

Notes from the Forest (Seminar)

Storytelling with the Penan of Borneo

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In the age of the Anthropocene, interdisciplinary methodologies are seen as powerful tools to redraw and relearn our connections. Fine art practices that examine and rethink the position of ecology, indigenous heritage, and natural processes are gaining momentum and critical force. Moving away from a western-centric vision, they attempt to present new connections with the environment and cultural diversity of marginalised communities.

Artist Paulina Michnowska will explore a recent fieldwork trip to the rainforest of Borneo, where a series of art-based collaborative activities took place with the community of Penan people. It will focus on how deforestation, urbanisation, and environmental changes have affected the Penan people's way of living and their relationship to the surrounding landscape.

It will also point at the latest approaches to collaboration and knowledge exchange that the Penan people co-designed with artists and external researchers to preserve and protect their cultural heritage.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6c0z5Arj2WQ>

Welcome to everybody tonight for this, um, wonderful lecture on, um, with Paulina Mcna, uh, doing work in collaboration with a Penan Paul's an artist, um, trained at, uh, in Rome, in the Slate School here in London, and also exhibited in, um, London, in and in the Tate Modern No Less.

She has been focusing her recent research on art, um, in indigenous heritage and ecology, particularly with, in this collaboration with the Penan and I'm going to hand over to Paulina to tell us about that.

Well, uh, first of all, thank you so much for having Me here, Chris and Camilla.

Um, as, as Camilla mentioned, I, I went to the Slate School of Art just around the corner quite a while ago, but I've been also attending these anthropology groups for quite a few years, and they had an immense impact on me.

So it's really, it's an honor to be speaking here and to just give back, I guess.

Um, I'm just gonna introduce a little bit myself first.

So, uh, I am an artist and I'm doing a practice based PhD at the Newcastle University.

Uh, I am essentially linking art and anthropology, and as I said, I went to the slate and I'm, and I have a strong connection with this building, and therefore, with the radical anthropology as well.

Um, my PhD explores the material culture of the Penan people in Borneo.

Uh, I'm particularly focused on looking at, uh, they, uh, what is called oral sign language, uh, but I'm looking at it from an artistic perspective.

So I'm looking at the kind of material qualities, tactile qualities, and, um, and I've had the privilege to being born here for quite a period of time, twice I was at this summer for five weeks, and I was also last year for four weeks.

I'm gonna a little bit introduce about the Penan, uh, for whom doesn't know about them.

So, Penan, uh, is an indigenous community based in a region that, that kind of, um, orange area.

Uh, they have been, uh, um, they have been hunter gatherers, and they have been one of the last kind of semi hunter gatherers in Southeast Asia.

Um, I've been particularly working in the community of Long Lama Village, which is, um, it looks quite, uh, fairly built up village, but it's, it's actually quite isolated.

Uh, there is no, uh, road access to that village.

The only way to access this is by River Barra, which they really are codependent to.

The only way to get there is to essentially fly from RI to Long Banga, which is a 40 minutes flight on a very small plane and it's very weather dependent.

So if the weather is just a little bit off, you can't essentially flight, and then you have to take a, uh, boat from long Banga to long Lamai, which is a 40 minutes ride.

Again, they really depend on the river, and if the river is not in any kind of perfect state, they are absolutely isolated.

So if the water is too low, they cannot use it, because obviously the boat will crash with the stones.

If the water is too high, the current is too strong, it's dangerous, and that's when they hike.

Um, as many, uh, communities, indigenous community all over the world that lived in a forest that have been massively affected by the deforestation.

It's, it's kind of a, it's, it's a horror story in a, in Borneo, uh, I think at some point in a late eighties nineties, Borneo was the biggest import of timber, and, uh, there has been years and years, decades of fights, uh, through which Penan had been suffering a lot.

As a consequence, uh, a lot of their cultural heritage is, is absolutely, uh, destroyed.

And, uh, despite them being really optimistic and positive, uh, it's really sad because you kind of, if you travel there, you kind of witness that heritage disappearing even as you're there, partly because the young people are, uh, tend to escape from the small villages and go to big cities.

This is why I was incredibly moved.

When I heard first and saw, uh, the, or sign language, it was actually through a TV series run by Bruce Perry, a tribe, uh, he's kind of really wonderful description of it, just like hooked me and I just started researching it, and, and it was, uh, yeah, it just, like, I, I can't really explain it, but I just saw it as an incredible, almost sculpt system.

And, uh, it is, it is an endangered language, so not many, uh, penan are able to even use it.

Uh, those, those symbols and those signs are usually signs of care and the penan used to use them, especially in the nomadic, um, existence.

It, when they were in the forest, they would be leaving each other's messages, and they were, again, messages of care and those would be signs of warnings and also practical messages where things would be placed and it is kind of an incredible, I find it an incredible three dimensional diagram that captures through those symbols, uh, those, those plants, penan cultural heritage, uh, its animistic and nomadic history, and its relation and interaction with the forest.

This is just an, uh, the oral signs are built on, uh, this kind of main structure called batang, which is a stick that has to be of a certain size.

It cannot be too small, it cannot be too big.

It has to be visible to to, to those who needs to see it.

But otherwise, they are invisible signs and in, and in those, in that main batang stick incisions are made with a, with a mache knife, and signs are placed there.

Uh, those signs can be, again, those, those, those batang sticks can be multiple, they can extend up to like five or 10.

Uh, those messages can be incredibly complicated.

There is a sense of time in them, because an, anything that is at the bottom means before anything's at the top.

At the top is after.

And, uh, this is, for example, the sign here is a sign, uh, that's, um, of a person and again, the penan uses a plan to identify with the person, the, the root system.

Obviously, it means it's in a alive person.

And, uh, I was going with an elder and he was showing me them, and he asked me to like, pick them up, but he told me, you, you, you can pick up certain plants, but you cannot ever pick up, uh, medicinal plans because obviously that would be a great way wastage.

So again, they have a kind of code of practice around that, uh, those signs, which is, uh, quite, uh, also about care.

This is another, another symbol.

Uh, this symbol in particular means.

It's a, it is a warning symbol, and it's, it is warning against a poisonous snake that is in an area, but again, it's not just a symbol of the poisonous snake.

The actual, uh, manga that is there is also the cure for that snake bite.

So there is this kind of incredible interconnection between the meaning and the uses of those signs.

Certain things, for example, like the symbol of the river is made by the plant that the penan used to make, uh, fishing roads.

So there is this kind of beautiful poi poetic interconnection between those signs.

Um, some of the signs are also, uh, forbidden, uh, for whoever is not part of the group.

So this is a sign that we dunno the meaning of, and they are, they don't want to share it with us.

Some of the signs are also because of the kind of, uh, introduction of the church in the sixties, like some of the signs are not appropriate anymore.

And, and, and the penan also have a certain guilt towards them.

So it was really sad about that, that the penan are not, uh, were not willing to talk about certain science because they become a taboo.

Um, so, um, obviously as I said at the beginning, I'm an artist and I, and I was interested about understanding more about the penan, and obviously I had to go o um, I, I went there.

Um, I'm not gonna talk too much about the kind of ethic process, but it was really hard to kind of be accepted.

I had to like, uh, make sure that they would be, would be benefiting from my research, because there is a, a lot of issues around knowledge extraction.

Uh, but, um, essentially I went there and I, and the pent opened up pretty immediately to me, and they were really happy to share the knowledge with me and I also had to offer something back.

So, um, we organized with, uh, some of the elders.

We organized a series of events, uh, quite informal, simple events, and I was kind of like on the side of them, but I was trying to like, you know, again, use my art tools.

That's, um, I've been learning here in the west and we, and we organized a series of, uh, events, which intention, many intention was to help, um, the elders to translate, to, to pass the knowledge into the younger generations and this is something that they asked me to.

So it's not something that I went there and told them to do.

This is something that they decided within the community.

So, uh, we did, uh, some, um, kind of workshops, discussions, exercises.

I would say, again, I was like, on a side of it, I was just participating and facilitating, facilitating a little bit, but it was mainly kind of, uh, run by the elder and again, it was about, about, uh, sharing the, the knowledge to the younger generation.

Um, so this is, for example, uh, me and Gar went, uh, to the forest.

We started gathering the oral signs.

We, we would then bring them into the village.

And, uh, again, those highs were incredibly precious because he really shared, uh, a lot of like his, uh, knowledge about the forest.

And, um, it was also interesting to notice how his position as an elder was different in the village and he was different in the forest in a village.

He was an older person in a forest.

He was becoming this kind of youthful, agile, uh, person.

Like, for example, he told me that his children wanted to send him to the city because they thought he would have an easier life, but he, uh, he just said he's unhappy

in a city and he's really happy where he is and it was just incredible to see kind of his, his transformation as a person.

When he was hiking in a forest.

I was like, barely behind him, you know, like, um, um, and this is again, incredible idea of, uh, you know, gathering like foraging for a language in the forest and all of this symbol have a very specific meaning.

They have a, they have very specific plants.

Uh, there is again, like this incredible knowledge just even within that basket.

Uh, and then, uh, we kind of like lay the sound, uh, signs on the floor.

So Gar would then, in Penan, he would kind of talk about them, uh, and then we would take the signs outside and then kind of do a demonstration in the, uh, in a kind of, in, in the place where they should be outside and again, some, some Penan knows those size penan that are accustomed to go hunting.

Um, Sam Penan don't know at all.

So, um, it's definitely as, as as, uh, a language that is, uh, sadly disappearing.

This is, for example, yeah, this is an image of garen, uh, explaining one, one of the signs.

This is a sign of, uh, wild boar.

And, uh, this sign is kind of amazing because, um, if the leaf is, is twisted in a way as it is right now, uh, it means that the wild bora is a big, quite fat because the kind of meat is coming outside of the, uh, ribs, if you know how I mean.

But if the, if the leaf would be kind of, uh, uh, folded the opposite way, it would mean that the wild boar is quite skinny and there is like so many nuances about all of the signs and sometimes, uh, they, uh, depend on, can recognize each other's signs by the way they kind of fold them.

So they are almost like a handwriting and when I was speaking with Gar about this sign language, he was actually referring to, to it as, as a, as a written language of the forest.

So he was saying this was, they written language before the kind of written language as we know it came around.

Uh, some of the signs, uh, uh, are new.

So for example, this is a sign of this is mine.

Uh, Garrin didn't really know about it, but, uh, uh, this is, that, that was his, uh, hypothesis.

So maybe this is the kind of effect of obviously ownership and gathering things.

Um, and uh, another concept that I've, uh, I've kind of, uh, came across during this workshop, again, through this kind of open conversation, was this incredible concept of molong, which is, uh, kind of a, um, which is this kind of spiritual and emotional connection to the forest that the Penang can develop on a, on a, on a very personal level.

Um, and, uh, I just would like to read something about it actually.
cause it's like there's this beautiful piece of writing about this.

Um, but essentially a molong is, uh, like each penan can identify a, an object in a forest, a thing in a forest from, from a butterfly to a tree to a bird and they have, and they develop this personal relationship with that entity.

And, and the aim of their life is to protect it.

So, um, and I just would like to read this, Mo Molong Integral to the Penan community embodies a complex generational belief shaping the profound relationship with nature.

Penans as dwell of the born near primary rainforest, have the choice to select a living element from the forest, referred us along and develop a reciprocal relationship, not ownership with they along.

For example, when Penan makes along a fruit tree, they will assign a specific oral sign, and then they will take care of the tree as custodian in return of enjoying the fruit of the tree for a spec specific time, operating on various levels.

It promotes ecological stewardship, sustainable livelihood, and fostering a deeply personal connection between human and nature, the spiritual and emotional attachment ingrained for centuries faces and their endangerment due to changing lifestyle in born new rainforest.

So in this context, uh, uh, so I didn't know about this concept, uh, and I was introduced to it, uh, la uh, last two years ago when I was there and again, this is just an example of, uh, um, of how Garen was explaining about the concept of, uh, about this kind of philosophy to the, to the, to the local penan and again, sadly, none of them knew about this.

And, uh, most of the penan uh, the kids are kind of taught in a school, in a village.

Obviously it's a, it's a, it's a beautiful environment if you kind of don't, don't see the bigger picture of what's what they've been going on.

But, uh, it was just so, so much interesting and, and so much easier to explain about such a concept as Molong being in the forest, taking, uh, taking them to the forest and also, again, that activated a lot of different discussions.

For example, the difference between the primary and the secondary forest, which I didn't know, and also those kids didn't know.

So this kind of like workshop where a form of kind of activated those, those, those conversation and, and providing a very simple service to the elder in exchanging the, the knowledge.

Uh, one of the, uh, latest project that, uh, we've been doing together with the pan was, uh, we have painted a, a mural in the village.

And, uh, this was the kind of main objective of, of this mural was to create a visual archive in the village.

Uh, this was partly because the elders were saying that there's a lot of people coming into the village.

There's a lot of people kind of publishing papers, and, and a lot of the books that are published have been, obviously have words of the elders in them, but unfortunately everything kind of goes out of the village and nothing stays in the village.

So, uh, uh, so Gar thought that this is a great opportunity to create something that is in the village and again, this was, this was an excellent kind of, uh, way to see how, how they cooperate together.

cause like we had to, uh, they had to chose the subjects.

What, what is the mirror gonna depict? And it, it, we had to go through a lot of different kind of stages of acceptance.

I was obviously, again, on the, on, uh, on a side of everything, but this is, for example, um, we were trying to draw a original penan nomadic hat, and which would then become part of the, the mural and again, it's, it was just incredible to kind of understand how specific everything was and every part of the wood has got it.

Its particular name got, its very, uh, very, uh, specific purpose.

Like those had, had were, for example, built at a certain kind of, uh, level.

So like, so the blood circulation, while while the pen would be sleeping, it would not affect the, the body badly.

So it was, it was just through that detail of like drawing and understanding how those hats were constructed.

It kind of makes you understand like how much information and how much, uh, heritage is in those construction.

Uh, and this is again, uh, gar Gary is trying to, uh, explain and they kind of drawing and explaining to each other the construction of the hat and we all obviously, uh, did design like different elements as well.

This is doing the, during the kind of preparation of the, of the mural, uh, they have decided to have the mural kind of divided in three parts.

So the kind of nomadic penan, uh, then the period of transition, and then the contemporary period.

And, uh, this is an ongoing project that hopefully we're gonna be able to add, for example, c certain plans to it that don't exist anymore, but used to exist in, in the nomadic era.

Uh, so this is just one section of the mural, as you can see.

You can, you have, uh, for example, oral science over there, then that every element has got a partic, uh, particular reason and history behind.

Uh, and there will be a video.

Okay. Paulina, can you introduce yourself? Hello, my name is Paulina, and I am a PhD student from Newcastle and I am traveling here and spending some time in Borneo, uh, because I'm researching Aura sign language, and I'm gonna, uh, and I'm also running with Zaman some workshops which are related to the concept of molong, which is the, uh, philosophy or sustainable way of managing the forest.

So today we started doing some workshops, and the intention is to, uh, bring younger generation closer to the forest using, uh, different techniques like, for example, um, r workshops rather than in a classroom in the actual landscape and we were really lucky to have garen to explain as also at the same time how, um, uh, the concept of molong and, and explain us about the forest.

Uh, thank you.

When I see this project, it's, uh, it's really surprises me, me when I, uh, so all what they, the kids over there are doing after they coming into this, uh, forest, they are trying hard to understand what you explain to them.

That, uh, for example, they, the tree, they draw what they hear imaginations what they saw, for example, they, even the bird, but the fly, because I saw it myself around this place, that is sound, that mean.

This is one of the, uh, thing that we elders, elders trying to teach our new generation.

If we teach them one by one, it's quite hard for them to, but I am, uh, so thankful for this project.

So in group like this, I'm surprised that they are interested in doing thing.

Mm-hmm. By doing it like this, they learn, they learn the past, they learn their origin, they learn about the forest.

This what we want. Thank you.

So I just wanted to kind of start wrapping things up a little bit.

Um, and I was, I was kind of asking myself yesterday and the day before, like, what did I really learn during these two trips? Um, some of the most important things that I've learned is, um, and I would like to talk about this, the importance of the community spirit today in Penan Village.

Obviously I'm talking about the, that particular village, which is quite modern compared to some other villages.

Um, and also the, the, the penan relationship with the forest today.

Um, the, the sense of community, community is still, uh, very central to the village, sharing and ca and caring a practice in the village daily.

Um, the pen, obviously, I'm not able to be hunter gatherers anymore because most of the forest is secondary forests.

Uh, large animals can't live in that forest.

Um, when I was speaking to one of the, uh, elders, he told me that if, if they want to hunt for like wild bora boars, for example, which used to be the day-to-day foods that they had to not, now they have to hike for four days.

So obviously they, they organize themselves and some hunters go and hike and then they sell the section of the wild Boer.

But the reality is that they have become farmers after years and years of battling with the governments they had, uh, they have the land.

So in some sense, in some sense they are protected.

Um, the battles of of the land were particularly di difficult for the penan also, also because the penan, because of the way of living, they have not left any traces for centuries.

So they have not built any big pyramids.

So they had not built, built any buildings or, or don't, don't have any cultural heritage that is like in museums of large scale.

So this is why that was one of the main kind of delay in having the land given to them.

Like they, the government was saying that they essentially lying, they, they've never been in, in the forest and this is also something quite sad because a lot of the other indigenous group, because of exactly that reason, they're kind of considering the banana a little simple.

There is not an appreciation of this highly sophisticated technology, for example, like the, or science.

Um, and despite, uh, despite being farmers, they still, uh, they still, um, live in the forest whenever they can.

Apparently in the, during the covid time, actually, a lot of the families, if they had hus uh, this traditional, uh, penan huts in the forest, they would stay there for quite a while.

Um, they also have to have a knowledge about the forest because some of those farms are one or two hours hike away and the forest is dangerous.

Um, this are also some of the, this is also some of the image of, uh, them, uh, clearing a section of the forest to create rice farms.

But again, they have a rice farms in certain areas, but every few years they kind of move those farms some, somewhere into other areas.

So the, so, so, so those areas can rewild, so they, so they still manage the forest and take care of the forest.

I was speaking to some of the panel actually, ViiV was telling me that had her father has self in, in, in day land, that they've been planting fruit trees and there is a lot of fruit trees that, uh, they obviously rely on and they share between themselves as well.

There is obviously, uh, a tragic story of, uh, the deforestation.

I have witnessed myself, uh, the incredible scale of of it.

I've traveled in Borneo from, from planes to buses and at some point, I mean, it's not really visible here, but it's literally farming of palm oils until the horizon.

You see this grid system and the only reason why it's kind of didn't got to, to the pen on just yet is because they are slightly harder areas to get to 'cause they're not flat.

Uh, but yeah, also like traveling by bus, um, for hours and hours, you just see palm palm oil farm, uh, farms and they, and the kind of negative of the farm, the palm oils is they also suck the nutrients from the, from the land.

So after 30 years, the land is absolutely empty of any nutrients.

Uh, this is, this is a recent, uh, kind of scale of the oil palm and timber plantations just in area of sidewalk.

Again, those map changes incredibly even every few years.

So penan, and the only thing that kind of like residue from that nomadic lifestyle is that kind of semiotic of the forest that is still embedded in a, in the, in, in the village.

So I did notice certain similarities of the way they were kind of constructing oral science in the way they are kind of constructing fences.

So unfortunately, it's, it's still obviously present, but seems like that is the kind of transition that is eventually gonna disappear.

Um, Um, yeah, this is, this is an image, um, of, uh, some of the exquisite like tools that they build this, there is a, an incredible amount of baskets that they, uh, and an incredible amount of variety of baskets and again, it was really sad to understand that, uh, they kind of cultural technology is not really appreciated even by the local, other indigenous groups and obviously, uh, the, the, uh, evangelical mission, the church has got a great impact in the village, partly because there is a sense of, again, the sense of guilt and shame towards the animistic, uh, animistic religion and it is, it is really subtle, but it was, it is, yeah, they do spend a lot of time in a church.

It is the kind of focal point.

And, um, and a lot of the, a lot of the kind of external studies also funded by the church.

So if some, so if somebody wants to go in and do a secondary or study at university, it will be funded by the church, but then they have to come back and offer back years of work, basically.

So it's, it kind of lifts up, like it makes the penan, It, it creates a center in a community.

But unfortunately, again, if you see the bigger picture of what it happens, you know, here or in South America, you kind of know, know where everything is going and I am gonna talk about my art, art practice, and again, how this, uh, kind of, uh, intertwines into with my work as well.

Um, Um, when I was in, when I was in Borneo, I've made a series of, of obviously work and activities with, with the penan, but all, I also had my moments of like, solitude trying to like reflect on like what I'm seeing and what I'm kind of experiencing and this is, for example, an image that's I kind of, I created, like thinking about how it is to be inside of a tree and I, I was looking at the intersections, interrelations, inner, the patterns in the worlds, in the boundaries of a forest.

I was attempting to visualize this complex sense of correspondences.

I feel deeply connected to the penan because throughout my life I had experienced several, several moments of profound connections with nature.

This through solo hiking, wild camping, as well as working with indigenous group shamans and learning through medicinal plant.

Despite it being threatened, the penance still have that connection and live within that complex sets of correspondences with the environment and the as ancestral lineage and this is why I have decided to work with them, understand more in depth those correlations and be guided by my art practice to show it.

Uh, the most recent thing that I've been kind of making, uh, after the experience of, uh, of Borneo, um, I started to create this, um, tactile language made of ceramic symbols that I constructed myself and fired them.

Uh, and then kind of I'm assembling them in a, some sort of pattern and I'm almost, this is, this is quite a new project, so I'm kind of like still at, at the beginning of it, and it's still in progress, but I am, I am almost trying to create a new methodology to process this kind of multi-layered knowledge.

Um, and I'm trying to create a language that is dynamic, that is tactile, that is, is interchangeable, modular, and a language that is active.

I'm looking at pattern formations, some from Borneo and some coming from my personal language of dreams or subconscious and these are some of the, uh, closeups I have actually some of them here.

If somebody wants to have a look at them, and this is a panel basket, some of the compositions will attempt to convey that sacred connection to nature that we are losing, where only through poetry and metaphor, this process of remembering can be reactivated and everything started with just simply cutting out and using paper and kind of starting to like think about almost from backwards, how to like, think about those, those stories that the, that the penant told me and to conclude, I just would like to read like a very short, something about like my practice in a connection to this.

This works, it's called notes to the materiality of words, material qualities of the language.

Do words have gravity? How easy is to flatten the language out of the bag of clay, which contains endless possibilities of shapes and forms.

Eye form and define specific symbols through the process of fast extruding them, and then create infinite units.

I decide the shapes of the symbols and then will construct An open or closed image with them.

Those images will represent some kind of reality on our radar.

My, my emotions or stories from the past or the present, potentially an open-ended conversation, material memory through shaping, cutting, flattening dehy, dehydrating mud, extracting water from, from a tear.

How much water does the tear hold? Can you dehydrate a tear architecture of the symbol in architecture? We assemble elements and make sure they are rightly supported so the structure doesn't collapse.

For example, how does this process works with material language or written language? What is that invisible scaffold that holds meaning of sustain the actual process of becoming meaning? How many stories can be written within those symbols? Can I make new symbols? Symbols that represent indescribable things or emotions, like those paper of guts, that particular one that I kept and it just made me feel something.

How important is the presence of those type of symbols? Those symbols that don't have a meaning or are not describing anything? Maybe this is that space that opens up, if you are in nature, you're transported into a world that doesn't operate like language formatted through buildings or category systems.

Thank you, Really lovely. Thank much and evocative.

Very so sad and so suggested is such a very intuitive collaboration and something that clearly was being valued by the community.

Yeah, you have this and that is something so important to look for in Yeah.

A research project too.

To find that kind of feedback and interaction Is just, and make something useful for, for them, not just for assuming.

Yes. Yeah. And do you, do you feel that gar really, really, he came over as though it really mattered to him to have this potential to, to speak to, to decode the oral with Yeah.

With the younger people.

Yeah. I think he, I mean, the pan are incredibly, incredibly open.

It's kind of really like if you introduced by somebody who they trust, they just will open up your everything to you.

So they, they have incredible trust and they, and they really want people to be there who are not from there because they understand what's that is, is helpful.

So in that sense, they really, they're proud of their traditions and they also, um, yeah, they're also welcoming.

Obviously if you, if you accept I had to go through this, um, they have actually written a set of rules that a lot of indigenous groups are actually doing.

Mm-hmm. Uh, I've discovered that at the conference this summer.

Hmm. Because main, the main problem is of, as I said, academics or anthropologists coming and kind of writing beautiful papers.

But like they, they get absolutely nothing and sometimes those papers are not even published with their permission.

It's not, it's not, not that often, but it happens so that the ones that obviously ones trust opens you.

I, I'm also committed, I've committed myself to work with them for a longer period of time, so I'm obliged to go back.

I can't, they ask me not to just come in and go and move somewhere else.

Um, question.

Yeah. Developing very interesting visual language.

I was just thinking if you were, it, it, it sort of pulls up history.

It's a conduit of history.

I was wondering if you would, um, mix it with other, um, areas like the Amazon Forest and be able to use crossovers that would diversify your language building.

Um, yeah, that's a great idea.

Um, I think this part is really difficult because as a, is any, um, like as a part of the practice based PhD, you, your, your kind of final thesis, a part of the written one is also that, that the work and they kind of, uh, and it's very unusually artists I use a little bit like illustrators, they kind of illustrate, they expected to illustrate something and I'm just not interested in illustrate oral like directly.

cause it's like there's not, you know, it would be copyright plus.

Uh, there's no point.

It kind of exists in a, that language exists in that particular place.

But I was trying to just understand like almost working backwards.

Like forget about being inborn and trying to understand like kind of direct my attention to my practice for a little bit and, and try to just think about the way we communicate, you know, how, how like when Garant told, told me this thing of like that depth, that language was the written language, like that, that kind of spark or something and uh, so yeah, it's kind of still a work in progress, but trying to like underst also like working with clay, with materials, uh, like clay as a, as a material is quite versatile because you can also like make things that are quite porous and fragile, but you can also fire it and something's gonna be as hard as the stone.

Like na, NASA uses clay to like build a space agent, space agent.

But yeah, I'm kind of like right now I'm trying to like not focus on too many, uh, groups.

You have a question online? Um, I will unmute.

Yeah, I think so. Manchego, I've asked to unmute.

You should have the option.

Okey do. Okie Do. There we go Again. Um, Paulina, I just wanted to, uh, congratulate you on that notion that that of gathering the language that really hit hit me hard and, you know, it really is.

That's great. That is wonderful and I hope you really spin that out some, I dunno how, but yet thank you Martin.

There's another from Dottie.

Claire, maybe we got to do one in the room first. No. Okay.

Uh, Dottie.

Hey Paulina. Hi. Thank you.

Um, just really love the, both the talk and your, um, yeah.

The way you like responded to it.

I think that was really responded to the penan people.

Very inspiring. Um, I just wanted to show you this, and I don't know if anyone in the room or you can, uh, have any ideas what what this is because, uh, I have a feeling it might be from the part of the world you are in. Oh, Yeah, yeah. I think it's a Iban Uh, IBAN. Right. Okay.

So that's, that's from a different group.

Is it? Is it, is it, is it probably This for anyone to See? We can just about see. Thanks Dotty.

Yeah. So it's, uh, it's, it's a Camilla, I found this on Oxford Market a long time ago Doing your gathering.

Yeah, we've been out, we've been out, she's been out hunter gathering and, and, uh, I'm always up to something and, and, uh, I'd love to get, get together with you, But I, I was just wanted to, um, I sent you a message on Instagram, but I just wanted to say it'd be great if you could come down and do a art workshop with us in Oxford.

We really like that because I really like what you were making with the subconscious symbols.

And, um, it's something that I wanna, um, work with with groups down here because I feel like there's a lot, um, there's a lot of work that needs to be done on unconscious, um, nature relation and, um, relating to each other and, you know, and then, uh, I also wanted to just raise this thing, I put put on the chat as well about how the, the, the, so the symbolic language of the, uh, penan people really reminded me of, um, uh, like English countryside, um, uh, symbols of previous ages and I think something else was, uh, agreeing with me.

So there's, there's these things called witch signs, um, which are, which might be something you would want to look into, um, which is an equivalent way of people.

Um, so people like marking things about safety, about, uh, places to stay.

And, uh, so also like they were in America, they were called hobo signs, I think.

Um, and another thing that struck me was when I think the first, one of the first black and white slides you put up was, uh, uh, and I would like to remind me please, about the term for the, the, the, the symbols there.

Was it Ula, ULA Lan Milan? Uh, so that's, that's the philosophy, right? Milan is, Uh, with the forest And what was the name of the, um, the, the language of the leaves with the, the markings in them.

Oro, uh, OR You take up so Much Time, dart.

And, uh, okay, because I was thinking that those, um, those sums really reminded me of the oum script and uh, I was just, I guess I'm just thinking about how we have a lot of these same things in our own cultural heritage as well.

Absolutely. Yeah. Uh, of course. Yeah.

There's a lot of, in the Ingrid countryside of the kind of yeah.

Science that we learn when we scouting. Uh, So did, would you learn, you think you've learned how to use those signs yourself now? Uh, yes. Uh, I think I know like maybe 45 of them and I know how to make them cool.

Yeah. So, but I think there is much more to learn and they obviously kind of changing and sometimes depend on, make things up as well.

I've noticed somebody told me, Well they're bound to, I guess, 'cause new, new concepts and ideas will come up and new ways of, uh, new and especially because of the incursion of the, uh, kind of western farming life or the, you know, the arable list kind of, uh, life has got into their encroachment on their territory.

So they have to have new symbols to indicate, you know, A mobile phone.

Yeah. Or like, you know, crazy people with chainsaws, crazy chainsaw.

People are over that way, you know? Um, yeah, actually a, a, a symbol for the foreigner, like a foreigner as an outside of the village.

It is a, it's a rolled leaf with, uh, symbolizes a cigarette because depend don't smoke.

Um, so yeah, that's, that's again, that, that is in that particular village Or, or just a dead plant would of any kind probably would do the trick.

But thanks again. That was really, really fascinating.

I look for, I'm, I'm, I look forward to seeing the, the video on the catch up because, um, we couldn't quite watch the, couldn't hear the sound of your video clip.

So we, I'm looking forward to seeing that when it gets uploaded.

Thank you. Um, cheers. Um, thanks so much.

So interesting to hear it from an artist point of view as well, and not someone that's going in just to do kind of written, written research or verbal research.

Um, and I think what this, I dunno the guy's name, um, you all seem to know him already, but what you was talking about those symbols coming up in our subconscious and universally how, how these symbols are connected to ancient, ancient Egypt and then we look at what you are making and what the ana making, but there's symbols that you were showing seemed very much, they seemed really practical, like skinny ball, fat ball, cigarettes, warnings and I wondered if, if you got into any conversation with them about, um, communication this language, maybe about dreams or, or something other than just practical stuff and 'cause it is communi, there's this communication.

I wondered maybe that's what you've not been pri to as a, as an outsider.

I just wondered if it, if that language is just limited to practical information.

Yeah, it's, it's hard to say that, but I have been, yeah, I've been wondering about this because like, they seem to be sharing the same language with every person who is from outside.

Yeah. So I think they literally sat down and they said, these are the signs I've showing them.

Hmm. Anything else is not allowed. So, um, because When you start talking about being inside the tree and making the paintings from that position, I was like, that's the stuff I'd really love for you to talk with them about and wonder if they communicate things like this as well.

They're not art, you know, artists, it's more practical.

So yeah. Yeah, just mainly start thinking about dreams and subconscious and symbols coming up as Well. There is something which, like I, when I was there, I, I got at some point quite depressed about the kind of presence of the church, obviously.

I was just like, oh God, it's just like, it's gonna be like different, you know, even in two years gonna be probably quite different.

But like then, like this, this, this girl who has been working with the Penan for like, uh, 10 years, she told me, 'cause I, I was speaking about this and there was also an NGO that came in that time to kind of, uh, inspect the penan farming and I was just like, and they were, um, they were paid by the church.

Um, and I think it is a, it is a kind of way to kind of make them feel guilty about their heritage.

Like they should improve their, you know, the, the sewage system or things like that.

But anyway, uh, I was talking with this girl about this and I was just saying, oh, it's really sad.

Well, but then, then she told me Paulina like, don't worry about it.

cause like they have their own traditions, they're just not sharing them and she told me this experience because one day she was coming from MI and she, uh, and the plane was canceled because it's a low latitude plane and the kind of the, the, the airport is like, it's tiny.

So like they cannot land if, um, if it, there is a little bit of plane.

So anyway, they had to take this road, this uh, road that the, uh, logging companies use and they're really dangerous cause they, they just, uh, slide the kind of mud essentially and they had almost a massive accident. They almost died.

cause it, the car kind of slid almost into the, the bes.

Mm-hmm. And uh, as soon as they came back to the village, the whole, like the elders gathered the whole village in a church, closed all the doors and did an intense, she like didn't tell me they did that, but she did hours and hours of connected to the ancestors, like trying to understand why, you know, what, why this happens and few times, like I, I had that feeling like as well, like when I was there.

Uh, so like, so, so she basically told me, and I guess I have to trust her because she's been there for like 10 years.

They kind of like, you know, they, they also using the church Yeah.

The way they can use it.

But like, there is, uh, in, in her, in her opinion, there was still a strong set of, uh, connection to the past heritage.

It's just like, it's not necessarily shown to people because it's, you know, 'cause I, I can be seen also as a threat.

Yeah. Yeah. Because they ultimately, I think right now they do rely on donations from the church. Chris, do, do you wanna Say anything? Okay. Um, that was very, very moving.

Um, and I suppose the, the emotion which from you came out to all of us is sadness and so, I mean the, um, the rate of forgetting seems to be so rapid.

It's so astonishing.

I mean, when your, your, your elder friend, I forgets name, um, Garen Garen.

I mean he, when he said that, you know, that they know nothing about malong this primary spiritual concept and they need to be going into workshops with you to be exactly told about such an absolutely basic thing.

I mean, it is so that's so rapid.

Um, so I suppose I'm wondering whether, I mean, you asked me at one point about a year ago, didn't you, for, for me to send you, um, a copy of what actually was at one stage in the seventies or eighties, I suppose pr possibly the most famous, um, article chapter in the whole of social anthropology, Rodney need it's blood thunder and the Mockery of Animals.

So there's, there's Rodney Needin, there's Howell, and so many people doing the sixties, fifties, sixties, and seventies were doing field work.

It was a hugely, massively rich, credible culture all around that vast area.

So I would imagine that, um, it's one of those terrible situations where in order to recover the past to, to retain memory, it's ironic obviously that, you know, western anthropologists come in handy.

I mean, who else actually made records of these extraordinary complicated beliefs? I mean, it was really funny because I mean, because of me being there being interested in oral science, the, the youngsters found that interesting.

So then they, they got interested.

So there was this kind of like funny, like, yeah.

So yes, it's sad obviously because, but it's, it's That, that's that concept of Mulan.

I mean it's sounded to me that that the way the concept exists now as a result of decades and decades and decades of forgetting, I mean, it sounds to me like almost nothing left when of course it would've been so much about laughing at animals, not laughing, the blood thunder, the, the gods of the high, the gods under the water.

The so many things which are connected up with very similar concepts of, you know, life force in, in blood, the blood of animals that lot of women, it's, you know, Jeromes are, kill a concept, connected with the moon, all those things.

It just seemed extraordinarily denuded of all that richness.

Yeah, they were Course you don't, you you've been telling us that.

I mean, it's just such a that's exactly. Yeah.

But I, I suppose I, I'm just wondering, it just seems to me that you, you know, it might be helpful to, to go back to the classical anthropologies for those who really, those young kids who might want to really know about their their past because um, yeah.

It's, it is, it is reported quite well, unfortunately, to such a large extent Yeah.

By Western ans that were interested in these things in those days.

I mean, nowadays of course anthropologists have lost all interest in all that kind of stuff.

They just interested in social work at various kinds and, you know, what's called development all that crap.

But, um, but there was a time when yeah, antibodies were mainly interested in learning from other cultures how to be human and finding something new that we could be, you know, be inspired by him.

I mean, it was interesting 'cause Gar was, uh, he was telling me like, cause I think I, I mentioned like, I dunno if I mentioned that paper or something else, but he was asking me, can you send it to me? Because like, he actually, a lot of the books are written in the last 10 years about the penan of that area are basically based on his knowledge and he, he gave me a lot of books.

Like, so I I, I kind of, But you didn't come across anything about not, you mustn't laugh at wounded animals just yourself, Not, not through him and I think there is, um, like few times I was trying to, like, even, even with the, with the animistic uh, practices, uh, they had chosen which one to say to the outsiders.

Yeah. And there's this particular one about the bird.

But like, I feel like they, they are protect, it's, it's kind of really hard to understand if they are protecting it or if they don't want to reveal it because they, somebody will tell to somebody they still believing in it.

Mm-hmm. So this is really, uh, like, it's really hard to understand.

Obviously I didn't want to like push too much, so it Sounds to me as though the more secrecy the better.

But these, these papers that you're talking about, these recordings, like, I guess that's what I was trying to get at, like the secrecy of stuff, like what, what were, what has been revealed like through those anthropologies in the sixties and what is the secret still? Do you know what I mean? Like, we can only find out a certain to a certain extent through that and I think, I'm just trying to think as an artist, like going back with your practice, could that make visible something? But it might open up a another way of exchange because it's gotta be a sharing, hasn't it? Yeah. Can we have at the back and can we, um, make it that or will? Sure. Yeah. Uh, we'll speak to the Zoom. Oh yes.

Okay. Thanks so much. I loved your presentation.

Um, um, I also really enjoyed, you know, I know, um, following your Instagram, seeing, you know, seeing the journeys being revealed piece by piece as well, getting overview, um, I felt like, um, really, um, embodied a lot of ecofeminist methodologies like very, very naturally.

And, um, I wanted to ask you about the role of sensuality because it feels like the role of, I know you talked a little bit about materials, but also about the role of sensuality in what, in the work that you've created.

It feels like that was a, for me, that felt like a really important way that you were, um, communicating kind of non, non-verbally actually.

Um, interesting about how much research is verbal, but nonverbal courses, so verbal. Yeah, Yeah. Um, I guess some People Heard it. Okay.

I, um, yeah, I did, I did, uh, think about that.

I guess the kind of use of materials is quite important.

Use of clay or use of paper, the kind of materials that are not, I would not say from the land, but there's something, uh, connected to the water and again, as I was saying, clays is I'm really close to the material, the materiality of the clay.

Initially I wanted to potentially use clay in Borneo, but um, they, they don't have any infrastructure there and I kind of didn't want to like, bring my own set of materials and like destroy the local, uh, kind of tradition.

But yeah, it's like, it is really, um, I, I still don't really know how to phrase it, but like, I really loved, um, and that that is kind of connected to sexuality of the language.

I really love the kind of the way that kind of the penan uses the kind of material language in the village.

Like how, like how it is really visible that they still have a strong connection to the forest and that is simply by um, kind of comparing to like, you know, a city and just things are this and that is, everything's still, like, everything is kind of done with a

care that is unnecessary and there is a sense of craft that is also unnecessary, but it is just there.

So I guess that's the kind of thing that I'm trying to make.

Yeah. Just like look at a little bit more.

Does that make sense, Alyssa? Hi.

It was interesting and um, it's remind me of work, a friend of mine who's a social oncologist who works in as well, and she knows looking at the social structure, hunter gatherers, cultural men on the edges of cities and she said she noticed the roles within the community and who held the knowledge was changing depending on who was having to stay at home and who was having to go out and get work, who could get jobs and she noticed that, especially the role of women change, but in the countryside, well, she was around her.

Remember they, it was the women who knew about France and the berries and they looked after the children and they managed everything.

But when they went into the city asking to change stock playing hunter galleries, they were the ones who went and got the money.

So she said suddenly the men were at home. At home.

She says they, you know, but so the roles, so she noticed that the information that was being collected by different people when she was collecting it, and depending on whether she was in the edges of the city, whether she was in the middle of the city, depended when she went out to the areas which had some agriculture.

But then she changed. Was she going to sort back in the forest who was willing to give the information and she's been doing field work for the eons.

Uh, who gave the information? Who had the, was willing to give the information, who had had the information changed it, men or women or who was it? And the person within society, were they young? Were they old? Were they, but at the same time, she also noticed that the youngest, the newer generation weren't getting it.

This is interesting actually.

cause I had this conversation with one of my supervisors there and uh, yeah.

cause I was assuming the elders have the knowledge, but then for example, yeah, that's obviously not true.

Kind of depends like which family raised you and if that family had certain practices, you could be a, a teenager in heaven.

You know, there has been that some, some hunters in, in a village that they were 12 and they apparently do those were the people to ask.

Yeah. And also, um, yeah, so that is really interesting.

Like, for example, like that there is one artist in a village and, and he's got an incredible knowledge about materials and about how things obviously build and how things work in a forest because because of his practice.

Mm-hmm. So because of his practice, he will have much more information about certain color of the birds versus another one and um, another thing that that's they

told me last time was like if the rules are signed to certain people, they will, they will assign those rules, ba rules based on the character of the person.

So for example, a hunter who is dealing with very dangerous and poisonous darts, but who, who's got a static character is just not a good combination.

So apparently certain, yeah.

So certain like roles that specifically assign based on, uh, the character of the person, if it suits that, that, that type of job. If that makes sense.

That's because I remember her telling me, yeah, I can give you her name. She's really nice to Oh yeah, yeah. Would be lovely to, yeah. What, what, could you pass me her name? Yes. I can tell any more questions here, Lauren.

Yeah, no, I was suddenly thinking, I'm curious of if you also were tempted or actually did research the actual church, uh, the Christian Church because when you told this, uh, story about your friend who'd been working there for 10 years and she had this almost accident, death accident, and then they did this ritual in the church, uh, sort of the healing, I guess, uh, I mean that makes it sound like, you know, they're kind of using the church as a coverup to actually Kind of, I'm hoping we maintain their original, uh, the, the, the offensive, uh, heritage, uh, culture.

Yeah. Did you see more of that and that they kind of Yeah.

You know, have their own version of whatever goes on in Supposed to go the church? Yeah, because yeah, in like one of the book that Gar gave you to just like the, the, there was a very detailed description of the, of the method of the church getting to the Panal and it was like in the sixties they kind of assigned this woman, this nun, and she was kind of meeting, she was waiting for the penan in a specific areas in like in markets.

cause occasionally they would be coming outta the forest and exchanging goods, like essentially selling goods and exchanging for something else and then this, this women started kind of getting closer to the children and the women and that's how, you know, the kind of process of indoctrination started. But It was, yeah, there must be a lot of research about that, how you're seduced into the church.

Yeah. By all kinds of, uh, Some needs.

Someone together is like, the HUDs are very resistant indeed to Christian.

Um, they'll, they'll take stuff, they'll take free gifts of maze or whatever, but they absolutely resist being Christian.

Not, not everybody does, but they definitely keep that core of traditional stuff.

But if, but it's also interesting why this is a Malaysian state that there is so much Christianity penetrated.

Yeah. It's Muslim Christian, but yeah, it's mainly, I don't actually know if some of the Yeah, I think most of the pen are Yeah. Would be Christian.

I'm not entirely sure about it, but No, it, it's almost like, you know, the smart thing to do is like to sort of play, play along.

Oh yeah. Play underneath. You remain.

There has be, there have been many places where there is a relationship of an belief with Christianity.

Yeah. Many just, it just Asia.

Yeah. So like, there, there is a kind of feeling of, although, you know, although the way they Yeah.

They're talking kind of feels Yeah, of course.

I was wondering that, um, anthropologists sometimes do translate, uh, sort of ab aboriginal knowledge in what ways your translation is providing the sign language you have presented us is like a different way of translating those signs you have shown us.

How do you plan to connect these two set of languages and perhaps to devote like extra translation, including the lead signs you've shown us? Yeah. So like, um, this is a really hard one because like I am not trying to translate it.

Okay. Uh, I'm just, I'm, I'm not trying to like kind of illustrate whatever.

I didn't mean.

No, I was think of interconnection of your, like with what you have understood through their language. I'm not Certainly Not attempting.

Of course it's artwork. Yeah.

So in what ways it'll make a dialogue.

I'm still trying to figure that out, but I'm thinking about it as a method.

So like the symbols, so a method of creating stories or narrating stories.

Okay. So for example, I was thinking to use some of them, cause initially my idea was to create these like images, which would be like a, a, um, kind of a puzzle, like a mosaic piece with like grout and kind of fixed.

But then as I was making them, I kind of realized they're much more interesting when they are not fixed.

Mm-hmm. When they're kind of randomly arranged and that kind of made, made me think of like, oh, this is interesting.

Like it really changes the, the context.

Like if something is fixed Yeah.

It really changes that when something's, I can just take it and move it around.

So I started almost playing with like, like yeah, like as They do in forests.

Yeah, yeah. Maybe, yeah.

Maybe just trying to create like parallel of storytelling.

So the method they're using while giving messages to each other, you are trying to do with your parts, is it? Right.

Yeah. But maybe not consciously.

Oh, I'm not saying like p time. Okay.

Yeah. I'm still working on that. Okay.

That's, that's a hundred bucks question.

I just wanna Question. Yeah.

It's not so much a question, a question actually.

There is one. Um, but just a couple of comments.

Uh, Christine can't be with us tonight, unfortunately.

She's aware, asked, are you going to take your art to show them? I'd like to see your art in the forest.

Uh, yes, definitely. Yeah and we, we've been, yeah, they've been always aware of what I'm doing.

I'm exchanging, we are, we are on WhatsApp sounds That's great. Um, manchego earlier Lia shared about like other cultures who also use signs that his grandma at the ranch with a real, a real road running right through it, um, used to have coming to her door because she would feed them every time and they knew that. And so they would mark like the front of her house so that when they were coming through on the railroad, they'd keep going back to her house, which is pretty cool.

Uh, and otherwise the last one was from Dotsie and they just said it was very depressing to read that only 200 of them actually still live nomadically according to Wikipedia, Only 13 apparently.

13. 13, yeah. 13. Fully, fully nomadic and they, they not even, I think they kind of, not most of them are elders.

So I think that that's the last number I've heard.

13. Are you gonna say about this picture? Oh yeah. So Question, question about the picture.

Oh, but sorry, it's a very quick question. Question.

Sorry. Um, So the, the leaf symbols, um, there are some that they won't tell you what they are.

Yes. Um, are you recording those? Is there a problem about recording those? It seems that would be tragic if they were kind of lost, Obviously.

Um, so, uh, there is a, um, a person called We record without obviously not knowing the meaning.

Just record. This is a simple, we don't know what it means.

Yeah. So, uh, uh, Terry Zaman, who has been working with the pen for like 10 years and he actually introduced me to that community.

He's, he's publishing a book now with all of the signs that obviously they were happy to, to share with.

And, and I think the method is like they will still record them, but they will just not say so they will say this is not, uh, they are happy, they're not happy to share what the sign means.

Obviously he was trying to get, but like, yeah.

Uh, 'cause those are the sign that then I think actually Bruce Perry in, in his episode of, with the Pen, there was a sign about a ritual.

There was a stone, it was a curse.

It was a curse sign, uh, towards the neighbor or something. And then Is Bruce? Is Bruce? I don't know. He said he would be, but maybe Is he, is he around Bruce Paris, Bruce Perry? I don't think so, no. Unless He's under a different name.

Um, so yeah, this, I, I brought this picture because we have done it with the PanAm.

Uh, um, apparently Bruce is here earlier. Oh God. We can hold it up for everyone.

Yeah. So we, we have done it earlier, um, while we were painting the, the mural in a village and this, this was a picture that we took, uh, to a conference in Borneo.

Uh, uh, me, Gar and Zaman went to the conference and, uh, Tarik suggested to bring something of the village while we were already painting.

So we just, so we painted from sketches, sketch some of those elements that were on the mural.

Uh, and, uh, so this, this is for example, the process of, uh, saga tree, which is the, the main food during the nomadic life.

This is the, the heart.

Uh, and, and they did, I did got asked a question, like I, I would criticize him during the conference, like why is this written in English? But actually the pen decided to write it in English.

So it would be understood by, by the people in the conference.

But yeah. And then they give it to me.

They have the four on the back. Is that a fat one or skinny? Yes, yes. One, one another Fat, fat one. Yes, yes. It's Quite interesting pal.

cause did you say you trace some of, because that looks almost identical.

That figure is the one on the wall. So it is interesting.

Now this language is being traced and taken.

You're leaving the mural there, but then you've got this portable language that you're able to take as well, which is really Nice. Yeah. Yeah and because it's the same fig, I think it's The same. Yeah. It's, it is the same figure.

And, uh, it was interesting, uh, actually with the, with the Wild bo, it's quite funny story.

Mm-hmm. Because, uh, I think the, the children were, they were drawing the, the baskets, but then the, then the elders came in and they said, no, no, no, this is absolutely not how we used to hold the animals and they were kind of like really telling them off.

So essentially they were drawing things in pencils on the mural and then the elders would be coming and say, no and I, they, they were really tough and at some point I had a panic attack because I, I'm really bad at drawing trees and the pan banana obviously.

Like they exactly know how things should be.

So I, I called Tarik and I was just like, I just don't want to like, I don't want to like do anything here.

cause like they're gonna tell me off and then Tarek told me like, why don't you do like, then do everything and that's the kind of right thing anyway, right? Mm-hmm. But, um, yeah, it was kind of terrifying the process of like, it wasn't a game, which was just like, it has to be exact.

Um, so yeah, was was quite funny.

Do, do you know what he would have, uh, around his waist? There is something like, so does the, does the hunting, hunting darts would be here and this is where the poison would be.

Oh, is it? And again, this now you tell us.

They, they would also have different kind of symbols on them, depending if they would be penan or Iban.

So one of the penan in the village long, I now like, who is a, um, who's a teenager.

He, uh, he was drawing them, but then Gar again told him off because he was saying, this is Iban and he's like, I'm half.

So there was this kind of like moment of like, uh, yeah.

So it's like every kind of even decoration, uh, has got a very strong symbolic meaning.

What is the ladder for at the bottom in the front here and the, is it, this one looks like, so this was a, oh, Sega.

Sega. Ah, so this was a saga being kind of filtered through this basket and then Okay.

Run through and became water.

So then they would consume this and what does it say at the bottom? It says, uh, uh, long, long time ago in long lamai.

So this is the representation of the, um, it's supposed to be the representation of the transition, uh, the, the the transition period.

Yes. Thank you Lex.

Um, yeah, there's a question.

Someone's put their hand up actually, so I'll let them speak. That's Okay.

Hello Johnson. Hello. Hi. Yes.

It's just, just, um, saying that, um, where I'm asking whether, um, a lot of the penan, um, behavior changes, uh, are facultative at the minute.

Um, and, and if or when the majority of societies around them recede, then there is enough, uh, cultural memory within the population to return to that previous lifestyle.

But obviously within, you know, after a couple of generations that that base of knowledge will have gone too far, will have been too far lost to recover entirely.

But it seems as if they are quite strong in the face of what, in, in the light of what they're facing.

They seem to be quite resilient.

Well, because of the, the fact that they have, they all have this kind of main village and they also have land.

Each family has got a quite big amount of land.

When I saw it, uh, a lot of the, the youngsters apparently are coming back.

Yeah. After, after, after living in a city, they actually come back because they essentially can live in a much nice environment and once they, once they realize that they, they, they often actually come back.

Quite often they're trained as teachers and they come back and will be teaching, uh, will be sent back by the government to teach in uh, penan villages.

Right. Right. So actually that's, that is probably one of the good news news is they, they kind of realize the village they live in is, it's much a nicer place to live than a small little flat in a polluted city and working for nothing essentially.

Yeah. Thank you and thank you very much for your presentation and your work.

Thank you.

Just perhaps say that Jerome Lewis says that as soon as time together settle. That's It. That's it.

That's, it's settling with me. Someone lose everything.

cause when you're moving around you've gotta keep it singing up and so many things.

It's a part of being not settling itself means One of the aspects is often in terms of gender and women's autonomy and freedom as well.

But it may not be, it may not be The women you decide to where to move.

The kids were not apparent when they settled.

That's, So it's the opposite to what our friend was saying that suggesting.

Mm-hmm.

Yeah. Any more questions here or? No? We, we can decide to, when are we going to be able to see your art? I wouldn't say to say the art, the picture of the sun was absolutely amazing.

Yeah. And I know you had a little signs of the moon and the other picture, but are you gonna do an equally marvelous, magnificent picture of the moon? Was Just, that was absolutely stupendously brilliant.

Extraordinary fantastic in every way.

Sneaky Snake. And I'm just hoping you're gonna do another one as a moon.

Yes. That's a, that is a very good point. She's got work Art center at the moment.

Is, uh, is that, does the moon have some figure in the cosmology that you were aware of? Were you feeling in there was any sense about But they have a oral signs Yeah.

Represented the moon. And because in Malaysian and also in Penan language, uhhuh moon, uh, month and moon are the same words.

They would be, and it is Islam would Be, so if they, if you say so there is a, there's actually a sign one month and that is a, a sphere that is cut.

But I, I I, i have, I, I can't remember who told me that now, but it might not be true.

But I, 'cause I was asking them about the moon while I was there.

Mm-hmm. Um, and I dunno if that's true.

I dunno actually if they told me that or somebody has told me that.

But they said because the por is so dense, they were not, I didn't See They were, they needed to be more aware what was going on on the ground.

So they were not into the penan.

Were not into the looking at the sky.

But I am not sure about that.

So moonlight doesn't even penetrate foresters.

It's a bit like the situation in, in the, like The, the kind of constellations would be more happening in the forest.

They're kind of correlation.

Shouldn't that shouldn't stop you from doing a fantastic painting other way.

Absolutely. So it isn't affecting hunting.

It must do. It must do. But I guess, I Mean, what we, what we don't know, but, but yeah.

You say you were trying to imagine being a tree when you're making it.

Yeah, yeah.

Try trying to imagine how to be inside the tree.

Like what, how the kind of, the filters that we obviously cannot see because of our sense of being limited.

Yeah. How kind of things opened up? Um, Can you just say a little bit, what, what made you paint that and what mood were you in and where did the idea come from? Where were you when you're painting it? How long did it take? Just A little bit.

I know a big question, but just a few.

Well, it was interesting because, um, I was, uh, so I was painting this, I was painting this few images while I was there and uh, it, it, it is very, it was really difficult to work actually.

cause I had this, I had this tiny room.

I had this tiny desk.

Uh, there was not like glide, there was only candlelight and I, and I saw those as all negatives and obviously it wasn't and it was like, uh, and, and I was kind of surrounded by kind of anti mosquito, uh, like in a, in a circle cause they were absolutely destroying me.

Um, but I just, I dunno, there's something like I have never done anything as dense as this kind of three watercolors.

Wow. That's the one. So I like the eyes the second, the red One. Yeah.

The eye there.

Picking out with all it little moon crystal balls and the second one.

Totally genius. I mean, we do need one and I'd rather go out.

The body needs a kind of, you can have version as that's sort of logo.

Yeah, yeah.

I'm gonna, are commissioned We commission. Of course, of course. You can have it. I'll be delighted.

Talk to the house. So are we getting there Is a question from Leon.

Hi. Hi Paulina. Thanks. That's absolutely beautiful.

Uh, I was just thinking about your methodol well, your symbols that you've created and the fact that your, um, your feeling that you can't kind of stick them down.

You don't want to grout them and it made me think about the, the, the way that there's only 13 people still moving around being nomads and I wondered if there's

some connection between that fluidity and that the fact that the, it's so essential for things not to be stuck down and then you mentioned earlier, I'd love to hear what, I can't remember quite what you talked about a flattening effect of language and how that loses.

Its kind of, um, what's the word? Its buoyancy or its life kind of thing.

So I, yeah, it was just, I just had those thoughts.

Um, but yeah, I loved it. Thanks.

Yeah. I, it's, uh, yeah, it really made me think about this.

Like, I, I have always been things that I would do that would fall from my desk onto the floor would be usually the thing that I'm kind of made me wonder.

Yeah. Having something that is something that I control and I think that's how perhaps this expresses the two different worlds.

Mm-hmm. And I'm right now drawn in, into that world of the wonder.

Hmm. And to kind of represent that.

Absolutely. Yeah.

You are right in between, aren't you at the Moment. It's, it's interesting about this that those 13 people Yeah, that is kind of sadly at the back of my, kind of at the back thought often. Yeah.

Thanks. Good luck with the next bit.

Oh, mark is over there with a question, don't you?

It's not really a question. I'm just gonna, my thought processes might be, might not be the same as everyone else, but perhaps we shouldn't get quite so pessimistic about the fact that people are shifting from one form of society to another, just in one generation or less.

Because if that's possible, it somewhat suggests that one could shift from this form of society to a more socialist form of society. Elements perhaps have come together a communism and other elements as well in a very short time and considering the state of the planet, I think we have no choice but to do that sometime. So that's Fantastic.

Yeah, that's a very good note to end on. Thank you.

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Paulina Michnowska
Notes from the Forest (Seminar)
Storytelling with the Penan of Borneo
Feb 4, 2025

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