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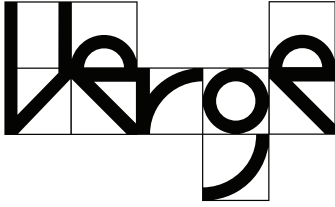
IN CONVERSATION WITH JAYANTO TAN - CAP GO MEH

"In his exhibition **Ritual: My Beautiful Curse (Cap Go Meh)** Jayanto uses the beauty and potential of food to pull together the disparate strings of his unsettled life and reflect optimistically on how they have shaped the person he has become in Australia. Tinkering with the much-reproduced Chinese ornamental design 'double happiness' (囍), Jayanto re-frames a common sentiment with gentle irony to consider his 'double dislocation' as a twice-over member of a migrant family. First, as part of a very mixed-ancestry Chinese family in Indonesia and then solo in Australia as part of a diasporic family spread from Germany to Taiwan."

Greg Doyle

TM: Hi Jayanto, thanks so much for taking the time to answer these questions about your practice and exhibition at Verge. Firstly, can you tell a little bit about your background in art making and perhaps what led you to a career in the arts?

JT: From a young age, I have been interested in art. But having come from an average family background, the artist in me was buried deeply in the ground. I was born in a small village in far North Sumatra to both Sumatran and Chinese parents. I grew up with multi-bilingual languages from my region. I came to Sydney with hope. Hope that I could study fine arts. I was fortunate enough to be able to complete my Diploma of Fine Arts from TAFE then my BFA and MFA from National Arts School. My dear friend was encouraging me to do so. I didn't expect that I would finish my studies. Art is my visual language, my connection to the 'lost ancestral' and my bridge to connect with the world. So Here I am and I hope I can continue to do something that I love.



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TM: Your installation, 'labour of love - cap go meh potluck party', there is a lovely circular ceramic piece with the word 'merantau' piped in white porcelain. What is the translation of 'merantau' and what does it mean in this particular body of work?

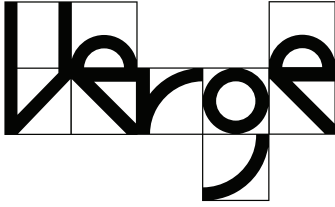
JT: Merantau is the word used for a 'young man' (from my region) that is old enough to travel interstate or city to find a job and earn some money to then give to his parents. I think in English it translates to 'Wander'. I created this body of work, agar-agar (pink jelly) with the text 'merantau' on it as a memento of my mother. It was an emotional conversation with her about what she thought about my 'wandering'. I was a bit disappointed with myself, since I was merantau for too long (because of Australia migration issues) and did not see her again before she passed away. It was our last sentimental 'good bye' conversation.

TM: Greg Doyle, USyd academic, quite lyrically, wrote of your intentions that 'to be wholly one thing only is to potentially deny oneself meaningful connections into larger and richer worlds'. What do you mean by this?

JT: I think is about adapting and accepting. Coming from a diverse family background, I never felt completely myself. From my point of view, I must be ready and willing to change and embrace the differences. Perhaps it is like the Phoenix rising from the ashes. I am not quite sure how to put it into words. I hope, I am not destroying Greg Doyle's meaningful, beautiful and lyrical words.

TM: In his essay, Doyle mentions the influence of queer Cuban artist Felix Gonzales-Torres on your practice. Are there other people, artistic or not, that guide your work?

JT: As an immigrant artist, I was looking for my role model that has had a



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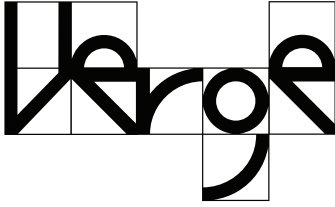
similar life experience. Then I found Felix Gonzalez-Torres during my MFA. But I didn't share it with classmates as I was afraid. His work is very personal, it allows me to understand my own journey. He is my role model and without him, I would be completely lost. I am also influenced by Rumi's poetry . However, my family, especially my mother, is my true inspiration. I use my humble mother in my work very often because she is the only person I know very well. Her spirit encourages me to continue my practice. I am also inspired by Louise Bourgeois and FX Harsono (Indonesian-Chinese visual artist).

TM: What are the ingredients of Longtong Cap Go Mei? We hear the dish is loaded with lucky elements.

JT: Lontong Cap Go Meh is a special dish from Peranakan Chinese Indonesian that takes on traditional Indonesian dishes. The ingredients of Lontong Cap Go Meh is love combined with many lucky elements. The lontong itself (rice cake cooked in banana leaf) symbolises longevity, the marinated eggs symbolise good fortune and the yellowish shining tumeric coconut milk broth symbolises gold and fortune. And there you go, the dish is served only for celebrating Cap Go Meh.

TM: Take us through your favorite celebratory dish served by your mother or any relative cook for cap go meh ?

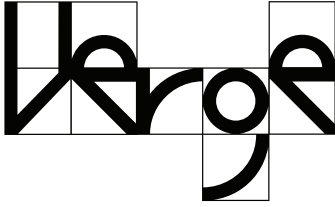
TM: All the dishes in this installation are my favourite, and each of them have a special meaning and have a connection to a special moment that I have spent with my mother during my childhood. But the mundane 'moon cake' (kue



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keranjang) is a very special soft sweet, it is made from simple ingredients that symbolise safety. I used to help her in the kitchen with the preparations for the celebration. The colourful glutinous rice balls with ginger syrup symbolises family togetherness and good luck as we can see through the bright colours and the beautiful ginger syrup fragrance. The iconic traditional red tortoise cake (Ang Ku Kue) with mung bean filling inside, with the longevity symbol on top of the cake, is the winner in every mother's heart. Once we eat one, we never stop. My Mom liked sugar cane (Kham Ciap), we used to have it in our backyard. Once upon a time, Mom told me (in a whisper) a 'strange story' about how important the sugar cane is for Hokkien people. She makes the most delicious 'sweet' sugar cane juice. And the 'egg noodle' dish with sambal and other elements that symbolise a long life. And of course the Lontong Cap Go Meh. Those ordinary soft cakes and 'hot spicy' foods reminds me of our humble Cap Go Meh celebration in our hometown.

After living in Sydney for many years I finally became an Australian citizen. As well as receiving a certificate and a wattle tree, I was given a Lamington and meat pie from a friend. While I call Australia home, a part of me is still a 'anak kampung' (village boy), who belongs to the Sungai Deli (Deli River). This was when the split pandan Lamington was born. This is a super special dish to me, which I created in the hope that I can be part of Australian culture. Also, I like the 'Mezze plate' (Australian Jajan Pasar). A while ago, I was invited by an Australian friend to join his Christmas Party. The party had the theme 'Potluck Party'. As an early arrival migrant, I couldn't understand what that was all about. So I ended up at the party without bringing anything. I was so embarrassed...These memories warm my heart. I like the idea of people



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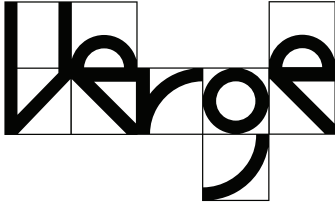
bringing something to share with friends, it reminds me of home. In my colourful Mezze sweet plate, I blended the elements of my Eastern family with my Western family, from the streets of Indonesia to Sydney life. I wanted to share my mother and sisters' ordinary cooking with Australian audiences and pass on the family tradition for everyone to enjoy!

TM: Double Happiness- what does the phrase mean in relation to you as a person and as an artist?

JT: The first time I saw the symbol of Double Happiness was at my sister's wedding. I was fascinated by the red text on top of the door. But as a kid, I couldn't understand what that meant. Looking back to my childhood, the Double Happiness appears as a reminder of the good times with family and memories of togetherness. As an artist, the Double Happiness symbol is like my own wedding with those many memories from the past. As Greg has mentioned about two time dislocations, I can also add that the Double Happiness is the dualism between dark and light, fortunate and unfortunate, mortal and immortal, pain and glory, here and there, life and death.

TM: Where do you find inspiration for your pieces and how do you achieve such a realistic finish?

JT: This installation work was inspired by my fear of losing everything. This installation is about controlling my own fear of people that I love that no longer exist. I am afraid to face it, I want them to be around and this work becomes alive through that spiritual connection. I felt so much joy when I created these works.



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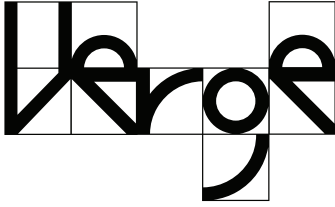
Sometimes I think I didn't do the work by myself, I didn't plan or expect the final result. If it looks so realistic, I guess it's meant to be realistic. My job is just making and making, and to please my mother, my family and my friends. I have to say, I enjoy the process rather than the result. The process from soft clay to colouring then twice or third or sometimes fourth firings. I had the intimate conversations and meditation during the making that have allowed me to control those fears for a while. At the end of the day, I was so exhausted.

TM: Do you create a series of parts of dishes and then assemble them on the ceramic plate or do you construct a dish piece by piece?

JT: I wanted to make this work for many years. This ongoing multiple series work constructed from small pieces. I like the idea from little things, big things grow. Some work is inspired by the Romanticism movement and the uprising movement like Felix Gonzalez-Torres's Fortune Cookie Corner. I had fun when I constructed the little pieces on the plate. Somedays I tried to construct those little pieces into a mountain shape (like Felix fortune cookies corner's work). Very often it collapsed and I had to start all over again and again until I found the best shape. However, at the end after coming out of the hot oven (kiln), the work completely changes.

TM: What would you like people to learn from your work?

JT: Last year during COVID-19 restrictions, I did a show at Pari, mon amour, not there, not here, nowhere. I folded thousands of colourful papers that looked like fortune cookies. I wanted the work to be destroyed and to disappear. I was inspired by Felix Gonzalez-Torres to create this work. I was in the state of sadness and was frustrated with my situation. After finishing the show, I threw away all the

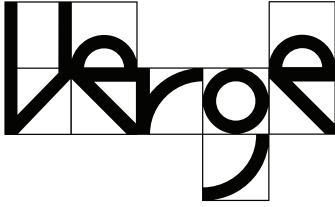


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‘fortune cookies’ and then I felt satisfied. This quote from Felix Gonzalez-Torres made me understand how to deal with my work and how to recover from the pain.

“After doing all these shows, I’ve become burnt out trying to have some kind of personal presence in the work. Because I’m not my art. It’s not the form and not the shape, not the way these things function that’s being put into question. What is being put into question is me. I made “untitled” (Placebo) because I needed to make it. There was no other consideration involved except that I wanted to make an artwork that could disappear, that never existed, and it was a metaphor for when Ross was dying. So it was a metaphor that I would abandon this work before this work abandoned me. I’m going to destroy it before it destroys me. That was my little amount of power when it came to this work. I didn’t want it to last, because then it couldn’t hurt me. From the very beginning it was not even there – I made something that doesn’t exist. I control that pain. That’s really what it is. That’s one of the parts of this work. Of course, it has to do with all the bullshit of seduction and the art of authenticity. I know that stuff, but the other side, it has that personal level that is very real. It’s not about being a con artist. It’s also about excess, about the excess of pleasure. It’s like a child who wants a landscape of candies. First and foremost it’s about Ross. Then I wanted to please myself and then everybody”.

Ritual My Beautiful Curse (Cap Go Meh) created during COVID-19 restrictions came about from conversations with friends and family about what kind of works should be made during isolation. I created this emotional installation with



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the hope that I can please my mother, sisters and friends that I never had the opportunity to bring together when they were still around. And also I hope to find my own unique community.

TM: Where do you see your practice headed in the next five years?

JT: This is a hard question. I really don't know. For me, to be able to make art and survive these days is a blessing. How many years, I don't know. I want to experience a few other things though. Such As living solo in Sydney, I want to go back to Berlin, Taipeh, Medan, Fujian and Paris to meet my family and share my spiritual journey. And also, I want to be able to be in love again, love that gives me the space and the place to do more work. I am lucky enough that I can actually make it into my practice. That is why I make artworks, I still have some hope. My work has a lot to do with hope. It's work made with eyes open. It is about seeing, seeing what is there.

Currently, I am working on a public permanent Lanterns art project commissioned by the Inner West Council with fellow Inner West artists. And I am super excited for the next residency at BigCi in Bilpin. I hope by continuing to make work, I can make this world a better place for everyone and complete my journey to please my mother.