

Carried Through the Water

Diyan Achjadi



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BURNABY ART GALLERY

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Nanaimo Art Gallery
April 16 – June 26

Burnaby Art Gallery
July 15 – September 18

Curated by Jesse Birch
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Introduction

Carried Through the Water is a solo exhibition by Diyan Achjadi that features Diyan's stop motion watercolour animation *Hush*, set alongside new and recent works on paper that reflect on the impact of human activity on the ecosystem, including shifting of shorelines due to climate change and coastal land reclamation. Through visual storytelling, Diyan's work also considers how activities in one location might impact multiple other locations. An ash-cloud from volcanic activity on one island might change the colour of the sky thousands of miles away, and the movement of people, objects, stories, and memories can have profound effects that reach across oceans. This booklet features written reflections by Diyan and Ashok Mathur that accent and inform the works in the exhibition.

Carried Through the Water was developed as the first exhibition in a series of projects through which Nanaimo Art Gallery asks the question: *What stories do we tell?* After the Nanaimo iteration this exhibition will tour to Burnaby Art Gallery where it will be on display from July 15–Sept 18, 2022.

Three stories about water

—DIYAN ACHJADI

I.

I once knew a tree that looked like a fan. It was brilliantly green, leaves like a banana plant that had been artfully arranged in an arc, standing tall from its patterned trunk. It grew in the garden between my sister's window and the fence, the fan becoming a curtain sheltering her room from the street. It is a traveler's palm, a tree that originates in Madagascar, across the Indian Ocean from our house in Jakarta. It is said that at its base, somewhere between the patterned shapes of its trunk, rain water collects, so one can always find fresh water to drink in an emergency. I don't know if I ever noticed the water there, I only ever looked up to see the leaves.

Anyone from the equatorial regions of Asia will also know that standing freshwater is where *Aedes aegypti* breeds, the mosquito that carries and transmits dengue fever. When you live in the tropics you learn to tell them apart—the brown malaria mosquito, the striped dengue mosquito, the elephantiasis mosquito, I'm sure there are others too. Every month—or maybe every other month, I'm not really sure, it was so long ago, but it seemed to happen regularly enough—people with packs full of insecticide would come by the house and we'd close all the windows and they'd spray the whole yard to kill the mosquito wrigglers. White clouds of stinky chemical smoke would be everywhere. We would sit inside, and they'd be outside, and in an hour or so we'd open the windows again. Once the smoke cleared, you couldn't tell that anything had happened.

There are many of kinds of dengue. There's one where your body stops remembering how to control the flow of blood, *demam berdarah* we call it, the bloody fever. It seems that most people I know have caught this at one time or another. The first time I had it, I was sixteen and getting ready for a date and taking a shower when I started shivering, shivering, shivering, even though it was as hot as it always was. And then came the headaches, the tiredness, and the intense thirst. There's nothing much you can do about it once you get it, but sleep and rest and drink so much water and gatorade and pocari sweat and anything to counter that thirst.

2.

Once I was on a video call with my mother: she, in her room, in the morning of the next day; I, on my sofa in my apartment in the early evening of the night before. Speaking across continents is an act of time travel: here I am always fifteen hours behind there, figuring out the right moment, a negotiation of conflicting daytimes and nighttimes and states of awareness.

Her room faces a small park. There's a big, lush, mango tree there, with a small wooden bench underneath; the leaves and branches providing some shade from the hot midday sun. People congregate there from around the square, sit, laugh, eat, rest. You can hear the birds every morning, rustling the leaves.

When she comes on the screen, her laptop is always aimed at her forehead, then slowly adjusted to frame her face. As we talk, there is a mechanical noise in the background, the sound of a loud motor. Someone in the neighborhood had found the mango tree to be too messy, too unruly, the falling leaves disrupting their sense of order. There were people in the park taking a chainsaw to the tree, hacking away at its branches and leaving behind a skinny, empty, awkwardly-shaped trunk.

The next day, a text message: It rained later that night, my mom said, the kind of intense tropical rain with big droplets and lightning and wind that cools everything down, with the hard tktktktktktkt sounds of water hitting concrete, brick, soil, grass, and leaves. I used to always wait for that rain: it comforted me on nights I couldn't sleep, every noise keeping me alert for ghosts and intruders and monsters. If it's raining no one will try to come and bother us, I thought. If it's raining we are safe. My mother said when she woke up in the morning her windows had dampened and warped; with the tree now bald, there is nothing to soften the intensity of the water from the sky.

3.

I used to orient myself by the mountains. Standing in the street in front of our small green house with the fan tree, if I looked to the

horizon and saw the volcanoes in the distance, I would know I was facing south, with the sea to the north. Neither were that close, about an hour in each direction, but close enough that I knew where I stood. Later on, in another decade, on another island perched close to a different ocean, there were no mountains nearby so the twin tall skyscrapers became my compass, until they were gone in a violent instant. Now, the green house is no longer green. It's not ours anymore either. And the sky is so dense and gray with smog and particulates that the mountains are rarely ever visible.

Sometimes, I orient myself to the ocean. The first time I went to the Pacific side of the Americas, I had already been living away for a long time. I stood at the beach and looked at the water and realized, this was the same water that was over there, that the sand I was standing on maybe came from a rock over there. I thought about all the things carried by the water and the distances they travel. When I moved here, to these lands from the ones out east, I thought, finally, I am a little bit closer to home. Yet, closer is still a twenty-four-hour flight away.

The last time I went home, just before everyone understood that there was a virus going around and that everything would change, I stayed in a hotel in a room with windows facing south. I woke up early one morning, jetlagged, and caught the sunrise out the window. Stacks of buildings in the foreground in no particular order,

roads winding and then straight and then curving back again, red clay roofs next to tin next to giant walls separating the mansions from everything and everyone, then tall glass buildings awkwardly jutting here and there in between all this. And, just in front of the sun, there they were. I could just make out the faint triangles of the volcanoes as the dusty fog of pollution cleared that morning. I went to get my mother in the other room, so she too could see that the mountains were still there.

Now, I can orient myself to both: mountains to the north and water to the west. From here, if I continue west and follow the water, maybe, eventually, I'll end up back at the street with the green house and the tree that looked like a fan.

Hush: a poetic listing

—ASHOK MATHUR

I have had the distinct honour of knowing the intimate artistic expressions of Diyan Achjadi for over two decades, so being asked to respond to her latest handmade animation project was both a welcoming and challenging opportunity. To prepare, I spent incessant blocks of time allowing her *Hush* animation to wash over me, to look at each moment and each frame for what it was—a constantly transmuting artistic canvas that enacts age-old instincts of creation and dissolution in each transitive gesture. As I permitted each mark to resonate, my senses of sight, of pleasure, of temporality all blended into what I can only describe as a proprioceptive experience—a direct appeal to my innermost machinations that supercede the senses and go directly to the source, as it were.

I knew almost from the start that any response would be necessarily poetic and fragmented. To attempt to encapsulate this work through critical acuity alone would be an ultimate disservice. How then, could I write something that parallels the experience of *Hush* without reducing it to the mechanics of labour? To this end, a few moments of history poured through—despite their apparent political distance from Achjadi's formative practice, the Romantic poets and their (sometimes) fondness for listings; bp Nichol's now-classic hypertext poems, some of the first textual work that created animation out of words; and how technology such as stop motion and artificial intelligence could lend texture to this work. Indeed, alongside references to Whitman's "Leaves of Grass" and to Nichol's "First

Screening”, I drew on the A.I. writing program Sudotext to actually compose some of this poetic response. While Sudotext and the aforementioned poets provided me with some of the raw material, my suturing and editing of this material makes this reflection a type of polyvocality. There are indeed many voices reverberating within this experience, and to understand on such multiple levels, I felt the need to integrate them, swallow them whole.

This, then, is a type of image to text translation of Achjadi’s work. It is both a microscopic approach to detail and a bodily entry into a wormhole that leads to a different universe.

• • •

celebrate the self // sing the self
they said to their self watching
solo sol spots // flare into blue
crossed layers growing second into third dimensions

loop washaway

draw with right // unshutter with left
gestures marking // marks gesturing

compendium of drawings dizzier than disney
twice as good
sequential meering

the world a shade darker
the sky a shade darker
the water a shade darker
colour of the trees
colour of the sunset
colour of the leaf
colour of the cloth
colour of the flower
colour of the grass
colour of the moon
colour of the ocean
colour of the moth
colour of the teeth
colour of the hair
colour of the skin
colour of the eyes
colour of thoughts
colour of words
colour of body
colour of soul

patterned blue hue to tonal earths
stairs to no whair
rising levels aitch too ohhhh
trembling toes // waifs in waves

the world was a shade darker
the sky was a shade darker
ground was darker
colour of trees
colour of sunset
colour of leaf
colour of cloth
colour of flower
colour of grass
colour of moon
colour of ocean
colour of moth
colour of teeth
colour of hair
colour of skin
colour of soul

spirit dreaming of flight
of the colours of sky
of the colours in sky

of the colours of clouds
of the colours of water
of the colours of trees
of the colours of grass
of the colours of squares
of the colours of layers

colour of eyes
colour of thoughts
colour of words
colour of body
colour of soul
colour of bones
the colour of colour

but then wings
unflappable floaters on a blue sky is ocean is home
earth emerge // ice flow // rain go
neck buss with whisker touch // back to sol glow // flare onto skin
eye lid loaded into waves touch rock touch skin touch sol
frag meant to be somebody our bodies all water
fly by butter eleven tetricyclical elision
lattice woven colour palette dreaming
wandering lonely as a cloud of blue

the colour of the hair
the colour of the skin
the colour of the moth
the colour of the thoughts
the colour of the words
the colour of the body
the colour of the soul
the colour of the bones
the colour of the marks

rich river rains
speckled spectacularity
which quiver reigns
spectred speciality
plotting blots
blotting plots
piecemeal dessert
deserted piece of meal
footflow and wavetoe
usher in a hush

a new layer of thoughts
a new layer of thoughts
a new layer of thoughts

a new layer of thoughts

a

repository right gone // blue splurred
weave wove ribbon of lightness over me
interstitiality wakes up the burdened beast
blue water // gone burnt
cry the past moth festooned
by the last moth
calcified dreaming

//

Biographies

Diyan Achjadi is a Vancouver-based artist who explores the ways that surface ornamentation and illustrated printed matter can document the circulation of ideas and stories in visual form. Born in Jakarta, Indonesia, her formative years were spent moving between multiple educational, political, and cultural systems. Diyan is currently the Interim Dean for the Faculty of Culture and Community at Emily Carr University.

Ashok Mathur is a writer, critic, artist, and arts educator. He has published several books of poetry and fiction and is currently the Dean of Graduate Studies at OCAD University.

What stories do we tell?

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