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Tracing the Void

Boedi Widjaja on building meaning and the concept behind his subterranean installation

By Sylvia Tsai

It is challenging to keep up with the artistic practice of Boedi Widjaja. Conceptually rigorous and emotionally compelling, the form of his work is constantly evolving, oftentimes combining drawings, installations, performance and sound.

Widjaja taps into his lived experience of migration from Indonesia to Singapore, particularly residual feelings of displacement, separation and anxiety, as the impetus of his practice. As a trained architect, Widjaja has a particular affinity towards built environments, and explores their potential as emotional triggers. In 2012, for instance, the artist returned to what was left of his childhood home in Solo, Indonesia, and made graphite rubbings of its architecture as a means of preserving memories from his youth. He deftly interweaves these personal articulations with cultural and political histories, as well as wider aesthetic considerations, to bring forth expressions that prompt multiple layers of engagement from the viewers.

In October 2018, Widjaja was announced as the first commissioned artist of the Singapore Art Museum and Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art's (QAGOMA) five-year partnership. The first part of the commissioned artwork was featured in the 9th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT9) in Brisbane, while the second iteration will be shown as part of the Singapore Biennale 2019 (SB2019). Widjaja's structural installation *Black—Hut, Black—Hut* (2018–19) in APT9 brings together his past and present environments, drawing influence from the architecture of Indonesia, Singapore and Brisbane. After seeing the work in APT9, we had the privilege of speaking with the artist, who shared more about the artistic intentions behind the work and how it will be presented in SB2019.

You've previously mentioned that the memory of your childhood experiences is similar to a living image that is deeply ingrained in your being. This image triggers an emotional state, whether positive or negative, that inspires you to make art. Through your art-making process, are you seeking to find some form of resolution to your past?

Using art to resolve a painful memory often means seeking closure through catharsis, and one needs to be able to articulate the trauma in order to achieve emotional release

from it. The method, however, proves to be challenging, as my childhood memory manifests as a void—a cloud of micro, latent emotions that is difficult to crystallise. The memory is beyond what I can fully grasp, much less exorcise.

I read about a house that the Japanese architect Toyo Ito designed for his sister after her husband had passed away. Ito wanted to express the notion of a family living with a void, hence the house was built with a permanently closed central courtyard that nobody could enter. Similarly, my art-making is akin to building cultural substance around the memory of my itinerant childhood. Drawing is an important process in my practice, therefore I may also describe art-making this way: around the imaginary contour of the void, tracing the invisible image of my childhood home, I seek new connections to build meanings.

Walking through the other galleries that had high ceilings and natural light flowing through, your work, Black—Hut, Black—Hut (2018–19), which was installed in the lower level of the Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art (QAGOMA), created an intimate alcove. It references regional architecture and the style of raised homes. What is it about these empty, or void spaces that interests you?

I was first drawn to the space underneath the Queensland, Malay stilt houses and the void decks of Singapore's HDB

[Housing Development Board] flats by what I perceived to be a kind of spatial rupture. The "space underneath" splits open two grounds—land and floor—and holds them apart, so to speak. However, the spatial gap seemed to also possess a calm, liminal quality. The spatial strategy of *Black—Hut, Black—Hut* at APT9 was to extend the upper gallery's floor over the lower gallery and create a "space underneath" by amplifying the latter's existing spatial relation with the former. Placement of the steel supports also took into consideration the presence of transitory spaces and sight lines, as I wanted a porous space below the concrete platform that responded to the lower gallery's direct physical connections with the other galleries. Therefore, the "space underneath" in *Black—Hut, Black—Hut* wasn't conceived as empty but rather, imagined as a productive space that could potentially be filled with movements, emotions and memories.

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— Boedi Widjaja



*Detail of Boedi Widjaja, BLACK—HUT (2016).
Commissioned by the Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore.
Photography: Cher Him.*

On a similar note, I recently came across a poem titled “To fill a Gap” by Emily Dickinson, and I felt it resonated a lot with the way I was thinking about *Black—Hut, Black—Hut*:

To fill a Gap
Insert the Thing that caused it—
Block it up
With Other—and ’twill yawn the more—
You cannot solder an Abyss
With Air.

When you see the work from the mezzanine level above, it is completely exposed. The surface is made from black concrete mixed with salt, a combination that alters the surface over time. This duality of enclosure and openness provokes physical responses to the engagement with your installation. Can you tell us more about this idea?

There’s a recurrence of dialectic notions in my practice, and I think it’s because the coexistence of opposite extremities often proves productive in my art-making. For *Black—Hut, Black—Hut* at APT9, I wanted the structure to almost “disappear” and be partially subsumed by its site on one hand, yet I also desired for it to resist the site, to maintain its autonomy. I also wanted to contrast the material and spatial lightness of a tropical/subtropical house against the brutalist architecture of the QAGOMA; I had read about how in traditional Malay stilt houses, the relation between room and activity wasn’t predetermined (unlike pre-20th century European houses) hence I was drawn to its transformative spatial modality. Embedded in the installation are these ideas, expressed not only in its form and build, but also through the spatial relation between the upper and the lower gallery.

Your previous installation at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, Singapore, Black—Hut (2016), articulated a central point of the hut, which had a speaker playing a sound piece.



*Boedi Widjaja, BLACK—HUT, BLACK—HUT (2018-19).
Co-commissioned by the Singapore Art Museum and QAGOMA for
Asia Pacific Triennial 9 and Singapore Biennale 2019.
Photography: Natasha Harth, courtesy of QAGOMA.*



Boedi Widjaja, *BLACK—HUT* (2016)
 Commissioned by the Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore.
 Photography: Cher Him.

Similarly, in Black—Hut, Black—Hut, you’ve demarcated this node with a speaker playing music from a Javanese gamelan. Why is locating this point significant?

I determine an imaginary centre in every *Black—Hut* installation for several reasons. The first reason has to do with the mandala—a centre-periphery spatial configuration that is present across the cosmological, religious, political and economic dimensions of Javanese thought; it features prominently in the Javanese joglo house—which was one of the important references for *Black—Hut*. The second reason is related to how I envision a speculative nexus in the installation where transformation of memory takes place. My childhood house was located near the Surakarta palace (Kraton Surakarta in Bahasa Indonesia) and I passed through its palatial grounds every day on my way back from school. I came across a free online library of sound files that

were recordings of each of the 131 instruments that made up a hundred-year-old gamelan (a traditional Javanese metallophone instrument) from the palace; it led to the idea of a sound column—a directional speaker playing back a series of digitally distorted gamelan sounds. The third reason has to do with the site-specific nature of *Black—Hut*. The imaginary point is derived through a close survey of the site, and the process helps to bring insights into the possible spatial relations between the installation and the site.

Can you share a bit more about the Singapore version of Black—Hut, Black—Hut?

Black—Hut, Black—Hut was conceived as a diptych of two site-specific installations across the time between APT9 and SB2019. I wanted to draw on the geographic similarities between Brisbane and Singapore as they are respectively

located in the subtropical and tropical region. I started the process through the architectural correspondence of Brisbane’s *Queenslander*, the Malay stilt house and HDB void decks which of course, led to the architectural expression of an “elevated ground” for the installation at APT9. At first, I had wanted to repeat the spatial gesture in Singapore. However, the time-space specificity of the Singapore Bicentennial (a government initiative which marks the 200th anniversary of Sir Stamford Raffles’ arrival in Singapore) and the location of National Gallery Singapore’s Coleman Courtyard’s staircase towards the basement level (the site for *Black—Hut, Black—Hut* in SB2019) offers me instead the opportunity to look deeper into the ground—historically and spatially. The Singapore iteration of *Black—Hut, Black—Hut* is therefore conceived as an installation that conceptually expresses an “excavated ground”—the subterranean mirror image of the APT9 installation.

How do you think the work responds to the SB2019 theme of art’s potential to offer a sense of hope that becomes a catalyst for wider social change?

Contemporary artists grapple with the question of social agency all the time, yet one of the most difficult things to predict is a work’s affective influence. When I read [Artistic Director] Patrick Flores’s statement for SB2019, I felt hopeful, because he deemed the process of making art to be integral to social change; therefore, the question changed from what the work could do to what doing the work could mean. In the process of making *Black—Hut, Black—Hut*, I’ve put my “faith squarely in the potential of art and its understanding to rework the world” [to quote Flores’ statement], and I can only hope that my labour is a step in the right direction.