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**Rewriting the Signpost: Memories of Misdirection**

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# REWRITING THE SIGNPOST: MEMORIES OF MISDIRECTION

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## I. Introduction: Cultural Display in a Contact Zone Setting

When art exhibitions, especially those mounted by ex-patriots on foreign soil, are compared with Clifford's (1997) notion of how museums operate as contact zones, these exhibitions appear to match-up with his description of how a public site or location can serve as a contact zone. According to Clifford, a museum operates like an open market or other cultural site that attracts and admits culturally diverse groups and, as such is a contact zone or place where people meet and come together. Clifford explains that as a consequence of their social interaction at a given site, these cultural groups either wittingly or unwittingly vie amongst themselves for control of cultural information and positions of social dominance. Clifford's (1997) description of how museums appear to correspond to places where social interaction takes place can be equated with Pratt's (1992) definition of contact zones.<sup>1</sup> Clifford notes two similarities that each of these places possesses: first, both are places that contain a center point for gathering; and second, both have a periphery area that functions as a discovery zone. Since art exhibitions are mounted for the purpose of attracting parties that are interested in gathering new social information and experiencing social interactions, they too should be considered contact zones.

While it is the aim of this paper to deconstruct the meaning and visual content behind two primary pieces of work that I placed on display in the exhibition that I am about to discuss, it is important bear in mind that both the intent of the work and the circumstances under which it was created have a direct bearing on how the work's final structure and symbolism evolved. The content behind my sculptures *Sign-Out: Bradford, PA* (Figure 1) and *Sign-In: Brunei Darussalam* (Figure 2) was conceived of first and foremost to satisfy my desire to say something original and specific about my sense of identity and place as an artist moving to Brunei Darussalam for the purpose of teaching art as an assistant professor at the University of Brunei Darussalam. However, the content of my work as it pertains to memories and experiences from specific geographical regions of personal reference—Pennsylvania, Hong Kong and Brunei, were greatly influenced by the circumstances and requirements for producing sculptural work that could be included in a two-part, two-person exhibition to be held in Brunei during my first semester of teaching at UBD. Because the conceptual message and final visual design of my sculptures resulted from both controlled and uncontrolled influences brought on by the circumstances of my relocation and teaching assignments at UBD, this paper will serve as a kind of forum for my presentation on how my old internalized memories of a place just left behind became entwined with the newly formed memories and fresh experiences of displacement and desire. Furthermore, I will try to add to my reflection on these influences and factors of my relocation and reassigned role as ex-patriot, and by de-fault of my position of elite power as a university professor at Brunei's national university, an imperialist foreigner.

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<sup>1</sup> Clifford (1997) explains that he is building upon Pratt's (1992) definition of "Contact Zones."



Figure 1: Martie Geiger-Ho. *Sign-Out: Bradford, PA.* 2012. Driftwood sculpture, 78”H x 28”W x 28”D



Figure 2: Martie Geiger-Ho. *Sign-In: Brunei Darussalam.* 2012. Driftwood sculpture, 84”H x 28”W x 26”D

## II. Taking up Residence in Brunei Darussalam

I followed my husband, associate professor Kong Ho to Brunei after I accepted a position teaching art as faculty of Art and Creative Technology at UBD. Prior to his having joined the ranks of UBD’s area of Art and Creative Technology one year before my arrival in July 2012, he had been full time faculty at the University of Pittsburgh at Bradford (UPB) where he worked for ten years. My husband’s decision to leave was not made lightly. Even though I was not full-time, I enjoyed my employment at UPB as a visiting assistant professor because I was able to teach my favorite subject, ceramics, along with other related design and art related subjects such as world art history and occasionally drawing and painting. It was because of my teaching commitments along with my establishment in the community of Bradford that I did not relish the notion of changing jobs. However, my husband felt that in light of recent changes by the new university president, which included an aggressive policy that he and his administrators were promoting regarding the expendability of non-tenure contract faculty like himself, that he had no choice but to leave and look for a position where his contributions to the university would not go unacknowledged.

Kong had been working in Brunei Darussalam, for approximately six months when I traveled to Brunei in December of 2012 to visit and also apply for a position at the university. I remember a feeling of trepidation before my journey to Brunei. This was not because I had never traveled so far from home before—on the contrary, I had worked full-time in Hong Kong at the Hong Kong Baptist University, Academy of Visual Arts for two years (1997 to 1999), so that was certainly not the cause of my unease. I believe that while I wanted a position where I would be working with my husband, I was feeling apprehensive about leaving my home and starting over again in a place where I would once again be an ex-patriot.

In Hong Kong I was able to live with Kong's mother and visit his family, and I knew that after finishing my two-year contract at the Hong Kong Baptist University, Academy of Visual Arts, that I would be returning to my home and my own basement studio where I could alternate my time between teaching at UPB and making one of a kind ceramic sculptures. Moreover, I would also be able to continue my gardening projects and enjoy the passing seasons that are a hallmark of Pennsylvania. Located near the beautiful Allegheny Forest, shown in Figure 3, our modest home also shares its surroundings with the depressed oil town of Bradford and the mushrooming fields of oil and natural gas that are enjoying a new boom due to the ever-widening energy crises.



Figure 3: Martie Geiger-Ho. *Sign-Out: Bradford, PA* (Detail view). 2012. Driftwood sculpture, 78”H x 28”W x 28”D

My interview for the art position at UBD went well and I felt confident that I would not have trouble teaching, or producing papers and attending conferences. I was keen on the idea of possibly receiving grants for participating in academic activities like conferences and research because I had never before received grants or recognition for undertaking these pursuits at UPB due to my part-time status, but something about the art program was not sitting right with me. The problem was the glaring need for a functioning ceramics and sculpture studio for teaching the courses that I would be responsible for. Although I had set-up the ceramic facilities from scratch at both HKBU, Academy of Visual Arts, and at UPB, I could see that no attention had been given to the art facilities at UBD for years. Furthermore, studio equipment, except for computers in the areas of new media and graphic design, were almost non-existent. When I brought the poor condition of the art studios to my husband's attention he reassured me that there would be money and an opportunity for me to get everything fixed to operating standards early on in the semester. He also felt that the facility electricians would only need my direction and the submission of work orders to get a massive industrial looking electric kiln up and running in time for me to teach ceramics in the fall if all went well with the search committee and my job application.

In addition to interviewing on campus I also had the good fortune of being invited along with my husband on a three day, two night trip by the Brunei Nature Society to the Kuala Belalong Field Studies Centre (KBFSC) in the Temburong rainforest. The trip was incredible and I decided that the lushness of Borneo's rainforests cancelled out the problems in the studio.

I was offered the position at UBD a couple of months after my interview. However, I had already been preparing for my transition to Brunei just in case the job offer came through. I used my remaining quiet time in Bradford to write my book *The Worship of Kiln Gods: From the Studios of Western Potters to the Temples of China*. I also taught myself how to work with silver clay and I put together a small body of work to take to Brunei because I knew that I would need some art for the two person exhibition that Kong and I had proposed as part of the larger mural project with the U.S. Embassy.

### III. Transcending Culture and Space: A Community Art Project

Interviewing at UBD and having a bit of adventure in one of Brunei's wilderness areas was not the only activity that I pursued during my half month long visit to the tiny Sultanate. I also worked with Kong on an ambitious public mural proposal that he wanted to co-produce with me. Together, we approached the U.S. Embassy Brunei Darussalam to enquire about possible grants and other forms of support for Americans wishing to create public projects that would serve as a means for strengthening the ties between our two nations by gaining a better understanding of our shared and unique cultural identities. Kong submitted the grant application to the embassy after I returned to the U.S., and he continued to work on organizing the project in my absence after it was approved. By the time that I joined him in Brunei in July 2012, the community mural project and workshops were already underway.

*Transcending Culture and Space: A Community Art Project*, shown in Figure 4, was sponsored by the U.S. Department of State through the Overseas Federal Assistance Award and the U.S. Embassy Brunei Darussalam. Co-sponsors that provided workshop space and moral support but no monetary funds for the pilot scheme were; Universiti Brunei Darussalam (UBD), Pusat Belia Bandar Seri Begawan (Youth Centre) and Jerudong International School (JIS). This art project is a practice-based research in community art in Brunei. This community art project showcases the diverse and inclusive universal symbolism that is shared between the cultures of the United States of America and Brunei Darussalam. The thirty-foot long by six-foot high transportable mural was created by Bruneian youths, JIS students, UBD students, US Embassy staff, and the general public. Each time the mural was set up in a location both public and individual workshops were given on that site to help participants learn about mural painting.



Figure 4: *Transcending Cultural & Space Mural*. 2012. Acrylic on canvas, 6'H x 30'W, painted by 238 participants & collected by Universiti Brunei Darussalam, New Library Extension Building, Brunei Darussalam.

Activities for the overall program included: mural painting workshops, a traveling multimedia art installation and public gallery talks. Together, these events are estimated to have reached 2000 people. Venues include a local youth centre, the US Embassy, a well-visited mall, UBD art studio, JIS Art Gallery, UBD Student Centre and the U.S. Embassy's official 4<sup>th</sup> of July event at the Empire Hotel. The complete mural will become a permanent piece that will enliven the Student Centre of UBD. This community art project has aimed to encompass the most updated concepts about community art through the social inclusion of Bruneians from all walks of life. This inclusion is illustrated in the types of participants that came to work on the mural, like people from diverse age groups, socio-economic strata and people with various abilities. By being inclusive, the project was in support of its objective of adding to the foundation of social enrichments that are being used to help the Bruneian society to build a strong and vibrant community that counts art and other art supporting facets of the creative industries as part of its infrastructure.

As a new faculty member at University of Brunei Darussalam, I wanted to create artworks that would address my eagerness to experience the culture and terrain of Brunei and would at the same time offer a chance for my ceramic/sculpture students to follow my ideas and to gain from the actual execution of the work. My concept for the two sculptures that I am discussing here, *Sign Out: Bradford, PA*, and *Sign In: Brunei Darussalam* served both of these criteria admirably. Although I did produce a number of mixed-media artworks for the exhibition, I believe that my two free-standing large pieces were among the most successful because of how they engaged viewers. Viewers particularly liked the small trinkets and details that were liberally placed throughout the work. Some of these items were “found objects” that viewers enjoyed “discovering” among the structure of each work’s carefully thought out 3-dimensional composition.

#### **IV. Signs as Symbols for the Past, Present and Desired Future**

The concept for this set of sculptures was based on change and ways of connecting with my shifting identity in Brunei through a sense of place. The actual realization of how to address my feelings about changing my work position from teaching at a regional campus in a small town in the US, to teaching at a major university in Brunei Darussalam came to me shortly after my arrival in Brunei. I was collecting driftwood and seashells on the Maura Beach when I realized that I could connect my last body of ceramic work with something new through the use of beach combed objects gathered from the South China Sea. Because my last body of work, *China from the South China Sea*, relied heavily on my use of shards (broken ceramics) that I routinely collected off of the coast of Hong Kong, I felt that if I could use the driftwood and washed up boards from buildings, found on Brunei’s South China Sea beaches, that a new series of artwork would begin to evolve. I quickly realized that if I could relate the wood to places in Brunei in a way that was similar to the means by which my conceptual ceramic pieces, made with found porcelain and stoneware shards, echoed back to China and its rich heritage of ceramics, that I would be able to make meaningful work that would help to ground me in my new location. The recent publication of my book *The Worship of Kiln Gods: From the Temples of China to the Studios of Western Potters* (2012), in September of 2012, stirred my connection of beach combed artifacts found on South China Sea beaches in Hong Kong with artifacts and driftwood found on Brunei’s South China Sea beaches because I wrote about my previous body of work--shard infused ceramic sculptures, as part my introduction to Western concepts about kiln gods.

The notion for making a signpost came to mind when I began collecting flat pieces of wood in addition to more appealing ocean-scoured tree vines and other sinuous water-sculpted pieces of driftwood. I was immediately excited about this idea because, in addition to the free weathered boards, I thought that the possibilities of working with names and places was very appealing. I knew that I wanted a simple but sturdy rustic wooden stand that I could mount my signs on, so I went to a local hardware store in Berakas and I ordered two to be built to my specifications. At first I thought that one signpost would be enough, but when I learned that the cost for nailing together the basic structure for my future sculpture only came to \$26.00 Brunei dollars, I ordered two rough sawn, raw wood structures. My decision turned out to be for the best because once I began to paint the posts with bright and wild abstract colors and splatters, I started to explore the idea of making one signpost loaded with various signs indicative of the general region of Pennsylvania, where I had just come from, leaving the other signpost to hold the names of places that evoke feelings and important memories for me from my experiences in Hong Kong and Brunei Darussalam. (Although I am new to Brunei, I already had a list of favorite places, which included rivers, beaches, rainforests, and other natural environments.)

As I began to paint the wood, the colors and textures of the salvaged planks began to suggest their own aesthetic appeal and character. I decided to listen to the underlying quality of each wooden slat and plank as I painted and stained the raw wood. The more I worked the more the planks and shattered bits of wood seemed to each remind me of a place, a saying, or a mood that I knew was representative of either Pennsylvania or Brunei with a little Hong Kong thrown in for good measure.

Not long after I had begun painting the stands and getting the base colors rubbed and brushed onto the slats of wood, Kong took notice of what I was doing and he offered to hand write the various signs according to my specifications. Kong's precise lettering lent still another dimension to the over-all cohesiveness of the two sculptures. Because he was using the same paints as I was, the colors and tonality of the signs matched up well. As I glued and nailed my sculptures together I began to spend more and more time making sure that they appeared interesting with just enough tension to make the lines, colors, words, and angles of the composition feel natural and not forced.

When I work with found and beach combed objects I like to work without restraint and to allow myself as much freedom as possible without compromising the integrity of my artwork's structure. Craftsmanship is important to me and I try to push my materials to the limit (whether wood or clay) to see if I can squeeze more visual interest out of them. I believe that the playful nature of the signpost sculptures invites viewers to spend time exploring the various elements and place names of each piece. The close proximity of the place names undoubtedly causes some conceptual mixing of memories and experiences in the minds of viewers, while other signs are meant to evoke a new sense of place. The fonts and colors of each sign as a sculptural piece or element was carefully planned so that the image of the sign as an artwork in and of itself helped to complete the mental connection to either a real or fictional site. Like the mural, *Transcending Culture and Space Mural*, my signpost sculptures also aim to transcend space and culture by shifting their place of representation through the relocation of their pinpoint memories in the viewer's mind.

## **V. Conclusion**

Whether going to or coming from a destination, we count on signs to tell us what routes to take by following certain markers (including street signs, stop signs, and even posted maps or directories) to get us there efficiently and safely. In today's digitally connected world we have GPS tracking devices for use in all of our vehicles and we can even use this technology in our smart-phones so that we can find our way through the mazes in our world. As useful and reassuring as today's technology is, sometimes nothing can replace the comfort of being in the presence of a tangible symbol or artifact that can make us feel as though we are wrapped in a familiar blanket of cultural memories. Creating artworks that would convey this latter sentiment was a priority for me when I began to plan the design or outward expression of my concepts.

Other motivating factors for using the format of a signposts capable of displaying a multitude of directions and references was my need to demonstrate to my students at the University at Brunei Darussalam that conceptually provocative and visually entertaining and playful sculpture could be executed in our studio/classroom using low-tech construction techniques and found materials such as driftwood planks and other beach-combed items. Furthermore, by using weathered wooden planks and other cast-offs that were found on Brunei's beaches, I was able to lend an air of authenticity of materials, and by association—place, to my sign-pole sculptures. Even my sculpture *Sign Out: Bradford, PA*, became imbued with a sense of authentic realism through the use of weathered wood that displayed names and sentiments from an almost lost nostalgic by-gone era. This sort of feeling in my signpost sculptures reflects the remarks by Heather Zeppel and C. Michael Hall (1992), "Culture, heritage and the arts have long contributed to the appeal of tourist destinations. However, in recent years 'culture' has been rediscovered as an important marketing tool to attract those travelers with special interests in heritage and the arts." (p. 47)

I believe that my signpost sculptures intrigue viewers and entice them to want to explore the details of the work further because the work is about places and activities that induce nostalgic memories and a desire to travel to these heritage sites. Finally, I do feel that the manner in which my signpost pieces operate as facilitators for unlocking nostalgic memories and causing people to want to experience other places that promise to deliver similar experiential references is similar to the kind of experiences and memories that a person would gain from participating in a trip based on heritage tourism. This is because my signposts and heritage tourism share similar philosophical underpinnings. Zeppel and Hall sum these philosophical concepts up when they state, "Heritage tourism is based on nostalgia for the past and the desire to experience diverse cultural landscapes and forms." (p. 47)

Even if my signpost sculptures cannot really transport a person to a heritage site full of places that promise sights and experiences that will lead to the formation of new memories, at least my colorful signposts can point potential travels in the right direction through words and images that conjure up a kind of nostalgic adventure that really only can exist through our fondest memories.

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