

WORK: PROPOSITIONS FOR THE FUTURE OPEN-STUDIO BY SAMUDIN WAHAB

A Fergana Fellowship Project

INTRODUCTION

Less than a decade ago, having just graduated from university with a degree in fine art, Samsudin Wahab entered a burgeoning market-driven art scene buoyed by the emergence of galleries, consultants, collectors, art fairs and auctions. Grand in scale, bravura in style, and raw in anthropomorphic imagery and social satire, Samsudin's paintings captured the imagination of the public in search of the young and new. He became a much sought after artist. Stories of long cues to acquire his wet canvases circulated in art-chat. But such success and attention weren't exactly what he desired. A year ago, he took a pause and spent much of his time, as he explained, to *bertapa*. To reflect and meditate. He wanted to challenge himself to explore a research-based methodology through reading and discussion, fieldwork and collecting data.

As the first recipient of the Fergana Art Fellowship, an award developed precisely for such career pauses and evaluations, Samsudin spent the past six months shuttling between his studio in suburban Selangor and Selinsing, his birthplace and village in the rural paddy-farming heartland of Perak. There, he reconnected with his family and community; he wanted to understand both the tough realities of the lives of the people and the mystical legends in the



Show Proposal 4
2015, collage and watercolor on paper,
30 x 25 cm



Show Proposal 3
2015, collage and watercolor on paper, 13.5 x 18 cm

area. He went back to the fields to re-enter and re-see his childhood experience of working in rice cultivation, collecting oil palm fruits and digging for mangrove worms; to re-remember the sulphurous air and slippery suction of the mangrove mud, the stinging smells of pesticides and herbicides, and the crackling sounds of walking on dried rice straws. But this exercise is not about traveling down memory-lane. Samsudin sees it as an attempt to understand both land and people, work and labour from personal, economic and sociological vantage points; and how these could in turn re-wire his way of thinking and working, revitalising his practice. It is not about lingering in the past but engaging with the future.

WORK: Propositions for the Future is the outcome of this six-month experiment. In this period, Samsudin also worked with two advisors: T. K. Sabapathy, one of the Asia's most respected art historians and Yap Sau Bin, a prominent curator and thinker in Malaysia. These dialogues, structured into the fellowship programme, allowed Samsudin the opportunity to engage with new ideas, focus his research, solicit feedback and critiques, and map out creative directions. This open-studio is a platform for Samsudin's research, documentation and studies. It organises and animates these ideas and processes, visceral and raw in their incompleteness, into a cogent visual narrative. These are works-in-progress and propositions for the future.

Wong Hoy Cheong

1.

Semasa aku kecil penanaman dan penuaian padi masih dilakukan secara manual sepenuhnya. Tanam padi pakai cucuk kuku kambing, potong padi dengan pisau pengerat dan gunakan tong pemukul padi untuk pisahkan biji padi daripada tangkai. Agak luar biasa hidup aku berbanding anak-anak sebaya aku bila aku harus lupakan main bola pada waktu petang dan pergi sekolah fardhu ain kerana terpaksa tolong keluarga di bendang. Situasi tekanan di tempat kerja dengan cuaca panas menghening dapat dikurangkan dengan bermain seperti berlumba memotong padi dengan abang atau mandi parit setelah selesai kerja di bendang. Sistem penyelenggaraan stress yang berkesan. Pernah satu ketika jari terluka waktu berlumba potong padi dengan abang. Nak bagitau mak dan arwah bapak takut kena marah. Aku teruskan juga dengan darah bercurahan membasahi pokok padi yang menguning. Aku berjuang sampai perlumbaan aku yang menang!



Menuai Beras (Rice Harvesting)
2015, collage and watercolor on paper,
29 x 20 cm

2.

Kerja di estet sawit mengisi masa cuti sekolahku. Aku, abang dan mak kerja mengutip biji sawit yang berselerak selepas tandan sawit dikait jatuh berderai dari pokok. Satu guni 10kg biji sawit aku dapat 90 sen. Matematik yang mudah. Ular menjadi musuh aku di kawasan semak sewaktu mengutip buah sawit. Segala aktiviti dikawal oleh seorang mandor (ketua kawasan kerja) yang tegas dan menerima arahan daripada 'tuan' yang selalunya pakai seluar pendek putih, stokin putih tinggi, boot kulit dan topi macam orang putih. Waktu yang aku tunggu adalah waktu rehat 30 minit pukul 11 pagi setelah 3 jam bekerja. Seronok makan beramai-ramai dan bertukar-tukar makanan bekal yang dibawa dari rumah masing-masing. Pukul 11.30 mandor dah jerit dan sambung semula kerja sampai pukul 2 petang.

Working in oil palm estates occupied my school holidays. My mother, brother and myself collected the palm fruits that were scattered on the ground after the bunches of fruits were cut and fell. For one gunnysack of 10 kg, I made 90 cents. Simple mathematics. These activities were watched over by a stern *mandor*, the supervisor of a work area. He took instructions from a *tuan*, who always wore white shorts, knee-high stockings, leather boots and a hat like those worn by whites. The moment I waited for was the 30 minutes break at 11am after 3 hours of work. It was fun to eat together and share the food we had brought from home. At 11:30, the *mandor* would shout, and we continued working until two in the afternoon.



Umpun-umpun R&D Centre
2015, collage and watercolor on paper,
29 x 29 cm

When I was young, the planting and harvesting of paddy were still done manually: the "goat-hoofed" fork for transplanting, the sickle for harvesting, and a bin for trashing the paddy stalks. It was unusual for kids my age to be working in the fields rather than play soccer or go to *fardhu ain* religious classes in the afternoon. The oppressive heat and stillness in the fields were often relieved by games like competing who can harvest faster or bathing in the irrigation canals after work. This was how we coped with the stress. Once, I cut my finger when I was challenging my brother to see who could harvest faster but was scared to tell my mother or late father. So I continued, spilling blood on the golden stalks of the paddy until I won the race!



Installation (Work) 1
2015, collage and watercolor on paper,
29 x 29 cm

4.

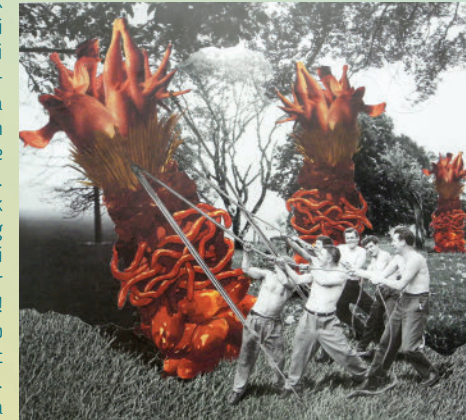
Mengorek umpun-umpun di hutan bakau bukan kerjaya yang baik untuk *environment*. Ia mengancam ekosistem pokok bakau dan hidupan di kawasan tersebut, tetapi yang lebih penting daripada itu adalah mendapatkan RM20 daripada 1 kg umpun-umpun. Teori ekonomi bijak yang aku pilih. Pelbagai kejadian seperti ada kawan yang sesat dalam hutan sampai berhari-hari hanya kerana 1 kg adalah RM20. Bukan mudah untuk dapat 1 kg sehari. Mungkin kurang separuh. Ular tedung, ular kapak, penyengat dan lebah adalah musuhku. Pengawal untuk penceroboh hutan bakau. Teori orang lama, hutan bakau keras berpenunggu. Pernah sekali kawan sekerja didatangi makhluk menyerupai *Bigfoot* bermata merah sewaktu mengorek. Tetapi katanya bulunya berwarna putih. Bagi aku mungkin itu *Yeti*! Kerja ini menjadi pilihan mat gian. *Easy money*. Tak perlu libat ramai orang dan kerja ini penuh ketenangan dan mendamaikan. Mana ada polis nak masuk becak lumpur bakau untuk buat operasi. Hari-hari menggorek umpun-umpun membuatkan badan berbau lumpur yang kuat melekat. Untuk keluar ke pekan kenalah calit minyak atar (minyak wangi Arab) ke badan. Kalau tidak satu bas boleh bau lumpur bakau.



Pesta Umpun-umpun (Umpun-umpun Festival)
2015, collage and watercolor on paper,
29 x 20 cm

Digging for *umpun-umpun* worms in mangrove forests isn't exactly environmentally friendly. It destroys the ecosystem and life of the mangroves, but what was more important was that one could earn RM20 for every 1 kg of *umpun-umpun*. Shrewd economic theory. For RM20 per 1 kg, some of my friends were lost in the forest for days. It wasn't easy to get 1 kg a day. Maybe less than half. King cobras, pit vipers, wasps and bees were our enemies. They protected the mangroves against intruders. According to legends, mangroves were full of spirits. Once, a friend who worked together with me was visited by a creature that had red eyes and looked like *Bigfoot* as he was digging for worms. But according to him, it had white hair. For me, it was probably *Yeti*! Digging for *umpun-umpun* was choice-work for drug addicts. *Easy money*. Didn't involve many people, and was calm and peaceful. No policeman would want to trudge through muddy marshes to investigate. The smell of mud would strongly stick to the body after digging for *umpun-umpun* day after day. To go out to town, you had to rub fragrant oils on your body. Otherwise, the whole bus would smell of mangrove swamps.

My job in a chicken-processing factory in Taiping was a work experience away from my *kampung*. 15 years old and I was paid 15 ringgit a day. Simple and linear algebra. The first week, I was assigned to the slaughtering section. Whether it was hygienic or not, only I will know, but the consumers need not worry as there was a big sign with a HALAL logo. After that, I was assigned to the freezer room. The temperature was so low and cold until I had to dress up in a costume much like those of Eskimos. Within a week, I lost my voice. My skin was dry and lips were peeling. It was good preparation for winter-living in Europe, one day perhaps. The chickens were arranged according to the slaughtering date. Often, the *satay* sellers would buy the chicken which had been kept for over 10 months because they were cheap. The technique of making good *satay* was to transform the bluish-black meat of the chicken to golden yellow and which tasted delicious once they were grilled! This chicken factory is closed now. But I still remember the boss of the factory. He was big, fierce, and had hairy arms. Perhaps a wolf in disguise trapping chickens.



Sculpture Park
2015, collage and watercolor on paper,
29 x 29 cm



Pest Castration
2015, collage and watercolor on paper,
12 x 17 cm