



KEBON INDAH

MINTIO & KABUL,
KELOMPOK BATIK TULIS SIDO LUHUR,
COLLABORATION



Published on the occasion of the exhibition

Kebon Indah
Mintio & Kabul, Kelompok Batik Tulis Sido Luhur, Collaboration

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This exhibition displays a set of artworks which combines the tradition of batik making with portrait photography. It was conceived as part of NUS Museum's current exploration into the theme of portraiture which includes the exhibition *Dressing the Baba* (5 December 2012 – 31 July 2013), the *Presenting Portraiture* talk series, and a forthcoming exhibition at NUS Museum. This selection from the *Malam Di Jari Kita* series enables us to widen the discussion from a 19th/early 20th century focus to encompass contemporary exercises in the representation of self and others. For this, we thank Ms Agnes Tan, founding donor of NUS Baba House, for the donation of the *Malam Di Jari Kita* artworks. We are also grateful to Mr Peter Lee, honorary curator of NUS Baba House and an avid researcher and collector of batik textiles, for introducing the set of artworks to NUS Museum.

The artworks were produced by artists Samantha Tio (Mintio) and Budi Agung Kuswara (Kabul) working hand in hand with batik practitioners Ibu Suminah and Pak Sukardi. We would like to express our gratitude for their co-operation towards the development of this exhibition. We also thank batik makers Ibu Tri Sugiarti, Ibu Tukinem, Ibu Tuti, Mbah Medi, Mbak Surani and Mbak Yamtini – their reflections offered us valuable insights into the *Malam Di Jari Kita* project from a participant's viewpoint. Thanks also to Kabul for interpreting the conversations.

Our appreciations also go to Ms Amalinda Savirani for her essay contribution, and to Ms Kamielah Khairoullah for translating the original information about the artworks from Bahasa Indonesia to English.

FOREWORD

AHMAD MASHADI

The exhibition features a series of textiles produced combining photographic and batik techniques, an art project initiated by contemporary artists Samantha Tio (Mintio) and Budi Agung Kuswara (Kabul) in 2011, and developed with the batik makers of Sido Luhur based in Kebon Indah, Central Java. As entrepreneurs of Sido Luhur, Ibu Suminah and her husband Bapak Sukardi took on principal roles in discussions with the artists, and directing and participating in production processes alongside other batik makers. For the contemporary artists, the project is conceptually framed within the question of representation and agency, using portrait photography as an initial device onto which perspectives of self are engaged and interrogated. As aims, these enter into a complexity where perspectives, motivations and eventual responses of the batik makers generate dynamics of mediation and exchange; as encounters between loftiness of activism and efficacy of predicament.

Two essays accompany this modest publication. The first by Amalinda Savirani explores the world of batik communities in Central Java, Indonesia, in particular the status of the batik workers relative to efforts in promoting batik products and their successes, positioning the collaboration as ways to 'exert the existence' of the batik makers. The second, by curator Foo Su Ling, explores the interactions and exchanges that took place between artists and batik makers, as attempts

to examine the varied motivations and speculate ways in which diverse practices and their conditions interact to transform attitudes and regard, not necessarily affecting economic change, but as the necessary creation of an indeterminate space to construct narratives and prospect individual directions.

These works are generously donated by Ms Agnes Tan. The NUS Museum and the Baba House are grateful for her ongoing support through which we hope to continue to develop our programmes that facilitate the appreciation and awareness into Singaporean and regional heritage and culture. We thank Samantha Tio, Budi Agung Kuswara, and the batik makers of Kebon Indah – Ibu Suminah, Bapak Sukardi, Ibu Tri Sugiarti Ibu Tukinem, Ibu Tuti, Mbah Medi, Mbak Surani, Mbak Yamtini and others – for their kind cooperation in the development of this exhibition. We also thank Ms Savirani for her essay contribution to this publication.

Ahmad Mashadi
Head, NUS Museum

ART, COMMUNITY, COLLABORATION

FOO SU LING

Malam Di Jari Kita (The Wax On Our Fingers) is a series of works resulting from the collaborative efforts of Singapore photographer Samantha Tio (Mintio), Indonesian contemporary artist Budi Agung Kuswara (Kabul) and batik makers of the Sido Luhur group from the village of Kebon Indah in Central Java's Bayat region. The series consists of eight artworks – four individual pieces, two diptych, a triptych and a quadtych – which combine the traditional art of batik with contemporary photography. In Bahasa Indonesia, *malam* translates to 'night' but as a play of sound in the Javanese language, it also refers to 'wax', a fundamental material in batik production.

Batik is one of two techniques employed in making the artworks, the other being cyanotype – a method of printing photographic images on to fabric – executed by Mintio and Kabul using the negatives from a medium format camera. The production of each artwork starts with tracing on to cotton fabric the silhouette of a batik maker's image, photographed earlier as single individuals or in family groups. The cloth is passed on to the batik practitioners who are invited to incorporate batik motifs of their choice on the background and in areas

representing their attire. In the final stage of the process, the cyanotype technique is used to fill the silhouette with the photographed image of the batik maker.

Focusing on the interactions between Mintio and Kabul with the batik makers of Kebon Indah, this essay examines the artistic and social dynamics between contemporary artists and traditional craft community, the outcomes, and considers the fluid, often unpredictable nature of such community-based art initiatives. The terms 'artist' and 'maker' and their attendant categories of 'art' and 'craft', prompts considerations into their comparability, relative status, value, and also the question of authorship. Where the lines that divide such categories are blurred, in this case through the proposition of a 'collaboration', in what ways can the destabilizing impact be rendered productive? Can 'collaboration' be conceived here as a device in democratizing prevailing approaches in the production and reception of art, offering insights into the shift in

artistic practice away from object production to outcomes that demand a framework of inquiry beyond the paradigm defined by 'art' and 'craft'? Further, the term 'community' and its inference to a hermetic society bound by tradition and continuity deserves scrutiny, for it is not impervious to shifts in taste and the introduction of newer technologies to which it has the agency to respond through aesthetic choices, and economic decisions on scale and viability. In the sections that follow, we contemplate how this agency is expressed through an encounter with contemporary artists such as Mintio and Kabul, and how *Malam Di Jari Kita* contributes to ongoing discussions on the significance of collaborative art practices and the social and aesthetic values they generate¹.

Each artwork in *Malam Di Jari Kita* is also a batik piece, linking it to a category of cultural material with a history of association with locales and communities; mode of production; circulation and use; and encounters with modernity, transformations and changing ecologies of the market. As part of a broader category of Southeast Asian art and folk textiles, batik formed part of an emerging discipline in the 1960s initiated by William Willetts during his tenure at the University of Singapore (renamed from University of Malaya in 1962). Willetts added village cloth as a category to the Museum's collection at a time when there was little regard for crafts in museological discourses². Art historian T.K. Sabapathy argues that with the deliberate focus on craft traditions, Willetts had 'sought fresh

criteria for museum acquisitions and widened the base of art historical scholarship to include a broad spectrum of material cultures'³. As the beneficiary of *Malam Di Jari Kita* – artworks which innovatively combine a craft tradition (batik) with a contemporary artform (photography) – NUS Museum is presented the opportunity to engage Willetts' spirit of bringing into the collection 'relatively unknown' materials with the potential of opening up fresh discussions on art and museology.

Willetts recognized that as a cultural material, textiles have the capacity to foster awareness of the social, cultural and economic lives of societies that produce them. In 1964, he curated the exhibition *Indian Textiles* which included an accompanying catalogue detailing his observations of the processes by which different communities produce and pattern textiles. He also includes brief comments on the economics of India's traditional textile industry whereby he discloses his pessimism about its viability. With the labour and time required to complete a piece of textile and the meagre returns from its sale, Willetts anticipated that the industry was incapable of 'protect[ing] itself against competition from the mills'

Each artwork in *Malam Di Jari Kita* is also a batik piece, linking it to a category of cultural material with a history of association with locales and communities; mode of production; circulation and use; and encounters with modernity, transformations and changing ecologies of the market.

and 'the prospect of total extinction' loomed⁴. Another exhibition at NUS Museum in 2009 – *Past-Present: Craft Communities in Contemporary India* – was based on a student study trip of craft communities in present day Northern India; the catalogue essays suggest that economic conditions remain challenging in these societies⁵.

With the present exhibition, our attention shifts to a textile community closer to home. In her essay *Centering the Marginal: Batik Workers in Indonesia*, Amalinda Savirani gives an account of developments in the central Javanese batik industry after a catastrophic earthquake destroyed significant segments of the Yogyakarta and Central Java provinces in 2006. A healthy interest for batik textiles has

developed but discourses about the industry are directed at the artistic and economic dimension, neglecting the 'people aspect'⁶. Savirani questions the future of a trade where wages are barely adequate for the worker's daily subsistence. In this regard, she commends the initiative of Mintio and Kabul whose artworks position as its primary focus the batik makers and in so doing create 'a space for the batik makers to appear and exist in the batik discourse'⁷.

MALAM DI JARI KITA - THE PROJECT⁸

The project germinated in January 2011 during Mintio's six-month residency at Ruang MES 56, a Yogyakarta art collaborative which encourages experimentations in photo-based artworks. The ubiquitous presence of batik textiles caught Mintio's attention and drew her to batik workshops in the outskirts of Yogyakarta. Observing the process of producing *batik tulis*⁹, Mintio realized the intensity of labour and time involved, making the finished product unaffordable for the batik makers to keep for their own use. The exclusiveness of hand-made batiks and its immense popularity in both local and foreigner markets present a jarring contrast to the anonymity and modest social conditions of those who make the textiles; this gulf in the standing of the product vis-à-vis its makers motivated Mintio towards a project which would foreground the hands behind the graceful textile expressions. As a fine art photographer, portraiture as a way of presenting this community came to mind.

Common interests and intersections in their practice led Mintio to collaborate with Kabul during the residency; both are earnest about involving communities in their art projects and explore ways of bringing contemporary practices to groups

that do not normally visit spaces where such activities are held. Moving within Yogyakarta and its outlying areas, Mintio and Kabul looked for potential project partners by calling on workshops known for their batik traditions. The village of Kebon Indah prides itself on the production of *batik tulis* and it was here that the artists walked into Batik Wahyu Putro, a workshop which colours fabrics using only dyes made from natural materials. For owners Ibu Suminah and her husband Pak Sukardi, experimenting with new ideas forms part and parcel of their batik enterprise and the workshop collaborates with collectors and distributors in the production of customized batik pieces. The concept of combining batik and photography piqued their curiosity and before long, they agreed to be part of the project, eventually becoming crucial members in the collaboration.

A typical batik workshop has a small team with one or more person specializing in a different stage

of production. The process starts with tracing the design on cotton fabric and at Batik Wahyu Putro, this duty is assigned to a young worker Mbak Tri. Directing attention to her role, Mbak Tri's portrait with her mother Ibu Tukirah is presented against a background bearing only traced motifs. The step after tracing involves the application of wax to cover areas on the design that are to be protected from colour when the cloth is immersed into dye. This is arguably the most time consuming part of the whole process where wax is repeatedly applied and removed, as many times as there are colours on the piece, to allow for progressive dyeing of the fabric in different colours. The task is undertaken by Ibu Suminah's sisters, Ibu Sulami and Ibu Yatmirah, and her mother-in-law. Pak Sukardi manages the dye preparation and colouring, followed by boiling the fabric to remove the wax. He is assisted by Ibu Tukirah whom we have mentioned. Most of the batik makers from Batik Wahyu Putro participated



Mintio (left) tracing motifs on cotton fabric with Ibu Suminah looking on.



At the home of Ibu Tri Sugiarti: Ibu Hartini applying wax on a batik piece. (Photo by Foo Su Ling)

in the project. It was also at this workshop, with Pak Sukardi and Ibu Suminah working hand in hand with Mintio and Kabul, that the experiments to create batik designs on fabrics with cyanotype prints took place.

There were other project participants from the batik making community. The waxing stage is labour intensive and most workshops engage additional hands to assist in the task. Forming the core of this additional workforce are ladies in the village who work from home to supplement their family income. Those living in close proximity

to one another join a *kelompok*¹⁰ for mutual support. Kebon Indah has five *kelompok* and participants of the *Malam Di Jari Kita* project are from *Kelompok Batik Tulis Sido Luhur*¹¹. As leader of the *kelompok*, Ibu Suminah made the initial introductions which paved the way for the contemporary artists to become acquainted with the other batik makers. During the project, the participants would also occasionally seek Ibu Suminah's views whenever they wanted a second opinion on dress style, pose or the selection of motifs.

Collaborating with the batik makers had a key bearing on the medium used for the *Malam Di Jari Kita* suite of artworks. The artists had initially chosen silk but it is not a fabric that is regularly used in the batik process and the participants found it difficult to be creatively engaged as dealing with the technical aspect proved to be a challenge. Mintio and Kabul eventually elected to use the regular cotton cloth that the batik makers are familiar with. To print the photographic images on to cloth, the artists had considered digital printing but were unable to locate suitable facilities in Yogyakarta;



A piece of artwork after the first round of colouring.



Dipping the fabric in boiling water to remove the wax.

the cyanotype technique came up as the only choice available to them.

As a way of introducing the project to residents of Kebon Indah, Mintio and Kabul set up a field studio and invited interested villagers to have their photos taken. A photo session in a makeshift studio was a novelty which generated much interest and received considerable response. The cyanotype process was used to print the shots from these sessions and at the conclusion of Mintio's residency, work-in-progress samples were available. The artworks in their final form would be accomplished only after another year of experimentation.

RELATIONSHIPS, EXPERIMENTING, EXPERIENCING

The project saw a significant social resonance as a result of the willingness of the contemporary artists and the batik making community to

commit to a prolonged engagement with each other. For a year and a half, Mintio and Kabul made frequent trips from Yogyakarta to Kebon Indah. During each visit, Ibu Suminah, Pak Sukardi and various batik makers took the time to meet the artists, never grudging this regular intrusion into their lives. Mintio recollects these interactions:

For all the pieces, the decision on the poses and choices in the photographs were made in a rather long process. From the beginning when we first met the individual batik makers, we went through many sessions of discussions and sharing, each differing in length. The discussions were mainly on personal matters such as family life and everyday activities. We didn't directly talk much about the work. From my point of view this is a cultural aspect of life in a Javanese village. People are regularly more open to topics on the family than to directly talk about art or work. So with that said, the decision making process was very gradual and it had a lot of influences from the kind of narratives that were shared. Most of the process was extremely organic.

Personal relationships were built between the contemporary artists and members of the batik group; the familiarity and trust that developed created an environment which was conducive for a variety of inputs, candid discussions, debates and negotiations leading to fruitful decisions. In this regard, Mintio's account of the image shortlisting phase is informative:

After the portraits were taken, I started to make a selection. As a trained photographer, I thought that I would be in the position to pick the ones that would best represent the sitters. Pinta, who helped me with translations in the early part of the project, was sure that the selection from the batik makers would be different, and she was right! Picking the photos involved an exchange of views about why one image was preferred over another. Sometimes the batik makers and I tried to influence each other's choices. The sessions also evoked a lot of personal memories... marriage, children, family events, etc, and decisions emerged during these chats.

Allowing ample time for activities which involved interactions was important in accommodating the informal structure of engagement that prevailed for most of the project. While Mintio and Kabul had a general project plan for accomplishing their objective, the timeline and progress was not always within their control. Kabul's description of the mode in which participants were confirmed offers an idea of how flexibility reigned over conformance to a precise plan:

A lot of people turned up for the initial photography sessions but we were not sure who would continue working with us. Eventually, we went to each lady's home to ask if she would like to be part of the project. Some people were not sure, others were away, a few said they were interested but did not come for the follow up sessions. The process of narrowing down to the final participants was quite fluid, the criteria was mainly their interest in coming on board.

Although they initiated the project, Mintio and Kabul recognised that as much as they could give to the

process, there was also a lot to be learnt from the batik makers. This unassuming manner, and the approach of encouraging each person to apply her skill directly on the artwork, inspired a sense of ownership among participants, a facet crucial to the project's success. Almost a year on, participant Ibu Tri Sugiarti still brings out her copy of the exhibition brochure¹² either when reminiscing the experience or to describe the project to her guests¹³.

Conversations with Ibu Suminah also reveal feelings of pride and achievement:

I recently joined the internet programme in our village and did a search for *Malam Di Jari Kita*. It was exciting to find the video and information about the project. When I

meet someone who is familiar with the internet, I would ask them to search for the phrase *Malam Di Jari Kita*.

When Pak Sukardi talks about the project to others, he proudly declares that these batik pieces are the only ones of their kind in the world.¹⁴

For its participants, *Malam Di Jari Kita* offered a rich artistic experience and opportunity for experimentation.

For its participants, *Malam Di Jari Kita* offered a rich artistic experience and opportunity for experimentation. Kabul points out that being the first experiment of its kind, no

one was sure how the works would turn out. Prior to the project, neither he nor Mintio had experience with the cyanotype process, and the technique was attempted relying on YouTube as the instructor! Combining the cyanotype and batik processes demanded hours of trial and error:



Ibu Tukinem and Mbak Ambar posing for the camera at a field studio.

We used the piece of Mbak Surani and Mbak Yamtini with their children for the first test. I applied wax around the areas we were going to print so as to prevent the cyanotype solution from bleeding into areas with batik design. After printing the image, we boiled the artwork to remove the wax. Unfortunately, the cyanotype image changed colour so we had to do the whole piece again. After trying a few methods, I found that the best way was to carefully scratch off the wax.

Schooled in visual arts, Mintio achieves the desired outcomes in her works through meticulous control of the artistic process. For her, opening up to the artistic sensibilities of other cultures, adapting and innovating as the artworks are being developed formed a key aspect of her experience:

On one occasion after a batik maker had chosen the design for her piece, I attempted to trace the motifs, positioning them according to a design idea I had in mind. The result did not seem to have an overall coherence as a batik pattern and in the end I left it to the batik makers.

I wanted certain parts of the design to be in specific colours but this did not always happen as planned. For economies of scale, the colouring process is done in batches so when the workshop prepares dye of a particular colour, we had to take advantage of it or wait for the next colouring cycle. This eventually determined the colours of the artworks.

I learnt to become more comfortable with the idea of loosening the control. Expecting that things might change halfway, allowing this to take its course, and appreciating that change can result in something beautiful and meaningful. I guess we cannot over-engineer a community to make art, the process has to embrace its rhythms and traditions.

The combination of portraiture and batik patterns creates an immediate association between the sitter and her occupation, at the same time bringing attention to her skill and acknowledging the crucial role she plays in the industry.

For participants from the batik community, the project was an interesting encounter with self representation. Ibu Tukinem who posed with her daughter Mbak Ambar

recalls some shots where she had donned a shorter pair of trousers. As she reviewed the photos, she decided that something longer would be more suited for her age group. The project forms a part of the memories she shares with her daughter; during a recent visit to Yogyakarta, the pair passed the Indonesia Contemporary

Art Network and reminded each other of the exhibition¹⁵. Ibu Tri Sugiarti enjoyed the photo sessions, the experience of seeing them being

Images printed with the cyanotype process.



Reviewing and selecting the portraits.



gradually transformed, and eventually exhibited. Not at all sure what to expect at the beginning, the artworks have turned out to be much more than what she had imagined.¹⁶ Mbak Surani whose portrait includes her sister and their children found it amusing that shots were being repeatedly taken with minute adjustments in posture and pose.¹⁷

In the case of Pak Sukardi and Ibu Suminah, the experimentation included the creation of a few new motifs. Designed by Pak Sukardi, the flourishing plants in the triptych of Ibu Suminah and her sisters is an expression of the sitter's admiration for the botanical environment and her ideal of a meaningful life being one where people coexist harmoniously with nature.¹⁸

The visual conceptualization of the artworks arrests our attention, particularly with reference to Mintio and Kabul's intention that the series would serve to acknowledge the batik workers' role as cultural-makers in Indonesian society. In Chinese and Western portrait painting traditions, the inclusion of objects alongside the sitter offers clues about his/her profession, status, achievements, wealth and interests. This visual strategy is adapted in *Malam Di Jari Kita*. Portraits of the batik makers are set against a backdrop of motifs designed and executed by participants from the kelompok. The combination of portraiture and batik patterns creates an immediate association between the sitter and her occupation, at the same time bringing attention to her skill and



Kabul applying paraffin on the outline of areas where images will be printed.

acknowledging the crucial role she plays in the industry.

ONGOING CONVERSATIONS

Mintio's curiosity about the circumstances surrounding batik makers led her to initiate the project. She provided the artistic concept and defined a general plan leading towards the objectives, but refrained from adopting a position of the 'artist as a

director' who controls every aspect of the script. Her mode of operation was to facilitate, adapt and innovate as the project progressed, allowing for the exchange of ideas with the batik makers and the incorporation of their perspectives. Through democratic dialogue, fresh possibilities in aesthetics were realized, encompassing the traditional and the contemporary. The batik makers' agency in the creative process was recognized, and the space given



Placing the film negative on the artwork after a coat of light-sensitive solution is applied on the area where a print of the image is to be made.

for them to become co-producers of artworks that are consensual representations of themselves and their community.

No measurable social impact or transformation may be immediately evident but the collective building of social knowledge through the interactions cannot be disregarded. As Steven Bridges notes, in encounters of this nature, inputs from different participants are '[metabolized]' to

create new forms of knowledge that, in turn, become subject positions to be exposed and further metabolized through the course of other activities'¹⁹. Through this continual process of 'metabolizing information', our collective social consciousness and the pool of experience and ideas from which we can draw are consistently refined and expanded.

Mintio represents the 'original and distinctive' voice which triggered the



(TOP) The assembly of cloth and negative is sandwiched between two glass plates and exposed to light. The solution on the cloth changes colour leaving a positive of the image.



(LEFT) Washing off the remnant solution on the cloth.

project into existence and in Claire Bishop's writings on collaborative art practices, she argues for the acknowledgement of such singular authorial capacity which has been sidelined on percepts of democratic and ethical consciousness²⁰. There are, however, other voices making a case for collective authorship – according of equal authorial credits to all participants within a collaborative project. These debates are pertinent in the context of *Malam Di Jari*

Kita where a visually compelling set of artworks have emerged. As the series is introduced to a wider audience, it accrues artistic capital which advances the position and interests of those credited for its authorship. The project saw a number of parties contributing in various capacities. Besides the inputs of the contemporary artists, Pak Sukardi was the hand behind the motifs which he designed with knowledge of the community's batik traditions; Ibu

Suminah was an active participant as well as the person to whom the other batik makers approached for opinions relating to aesthetical choices for their portraits. Each of the other batik makers can claim a distinct role in the process for it is her image and her selection of accompanying motifs that gives the portrait its visual form.

Collective authorship proposes equal attribution of credit with the idea of relatively equitable contribution by each individual. By what criteria do we measure the varied forms and quantum of each participant's input to a collaborative art project? In the absence of a framework for quantifying individual effort, should an egalitarian system be adopted and what are the issues that would arise with this approach? Mintio and Kabul envision *Malam Di Jari Kita* to be artworks that would generate sustainable conversations as they are viewed by a range of audiences. In bringing up the complex nature of attributing authorship, I have sought to use their project to inspire such a conversation; one which would become increasingly crucial with the rising trend of artist–community collaborations.

Foo Su Ling is a curator at NUS Museum.

Unless otherwise stated, the photographs in this essay belong to the *Malam Di Jari Kita* project team.

ENDNOTES:

- 1 In discussing the social and artistic outcomes of *Malam Di Jari Kita*, I have referenced the framework of analyzing participatory art projects in the writings of Claire Bishop and Grant H. Kester.
- 2 William Willetts was curator and director of NUS Museum's predecessor institution, the University of Singapore Art Museum, from 1963 to 1973. During his tenure, he added to the collection two categories of objects generally labeled as craft traditions – textiles of Indian and Southeast Asian origins, and Southeast Asian ceramics.
- 3 Sabapathy, 'Past-Present', 16.
- 4 Willetts, 'Indian Textiles', 8, 12 and 14.
- 5 NUS Museum and NUS University Scholars Programme (USP) co-organized this exhibition.
- 6 Savirani, 'Centering the Marginal', 16.
- 7 Ibid, 17.
- 8 Details of the project were gathered in 2013 during a number of conversations and email correspondence between this author and Mintio and Kabul.
- 9 In *batik tulis*, the designs are hand drawn on to the fabric and the application of wax is carried out with a canting, a hand-held device with a wooden handle and a metal reservoir at the end for dispensing melted wax. *Batik tulis* differs from *batik cap* which is also hand-made but uses a patterned stamp for wax application.
- 10 A work group or collective.
- 11 Sido Luhur is a batik motif believed to have been created during the Mataram period. (<http://fitinline.com/article/read/keunikan-makna-filosofi-batik-klasik-motif-sido-luhur>)
- 12 At the conclusion of the project in 2012, an exhibition was held at the Indonesia Contemporary Art Network in Yogyakarta. A brochure in Bahasa Indonesia was published for the occasion.
- 13 Ibu Tri Sugiarti, Conversation with author on 17 July 2013 with Kabul interpreting.
- 14 Ibu Suminah, Conversation with author on 17 July 2013 with Kabul interpreting.
- 15 Ibu Tukinem, Conversation with author on 17 July 2013 with Kabul interpreting.
- 16 Ibu Tri Sugiarti, Conversation with author on 17 July 2013 with Kabul interpreting.
- 17 Mbak Surani, Conversation with author on 17 July 2013 with Kabul interpreting.
- 18 Ibu Suminah, Conversation with author on 17 July 2013 with Kabul interpreting.
- 19 Bridges, 'Making the Invisible Visible', 85.
- 20 Bishop, 'Artificial Hells', 18-26.

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CENTERING THE MARGINAL: BATIK WORKERS IN INDONESIA

AMALINDA SAVIRANI

Bayat area is well known in Central Java as a centre of batik production, specifically the village of Kebon. During the colonial times, the Dutch recognized Bayat to be part of the “vorstenlanden” region together in which the royal capitals of Yogyakarta and Solo are located. The batik motif that batik workers are famous for is the pattern of the “vorstenlanden” areas, which is dominated by the color of brown (*soga*) and blue (*biron*); as well as motifs typical to the palace such as *wahyu tumurun*. The batik workers from Bayat have long been a backbone of the batik industry in Solo, much to the fact that almost everyone involved in producing batik in Bayat would have either worked at a batik enterprise in Solo or worked from their homes to support the factories there. In short, Bayat is an important place

for the batik industry in Java for a long time until today. According to the Klaten statistics of 2010, from a total number of 1,598 people in the Kebon Village, 169 women worked as batik makers.

Bayat batik workers are known for their fine batik or locally known as “batik tulis”. There are two kinds of batik discerned from the process of making it. The first is batik produced by manual technique, consisting of fine batik (*batik tulis*) and stamped batik (*batik cap*). The second is machine-processed batik production, known as printed batik (batik printing).

It is labeled as textile with batik motif in order to differentiate between the manual and the machine-based production. The batik discussed in this essay exclusively refers to batik tulis, though it is difficult for audiences without batik knowledge to distinguish between the few techniques.

BATIK BAYAT, EARTHQUAKE AND THE BATIK REVOLUTION

When the earthquake occurred in Yogyakarta and Central Java in May 2006, Kebon Village was smashed along with its batik industry infrastructure. Thanks to the International Organization from Migration (IOM) and their programs in aid of the earthquake victims, the infrastructure of Klaten was restored and the social and economic activities of the region was revived. Apart from rebuilding the batik production infrastructure, IOM facilitated the marketing of batik products from Klaten by organizing exhibitions and various events in Yogyakarta. The current situation of the batik workers in Kebon can hardly be separated from the efforts of these programs.

This stable environment of batik production in Kebon should also be situated in the macro-context of the batik economy in Indonesia. It was in early year 2000 when Edo Hutabarat,

a designer based in Jakarta, made two revolutionary statements in the way batik was worn. The first was from his experiment with making batik on cotton fabric. Previously, this technique was commonly done on silk. It demanded a high price for each piece of batik, establishing it as a luxury item that is expensive and unreachable for ordinary Indonesians. Demand for such batik was low. Only the rich and batik collectors from abroad could afford it. But due to Hutabarat's innovation with cotton, fabric made out of batik tulis became affordable. Hutabarat also modernized batik by creating casual designs, making the fabric appropriate for informal events and more popular with the young. Once used to be associated with formal events and the older generations, batik appreciation under the influence of Hutabarat was extended across generations and beyond the formal events. These breakthroughs resulted in the demand for batik tulis and textiles with batik motifs to increase till today.

Alongside this high market demand for batik products was also the decentralization of power in Indonesian politics in 2001. The impact of this change facilitated the local governments in strengthening their authority to decide for the economic betterment of their regions. This included the set up of batik production centers which sprung up all over the archipelago. The result

of these initiatives paved the way for a variety of interests in batik. Findings and recognition of batik motifs unique to Papua, an eastern province of Indonesia, started to get acknowledged by the public. In Solo, a batik carnival by the local government of Surakarta is annually held, as part of tourism strategy and to popularize batik local to the city. All of these events reached a climax in October 2009 when the UNESCO inaugurated Indonesian batik as an intangible cultural heritage of the world.

MARGINAL BATIK WORKERS

Despite the new excitement of the batik economy in Indonesia over the past ten years and its economic impact, little is known on how intricate the batik making process is and the fate of batik workers. The workers behind the production of batik, mainly female, are barely mentioned. The batik discourse in Indonesia has been focusing too much on the artistic and economic dimension, neglecting the "people aspect" which has all along been the most important in batik production. In reality, the fate of Indonesian batik for the future lies in their hands.

Amidst all the discussions on batik, there has been hardly any talk on the generation crisis among the batik workers and the absence of a wage standard. Not to mention the

complicated and uneven relations between the batik workers with the owner of the batik production house, middlemen, sales outlet owners and finally the last chains of batik distribution in big cities such as Jakarta, Bandung and Yogyakarta. Batik workers, constituted mainly of women from the village, have always been at the lowest ranks of the production cycle. They are paid at maximum IDR 12,000 (USD 1.3) per day, or sometimes they are paid at once a total amount that is more or less the same amount as a per-day payment. Due to this unfortunate situation, it is not surprising how the younger generations take no interest in becoming a batik maker.

FILLING THE GAP

In the context of the marginal position of batik workers, the collaboration project of Mintio and Kabul with the batik makers of Kebon village, speak of something that has been missing in the batik industry in Indonesia - namely to exert the existence of these people. In this collaboration, the end product consists of the typical batik motifs to Bayat (namely wahyu tumurun, buron worno, daun telo), placed side by side with the very women who crafted the batik fabric. Usually, it is the motifs that people pay attention to when they observe a piece of batik. This collaboration is beyond my imagination. For more than two centuries of batik history in

Indonesia, I have never thought that these batik workers can be revealed in their final products. If there were to be somebody to be displayed in association with a piece of batik, it would be the owner of batik production chains or perhaps the collectors, never the workers. Thus, for me, this collaboration leads to a kind of statement that Mintio and Kabul have made in advocacy for the status of batik workers.

Mintio and Kabul did not hit the streets to hold a demonstration on the marginalized fates of the batik makers. Instead they played with and innovated the techniques of batik tulis by combining it with the photography technique of cyanotype. This collaboration has several radical dimensions in the conventions of traditional batik. The first is in a kind of rebellion towards motifs that are considered sacred. As such motifs are final and cannot be replaced or disassembled with the input of other elements, the way in which the artwork appropriated the batik motifs is out of the ordinary. The second is in placing the face of a batik maker directly onto the fabric and batik motifs, positioning it as the

... the photos of the batik women with their children and the cross-generational relationships of the batik makers... is a clear statement to me on the existence of batik today.

primary focus on the fabric whilst subjugating the motif as a decorative backdrop. The usual case is for the motif (other than the color) to be at the centre of attention. But in this collaboration, it is the portrait of the batik maker that is placed in priority to the composition, when usually their image does not bear a single trace on the fabric. Further more, this

work is a clear statement to me on the existence of batik today. In picturing the photos of the batik women with their children and the cross-generational relationships of the batik makers onto fabric, Mintio and Kabul have created a space for the batik makers to appear

and exist in the batik discourse. For the batik makers to present their work as something of their own identity is a situation that may never happen in their imaginations throughout their entire lives in their craft.

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SISTERS: IBU SULAMI

2012

Cyanotype with batik tulis,
natural dyes on cotton

189.2 x 78.2 cm

The ladies are sisters whose family has been in the batik trade for generations. Ibu Sulami is the eldest of the three. They work at Batik Wahyu Putro, a workshop owned by Ibu Suminah and her husband Pak Sukardi. Of the nine siblings in their family, they are the only three still involved in batik making. Ibu Suminah used to work at a batik shop in Solo, where she met Pak Sukardi. After their marriage, the couple set up their own batik workshop, one of few which still uses natural dye for the entire colouring process. The botanical motifs in these three pieces are Pak Sukardi's designs.



SISTERS:
IBU SUMINAH

2012

Cyanotype with batik tulis,
natural dyes on cotton

189.5 x 77.5 cm



SISTERS:
IBU YATMIRAH

2012

Cyanotype with batik tulis,
natural dyes on cotton

189.5 x 77.4 cm

MOTHER & DAUGHTER: IBU TUKINEM & MBAK AMBAR

2012

Cyanotype with batik tulis,
natural dyes on cotton

191.2 x 77.8 cm

The youngest participant in the *Malam Di Jari Kita* project, Mbak Ambar was still studying batik making in a nearby school when the artworks were being made. A few months after the end of the project, she finished her studies and is the first batch of graduates from the batik making course. Mbak Ambar presently works at a batik shop in Solo. For the designs on Ibu Tukinem's attire, she started the wax application process but her mother eventually helped to complete the piece.



MOTHERS WITH THEIR CHILDREN: MBAK SURANI & MBAK YAMTINI

2012

Cyanotype with batik tulis,
natural dyes on cotton,
handpainted with synthetic dyes

170.2 x 105.9 cm



Mbak Surani and Mbak Yamtini are siblings and among the young active members of the batik group. Representing a generation which is largely uninterested in batik making traditions, their presence in the industry is significant for its revitalization. Both married early and had their first child at a young age. In this artwork, they are seen with their children. Mbak Yamtini is fond of the butterfly motif which was a predominant feature on the original background. It was the first piece that was combined with the cyanotype images but the test was unsuccessful. In remaking the work, Pak Sukardi surrounds the portrait with the Buron Wono motif, highlighting the family's joy at being in an environment of vibrant wildlife.



IBU TUTI IN THE MITONI CEREMONY

2012

**Cyantotype with batik tulis,
natural dyes on cotton,
handpainted with synthetic dyes**

172 x 105.4 cm

When this portrait was taken, Ibu Tuti was pregnant with her second child. During the seventh month of pregnancy, it is customary for the 'Mitoni' ceremony to be held where blessings are offered to the mother and her unborn child. A part of this ceremony is the 'Siraman' ritual where the mother is showered with water from a dipper made from the husk of a coconut. Batiks with the Wahyu Tumurun motif and lurik batik are commonly used in the ceremony. This artwork symbolically represents Ibu Tuti at a Mitoni. She is seated for the Siraman, surrounding her are the Wahyu Tumurun motifs and draped on her shoulders is a batik lurik.



MOTHER & DAUGHTER:
MBAH MEDI & IBU WINARNI

2012

Cyanotype with beeswax on cotton

145.6 x 104.5 cm (left)

144.5 x 102.7 cm (right)



Mbah Medi learnt batik making as a child and is now the oldest batik maker in the group. In her youth, she lived and worked at one of the batik establishments in Yogyakarta where she met her husband. When her workplace was shut down, the whole family returned to the Bayat area and continued their occupation as batik makers. Over 70 years of age, Mbah Medi leads an active life and besides making batik, she sells snacks at a nearby school. She also goes to the forest to collect firewood which is used for melting the wax during batik making. In this family, only Mbah Medi and her daughter Ibu Winarni have continued in this occupation.



PUBLIC & PRIVATE: IBU SAKIYEM

2012

Cyanotype with beeswax on cotton

80.2 x 50 cm

80.5 x 50.9 cm



PUBLIC & PRIVATE: IBU MARSINI

2012

Cyanotype with beeswax on cotton

80.4 x 49.9 cm (left)

80.2 x 50 cm (right)

Ibu Sakiyem and Ibu Marsini are neighbours. The artworks portray the ladies at home and in public, during which they put on a headscarf. Ibu Sakiyem owns a piece of batik cloth which she had made and used as her wedding attire. Ibu Marsini has a daughter who was also making batik but moved to Jakarta after she was offered a job at an office.



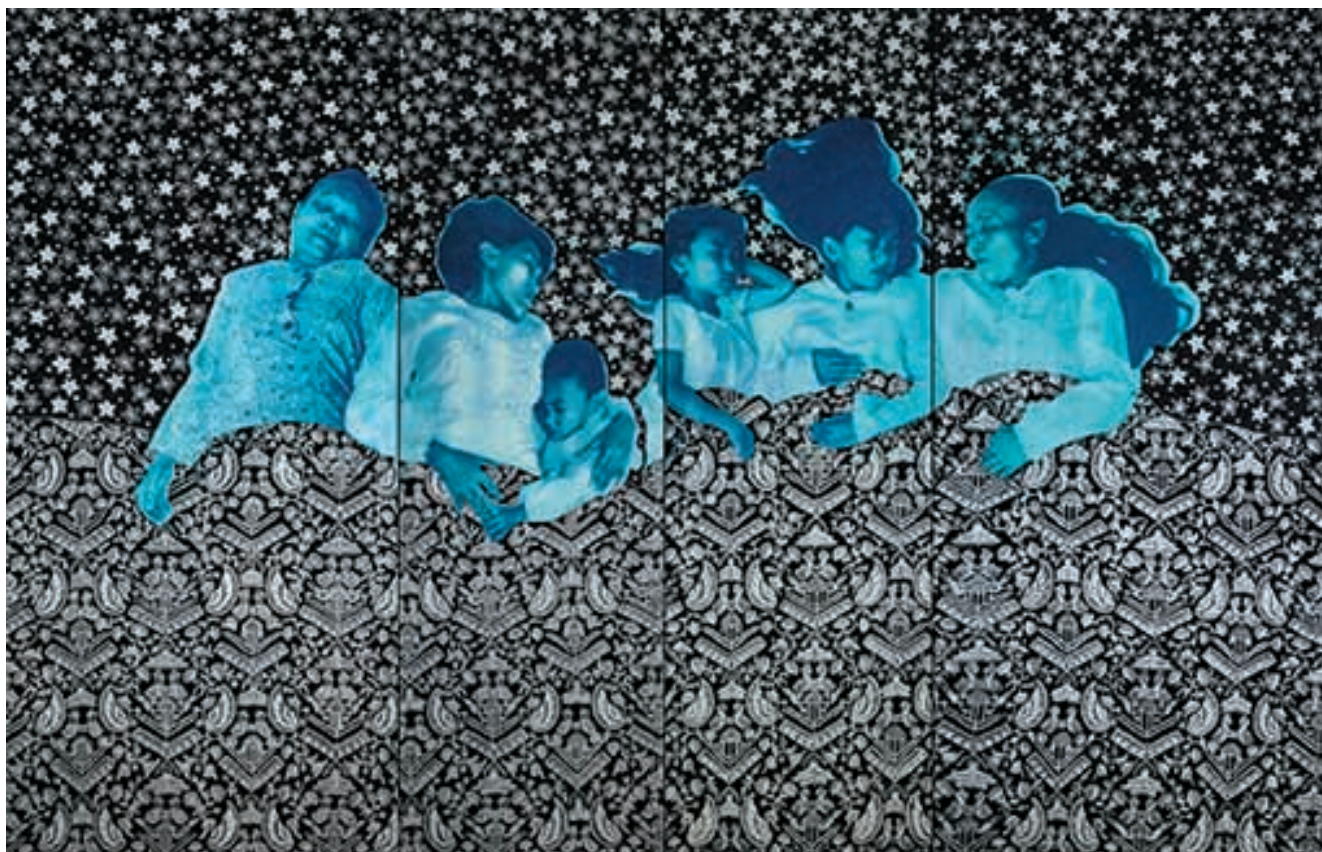
RESTING TIME:
MBAK TRI MULIYANI &
IBU TUKIRAH

2012

Cyanotype, pencil on cotton

105 X 167.5 cm

This mother and daughter pair of Ibu Tukirah and Mbak Tri Muliyani works at Batik Wahyu Putro. Ibu Tukirah assists with colouring while her daughter does the tracing of motifs on cloth. In a single day, Mbak Tri is able to complete the motifs on three different pieces of fabric. She is one of the young ladies in Kebon Indah's batik industry and started at the workshop after completing her secondary education. Here, mother and daughter are taking a break from work.



FAMILY: IBU JUMINEM, IBU TRI SUGIARTI, IBU HARTINI & CHILDREN

2012

Cyanotype with batik tulis,
natural dyes on cotton

Left to right:

246 x 111.8 cm

247.3 x 75.7 cm

242.7 x 76.3 cm

247.8 x 111.8 cm

This family portrait shows Ibu Tri Sugiarti with her children, her mother Ibu Juminem, and aunt Ibu Hartini. After lunch, the children usually gather in the living room either watching television or lying down next to their mother who cuddles them as they take an afternoon nap. Ibu Juminem would be working on batik pieces in the compound outside. Ibu Hartini's house is a few meters away and on some afternoons she drops by for a chat. At night, the children would often sleep in the same space with the adults, an arrangement that is captured in this portrait.

A few months after the completion of this project, Ibu Juminem was injured in a motor accident and subsequently passed away.

NUS Baba House

A gift from Ms Agnes Tan to the National University of Singapore, NUS Baba House was officially opened in September 2008. Once the ancestral home of a Straits Chinese family, it is now conceived as a heritage house which facilitates appreciation, reflection and research into the Straits Chinese history and culture. This is articulated primarily through the reconstruction of a domestic space characterised by the architectural conservation of the shophouse, and restoration of interiors including furnishing, household materials and decorative features. Research, conservation and restoration were undertaken in partnership with NUS Department of Architecture and the Urban Redevelopment Authority.

The first and second floors of Baba House reference the community's material culture during the first half of the 20th century. The third floor hosts temporary exhibitions, encouraging academic researchers and art practitioners to explore fresh perspectives into an evolving discourse on the Straits Chinese, and to develop insights into cultural encounters, hybridity and their contemporary implications. Baba House is also a unique resource for the study of architectural traditions, conservation efforts and urban development in Singapore.

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Visits to the exhibition only (3rd floor)
are free and By Appointment.

Visits to the 1st and 2nd floors are
By Appointment Only. Visitors are required
to sign up in advance for a heritage tour.



NUS Baba House is managed by
NUS Museum, NUS Centre For the Arts
www.nus.edu.sg/museum