

The SHYNESS OF TREES

Inception:

The SHYNESS OF TREES mosaic art installation resulted from an intensive, three-week artistic collaboration during the height of construction/renovation at Hotel Penaga – spring, 2010. The wall and floor-mounted artwork incorporates elements of local history, an evocation of the natural world within the urban fabric of George Town, Malaysia and an engagement with the architectural features of the site, designed by architect, Hijjas Kasturi. The project is something of a hybrid, bearing elements of both an art commission and a residency. Conversation between Australian artists Helen Bodycomb and Glenn Romanis and the project's sponsors during the prior year initiated the project, whose seeds had been planted while Helen participated in a residency sponsored by Angela and Hijjas at Rimbung Dahan, outside Kuala Lumpur. Two additional artists were recruited: Dominic Johns and George Fishman, who had exhibited work at the Malaysian World Wildlife Fund exhibition with Helen and Glenn.

Concept:

The SHYNESS OF TREES is a phenomenon of the rainforest canopy, in which colonies of insects “prune” the trees they inhabit in order to prevent hostile encounters with insects in neighboring trees. This action causes a visual effect in which an observer looking up in the rainforest may see “rivers” of light streaming through those gaps separating the trees. This is the negative space the artists incorporated

in their wall-mounted composition, that otherwise mainly consists of rough split-faced stones of many varieties, in a relatively soft palette. Close scrutiny of the main wall mosaic reveals an illusory doorway that reflects the actual door at the opposite end of the passageway and the various associations of a portal: travel through place and time, discovery, awakening, etc.

The blue-and-white disks, scattered throughout the composition, are the decorative centers of Chinese bowls, salvaged from a 17th-century shipwreck off Vietnam. They're also stand-ins for the coins purportedly shot into the forest by British Capt. Light at the beginning of Penang's colonial period to encourage local residents to clear the land. Additionally, an array of narrow chromatic gradient strips in a vivid palette of glass suggests prismatic light effects within the moist air of the rainforest. Both elements reflect the geometry and color of the large stained glass roundels on the flanking wall, part of the architectural design scheme provided to the artists. The wall mosaic "spills" onto the archway, side walls and ceiling to better engage the architecture in which it is sited.

Activating the long granite pavement of the passageway, a meandering course of engraved lines conjures the Penaga River, now lost to development. It connects the wall and floor elements, creating an ambiguous continuity, as the "water" becomes "air" and "light" when it encounters the wall. The floor also contains a large mosaic Penaga leaf insert, made up of smaller stone leaflets. The Penaga tree, once prevalent, was said to have stained the river red; it is now

quite rare in George Town, but part of the owner's landscaping plan.

Implementation:

With vital assistance from the construction foreman, Ooie Ben, crew chief, Mooie Ben and several carpenters, the artists organized and furnished a semi-private studio space in which to select, store and shape their materials. Hotel manager Stephanie (Last Name) and supervisor Suyani Hijjas also provided a warm welcome and critical help with logistics and accommodations.

Designing, fabricating and installing this cluster of art elements was an exciting challenge. No one among the artists was in charge, so each feature, concept and strategy for execution became fodder for discussion and decision. The process was notably amicable, with just a few temporary strains. Although the artists were all acquainted, none had worked in this particular style, nor collaborated so extensively and intimately with design colleagues. At the outset, the discussion/decision-making process was often exhaustive and exhausting. Over time, by informal consensus, greater responsibility was given to each artist for various aspects of the work in accordance with their respective experience and enthusiasm.

The wall design, achieved through extensive conversation and sketching on paper and computer, was transferred to a full-scale printed template or "cartoon" to use as a reference for laying out the mosaic. The cartoon was covered first with clear plastic, then with a strong fiberglass mesh. The stone and glass, shaped with special tools, was transformed into a mosaic during the layout process. The artists "battered" the stones and glass with cement-based adhesive/mortar and

pressed them into the mesh to form a flexible stone fabric, cut into manageable sized pieces. This “jigsaw puzzle” of mosaic sections could then be similarly adhered to the primed masonry wall, leaving the negative space of the “Shyness of Trees” to be filled with the mortar/adhesive as a final step.

The floor elements of the work, after numerous trial layouts in chalk, were ground into granite slabs, already installed: the stream as intermittent lines, leading in and out of doorways, the leaf shape as an inlay of pebbles, each carved with its own stem and veins.

Summary:

This intensive project was intended to generate an enduring artistic product, but equally important an experience of collaborative creation to serve as a model for future endeavors. The clients were broadly receptive to whatever might result, and accepting of an art installation within their hotel setting of a subtle but provocative nature – even one that might be challenging to comprehend. Hopefully, this summary will assist interested viewers to better grasp the artists’ intent and process.
