

Art and Graft: The Work of Monika Behrens at Rimbun Dahan

by R. Streitmatter-Tran

I met Monika for the first and only time in November 2009 during a site visit at Rimbun Dahan as a part of the 5th Asian Museum Curators Conference. We spoke then just briefly. Since that meeting, I've had the opportunity to think about Monika's work as a part of her year-long residency through images and text exchanged over email. I can't say that I completely understand all of the issues that underlie her recent paintings. And this, in a roundabout way, is one of the strengths of her practice – it is site specific and research intensive. And perhaps only by being there, in that environment, could such an inventive and serious body of work have emerged.

Her investigation into Malaysian socio-political life and its affect upon the everyday has been fused into a series of paintings depicting the grafting of local vegetation into figurative forms resembling the various positions of silat. There are two issues I'd like to expand upon here in relation to Monika's work, the first quasi-scientific, the other personal: the clever use of grafting as a metaphor for human relations and my imagined connection to Monika's process as an artist working with local issues.

One of the attractions complimenting the art studios at Rimbun Dahan is the site's sustainable landscape and green architecture including the only wholly indigenous garden in Southeast Asia. Monika has taken what would be a dream for botanists and used a method of plant propagation to speak about race policy in Malaysia. At the core of this policy, she tells me, is *bumiputra*, an institutionalized Malay privilege in all aspects of life from business and industry to educational opportunity. Monika transforms the concept of graft ingeniously in two ways – to criticize the *bumiputra* by revealing the artifice of opportunity at the heart of this policy and secondly, playing upon the second sense of the word, the unscrupulous use of one's position to derive profit or advantage. This double entendre also plays out in a two pronged attack through her paintings which on the surface seem disarming and perhaps even child friendly: what appears to be a grasshopper-like creature grafted from various fruits and vegetables in a dance with another creature made in a part from

dragon fruit. But the dance isn't any ordinary dance, the gestures clearly depict a stance from the local martial arts form of silat. Ritualized performances of this art form are often accompanied by music and as such might be mistaken for a dance to the outsider. To local viewers of the work, clearly this is scene of a battle. The creatures are assembled in ways that evoke Frankenstein where the body is held together through folds and fusions of material. We might also consider the technique of grafting divorced from plants and applied to the animal world. Skin grafting is a common treatment for burn victims where skin from one part of the body (and in some cases, artificial skin) is transplanted on the injured site. The site is then bandaged and allowed to heal. A mentor once told me that the bandage itself has a double meaning: it simultaneously lures and conceals. It signifies the wound while hiding it. I like to think of Monika's grafting series as doing the same. The paintings draw attention to the issue without revealing it openly. Through her engagement with what is certainly an emotional and loaded issue in Malaysia (that public protests and recent election results can attest to), she allows art to give the necessary space for both reflection and confrontation. These paintings require you to look deeper into the underpinning issues.

As an artist working with similar research based processes, while preparing for this essay I have developed an admiration for Monika's practice. She arrived at Rimbum Dahan open to allowing the local to inform her work. She immersed herself into the environment and over time developed work that can clearly be said to have been both from that space and at that time.

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