

NAVIGATING *CULTURAL THREADS*

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In: Catalogue *Cultural Threads*, TextielMuseum

(Part of text)

The artists included in *Cultural Threads* share an interest in understanding how the past global trade of textiles portends many current realities: gross inequalities in the distribution of wealth; material value exceeding the cost of human life; and the restless movement of materials, people and labour that underpins textile production. Many of the exhibition's artists work to make history alive in a contemporary context. But as Joseph McBrinn has observed, the long shadow of the colonial era plays a significant role in our understanding of contemporary textiles:

The period between the eighteenth and the twentieth centuries was marked by both a rampant and ruthless European imperialism as well as an astonishing revolution in textile manufacture and consumption. It was a period that saw textiles transformed at an unprecedented speed from an indigenous product of everyday use to a global commodity of rare symbolic value. The spectacle of innovation often masked appropriation or exploitation and it could easily be argued that in the modern age any, and indeed every, textile became inscribed with the entwined histories of colonialism and capitalism. (1)

The production and trade of textiles has both fuelled and communicated human desire for wealth, expansion and change for centuries.

Several artists in the *Cultural Threads* exhibition draw inspiration from textiles that offer little remaining physical or biographical material: Jennifer Tee and Vincent Vulmsa both draw inspiration from textile traditions of which little physical trace remain; Fiona Tan looks to historical textiles to assist in constructing the biography of a woman history has overlooked. The textile also plays a central role in artistic practices built around family histories. Mary Sibande, Aiko Tezuka and also Jennifer Tee use personal history as the starting point for their work. As curator and academic Christine Checinska has noted, "there is an accessibility when we work with textiles in a curatorial setting [...] visitors can come in and recognise, or begin to recognise, themselves and their own stories because we are working with cloth." (2) From these textile traces and family histories *Cultural Threads* teaches us not only of the complex histories the textile has witnessed, but also allows us to reimagine those histories that have gone unrecorded and overlooked.

Jennifer Tee describes “the act of travelling, both physically and mentally” as “an important metaphorical binding thread” (3) throughout her artistic practice. Indonesian *tampam* and *palepai* textiles, known as *ship cloths* by Europeans (4), and the heritage of her Chinese-Indonesian father who travelled by ship with his sister and parents to the Netherlands in the 1950s (5) prompted Tee to recently travel to the Indonesian island of Sumatra. Centuries before Tee’s trip, wealth generated through the trade of pepper brought prosperity to the Lampung region of southern Sumatra where small, square *tampam* and larger and more ornate *palepai* were originally produced. (6) Writing in 1979, textile historian Mattiebelle Gittinger observed:

The history of these ship cloths is obscure and the reasons for both their original use and their decline remain conjectural. The skills needed to produce them are now completely lost and apparently have been for three quarters of a century. The factors that are presumed to have caused this include the abolition of slavery in 1859, the decline of the pepper trade, and changing marriage traditions. So many have appeared on Western markets in the past five years that it is doubtful any significant number remain in use in Sumatra today. (7)

While traditional production of the cloth is now long gone, Tee instead found traces of the once intricate textile patterns on other local materials such as wooden relief carving, metal gates and mosaics.(8) These traditional textile patterns provided the inspiration for a series of three woven textiles inspired by the *palepai* and three embroidered digital textile prints inspired by the *tampam*.

Gittinger explains, “*Tampam* were made and used by all levels of society, but this was not true of the *palepai*” whose use was “essentially restricted to the aristocracy.” (9) The textiles “were displayed or exchanged at both birth and death, at marriages, circumcisions, and ceremonies marking changes in social rank [...] a sacred force that bound society together.” (10) Mirrored imagery plays a central role in their designs, which Tee has adapted to several philosophical themes she explains connect her woven works (2016): *Tree of Life* is often depicted as a combination of ship and mast that refers to origins and ancestry. *Ship of Souls* uses multiple layers of the vessel imagery associated first with burial rights but also later stages of life which suggest a sense of protection. *Womb of Time* depicts two vessels on top of each other in a cell or womb like shape considered to be an image of being part of the world. (11)

The textile patterns also act as the starting point for *Tampam Tulip* (2014 – ongoing) a series of digitally printed textiles based on collages that

incorporate the quintessential Dutch symbol. Here too the artist's family history plays a part, with Tee's maternal grandfather and great-grandfather working in the Netherlands' tulip trade that took them on long ship bound journeys of their own, including annual travel to America. (12) While an earlier commission for the new North/South tram line stop at Centraal Station in Amsterdam encouraged Tee to work with the Indonesian textile patterns and pressed tulip petals in what she describes as a "cheerful" (13) interpretation, her work for *Cultural Threads* suggests a darker contemporary commentary. Black tulips were selected for the *Cultural Threads* commission, which occurs during a time when the immigration crisis both across Europe and within the Netherlands is acute. Tee explains, "the figures 'falling' in the water also refer to the current migration crisis." (14)

The *Tampam Tulip* series also travels on additional journeys: the digital prints are produced in the Netherlands, and then "travel back to their place of origins" (15) where the textiles are embroidered with gold thread sourced from India and sewn in a small village near Bandung on the Indonesian island of Java. An "interest in the journey textiles take again" (16) informs Tee's strategy, navigating with diverse reference points and combining new routes.

- (1) McBrinn, J., Exhibition Review: Migrations, *Textile*, 15: 1 2017, pp. 112.
- (2) Checinska, C., <https://vimeo.com/242571907> [accessed May 5, 2018].
- (3) Tee, J., http://www.teeteetee.nl/tee_jennifer.html [accessed June 20, 2018].
- (4) Gittinger, M., *Splendid Symbols: Textiles and Tradition in Indonesia* (The Textile Museum & Eastern Press: New Haven, Connecticut, 1979) pp. 88.
- (5) Tee, J., http://www.teeteetee.nl/work_TAMPAN_p04.html [accessed June 27, 2018].
- (6) <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/771336> [accessed June 20, 2018].
- (7) Gittinger, M., pp. 95.
- (8) Tee, J., skype interview with the artist June 17, 2018.
- (9) Gittinger, M., pp. 90.
- (10) <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/316415> [accessed June 20, 2018].
- (11) Tee, J., skype interview with the artist June 17, 2018.
- (12) Ibid.
- (13) Ibid.
- (14) Tee, J., http://www.teeteetee.nl/work_TAMPAN_p04.html [accessed June 20, 2018].
- (15) Tee, J., skype interview with the artist June 17, 2018.
- (16) Ibid.