

Podcast Recording: Diyan Achjadi

Coco Zhou (4:04):

Thank you so much again, Diyan, for joining me today. We want to start by just asking you to share a little bit about your background and how you came to this land, known as Vancouver.

Diyan Achjadi (4:16):

Thanks, Coco, and thanks to you and Diane for the invitation. So I am originally from Jakarta, Indonesia. My dad is Indonesian, and my mother is Canadian of British, Scottish settler origin. But she met my dad in Canada in the 50s, moved to Indonesia. So I grew up in more or less an Indonesian household. Moved around quite a bit for my dad's job. So I went to elementary school in Hong Kong and the UK, and high school in Indonesia and the States. Ended up going to college in the States and working for a while in New York, going to grad school in Montreal, working in Baltimore. And then I was lucky enough to get a job at Emily Carr, teaching printmaking, and that's what brought me to Vancouver. And when I moved here, I had only ever been here for my job interview. So I came here with kind of very little connection or knowledge of the place.

Coco Zhou (5:12):

What year was that, just out of curiosity?

Diyan Achjadi (5:14):

2005.

Coco Zhou (5:16):

Okay, well, so you've been here for a while now. How do you like it here?

Diyan Achjadi (5:21):

Well, I've stayed. It's such an interesting place. One of the reasons I was really compelled to move here was, you know, I'd lived for a long time away from much of my family because I was in Indonesia while I was in the East Coast of the US and in Montreal. And something about being in Vancouver, in these territories that are kind of like right at the edge of the Pacific Ocean made me feel psychologically, emotionally, and physically closer to Asia. And so that was really one big impetus, you know. And for me, I still love to kind of look out into the water and feel like, oh, it's just on the other side of the water. It's just there. And so for me, that's a big anchor. It's also the first place I've lived in outside of Indonesia where I can sometimes hear Indonesian on the bus or on the street. And, you know, in the first few times, it's kind of a shock. And I like that there's these moments where I hear bits and pieces of it. And it's also, you know, I think I realized the longer I'm here, the more that the importance of being

somewhere that is close to the water is for my psyche. And so I think that that's kind of kept me here for a long time.

Coco Zhou (6:35):

That's actually really relatable for me as well. Being close to the water, I feel like it's good for your soul. And I feel like when I say that, it feels like I'm like a Victorian woman who gets sent to the seaside because of their illness or something.

Coco Zhou (6:50):

So I guess we can chat a little bit about your art practice. You work across many mediums, animation, printmaking, and you use kind of graphics and printed materials to explore cross-cultural narratives and often mythology as well. We're interested in learning what notions of heritage and cultural memory mean to you through your work.

Diyan Achjadi (7:16):

I guess there's a few sort of entry points to this that I can think of. One is I've always been really interested in history. I love stories and storytelling and reading history is a way for me to kind of understand the stories of the past that led to the present. And mythology for me kind of figures out as history as well. So mythology, oral history, you know, what some people refer to as folk tales, but what we might think of as kind of indigenous knowledge and storytelling about kind of like how a place came to be. And so that's sort of like one place that I always go to. The other thing that I've really always been interested in is the ways that we can kind of find overlaps between different stories. I started reading a lot about Indonesian history in particular a number of years ago, and was really interested in the ways that there's always been a culture of trade and a culture of exchange on the archipelago. And so, as I was kind of reading more about this, I became fascinated with looking at objects and how they might display the evidence of that trade and display evidence of kind of like how the culture that I understand as Indonesian through my education in the school system there and through kind of my time there is actually an accumulation of histories and stories from so many other places, as well as kind of what's local to the place. And then the patterns kind of come in through a couple of things.

Diyan Achjadi (8:48):

One is my mother studies textiles, and so I've always grown up with a lot of textiles in the house and batik cloths and ikat weavings and things like that. So I've always been kind of interested in these forms, and they're forms that I've always kind of been around. And a lot of these patterns also then in kind of contemporary Indonesia become transposed as decoration onto other surfaces. So you see them everywhere in buildings and stationery, etc. And so there's sort of ubiquitousness to some of these patterns that become sort of a shorthand for a place or a shorthand for a history. And then the other thing is sort of I realized at some point when I'd been in North America for a while that my aesthetic has always been kind of intensely

maximalist. It's just like everything's always full. And as I reflected on and kind of looked at my photographs from Jakarta and my memories of Jakarta, it's just like an intense urban metropolis. And so I think that sense of fullness is something that is quite the norm to how I understand kind of the visual plane. And so the combination of those things draw me to using patterns and ornamentation. It's a visual language I understand in terms of its fullness. It's a way to kind of look at how histories have been transcribed through visual storytelling. And then it's a way to kind of tie my interest in like, how do histories of different places come together?

Coco Zhou (10:14):

Yeah, what you just said about pattern was really, I think, provocative. There's like a play with depth and surface within patterns and also playing with the tension underneath surfaces as well. I'm curious about how that ties into your practice of being an animator, if those two things kind of inform each other or not.

Diyan Achjadi (10:37):

Yeah, so I was trained in printmaking primarily in undergrad. While I have a deep love for the craft of printmaking, what kind of really sucked me into printmaking was the way you could repeat things and the way that you could repeat things with slight differences. And so I was really fascinated by kind of like, well, what happens if a picture is repeated? What happens if it's repeated and put into different contexts? And then what happens with that repetition when it becomes normalized and we don't think about it anymore? And when do we kind of notice it? And so I think there's a lot of printmakers who work with the idea of the multiple and the ways that something repeated with a little bit of change is often how we think through our ideas in printmaking. And so animation wasn't that far of a stretch from it in that, you know, as you sort of like work through things, you can kind of see how a sense of time is developed in print that could also be translated to animation.

Diyan Achjadi (11:40):

But the first time I really worked in animation was in grad school. And at that time, I went to grad school in 1999 and in Indonesia in 97, there was a lot of civil unrest and protest against the New Order government. Some quite horrific things happened, a lot of conversation about history and truth and how some stories that were accepted as real, once the government fell, we sort of realized how unreal they were and how fabricated they were. And so in that period of time I was in grad school, I became really interested in the storytelling that happens in the news and trying to figure out how to talk about this more recent history of Indonesia. And because of the way that all my sources at that time were through the still new internet, I felt that I needed to make something that was in video form or animation form. That's what led me to animation in the first place. And so there's this period of time in my work in grad school where it's probably the only period of time where I was really specifically dealing with a

concrete historical period that's closer to the present. And then I kind of moved away from that again.

Coco Zhou (12:52):

It's interesting that that was kind of your starting point for working with animation because you're dealing with massive political societal change and unrest and violence. And I'm curious, what do you think about how animation differs from other forms of filmmaking in terms of what the form itself offers that maybe like a more traditional or conventional film media maybe can't?

Diyan Achjadi (13:21):

Well, I think, you know, like I'm very conscious of the fact that I'm not a documentarian. I'm not a historian. I'm not a documentarian. And with that particular body of work, I was also really conscious of the fact that I wasn't in Indonesia. When this happened, I was watching everything from afar and kind of hearing stories from my family and from my friends and from news sources. And so it was really important for me to find a way of narrating this experience with the acknowledgement that I wasn't experiencing it, but the sort of the mediated place. And so what animation offers, I think, is a way to tell a story that allows for a different entry point.

Diyan Achjadi (14:03):

So one thing that I was interested in in this time period when I was researching this kind of militarized space of Indonesia that I had grown up in is how early on in my education I learned to accept as normal certain things like learning how to march, you know, and like flag raising ceremonies and things like that, and then kind of looking into the ways that children's books and media for children starts, like kind of starts this place of normalization. And so animation was a way to use that language to some degree. In my first animations, it was really kind of drawings that I did that were rotoscoped that kind of had some movement. I would take news photographs and then I would rotoscope them and then kind of like try and imagine the movement in them. And then after that, I kind of went to something that was much more obviously fiction, because what I was really uncomfortable with with that work that I made in graduate school was that people would look at it and assume that I had been there or I had experienced this thing that I was really only narrating from a distance. And it was important for me to make the fictionalized or the storytelling or the interpretation aspect of it much more obvious after that.

Coco Zhou (15:16):

Yeah, that's really interesting. And I think the kind of highly mediated form of animation that makes that aspect of filmmaking more obvious than like a documentary form is really interesting. And also, yeah, like animation as a genre that is often associated with children's media, but also, you know, I also grew up in a communist country, or like I know what it's like to be inundated with these mundane forms of propaganda. And even in Canada, right, this also

happens. And I think that's also like a touch point with what you said about pattern making as well, that these forms become ubiquitous placeholders, that discipline bodies, right, and memories.

Diyan Achjadi (16:01):

That makes me think of, you know, the way uniforms are so prevalent in that space. Like my elementary school, I think, had like three different uniforms. And then my high school had like four different uniforms, it's like one for different occasions, and then like the way that that also becomes like the multiple. And everything is about how you're following a particular ideal, and that how you're trying to mold into that ideal, and just how easy it is to just take that as normal. And I think in some ways, though, it's like that happens everywhere, but it's just more obvious when you see it. As you say, yes, it happens in Canada too, but it's like much more popular culture here than it is in kind of an overt space, where it's like you are doing uniforms and learning to march and all of that. But the same sort of calculation kind of happens in every culture. It just happens in different ways.

Coco Zhou (16:52):

Yeah, for sure. I wanted to move on to talking about your past collaborations with Centre A. What was maybe the most memorable instance for you?

Diyan Achjadi (17:03):

For me, it was definitely the project, Little Distillery in NowGong. That was a project that Ashok Mathur initiated, and he's a writer and had written this novel, a really beautiful novel about a very long story of travel and diaspora. Colonization is in there, different ways of relating to popular culture is in there, and he invited three artists to collaborate with him and translate, interpret, re-imagine that novel in visual form. And he had also some photographic works that were his translation and his re-making of the novel into a visual form. And so that was the first time that I had worked so directly off a text, and it was myself, Brendan Tang, who also became a collaborator later on, and David Bateman, and I made a couple of animations. Brendan did this vessel with these kind of distillery pieces, and David Bateman did this really fabulous performance that had objects. And it was in the Centre A space that was back on Hastings, so that really strange shaped space. There was something about the synergy of the space, the colonial themes that were in the novel, that were reflected in the space, as well as the ways that the four of us, not working together directly, but kind of working in response to these different elements, all came together. And that was a really kind of exciting project because it stretched me so much in terms of my frame, and it allowed for a really different type of conversation.

Coco Zhou (18:48):

That's really interesting. What was it like to translate a written piece of text into a visual form?

Diyan Achjadi (18:56):

Stressful, especially the author in the show, right? It's like you want to do honor to the book. You want to do honor to the words, but you also want to make sure that you're still making your own work, right? And so it's like this really funny space. And actually one of the animations I made for it is one of my favorite animations I've ever done, and I haven't shown it other than in the shows Centre A, and then it traveled to Ottawa. But in the animation, there's this painting of Queen Victoria that gets eaten up by vines, and then she just like melts off, blows up with fire. And it was just so fun to make. And it was really, really small. It was displayed on a screen that was about the size of a pocketbook. It allowed for me to discuss things in a way that I hadn't been able to do before. I think all collaboration is stressful and exciting. It's like it's stressful in that you're always trying to find that place of negotiation that respects all the participants, but you're hoping that you'll get something that you wouldn't normally get. So I enjoyed the project. I hope I get to show that piece again at some point.

Coco Zhou (20:07):

Yeah, I hope you do too. I mean, I hope Centre A shows it again at some point. It sounds like a lot of fun. Yeah, I'm wondering about... You did a collaboration with Cindy Mochizuki at the Roedde House Museum in the West End a couple years ago now. That was, yeah, a way to insert interpretations of colonial history into the space of middle-class Euro-Canadian domesticity. I'm wondering, what was it like to work within this really strange but also recognizable space of moral ideology?

Diyan Achjadi (20:48):

Yeah, so that was a project that was curated by Catherine Dennis, who's currently the curator at the Evergreen Cultural Center. And when she came to me and approached me and said, would you want to do this piece at this kind of house museum as part of a series of works I've been doing, I immediately said yes, because it was kind of, I've always wanted to work in a colonial house like that. And some of my earliest works back in, right out of undergrad, I was looking at middle-class British girls' magazines and their illustrations and kind of like the narratives that were in there and trying to kind of talk gender and expectations and queerness. And I made all these embroideries and objects that were basically fit for a parlor of that sort. And I had also, just before going to grad school, as I was kind of transitioning out of that work, I had done these kind of small works on these antique handkerchiefs that I had inherited from my mom. And I think she said she wasn't sure if they were her grandmothers or her mothers, but they're sort of these Anglo-Canadian classic, beautifully handmade handkerchiefs. And I had put on these handkerchiefs these images from Indonesia, from my Indonesian grandmother, and from the military history and the colonial history I was trying to start to kind of work through and embroidered them on there. And these works are from 1999, and again, I'd only shown them once in Article Gallery back in 2001, I think it was.

Diyan Achjadi (22:24):

And so when Catherine invited me, I initially proposed doing some work with the wallpaper at the Roedde House and used that wallpaper space to kind of talk about some histories. And then as I was walking around, I said, by the way, I have these works from like 25-ish years ago that I haven't really shown, but I think they might work here. And so I brought them in, and we were able to use them in the exhibition. And so Cindy and I worked quite separately in that. So Cindy made her video piece, and I didn't see it until the opening. I think I was more impacted by it than I thought it would be. I remember during the opening, I choked up, which I never do. I've always been also kind of curious about how do you, knowing that I have these two very different histories, both of them really intense and complex in different ways, and to finally have a space to collapse them, and to really see quite literally how that collapse made things visible that I hadn't been able to make visible before was quite powerful for me. And so yeah, it was both a really fun project in terms of being able to intervene in that space. Some of them were quite subtle. I know there were a few people that didn't notice some of the pieces, which is what I had hoped for, and that they were kind of like blend in. But then at the moment when everything kind of came together, it was like, oh, I think I'm understanding what it is that I've been trying to work through all this time.

Coco Zhou (23:47):

I'm imagining that it's quite significant to be able to kind of reinsert yourself through your work into this highly mediated design environment that contains, as you said, so much colonial violent histories that are also obscured from it, right? And so your work essentially was to kind of bring those histories back into the space, which is really interesting. Yeah, like you said, the Roedde House Museum and also Chinatown, where Centre A now inhabits, are considered heritage sites. What is the artist's role in intervening into these spaces and reimagining their histories?

Diyan Achjadi (24:34):

I feel like it's always important for me to remember that what's happening now didn't start yesterday or even five years ago or even a hundred years ago. You know, like, I think for me it's always important to kind of remember the kind of the deep time of every place. And that as an artist, what I hope to do is bring some of those moments together to remind people of how interrelated so many moments in history are and to kind of see the impacts of something that happens in one place in another place or something that happens in one time that kind of shows up again in another time. And so I think, you know, with sites that are historical, that are loaded, that have stories, I think when artists can work with sites like that, there's an opportunity to both revive the stories that were there that maybe have been hidden from view for a while to merge the stories that were never visible, that were always hidden, and to then also connect it to the present.

Diyan Achjadi (25:33):

And I think it's that connection to the present that, and hopefully also the future that I'm really interested in, because it's really easy, often, for any of us to be like, oh, that's from before, that's long gone, we're over that now, we're at another place. But it's like, I don't think we are, you know, I think we're just like, we always make kind of slow movements towards something better and then fall back a little bit and then move a little bit. And so I think that, for me, that constant reminder of the length of history and the way history is still always present in every moment and the way that what we do now informs the future and that all these places have these kind of deep layers of stories embedded in them is what we can do as artists in these spaces.