

CASCADE by Woven Kolektif

Mashara Wachjudy, Kyati Suharto,
Kartika Suharto-Martin, Sofiyah Ruqayah,
Ida Lawrence, Bridie Gillman

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Curated by Leyla Stevens

Outer Space, 420 Brunswick St, Fortitude Valley, Queensland 4006

A Cascade Falls Softly

(Reflections On A Collective Practice)

I.

When we first imagined this show we thought of a cascade. We thought of a falling motion that spilt into successive streams. We imagined artworks to be collective in nature, leaking into each other, a pooling of materials, text, and sound. A cascade alternatively describes the downward movement of a body of water, a surge of sound, or a switching line in a ream of fabric. Cascade, as both verb and noun, speaks to how knowledge transmits as a successive series of acts where each realisation draws from its precedent. We thought of the knowledge that resides in the body, transferred through lineages and oral histories. We formulated that the notion of a cascade runs as a shared source in our work, a way of thinking that draws from ancestral and lived mythologies. Equally, it spoke to generative practices of care, exchange and learning. Just as water cascades from one point to another, we build on what came before, who came before, what was taught to us and passed down.

II.

To write through a collective pronoun requires reflective shifts. I came into this artist collective at the same time I was thinking about another watery question. Water imagery, particularly the ocean, has been a recurring site of exploration in my own practice. But increasingly I have come to suspect my own spatial inclination towards the ocean, and its default representation as an empty surface moving towards a singular horizon. We know this image well, where the ocean and sky meet in the centre and the sea is sublime, a beautiful surface devoid of human presence. The problem with this image is that it erases an understanding of the ocean, as told by many island-based lineages, as a deeply collective space.

I am not sure if this shift in oceanic thinking holds up as an accurate lens to reflect on a collective practice. For me, it speaks to how collaboration moves the individual practice beyond a single horizontal movement and instead immerses you into a deep watery mass.

To work collectively holds the promise of sharing labour, as well as respite from siloed towers of professionalism that we, as artists, increasingly find ourselves in. As a group we first formed through personal links to Indonesia, primarily Java and Bali, and the Indonesian diaspora in Australia. In working together, we nodded at a history of collaborative art making in Indonesia, where art *kolektif*s are central to an ecosystem of artist run spaces.

Thinking, making, writing, and reflecting collectively. Also: emailing, messaging, texting, spreadsheeting, zooming and administrating. In a group, the correspondence multiplies. Every decision must be discussed and passed several times over. The WhatsApp group thread cascades. But also, every decision is lighter, more flexible and less anxiety ridden: when one member needs to step back, another will step in. There is perhaps less at stake in the collective project. And yet, the results bloom in unexpected and expanded ways.

III.

This exhibition at Outer Space plays out through three artworks, which also act as successive stages of one continuous work that runs throughout the gallery. Each artwork formed through a collaboration between two artists from Woven Kolektif, and was framed through ongoing dialogue between the group.

Language and the materiality of text act as starting points to the exhibition. Upon entering the gallery, we first encounter an installation, *Public Baths* (2021), by Sofiyah Ruqayah and Ida Lawrence. Long paper strips, arranged in clusters of plant like tendrils reach out from containers of water. Each strip of paper is inscribed with a line of handwritten text, drawn from published sources, or a conversation the artists had with someone from their personal circle. The installation makes visible multiple voices in dialogue, conversations held with artists, writers, past teachers and activists, forming legacies of knowledge. More effectively, the installation is a record of listening. Words are slippery receptacles for meaning; even when speaking in the same language, there is an element of translation that occurs in conversation. To make ourselves understood, we need to symbolically meet at gathering points, to draw from shared waters and tend to the ways different voices can be heard.

Across the centre of the room hangs a curved curtain of fabric, titled: *hand to hand, a conversation* (2021), by Mashara Wachjudy and Bridie Gillman. It is made up of many swatches of cloth sewn together and interspersed with blocks of printed photographs on fabric. Sewing established a framework of exchange for the artists, where they would regularly post each other a growing textile mosaic to respond and add to. Photographs of chairs are stitched alongside a cut of batik. The yoke of a silk shirt falls alongside an indigo dyed block print from Japan. Rather than a cohesive narrative, its patched nature is embraced, where discerning patterns conversely emerge and retreat. Early into their collaboration Mashara and Bridie connected over life-long habits of collecting and their shared feelings towards material things, as traces of past routes and origins. The work comes together as an archive of fragments, connecting disparate images, and recovering memories lovingly amassed over time.

Behind this textile landscape lies *Hello from Pakem* (2021), a sound installation by Kyati Suharto and Kartika Suharto-Martin. Through the indication of a woven *tikar* (mat) and speakers placed on the ground, we are invited to sit on the floor and listen. As sisters and frequent collaborators, Kyati and Kartika's practice draws from a family lineage of Javanese kercong musicians, a popular folk music genre in Indonesia with a rich history. The looped composition begins

with excerpts from childhood tapes, recorded as messages from their childhood home in Desa Pakem, Yogyakarta, to send to their Australian grandparents in North Sydney. The correspondence falls into a flow of Indonesian, English and Javanese. We hear the voices of the artists as children sing songs and recount stories about their dog, and of the resident house ghost "mbah Buyut". Accompanying this is the gentle strumming of two guitarles.¹ We then hear a woman's voice singing formless notes, rising in a lilt that both aches and soothes.

Unlike the other two artworks in the exhibition, which were made over distance, this sound piece came about through proximity, and is evidence of the artists' closeness, both physical and familial. Through this composition, Kyati and Kartika pay homage to family members and the memories of their childhood home. The chords they play are based on the Javanese gamelan scales, taught to them by their father, when he was at home practicing his guitar. It is testimony to how knowledge is often passed down through informal moments. The casual tuning of an instrument repeated and accrued over time becomes an inherited pattern held by the body, and carried through subsequent generations.

IV.

"We didn't really talk about cascades. We did talk about fish fingers, Muriel's Wedding, funerals, mobiles, vinyl stickers, giving thanks, isolation, finding friends, ease, falling vs flying."²

Listening to Kyati's and Kartika's childhood voices, and the code switching they do between Indonesian and English words, triggers in me a jolt of recognition. The past is vividly recalled in this work—it represents a shared history with many in this group, of growing up between Indonesia and Australia, of having family elsewhere, of the need to communicate over distance.

Somehow, our initial premise of cascades has ended up being a show centred around memory and also nostalgia. Themes that as artists we are traditionally schooled to understand as being excessive and reductive. But for those who operate in the diaspora, who often hold complex relationships to language, the loss of language or the shame of not being fluent enough, memory and nostalgia are potent touchstones to which we continually return for guidance. Nostalgic images, materials and sound, form what we have come to see as knowledge worth passing on, transmitting in generative and generous ways. What if then, nostalgia was to be understood as an act of recuperation, of retrieving something in danger of being lost or subsumed in discourses that continually other and decentre us? As with Kyati and Kartika's sound piece, different moments in time and place are overlaid as contrapuntal melodies. They sing the past into the present. It is a gesture towards a successive pooling and layering of lineages found in the voice and in music. A gentle cascade.

— Leyla Stevens

1. Ukulele sized guitars, popular within a tradition of street busking in Java. Process notes from Sofiyah + Ida.

Biography

Woven Kolektif is a group of seven artists based in NSW, QLD and Berlin, who originally formed through shared diasporic connections to Indonesia. The collective represents a diverse range of practices, including the use of performance, installation, video, photography and painting. Current Woven Kolektif members include: Mashara Wachjudy, Leyla Stevens, Kyati Suharto, Kartika Suharto-Martin, Sofiyah Ruqayah, Ida Lawrence and Bridie Gillman. Our projects together are formed through collective thinking and resourcing: nurturing a mode of working that offers reprieve from the siloed nature of a professional arts practice. Past exhibitions together include: *Woven* at Verge Gallery, Sydney (2017), *looking here looking north* at Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre (2019), *Breathing Room* at Cement Fondu, Sydney (2019) and *Bara* at Bankstown Art Centre (2020).

Artwork Credits

Mashara Wachjudy and Bridie Gillman, *hand to hand, a conversation* (2021), collected fabric, steel, chain, 2.2 x 5.5m.

Sofiyah Ruqayah and Ida Lawrence, *Public Baths* (2021), Paper, ink, glass bowls, tinted water, cotton thread, clips, and translations of published texts and conversations with artists, teachers, community organisers and family members, Dimensions variable.

Kartika Suharto-Martin and Kyati Suharto, *Hello From Pakem* (2021), sound composition, bricks, woven mat, speakers, Dimensions variable.

Woven Kolektif live and work across unceded Gadigal, Wangal, Bidjigal, Bundjalung, Turrbal and Yuggera Countries. We acknowledge the sovereignty of First Nations peoples, and pay our respects to their elders – past, present and becoming. We recognise that sovereignty has never been ceded on these lands and waterways, and we stand in solidarity with all First Nations peoples in their struggles against the settler-colonial project.

Always was, always will be, Aboriginal land.