

Abdullah from Java: the Ties between Family and History

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Faizal Hamdan, *Dollah Jawa*, 2016, two-channel video projection with a channel on one side showing archival images of the Japanese occupation in Brunei. Image courtesy of Singapore Art Museum



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Bruneian artist Faizal Hamdan’s installation, *Dollah Jawa*, was commissioned by the Singapore Art Museum for the 2016 edition of the Singapore Biennale, “An Atlas of Mirrors”. The work, a two-channel video installation, emerged from the artist’s engagement with his personal family story of displacement and forced exile, a fact that reflects the migratory, cross-cultural character of Southeast Asia itself. The long history of intra-regional peregrination, the arrival of adopted religions and ways of life from China, South Asia and the Middle East, the intervention of the colonial powers and their socio-cultural legacy, the dark years of the Japanese Occupation – the contours of the Southeast Asian narrative foreground the

polyglot nature of the region as it exists today, the fractured patchwork of geographical entities crafted from the vicissitudes of history. Even the very nature of the term “Southeast Asia” suggests an externalised locus of understanding: “Viewing the region as lying in the “southeast” involved accepting an image of the world, and of Asia, created in the West. The reason is that “southeast” Asia has meaning only if the long-established European standard of Central Asia as the focal point of Asia is accepted.” (Shimizu 2005, 95)

Those convergent historical vectors – the macro and the micro, the historical and the individual



Faizal Hamdan, *Dollah Jawa*, 2016, two-channel video projection with a channel on the other side showing images of old photographs of the artist's family. Image courtesy of Singapore Art Museum

– are materialised in the form of visual images in *Dollah Jawa*. Faizal's grandfather, who hailed from West Java, was one of many Indonesians who were forcefully expatriated to Brunei by the Japanese army to serve the imperial troops during the war. He stayed on after the occupation ended, marrying a local woman and raising a family there. The artist recounts: "As a child, I remember him conversing in Bahasa Melayu, but a version of the language that was inflected differently, or of a different dialect altogether. It sounded different from my grandmother's tongue. I only understood that he was Indonesian when my mother said he was known as "Dollah Jawa" by the locals in the village."¹

Like dimly remembered figures from the past, or hazy memories of events occluded by dominant historical accounts, images are cast as blurry projections on either side of a screen in Faizal's installation, with the lack of pictorial definition seeming almost to serve as a metaphor for the erosive work of the passage of time. On one side of the screen, old photographs and documents relating to Faizal's grandfather – official portraits, letters, sepia-tinged family snapshots, with some featuring fragments of scribbled notes on the back – bear testament to an ancestral figure who exists only as a vague recollection for the artist today. Featured on the other side are archival images from the Japanese occupation in Brunei, which occurred from 1941 – 45: these include, among others, the photo of the arrival of the Japanese troops in the sultanate; the then Sultan, Ahmad Tajuddin, with members of the occupying forces; an example of the banana currency used during the war years, and the Japanese surrender to the Australians at the end of the war.

The juxtaposition of Faizal's familial biography and Brunei's wartime history represents the conceptual crux of the work. *Dollah Jawa* sits at the intersection of these dual narratives. In the telling of two intertwined tales, it engages, on the one hand, with the neglected history of forced migration in Southeast Asia during the Second World War, and, on the other, with the resultant impact that that episode had on individual lives, which collectively signal broader developments in the trajectory of the region's past. Caught in the tension between the two – the tragedy of history on the one side, and the generative effect it had on Faizal's family on the other – is the unrecorded chronicle of Abdullah from Java, a tale heretofore untold, one weathered, little-seen patch in the quilt of the story of Southeast Asia. □

Notes

1. “Dollah” is a diminutive of the name Abdullah, and the toponymic sobriquet suggested his origins in what was then the Dutch East Indies.

Bibliography

Shimizu, Hajime. “Southeast Asia as a Regional Concept in Modern Japan.” In *Locating Southeast Asia: Geographies of Knowledge and Politics of Space*, edited by Paul H. Kratoska, Henk Schulte Nordholt and Remco Raben, 82-112. Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2005.