at Selasar Sunaryo Art Space in Bandung. Photograph by Adi Rahmatullah. Image courtesy of Selasar Sunaryo Art Space and Mizuma Gallery.

Where will you be traveling to next?

I am still deciding between Cambodia and the Philippines, but that mostly depends on when I have time off from work, which would probably be during the school holidays. For this residency in Bandung, I already had to pull a lot of strings to participate. It was a bit of a stretch to leave a lot of things behind and to make the necessary arrangements before I could begin my residency, such as ensuring there was a replacement teacher to cover for me while I was away.

How do you think traveling, as a whole, has inspired you in your works?

I think this will always help me see and think of things differently. When you are stuck in one place, all you see is the same landscape every day. It is a limited view. It always makes me wonder what an alternative to living in such a manner is. A similar question I ponder regarding the arts is how we can better engage the audience. Should we always use the same methods? Are there any solutions or different approaches that I can find during my travels, such as a certain experience outside of Singapore that could probably resonate with our society?

Any advice for artists who have just left school and are trying to carve out a career? How do you also manage to take a break from everything when you need to, to grow your practice?

Have a lot of faith and do not give up. Work at the things you strongly believe in and be critical of your own practice and of what you see around you, so that you will always be inspired and motivated to improve yourself. Be active in looking for opportunities that will help showcase your work. Believe that your own work is good, but keep honing your craft. Perseverance is very important. It is also good to take breaks from time to time. Personally, I lead a rather active lifestyle, so when I need to, I go for a run or to the beach. I do not work at all on some days, when I may do something else altogether; nothing related in any way whatsoever to my job and my practice. Self-care is very important.

This interview has been edited for clarity and length.



Art and Market

Zen Teh, Selasar Sunaryo Artspace, Mizuma Gallery