Lantern's Diary

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LANTERN’S DIARY

By

Wei Zhong Tan

A selected project submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

Department of Visual Arts
Brigham Young University
December 2009
BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE COMMITTEE APPROVAL

of a selected project submitted by

Wei Zhong Tan

Each member of the following graduate committee has read this selected project and by majority vote has been found to be satisfactory.

_________________________________  ________________________________
Date                                  Brian D. Christensen, Committee Chair

_________________________________  ________________________________
Date                                  Von D. Allen, Committee Member

_________________________________  ________________________________
Date                                  Bryon Kay Draper, Committee Member
As chair of the candidate’s graduate committee, I have read the selected project of Wei Zhong Tan in its final form and have found that (1) its format, citations, and bibliographical style are consistent and acceptable and fulfill university and department style requirements; (2) its illustrative materials including figures, tables, and charts are in place; and (3) the final manuscript is satisfactory to the graduate committee and is ready for submission to the university library.

Date

Brian D. Christensen, Committee Chair

Accepted for the Department

Date

Joseph E. Ostraff, Graduate Coordinator

Accepted for the College

Date

Rory R. Scanlon, Associated Dean,
College of Fine Arts and Communications
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ABSTRACT

LANTERN’S DIARY

Wei Zhong Tan
Department of Visual Arts
Master of Fine Arts

My MFA project titled, “Lantern’s Diary” is a synergy of colors, tactile experiences, and reflections on change. The artwork is based on cultural influences. The physical form of the lantern is a metaphor of culture identity—in Eastern culture, paper has been used in architecture, furniture, clothing, funerals, writing materials, and lanterns. Its function as a material is to fulfill the necessity of daily life and ceremonial rituals. Hence, paper plays an important role in the Eastern society.

The color spectrum representing “Change” corresponds with the western system of color organization. The gallery space plays a spatial aesthetic role in guiding one’s interpretative journey through the artwork. The cooler colors were placed closer to the entrance of the gallery. Then the warmer colors were arranged and set in the furthest end of the left-hand corner of the gallery. As a result, the warmer colors would draw the viewers to walk around to the other end of the exhibit, signifying the importance of looking on the bright side of things as we go through life changes, with bright hope at the end.

I was interested in the thinking and production process. I sketched a lot in my sketchbook and made some prototypes as references. The lanterns were made from reeds and handmade paper. Each of the thirty lanterns is about seven to eight feet tall and hangs from the ceiling of the gallery. The structural form of each lantern may vary a little in
detail, but they are all based on the same design concept—a chrysalis. Reeds, commonly used in basket weaving were used to make the skeleton structure of the lanterns. Understanding the profound process of making the lanterns is important, as it mirrors us making sense of changes in our lives as they unfold.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Artist Statement

The night was dark.

Moon cakes, candlelights, the smell of melting wax from burning candles, lanterns. The laughter of children, voices of excitement walking in the dark. Children were carrying their lanterns of red, yellow, green, blue, and purple. The stars lit the night sky. That was my memory of the Mid-Autumn Festival in the late 70s.

Thirty years later, the very last village on the island of Singapore was gone. The city that replaced it was brightly lit by its own streetlights, the stars nowhere in sight—the dark night had disappeared.

Change is constant. I enjoy the changes of the past and present. It is a bittersweet experience, like the process of making the lanterns. It is a memory of the past, a product of the present, and a hope for the future.
Cultural Background

I am a third generation Chinese born in Singapore. I grew up in a developing country that was driven by economics and centered on the survival of a small island nation in the middle of South East Asia. Being a Chinese by birth, I was able to learn much of my culture from the festivals and traditional practices of my parents and relatives. My growing-up experiences influenced much of my artwork.

Childhood and Young Adult

I spent a few years of my childhood living in the Jalan Tua Kong Kampong\(^1\) area. The village houses were built from a mixture of shingles, bricks, and wooden walls; roofs made of shingles and attap\(^2\). A few of my cousins were furniture makers. The second youngest cousin was in school at that time, majoring in interior architectural design. When I was bored, he would show me how to draw shapes with just a compass to amuse me. It was fascinating as a child to see what colors and shapes can do to create a vibrant image. He would fold colored origami paper into cranes and boats that enchanted me. Paper boats were fun when it rained heavily during monsoon seasons in June and December because you could race them down the overflowing drains. I loved kampong life. Whenever there was a festival approaching, my grandma, mom, and aunt would cook and decorate the house for the occasion. The festival that I loved most was the Mid-Autumn Festival. The decorative lanterns were very interesting and came in all shapes

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\(^1\) A kampong is a Malay word that refers to a village.

\(^2\) Attap refers to a local palm tree with leaves that are long, sturdy, and durable for roofing.
and sizes. The lanterns would be made of translucent colored thin paper. The decorations on them were meticulously drawn with calligraphy brushes that create the images of flowers, animals, and people.

When my grandmother past away in 1983, a funeral was held in a small field outside the village. There were lanterns covered with white paper with the word, “奠” (dian) written on each in blue, which meant to prepare and present offerings for the dead. The funeral consisted of some sections that includes Buddhist monks or Taoist priest giving prayers to the deceased and providing family members of the deceased instructions to pray and to walk around in a circle in front of the alter. This process would span over a few days; one of which involved the burning of incense, joss sticks, and paper money for the kindred dead. On the final day of the funeral, the lanterns used in the ceremony, bundles of paper money, paper houses, paper cars, and paper servants were burned. The burning of paper assets and money is to make sure the dead have enough to spend in order to have a good life after death. This was part of the ephemeral paper culture of the Chinese in East Asia.

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3 Paper Money. It is a practice for the Chinese to burn paper offerings to their ancestors. One of the items used in the ritual is paper money or locally known as hell notes which are silver and gold papers folded into ingot shapes that were burned as part of the ritual. As the society progresses and advances, the idea of silver and gold ingots were changed to “hell bank notes” a form of paper money that comes with denominations from thousands of dollars to billions of dollars. The Chinese believe that these hell notes offered to their ancestors will be received through the process of burning and offering specifically for the deceased to use in their after-life.
In 1996, I joined Temasek Polytechnic School of Design where I received a design diploma. One area of study was an introduction to paper as a material for art and design. Three assignment choices were given: design an article of apparel, a sculpture, or a lantern with handmade paper. I choose to make a lantern. In the process of researching, I learned about the history of paper and Isamu Noguchi, the sculptor, and the traditional lanterns and papermaking in Japan, China, and South East Asia. I learned to make paper and how to create a lantern structure in the process. I spent a lot of time exploring different shapes, designs, aesthetics, and functions. After the project, I continued researching the regional aspects of the paper culture especially among the Chinese and Japanese. I sought out books, videos, and documentaries on the related subject. I started the practice of making paper and lanterns, and the process has reaped more than just that— I learned more about my own culture and other cultures around me.

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Temasek. It is the ancient name of Singapore, which meant sea town.
Identity

In the book by the anthropologist, Matthew Gordon, *Global Culture/Individual Identity: Searching for Home in the Cultural Supermarket*, he expounded on his research of four different groups of Chinese people in Hong Kong who viewed themselves apart because of political, geographical, and social differences. Although diverse in ideologies, they were common in race, culture, and shared capitalism and western influence (Gordon 76).

Identity draws a very fine line in our global village. In a world with such close proximity to information with a commodity-driven economy, boundaries between nations are no longer barriers; the transaction takes place effortlessly. Culture is like a marketable commodity that can be sold, bought, or adopted. There are no defined boundaries in the supply-demand economy. Singaporean Chinese can wear Issey Miyake perfume, put on Giorgio Armani Jeans, eat McDonald’s for lunch, drive a BMW and be a Catholic. Individuals can choose what to adopt as part of their lifestyle. Hence, globalization creates a myriad synthesis of intellectual influences and hybrid cultures.

I look back at myself and see a history of the culture I had inherited. The present and future generations of the Singaporean Chinese are not so definitive about their ethnic and culture identity. It will change as the environment changes. Identity can be vague and an intangible thing that is subject to individual preferences and perhaps political propaganda. Our multi-racial society has lived peacefully for decades because we are called Singaporean Chinese, Singaporean Malays, or Singaporean Indians. Notice that we are taught to describe ourselves as a Singaporean first before Chinese (Tan).
Colors

I have learned from color theories that color creates the visual language, which can be interpreted in the absence of sounds and words. Color is a language by itself; it is subjective to the viewer’s cultural background. Red is a favorable color to the Chinese during weddings and all auspicious occasions, but red is also used as a symbol for danger. Each viewer interprets the color in the context according to their own education and personal experiences according to regions, cultures, and social contexts. In my exhibition, the colors depict synergism, an intercultural mixture as a result of globalization and how minutely we influence one another for good and for worse. But eventually our influence will bring hope and goodness at a certain point in time.

Perception

The mind naturally perceives and interprets the object that is presented to it, and it is the mind that determines what is and what is not seen. Each individual sees and interprets everything they encounter differently. Zen Buddhists use the example of flying a flag to illustrate the idea of perception. The mind perceives the flag as being moved by gusts of wind. Is it the mind that sees the flag moving or is the flag actually moving? The mind interprets the experience independently without any relationship to the flag. My artwork is subjected to the each viewer’s individual interpretations.
Influences

These three artists, Isamu Noguchi, Iskandar Jalil, and Dan Flavin profoundly influenced the way I work and think. They provide important guiding fundamental philosophy, and concepts shaping and guiding my thoughts, perceptions and artwork.

Isamu Noguchi

Isamu Noguchi’s Akari lanterns were designed for their functionality and aesthetics; the lanterns carry an underlying Japanese cultural background. The functional aspect of the work is an important part of the Japanese culture. Noguchi’s minimalist presentations render a sense of order in its space. He worked with different materials, environment, and incorporated his cultural background into his concepts and ideas. In the video interview “Stone and Paper”, Isamu Noguchi spoke about how he thought and worked, “You can either think and do later or do and think later.” Noguchi’s work was well thought through, integrating culture, function, and aesthetics. His Akari lantern and lamp series inspired me to think about my cultural heritage, its value, and whether or not it’s worth keeping and perpetuating. There are experiences that cannot be bought or taught but are drawn from a rich cultural heritage. The history of Akari is a kind of technical and sculptural development. It is also part of Noguchi’s reclaiming his Japanese cultural heritage and merging it with Western modernism. (Noguchi.org)
Pictures of Akari lamps

Noguchi a.  Noguchi b.

Noguchi c.  Noguchi d.
Iskandar Jalil

In addition, I learned the principles of working with materials in classes taught by Mr. Jalil in Temasek Polytechnic. He emphasized the importance of cultural heritage. Cultural heritage is an integral part of our society; therefore, it is good to learn and assimilate its virtues and values in our lives. I learned to respect the materials I used, understand their nature, and work with it. The relationship between the materials and the artist is significant. The collaboration of the material and the artist is not a one-sided affair; honesty in work, no shortcuts, and everything has its due time. Hence, the exhibition is a journey reflective of the processes, time, and effort.

Dan Flavin

"One might not think of light as a matter of fact, but I do. And it is, as I said, as plain and open and direct an art as you will ever find" (Dan Flavin, 1987).

Dan Flavin engaged in using light bulbs and fluorescent lights as a medium of his artwork for the last thirty years of his life. He believed in the use of commercially available materials such as the fluorescent light (Bell). His work is straightforward and minimal, but carries depth and complexities. I enjoy the simplicity of a work that is able to engage the viewer directly to the material. A fluorescent light has a fixed life span. Flavin’s intention of using fluorescent light is not to let the artwork last forever. Rather the fluorescent light determines the life span of a work, which is poetic in its way symbolizing creation, changes, and temporality. The impermanence of the artwork also suggested the importance and philosophy of material. Flavin understood the life span of the fluorescent lights but had no intention in altering or manipulating the nature of it. By
working under the constraints of the material, Flavin shows his understanding of his work. Therefore, there are some constraints in my final project, a reminder that limitations are part of life, and we learn to cope with them and utilize them. A paper lanterns has its own life span, it serves as a parallel to the life span of a fluorescent light. Instead of complaining about gravity, we live with it and use it to propel us onward.
The Process

The process of creating the work for this exhibition serves as an important part of the lantern installation. The lanterns were woven from reeds with the intention to create individuality in form, although the form of each individual structure may resemble one another. The paper was handmade from commercial paper. I wanted to emphasize the relationship between the material and the artist, which was the main reason for making the lanterns instead of buying commercially-made lanterns. Each lantern took approximately twenty hours to finish from beginning to completion. As a result, the integrity of the materials can only be experienced and understood during this tedious process.
Weaving the structure of the lantern

The reeds were first soaked in water to soften and extend them. Then, the structure was woven to build a basic skeletal form. I wove the additional reeds which were intended to be random and intertwining into the structure. Each reed structure was woven and the lines were intended to be as fluid and uncontrolled as possible. The lines were created in partnership with the reeds, which curl in a circular spiral form to create a line signifying no beginning and no ending—life is infinite.
Paper making

Making handmade paper involves breaking down commercial paper into pulp. The raw material used for making the paper was commercial Xerox paper, which comes in three basic colors red, yellow, and blue. Using these three basic colors I was able to make up the whole color range; from red to blue, blue to yellow, and yellow to red. The process of getting the correct colors was based on a chart that was created in the Adobe software Illustrator using yellow, magenta, and cyan. Each color was mixed proportionately with the three basic colors to create the desired shade.

The paper making technique used was a variation of the basic double-deckled process. Instead of using two deckles, I used only one. This was to control the thickness of the paper. The intention was to make paper as consistent as possible throughout the entire process. In the process of breaking down the paper, the fibers of the paper became unlike the original commercial manufactured paper. The paper fibers were much looser and much shorter after going through the blending process. For this reason, fabric was used as a transferring support for the paper to stick onto it, so that the paper could be dried and peeled off the fabric later. The whole paper making process is repetitive and tedious, unlike the direct use of commercial materials that are readily available. The intention was to savor the process and help myself understand the process and the materials better. The process is to remind me of the quality of life. This quality of life is determined by perseverance, patience, and time.
Blending papers in the blender.

Dipping the deckle in the water mixed with pulp.

Putting a piece of fabric over the pulp on the screen and transferring the pulp on it.
Squeeze out the excess water between the fabric and the deckle.

The complete sheet of wet paper is transferred on to the fabric.

Dry paper on the rack.  Wet paper drying on the rack.
Laying the paper on the structure.
“Lantern’s Diary”

Harris Fine Arts Center Gallery, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

“Lantern’s Diary” Foyer Gallery Exhibit “Process”

I think, I breathe, I eat, I work, I sleep, I dream.
It is all but a process.
“Faucet and Block”

“My eating bowl and drinking cup” hand thrown and fired at cone 10 stoneware.
“Colored Xerox paper”

“Handmade paper”
Tools and materials.

Lantern prototype.
“Lantern’s Diary” Main Gallery Exhibit
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Vitra Design Museum1990.
Photograph appendix for references

Noguchi a The Akari, a term meaning light as illumination, but also implying the idea of weightlessness.

Noguchi b Akari E" lamp, ca. 1966
Isamu Noguchi (American, 1904–1988); Manufacturer: Ozeki & Co., Ltd.

Noguchi c Akari lamp.

Noguchi d Isamu Noguchi in the Akari lamp factory studio.

Falvin a Site-specific installation by Dan Flavin, 1996, Menil Collection Source.


Flavin c "monument" for V. Tatlin, 1975.

Falvin d “Untitled”, Dan Flavin, 1969, Installations, Blue, yellow, and pink fluorescent light EDITION/SET OF: 5, 8 feet across corner.